

Interview with Yungchen Lhamo

- Conducted by Rob McGann



So the point of this interview is to give people an opportunity to learn more about you and your music. One of the things people are most excited about is the new album you are working on. What is your goal for the new album?

On this album, I'm interested in developing a style of voice and sound that will make use of different rhythms and instruments. This time I will make more use of melody—melody that has a certain feeling to it. I will do the melodies and the instruments in such a way that explores a different range of feelings.

[Yungchen plays a demo version of a new song called “Lo-Sho” on a tape recorder]

This time I am focusing more on the music. So I am really excited about this new CD, because it's going to be very different.

Yes, it sounds very different.

Different from Tibet, Tibet and different from Coming Home. This song is about when you are a child and you have some kind of goal. How you should go and follow this. Then I say to the refugees and to the people, “Come home.” “Lo-Sho” means “Come home.” So in the song, there is a person waiting for this.

So this is an initial version of the song?

Yes, so now I will figure out whether to add a violin or another sound to go with this voice.

Approximately how many songs have you written for the new album?

More than 100. Now I have to go and decide which songs fit and go next to each other.

100 songs is quite a lot. Most musicians enter the recording studio with maybe 20 songs. How can you have so many?



For me every day, if I do something or see something, I will write out sounds. Sometimes I write when I travel. If I am in a car, driving from an airport, or even on a subway, I often sing a song for the landscape. If there is sadness, if there is enjoyment, sometimes when I'm just waiting, there are...songs. And lots of times I will keep them in my head. And if I really like the tune, then it stays there. Then later on I will rewrite them and record them.

How are you going to select out of 100 songs the 10 or 15 that might appear on the next album?

How? You have to speak to your feelings. Then I think it is easier. Sometimes three months after writing a song, you say, "No, this does not sound good. I do not want this song." Then your feeling has changed from the original moment. Maybe at that time you really liked the song and you said, "Oh, I'll put this song onto my next CD." But then after three months, it's changed.

For a lot of artists it is difficult to avoid just sounding like themselves at some point. It's interesting to see, in your case, a progression from album to album.

I believe any creative artist will do this. For me, I like to do different things. I keep my traditional roots in what my grandmother and my mother taught me. It's like when you are building a house, I think of this as my base. And then, on this base I create new things. There are so many sounds I like to listen to and sing.

What comes to you first, the words or the melody?

Melody. For example, if I think about my country or my family, different sounds come through my ear. I then try to put these into my song.

What are your favorite songs to perform and why?

Mostly, I like to sing devotional songs that talk about love and compassion. Often I choose songs based on the response from the audience. Sometimes at my concerts I will write new pieces for that occasion. Each moment is different, with different feelings. So I always try to create some kind of new songs at my concerts. And for me this is like a gift from my heart to the audience. I also like to sing along with the audience, and I really enjoy the giving and receiving, and everybody can enjoy it.

Mostly, you sing before audiences who don't speak Tibetan. What do you hope to communicate through your singing?

For me, the language is not important. Everyone has the same feelings inside. I would like to give a sense of peace and enjoyment. This is my first thought. Of course, different people get different things from my songs, even if they don't speak the language. Some people will say, "I saw Tibet." Some people will say, "I saw mountains." Everyone will find his or her own meaning.

Can you explain why you prefer to perform in an a cappella style of singing?

Hmmm, a cappella. One reason is that I would like to show people that if you have something inside, you cannot lose it. No matter where you travel or what has happened. When I left Tibet, I did not lose what I had inside me. So I would like to show this to people. And also that to make other people happy, you don't need so many things around you. To me "things" don't make us happy. When I do an a cappella concert, I wish in that moment, that people will get inspired and look at their own spiritual lives. I believe we all have our own spiritual life.

Does it relate to a traditional Tibetan style of singing, or is it more a style of your own that you've developed?

I can say that this is my own style because Tibetans traditionally perform with instruments. When they build houses, they have certain music. The nomads perform with flutes. But I decided that even though I lost everything I knew, I didn't lose my voice. So I decided to perform a cappella in my concerts to reflect this.

Can you explain how your grandmother taught you your first songs?

