

Lao Dan in Hangzhou, July 2020

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**Lao Dan**

collides years of training  
with oblique strategies of  
unlearning to create  
stark and physically  
challenging recordings on  
saxophone, flute and  
zither. By **Josh Feola**.  
Photography by **Li Hiu**

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"A Deserted Road", the middle track on flautist and saxophonist Lao Dan's June 2020 three-song EP *The Song Of The Uninhabited Island*, starts to unravel around the five minute mark. It begins, as do many of his compositions, with a series of low, sustained tones on the Chinese transverse bamboo flute, the dizi. As often happens, Lao Dan's impressive lung capacity purposefully drifts through a delicate melody before veering off into a determined display of physicality, the artist suddenly screaming into the void of his flute, smelting a guttural fusion of instrument and player. He emits an unsettling, slurred trill that resolves in the final moments of the track into an otherworldly tone of his own. Self-released in an autographed batch of 200 mini-CDs, *The Song Of The Uninhabited Island* is both a progress report from a young star entering his prime, and an ellipsis trailing a career that has oscillated between training and rebellion, dedication and deviance.

Now 33, Lao Dan was born in Dandong, a port city in northeastern China separated from North Korea by a thin strip of the Yalu River (the Dan in his professional nickname is a reference to his birthplace; his real name is Zhao Zhenyu). He first picked up a saxophone at eight, though for him musical training was more of an assignment than an interest early on, the kind of extracurricular skill-building common for schoolchildren across China. Five years later he began studying dizi, which sparked a longterm commitment to craft, a powerful drive to improve and expand.

Within a few years, he exhausted the educational resources available to him in Dandong. Driven by a raw desire to advance his dizi ability, he went to Beijing to seek instruction from Dai Ya, a professor at the prestigious Central Conservatory of Music. After his first lesson, Lao Dan returned to Dandong and practised sustained tone and fundamentals of fingering and breath control for six months before returning to Beijing for a second class. "It was a very long, exhausting and dull process," he recalls. The musician stayed in Beijing for weeks at a time over the next few years, living in a basement apartment across from the conservatory, taking solo lessons from Dai in the professor's free time. "The circumstances weren't very good, but my skill level improved greatly."

After making significant progress as a solo player in Beijing, Lao Dan returned to his home province to enroll at the Shenyang Conservatory of Music, joining the folk orchestra as its lead dizi player and developing his chops in ensemble work. But besides learning a few new techniques, he says he

experienced no significant breakthrough during this time: the instructional style was tedious, the Chinese conservatory model designed to mint performers who all sounded exactly like their teachers and each other. "Chinese education mostly emphasises technique," he explains. "It rarely pays attention to the student's individual line of thought." It was around his third year at university that he began exploring other idioms and composing his own work.

This deviation – his word – formed a schism, a fundamental binary that imbues Lao Dan's music with such thrilling tension today. At first his approach was to retain only basic techniques from his initial years of study, but soon he set about jettisoning his academic training entirely. He was naturally attracted to improvisation, and went back to his first tool, the sax, to explore a new mode of free jazz expression. The slow accumulation of new approaches and skills would morph over time into a gestalt that defines Lao Dan's core today, a fluid and mindful balance between the kicking in and dropping out of rigorous training.

2018 was a breakout year. In January, China's biggest independent label Modern Sky released his debut solo dizi album, *Going After Clouds And Dreams*. It was a distillation of not only his aesthetic vision, but also his guiding philosophy.

One of Lao Dan's first creative decisions after leaving school was to remove the dimo, a paper-thin bamboo membrane that imbues the dizi with a high frequency buzz. The deeper, fuller timbres and subtle tonal modulations achieved through playing three different sizes of de-membrated dizi coalesce on *Going After Clouds And Dreams* into a chimerical collection of brief, unhurried compositions sounding at once rooted and investigational. It's an acknowledgement of tradition – and a clear demonstration of skill – punctuated frequently by the visceral sounds of the body of the player, an audible attempt to occasionally break the frame. Due in part to limited label funding, the album was recorded sparsely in an air raid shelter in Dandong. The natural reverb of this mid-20th century wartime relic appropriately embellishes Lao Dan's sometimes diffuse, sometimes martial mode of expression.

