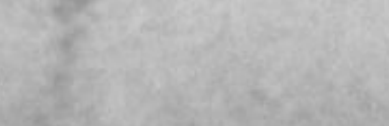




MUSIC ARCHIVES

# From Pop to Post-Bop: Jihye Lee’s Unusual Jazz Journey

by DAVID R. ADLER  
February 1, 2017



Lee came late to composition but caught up lightning-fast

BILL DOUTHART

Jazz composer and vocalist Jihye Lee wrote “Guilty,” one of the six powerful compositions on her new large-ensemble jazz album, *April*, with a stark message in mind: “You let them die.” A tribute to the 304 mostly teenage victims of the April 2014 *Sewol* ferry disaster in South Korea, *April* conveys a sense of incalculable loss — and undimmed anger. “They had an enormous amount of time to rescue [the passengers], but they neglected them,” says Lee, now 34. A native of Busan and longtime resident of Seoul, she was a student at Boston’s Berklee College of Music when the *Sewol* went down. “I talked about it with my Korean friends a lot. We couldn’t really focus on anything else.”

With its chamber-like woodwind textures, involved harmony and sectional counterpoint, and persistent rhythmic drive, Lee’s music fits comfortably within a resurgent large-ensemble format whose exponents include Maria Schneider, John Hollenbeck, Darcy James Argue, and Andrew Rathbun. But Lee also imbues her compositions with *han*, an ineffable sadness that serves as a dramatic element in much Korean art — compare the Brazilian *saudade* or American blues. “We were a colony; we were starving,” Lee says of the origins of *han*. “Nowadays the younger generation doesn’t live that [hard] life, but as descendants we still have that emotion. It naturally comes out.”

The April of the album title refers obliquely to other tragedies: The Boston Marathon bombing, close enough to Lee’s apartment for her to hear the explosions, came almost exactly a year before the *Sewol*; three years prior to that, in April of 2010, an explosion on the Korean-made Deepwater Horizon oil rig caused the worst spill in U.S. history.

While there’s an anguish befitting these events in the tumult and dissonance of Lee’s music, she leads off the album with “April Wind” — a slower, more melodic piece reminiscent of the work of Schneider, a Grammy-winning big-band composer and one of Lee’s chief influences. “I was thinking, *gentle breeze*,” she says. “But that makes the music even sadder, because it’s so beautiful. We are hoping for that warm breeze. April has to bloom again.”

After years training and performing as a vocalist, on this record Lee sings sparsely, in clear but wordless melodies. Her Berklee mentor Greg Hopkins, a veteran trumpeter, likens her vocals to Flora Purim’s on Chick Corea’s *Return to Forever*. “When you get a student that has an idea of the picture they want to paint, you’re lucky,” Hopkins says. “She’s already on a path and knows what she wants to write.”

Not that her path has been a common one: Lee had no jazz, or even classical, musical upbringing. But she taught herself theory and undertook formal training at Dongduk Women’s University in Seoul. She then spent six fruitful years as a pop singer-songwriter in Korea, performing under the name Jiyo. “I wasn’t famous,” she says, “but I was able to make my living.”

Having always been drawn to more complex music, Lee felt she was missing something as a pop performer and lacked mentors to help her discover it. “I knew that Berklee had a lot of variety, different genres,” she says. “But I’m not from a rich family. I waited and waited until I had some money, and [by then] I thought maybe I was too old. But I made a jump.” It was only after her move to Boston in 2011 — as an undergraduate, again, at 28 — that Lee discovered the richness of large-ensemble jazz. She’d been accepted as a singer but eventually declared a dual major, in vocal performance and jazz composition. On some level the decision was pragmatic: Her English wasn’t strong enough to write lyrics, and she lacked the technological bent necessary for film scoring or production. So she dove into contemporary big-band writing.

While her years as a pop singer weren’t quite training for a jazz career, they did give her a strong stage presence: Lee is confident, funny, and self-effacing in front of a crowd, as was clear during a recent big gig at Club Bonafide in midtown. It was a showcase for Korean women artists: Saxophonist Yoo Sun Nam followed Lee, while vocalist Song Yi Jeon, originally from Wonju, led off with a quintet and ventured a complex reworking of the Korean folk song “Jeongsun Arirang.”

Lee’s big band roared as she stood and swayed up front, conducting some of the city’s finest young players, including trumpeters Matt Holman and David Smith, saxophonists Alex LoRe and Andrew Gould, and trombonists James Burton III, Becca Patterson, and Nick Finzer. Creating with artists of this caliber is why Lee is in the States, like many who’ve preceded her. She cites Burton, LoRe, and fellow Berklee alum Patterson as particularly helpful in offering encouragement and facilitating new contacts.

Recent years have seen an influx of Korean jazz students in the U.S. It could be that South Korea’s exposure to jazz is catching up to, say, Japan’s, but that the development of a top-tier jazz scene in Korea has been slower. Jeon told me that jazz in Korea “is considered more like entertainment, easy listening. The experimental, challenging, artistic style doesn’t really exist much over there.” That partly explains why many Koreans are going abroad, Lee explains: “I think everybody’s so thirsty. Musicians [are eager] to learn and expose themselves to new stuff.”

Jeon and Lee became friends at Berklee; Jeon had previously studied classical composition and jazz in Austria and Switzerland. “It’s a very common thing [for Koreans] to study abroad,” Jeon says, “and also they [tend to] admire Western culture a lot.” Some students will return home, whether to study or teach; others may brave the demanding American scene.

Lee is taking a wait-and-see approach. “I want to stay longer,” she says. “I don’t know if I want to live here forever, but my fear about going back to Korea is I’ll lose the edge, I’ll lose the creativity. I’ll have to adjust to the Korean scene and it’ll be hard to make a living. At this stage I’m thinking, ‘OK, let’s create as much as I can and don’t think about success so much.’ I need to let my music live its own life.”

This article from the *Village Voice Archive* was posted on February 1, 2017

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