

## THE END OF THE MOON

An interview with Laurie Anderson about her new solo work *The End of the Moon* as well as other current projects.

Q. Tell me about "The End of the Moon". Will it feature new music and new tools?

LA Definitely new music. Music will be a big part of this work, bigger than in the last piece "Happiness". Partly it's because I've been working with some great new systems. Technically my rig is shrinking at incredible rates and I'm so excited at how much power there can be in this software. I hate to sound like a salesman but really it used to take two huge trucks to carry what I can now put into two briefcases. Now suddenly I have a huge amount of flexibility, I can play so many gorgeous new sounds. It's like I'm finally learning how to improvise. There are still a couple of analog things in my set up but basically it's almost invisible now.

Q. Is there a general theme to "The End of the Moon"?

LA I would say that time is the overall general theme. Our perception of time and how it affects us, how it changes us. That, as well as stories, the stories we tell ourselves so we can go on. And of course this is such a good time for stories! Election season is all about stories and it just comes down to whose story you like better, which one you can relate to. None of us are actually going to go out and take our own surveys.

Q. How did the title come about?

LA "The End of the Moon" is, I guess, a phrase that has some of the melancholy I feel at the moment. Not just melancholy really. More like loss. Like I lost something and I can't quite put my finger on what it is. Actually I think what I lost was a country. The last three years have been pretty tough, pretty alienating for a lot of people. And in this piece I'm trying to look at some of those things. On the other hand I see this as sort of a report that I'm making to wind up my time as artist-in-residence at NASA. So there are lots of colors in it.

Q. Where do you draw your inspiration? How do you decide which stories will be included in your work?

LA I keep huge notebooks filled with stories, and fragments. I've kept these journals since I was twelve. I check these out and then I decide what to work on based on things like- maybe it would make somebody laugh? Maybe because its incredibly sad. Almost never because I think it expresses who I am. I'm not trying to express myself. That's not my goal at all. My collaboration is truly with the audience. Maybe part of that is flirting with the audience; part of it is having a kind of rapport with them. I try to imagine this collaboration and based on that I edit it.

Q. Do you try to make things simpler as you go along? Both in your work, and in general?

LA I do try to make things simpler, and more to the point. Lou (her partner the musician Lou Reed) is very encouraging to me in this. If I'm hiding behind a simile, he'll say "Why don't you just say what you mean, instead of alluding to things all the time?" And sometimes he's really right.

Q. You presented an early version of this piece in February in Montreal as part of the Festival of Lights. You called the piece "Beauty", Why was that? And are there still some of the themes from the Montreal work in 'The End of the Moon'?

LA I guess mainly I was curious about how I make my own categories. I mean, what is beauty? What do I think is beautiful and why? And from there I develop lots of weird little scenes, each in a way looking at different aspects of beauty: hope, fear, regret and so on.

Q. Why do solos feel so right for you, at this point in your career and in your life?

LA My ambition is to be a troubadour, and to just absorb the world, and to try to express it in a very light way. Not in some heavy art model way with all those crushingly heavy double meanings. I'm trying to be lighter in general. I'm trying to understand things more, and produce less stuff. I think there's too much stuff in the world, already. I think if I had to say what there's not enough of, I would say, probably tenderness would be one. Another would be awareness.

Q. You've said that these are part of a trilogy of solo works. This is the second. How do these pieces work together?

LA "Happiness" was journalistic. It was about going places and doing stuff. I went there, I saw that, I did that. A series of stories. "The End of the Moon" is about the queasy feelings you might have later. It's dreamier. More abstract. There is a lot more trepidation about the future. There's uncertainty. It's my best attempt at describing life at this moment. However, I'm trying not to use "I" so much. For me, "The End of the Moon" generates a lot of writing issues that "Happiness" simply didn't. But I'd love to just do these small solo shows for the rest of my life- Happiness, The End of the Moon, The Beginning of History, Beauty, Pain...

Q. I felt that in "Happiness" you were telling your own story through those experiences. Do you feel like you're telling story through these mental places? Whose story?

LA I'm not possessive in that way - whether it's you or me. One of the stories in "The End of the Moon" starts out in a hamster cage. I'm not sure whose story this is. Maybe it's the story of anyone who's ever been in a cage that gradually turned into a trap. You? Me? Whatever.

Q. Do you have any thoughts on the third piece?

LA I would love to make just an endless number of these pieces. I'm kind of sorry I said "trilogy." I really enjoy making solo works because they leave me a lot more freedom than the larger multimedia things. I can jump around; I don't have to explain every move to a giant tech crew.