"I want to find the Chinese folk music that has naturally developed up to now, not the kind of folk music that's combined with Western composition, which doesn't belong to China itself," he asserts. The album's title describes his process of self-discovery through a reconsideration of history and tradition, and functions as one "category" of his repertoire, he

says. "I'm seeking the tradition of Chinese folk music that has truly travelled from ancient times to today, and my imagination of this folk music is 'going after clouds and dreams'."

In April 2018, Lao Dan's "intense, fierce, violent, ferocious" side got the spotlight with the release of his first solo sax album, *Functioning Anomie*. Here, his indebtedness to outside sources of inspiration became clear, showcasing the explosive alto sax blowouts he'd become known for on China's small but dynamic free improvisation scene. *Functioning Anomie* was also recorded in a naturally echoing space, this time a cave tunnel in Hangzhou, Lao Dan's current home base. It presents blunt departures in key, tone and volume, Lao Dan's expression unencumbered and casually mixed with the blurts of car engines and shouts of passers-by. What separates this missive from the freelance saxophone one encounters in any dense urban metro is its range and depth, a pervasive feeling that Lao Dan is frantically clawing at the edges of his own understanding and ability, transposing his instrument onto the sonic chaos of his mega-urban environment.

"I play these two instruments completely according to my personal thoughts, so it's very different from other players," he says of sax and dizi. "I'm in favour of learning, and I hate imitation. Learning is to transform knowledge into yourself; imitation is to turn yourself into someone else. Therefore, I pay attention to the unconventional use of notes and techniques in my performance. These things were given to me by time, I did not deliberately design and manufacture them."

2018 also saw the release of *They Know We Know They Are Lying*, the second album from Red Scarf, a trio formed five years earlier by Lao Dan, guitarist Li Xing and drummer Deng Boyu. Li and Deng were both trained in jazz and influenced by rock, and their combustion with Lao Dan has resulted in an intricate, prog-adjacent and omnivorous style that the group describes as "exam rock" for the technical leaps engineered into each tune. *They Know We Know They Are Lying* was recorded in two days due to the fact that the band's members are spread out across the country and rarely have the opportunity to rehearse together.

Though all hailing from the hinterlands – Li and Deng are both from Inner Mongolia in China's sparsely populated northern expanse – the trio have combined most frequently in Shenzhen, a mainland metropolis near Hong Kong. Shenzhen grew rapidly during China's economically booming 1980s, and is

known today for its world class capacity to innovate bleeding-edge technological hardware, as well as for the rootlessness of its citizenry. It's a city of transplants seeking new creative force, and it was in Shenzhen that Lao Dan found a community he could enthusiastically join after his disillusionment with the academic route. He was embraced by Tu Fei, an organiser and curator who oversees the venue B10, nearby shop and label Old Heaven Books, and two annual festivals: the Tomorrow Festival for experimental music, and the Oct-Loft Jazz Festival (a feature on Old Heaven can be found in *The Wire* 435). In addition to his bandmates in Red Scarf, Lao Dan met and collaborated with an impressive cast of local and international players through Tu Fei's persistent advocacy.

Tu Fei nudged him together with Li Daiguo, an American multi-instrumentalist who has lived in China for more than 15 years. "He's a sensitive and versatile player," Li says of Lao Dan. The duo recently played together at the Oct-Loft Jazz Festival – a live recording of their performance will be released later this year for Oct-Loft's tenth anniversary. Another live set from the two was released last year on cassette by Old Heaven Books, and indexes how Lao Dan is moving toward a more nuanced, personal playing style.

"We share similar backgrounds, aesthetics and goals, and our technical training and explorations could be seen as similar in some ways," says Li, who was classically trained on violin before studying pipa, mbira, tabla and techniques from a variety of systems. "He's really developed his own extended techniques and compositions, and they are beautiful and stunning," Li adds. "His level of control in terms of timbre and melody is really high – not a lot of Chinese players these days have that combination of technical prowess and imagination."