I learned to sing from my grandmother and my mother too. They both had very, very beautiful voices. The first song I learned was from my grandmother. I remember it very clearly in my head. I was very young. I think around five years old. One night she came home, and we had Tibetan food. And after the meal, she started singing a country song. I remember this to this day. Some time later, I actually sang this song for her. She just cried and she said, "How did you learn this song? This is my hometown song." I said to her, "One night, you sang this song." She couldn't believe that I remembered it. The song was called "Ari-Lo."



[Yungchen sings the beginning of "Ari-Lo."]

It's about when you come to a new country, how it can seem like a desert, because you don't know anything about the land. But once you learn about this country, it becomes your homeland. And if you see people, at first they are strangers, but then they can become your friend or lover.

So "Ari-Lo" was the first song you learned to sing?

Yes, then there were other songs my grandmother taught me to sing. And these were prayers. At this point it was quite difficult for me to understand. Here was a woman who everyday of her life was being punished and she was telling me to sing a devotional song. She used to say, "You want to grow up and help other people. This is a way you can help others." At the time, this didn't make any sense to me. People were dying. There was no food. Religion was made illegal. And I said to her, "I can't go anywhere to sing for people." And she said, "One day, you will."

You fled Tibet in 1989 in a 1,000-mile trek on foot across the Himalayas. I don't think many Western people have a conception of what a dangerous journey that is. Can you say a word about what that was like?

It is not easily explained. Most Tibetan people who flee Tibet are risking their lives. It's not easy. You pack a small bag, and you leave. And you do not know if you will ever return. And this is quite hard. In the West, when you go on a trek, you have different shoes and different things for the trip. We just left, which is very dangerous. There are many Tibetan children and adults who have died on the Himalayan mountains. Even today, they do.



Basically, I said to myself, "Even if I die, if I don't see the Dalai Lama, or if I cannot make this journey, it's a special kind of pilgrimage." Then there is some meaning to it. And I think this gave me strength. I mean, it's really frightening. I didn't have much sleep. Also, there was not much food. There are people chasing you, and if they catch you, you have to spend many years in prison. At one point, we were robbed. There were so many difficulties we had to face. From one point of view, it is lucky when people make this journey. On the other hand, there are so

many people dying. I don't like that there are so many children dying because they try to go across the mountains to India. And the parents in Tibet don't know if they ever arrive. I think this is quite sad.

Can you describe physically what it was like?

Some mountains have snow, some mountains have rain. And if you fall over, you will fall to your death. When you don't have enough food or water, it's even more difficult. There were so many bugs biting us, and all of our legs were bleeding, which is not so nice. We had Nepalese people and sherpas and a monk from East Tibet with us. All together, there were seven people in our group. It's so lucky we got to India.

It's often said that when artists experience something as life-changing in magnitude as what you're describing, that it is reflected in their art. Do you think these experiences come across through your singing?

Yes, definitely. When I think about crossing the Himalayas, there are no words to describe how difficult it was crossing those mountains. I can not put it into words to show you. But when I perform, I can almost show you. I can feel the mountains and everything I saw on the trip. Then I can make decorations to the song through my voice. I can tell you, "I crossed the Himalayas, and it took this long," but there are so many feelings that were a part of it that cannot be explained through words.

Sometimes people say, "Oh, how heroic. You crossed the Himalayas. This must have been fantastic." But it's not that you cross the Himalayas and you become a hero. I don't see it that way. I think the people who have survived under Chinese rule, all of them are heroes.

You have been speaking about the range of feelings you evoke through your singing. However, the subject matter of a lot of your songs engages a Buddhist spirituality that in a sense goes beyond feeling.

For me, this is my biggest wish. Right now, we are so busy with issues of money and power. People don't have much time for themselves. There needs to be a place you go and find peace. Tibetans believe that we can offer sounds to the highest living beings. In the beginning of a performance, I will offer the songs to these compassionate ones. Then once they have heard the voice, they will give blessings to all the earth. I always think about that onstage. I really believe you can sing, you can perform, people can hear songs. And the artist and the people who listen to this together can explore different levels.

On your second album you worked with Hector Zazou, who has produced albums for other notable artists such as Björk. What was it like working with him?

He's a genius, I think. He has a good ear and understands what I'm singing musically. It's very nice to work with someone who understands what you're singing about. I feel so lucky. It was an honor for me to work with him.

The title of your second Real World album was "Coming Home," which in a Tibetan context appears to have a kind of double meaning. Can you explain what you meant by that title?