Q. Elaborate on the NASA residency. How did it happen? What kind of experience did you have? How was your presence received by the staff? NASA has had a roller coaster year. Was this a good year to be working with them? How do these experiences figure into the new work?

LA I am going to talk a bit about my experiences at NASA in this work. It was really a big honor to be the first NASA artist-in-residence. Obviously my first question was "Can I go up?" I would give anything to go up there. Really anything! The answer was no. But I loved meeting the scientists and designers and of course I got to see a lot of amazing things. Drawing conclusions? Probably a lot of what I do over the next few years will be influenced by what

I saw on all my travels around the NASA sites, and who I met, and what I saw and thought about.

Q. I was struck by the first time you said you wanted to write an “epic poem.” I’m curious– what attracted you to this? Is it the sense of an oral tradition? You as troubadour going around singing and telling stories? Or is it the structure you like? The fact that it doesn’t really have to have an end? What made you think of this?

LA Endlessness is certainly appealing. Of course aspiring to write an “epic poem” is on the one hand inspiring and also utterly pretentious. Who do I think I am? But I like to be inspired in that way. Why not? I’d love to be able to write something with enormous scope. But epic...what does it mean? How does it start?

Often these huge poems are about a trip, about trying to get somewhere, getting lost on the way, and also about motion. There’s a protagonist, of sorts, sometimes the narrator. Me? I’m trying to do that. Also I’m trying to jump quickly in and out of these imaginary scenes, absurd scenes. Just because it’s fun. Just because I can.

Q. Are there poems that you, as you’re writing, go back to, to solve problems? Do you think of it that way when you’re constructing a work like this? Did you read things write before you wrote “Happiness” or “The End of the Moon”?

LA I guess you can use poems to solve problems. But when I read it seems like I’m reading for pure pleasure, not in order to figure something out. One of my favorite writers is Anne Carson, so I would say if I were to think of how to solve something, I might think of her. Her book “Autobiography of Red” has some fascinating jump cuts. You could study that and learn how to write something in which time is really slithery.

The way time moves in epic poems is complicated. There are lots of time frames and also they’re often about the distant past. Usually the author- the poet- wasn’t there – and that has a lot of advantages. But there are ways to exit the drama, writing in the present tense too.

Q. You've been doing so many projects all over the world in the last two years. Let's start with World Expo 05 in Japan which will open in April. Can you describe what you're planning?

LA Several things actually. World Expo is of course a trade show-slash-cultural exhibition, and the theme is nature. They've commissioned projects from a few artists. Expo's official mascots are shrubs, stuffed shrubs, a large one and a small one, possibly father and son which Lolabelle my rat terrier has completely shredded already.

I'm doing several big projects for Expo and the first is called "Walk" and it's series of visual installations in this huge garden as well as a binaural piece of music which you listen to on headphones as you walk. Binaural is beautiful, so very 3-D. I'm also working with some Japanese designers on a very cool infrared system that lets you access sounds on tiny wireless cards.

The other part of the project is a film on high definition video. It's so beautiful! I just haven't used images for a long time because I hate the way video looks. Now it's starting to look more and more like film, and I love it. We just finished shooting the film, and now we're cutting it. Basically it's twelve little sequences- songs, really, about the way we experience time.

In a way the whole project has been an excuse to work outside. The film will be shown on a giant Astrovision screen at Expo. We hope to screen parts of it in Times Square on a similar system as a test. Then in April I'll do a series of concerts in Japan as well. That should be fun.

Q. Tell us about Greece and the Olympics. You were working in Athens with the Olympics team for, what, a year and a half?

LA Yeah. Actually I wasn't able to talk about any of this when it was happening but it was amazing. They asked me to work on writing the opening ceremony and also to be the narrator. You know, the one who welcomes the world to Athens. So I went back and forth to Athens a lot for about a year. And I got to work with all these amazing Greeks- writers, designers, choreographers. I just have to say, first of all, they're a lot smarter than we are. They're sharper, they've got sharper tools, they've got a sharper language. They just do. It's more elegant, it's more complicated, it's more complex. And I'm someone in love with English. But I was really aware that they came from the people who invented virtually everything that our civilization is based on- philosophy, geometry, physics, tragedy, sculpture, painting.

So it was – such a long story- a wonderful experience to work on making something with them. The top secret aspect was also a lot of the fun. I could never tell my friends where I was going- I'd just disappear. Then last December there was a big money crunch and, sad to say, I was among the casualties so I didn't get to be the narrator in the end.