"When we perform together it's like a fish in water," Lao Dan says of the duo's relationship. "His playing stimulates a lot of unknown potential in me."

One of Lao Dan's recent releases sees him go blow for blow with a titan of the field, Connecticut saxophonist Paul Flaherty. The two met via Boston based mutual contact Qi Li, who arranged for Lao Dan's American debut in 2018. They first met at Willimantic Records, the site of the live recording, and the veteran was thoroughly impressed by the newcomer. "Lao fit perfectly with us, and we heard him play for the first time right then," Flaherty recalls. "He's an excellent and explosive sax player. He has a passionate scream/cry that identifies his sound as a unique addition to the free jazz scene. His flute playing is loose, sensitive, and he displays great ears as he blends his emotional sounds with each of our players, while at the same time taking the lead when the moment called."

Perhaps ironically for someone who has diverted from the path of strict tutelage, Lao Dan speaks of this encounter with a sincere student's humility. "Paul can be considered living history," he remarks. He says he values the "extremely refined ideas" of veteran musicians he's played with, like Flaherty and Japanese improv drummer Sabu Toyozumi, crediting them with inspiring him to move further down the idiosyncratic track the Chinese artist is carving for himself. "They are my teachers. I have learned a lot

from them, not only in music, but also their unique thinking. They both possess a sense of freedom and warmth... they have so, so much experience, and I have nothing but respect for them."

A question hanging over Lao Dan's future is how to navigate the binaries of East and West; dizi and saxophone; tradition and novelty; borderless exploration and a grounded commitment to the Chinese scene that shapes his sound and thought. Having impressed bona fide figureheads of the international free improvisation scene, he is on track to receive a level of label and festival interest rare for an artist from China. This may be due in part to the novelty of his primary instrument. "It's an exotic bamboo flute, and that's enough for a lot of people," says Li Daiguo. "A lot of players of an 'exotic' instrument who want to play 'new' music often get herded into a situation where they get plenty of good attention, but then after years or decades they don't grow because they just get used to how white audiences love everything they do, and they are just rehashing traditional licks and riffs in different structures... serious listeners won't be satisfied until Lao Dan climbs a few more mountains and further expands his and everyone else's mind."

The artist is up to this physical challenge. On his latest release *Chinese Medicine*, Lao Dan's upper body goes through the familiar playing motions with a tenor sax, while below he tears into the strings of a guzheng with his feet in the most iconoclastic approach to the instrument since Beijing artist Zuoxiao Zuzhou assaulted one with scissors in influential 1990s band NO. For Lao Dan this exercise was a literal stretch, a muscular effort to "create conflict" between these two instruments, forcefully pressing himself towards new territory on the saxophone.

"Of course, the prerequisite for achieving this is that you must be fully familiar with the instrument you are using, including the use of breath, the use of timbre, the use of fingers," he notes. "Various factors and details will change your music, so how do you play and use your instrument well? I think it depends on the combination of longterm, accumulated training, and unique thinking and judgment."

Perhaps most importantly, Lao Dan doesn't have to look beyond his current location for promising avenues to develop, especially as Covid has foreclosed most of his international opportunities for the time being. In addition to his forthcoming release with Li Daiguo, he's preparing a new series of collaborations called Tu Tu, starting with a duo with his Red Scarf bandmate Deng Boyu. "China is now at a very good stage of development, I think the conditions in all aspects are better than before, and the population base is large. There won't be a lot of income doing our kind of music, and there will be no big market, but I like this feeling," he says.

Still the hungry student who left home on his own as a teenager, Lao Dan is fully committed to progressing on his own terms. "If you want to do it, just keep doing it. There is nothing to ask for and nothing to worry about. It's very important to adjust your own mentality." □ Lao Dan's *Chinese Medicine* is released by Dusty Ballz. *The Song Of The Uninhabited Island* is available via Bandcamp. Translation assistance by Emma Xiaoming Sun

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