The meaning is that one day all Tibetan people will return to Tibet. All people need their own home. Even the birds need their own nests. With human beings, it doesn't matter what the skin color is or where they come from. Home is something special for us. We all need that home. Really, the meaning behind that title is "Now we've left Tibet, but we will return to Tibet." "Coming Home" means coming back to your own country.

I read in an article that the horse on the album cover of "Coming Home" symbolizes lightning.

Yes, and also the horse I chose was white in color. White for me is something that's pure. I believe that if we explain to the world the truth from our heart, then lightness will come to our country. This is my wish.

What are the goals of the Yungchen Lhamo Foundation?

The goal of the foundation is to open educational clinics in Tibet and other countries. Up till now, I have worked in India and in the West. In the future, my goal is to provide help wherever it is needed.

I want to open educational clinics where people can be taught to be their own doctors, taking personal responsibility for disease prevention, where people can be examined, taught and given tools to remain healthy and also provide child/parent education facilities, dialog, therapy when needed. Also I want to help disabled people remove imposed limitations and maximize their own potential. The main issue appears to be education, mainly how

we provide that education. What sort of study? It's not only just reading books about this country. We have to learn something about ourselves and look inside us. I think this is very valuable.

One of my main wishes is through the foundation to work for Tibetan single parents, whether they are inside or outside Tibet. I want to help single parents, because I have experienced these difficulties myself. When I was growing up, my parents had six children. My father had to flee Tibet, so we had just our mother basically to look after us. Two of my brothers died of malnutrition. My grandmother also was a single mother who looked after three daughters. Her husband was killed by the Chinese Government. I myself am a single parent. It's not easy to raise a child in this world as a single parent.

It is also my wish that in the future I will be able to go back to Tibet and do something for my country. I think it's really important through my success to help children. So I will build a school and also places for public washing machines. Because many mothers when I say "We need to study," they need to wash clothes and they don't have any time. I want to build places where they can wash their clothes in a machine. Then they will have time to learn computers and study what's happening in the world now. Then they can help the children. I think educating parents is a very good idea.

When you're not writing or performing your own music, what kinds of songs do you enjoy listening to simply for pleasure?

I like to listen to all kinds of music, but I prefer to listen to World Music. I like to listen to good lyrics, classical music, Jazz. I like to listen to Judy Garland, singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."



You've lived in New York City for the last two years. What's it like to be a New Yorker now, and what are your impressions of the city?

City lights, hustle bustle. You have to walk fast. Don't look. [laughs] Now I have lived here for two years. And for me, this New York City shows me friendliness. There are all kinds of people here, and people don't wonder why you're here. These are good things. Then there's also a certain energy. Everybody coming here to do something. They're willing to give something to this country. I think this is very good. There is goodness and there is sadness in New York City. I live here now and also travel to other countries, and this is a balance for me.

Your performances take you around the world now to several countries. What's it like to be such a world traveller?

I feel so lucky to have this chance to travel around the world. I can sing the songs that I want to sing. I can write songs that I feel, which to me really is a gift. I don't think of myself as such a special person. I am an ordinary woman with this chance the world gave to me. The audiences get to learn something about Tibet, and I get to learn something about the world, which is nice. I've travelled now to 60 countries, and it's very enjoyable to see other cultures and how other people live. For me, it's a kind of study.

Is there a reason why you wear your hair so long?

In Tibet, most people leave their hair long. But when the Chinese Government came, many people had to cut their hair. When I was very young, I had to separate from my parents and go to a factory to work. At that time, to get a job like this was a good thing. That's how I survived. In the factory, you have to cut your hair, and I know there were reasons for that. But when I left Tibet, nobody was telling me I should cut my hair. So I let my hair grow. And this was out of freedom.

What are you most excited about in terms of the future?

In the future, I am excited to work toward the fulfillment of my dreams and being part of a world moving toward peace and harmony. I am also excited about my own personal aging process, gracefully getting older. I would like to continue to travel and have the opportunity to perform 2 or 3 times in one place. I would like to perform one concert with music, and the next night without any instruments. This I would like to do.

Then I'll go back to Tibet as soon as possible. This is my biggest wish, and I do wait for this everyday. It's not so nice to have your body in one land and your soul and mind in another place. Everyday my heart is in Tibet, but my body is in New York. But I hope this is coming soon. Then I can be with my soul and my body together. Yes, maybe I will go next month. That would be very nice.