Q. You also have two projects in France- one for French radio and the other for the Opera Garnier. How did these happen?

LA The French Radio project started out when they asked me to do a project for their culture show. So I decided to do a diary, an audio diary. So I got this simple set –up of a minidisk player and tiny microphone like a spy microphone, and I carried it around with me everywhere and recorded things every day for several months. Just everyday things– people talking, atmospheres, taking my dog to the spa. Sound is such a powerful way to make a diary. Anyway it's sort of out of hand now, very long, like a miniseries. It's called "Nothing in my Pockets". The producers were just here, and we were trying to edit it but it seems like it's turning into a kind of ..... I think it will air this spring.

Q. I know you're doing a walking project as well. Taking these ten-day walks. Is this connected to the French radio project?

LA Well it started that way. I was in Milan, and I had just finished months of recording and I suddenly thought, maybe I should walk to Paris to mix this. Because walking is a lot like writing a diary are similar. You don't know what's going to happen next, and doing a diary is completely bizarre – there's absolutely no plot, and these people appear, and you're reading it and you say, wow I didn't realize that so and so was going to be so important to me- Anyway, the problem with walking to Paris was the Alps. Which was a major problem.

Q. So how many places have you walked?

LA The first walk was from Athens to Delphi, which was amazing. The idea was to walk along a very ancient road and this was the Sacred Way- the road of fate and answers. And it usually ends up at the temple of Delphi where the oracle was supposed to help you find out what you should do. I went in off season, and the oracle was only in season in summer, even in ancient times. So if you went in off season, like I did, in November, you would go instead to

Pan's cave, and you would dance around, and do other stuff, getting ready for spring, and the spring-like things that would happen.

Q. A kind of pilgrimage?

LA An anti-pilgrimage really. I'm trying to think of these walks as goal-less. Wandering. Looking. In fact I'm trying really hard in general to stop having goals. Goals have been getting in the way of a lot of things.

I just got back from the most recent one. It was along the Ridgeway, in Wiltshire – another very ancient road in southern England. It was the road you would take if you were a shepherd, because it winds through the crests of hills, so you could always look down and make sure that no one was coming to attack your flock, and you're protected – and it was a market road, that it would take you several weeks usually, to walk to the big markets in the north. It was like walking on the spine of a dragon.

I kept thinking I'm going to have some ideas on these walks, or that I'm going to be able to walk out a problem or something but no – my mind sort of goes blank, it's like "oh, this is beautiful", you're just dazzled by beauty, and that's all it is, it's just gorgeous. You just march along, and let all of those beautiful things be around you, and just be part of it.

Q. I always wanted to ask you if you would still be doing this, I mean performing, even if you didn't have an audience?

LA I can't imagine producing a show entirely for myself. That would verge on the insane. I like it when audiences understand what I do. It makes me feel less lonely. And being in the studio day in and out can be excruciatingly lonely.

Q. You said that this new work looks at the relationship between aesthetics, spirituality war and consumerism. Do you think the world's negative reaction to the US war with Iraq is more of an aesthetic difference or a moral one? In a world of war, do aesthetics really matter?

LA This is a tough one. The relationship between morality and aesthetics is obviously extremely complex. One of my favorite quotes is Lenin's "Ethics is the aesthetics of the future." I love to wonder what that might mean! In the future we'll all be good to each other and so we won't need to make art? Other people in the world have a myriad of reasons for their negative reactions to US policies.

If I had to say why we're at war, I would talk more about economics and power than about aesthetics. That said, what's right and what's beautiful are very mixed in people's minds. This is a very big topic in "The End of the Moon." It continually threads through it. On the other hand, I don't want to make it sound theoretical. This piece is – I should say- very impressionistic, allusive, elusive. Meanings keep flying away.

Q. What's left that you haven't done, that you really want to do?

LA What's left? Just about everything! Astrophysics, brain surgery, water colors. But it doesn't seem like there's going to be time for those things this time around, and I'm not so sure I'm coming back this way.

Q. Is there a particular emphasis on the outdoors in your current state of mind?

LA Absolutely! These days I love looking up at huge oak trees and watching the way the branches stand out against the sky. That to me can take up the whole day. Kind of like when I was a child. I'm finding that the sky and weather and animals have a new fascination to me. If you'd asked about nature or the outdoors five years ago, I would've just thought "that's pathetic!" ... I was more interested in situations and solutions, and technology, Now I'm going in another direction. What direction is it? Well, I'm improvising.

Q. Is there a limit to your curiosity? Is there anything that is off limits?

LA Yes, pornographic sex. Is it off limits? I don't know – it's just never been a big subject for me. I also don't talk about madness, crazy people drooling. I guess because I think that I'm trying to talk to people who are more or less in their right minds. Or let's say, I think that the people who understand the stuff I do are probably the dreamers, like me.

Q. How do you relate to the feedback from the audience?

LA Well, I like it when we fall into that communal dream.