

“My Career Is A Work in Progress”

Ernestine Anderson

Seattle

Jazz legend Ernestine Anderson has expressed her creativity through song all her life. Here is what she has to say about creativity to Living Buddhism correspondent Curt Young.

Living Buddhism: Thank you for spending this time with us. When did you know you had this talent?

Ernestine Anderson: As far back as I can remember, I’ve been singing. My folks tell stories about when I was 3 years old singing in the church with my grandmother. I think I’ve always wanted to sing. My father sang with a gospel quartet, so he was my first influence. And I wanted to be like my father, I wanted to sing, too, you know.

LB: You make your home in Seattle. Is that where your career began?

Anderson: I was born in Houston. I got my first job as a pro there when I was 12. But when my school grades started to go down, my father thought it would be a good idea to move. He wanted to take me away from the music scene, thinking it would help me focus more on my education. So he wrote to a friend who lived in Seattle explaining the situation. This friend wrote back and said Seattle was the best place for us to come because there was no night life to speak of. What this man, who was a Baptist minister, didn’t know was that Seattle was just loaded with after-hours clubs. My family moved there when I was 15. I wasn’t in Seattle two weeks before I was approached about singing in a band. My father said it would be okay as long as I kept my grades up. He warned me that the minute my grades slipped, I’d have to give up singing. So I kept my grades up.

LB: What was the next turn in your career?

Anderson: When I was 18, I went on the road with Johnny Otis. After that, a couple of years later, I went on the road with Lionel Hampton. In those days working with big bands was how you got your music education. I worked with each band for a year at a time. After I left the Lionel Hampton band, I went off on my own and have been on my own ever since.

LB: As you look back, who were your greatest musical influences?

Anderson: Well, I call them the masters. Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, Billy Eckstein and a whole host of instrumentalists. Miles Davis—I worked opposite him. He used to come to Seattle a lot and work this one club and whenever I went in he’d call me up to the stage to sing with the band. And of course you don’t say no to Miles. I also worked with him, at his request, at Birdland (the noted New York jazz club).

LB: You must have had things you wanted to accomplish musically. Have you done so?

Anderson: Some things. But, I’m still learning. President Ikeda once told me to have confidence in what I was doing for singing was indeed my mission, as he put it, for world peace. He said that artists have the fortune to touch hundreds and thousands of lives through their performances. He also suggested that I learn as much as possible about my craft, to learn something every day. I asked him, “How can I tell the difference between confidence and arrogance?” He said that when you’re satisfied with your station in life, that’s arrogance. But when you continue to grow and to learn and develop and keep seeking knowledge about your craft—this is confidence.

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LB: How has your practice of Buddhism affected you as a performer?

Anderson: My career had been developing slowly before I embraced Buddhism. Up to that point I was a very unhappy person. I didn't enjoy the success I had. In fact, my success had the opposite effect on me. I was afraid of it, if you will. When I started chanting, my whole life and my whole identity with people changed. I started to see people in a different light. And I began to enjoy what I was doing. I could enjoy working and not be uptight about it. It became an exchange from me to the audience, the audience to me. With that enjoyment, my career started to grow much faster; it's still growing. I spent so many years in a world of hell before that. But they weren't wasted, because I feel I had to go through all that to get here.

LB: It sounds like you're communicating joy.

Anderson: Exactly. You know, I feel as a performer that it's my responsibility to make people feel good. When they come in to hear me sing, they can be feeling as low as the ground. I feel it's my responsibility to have lifted their spirits by the time they leave. I chant to be able to show people that kind of life-condition.

LB: What were the circumstances around your deciding to practice Buddhism?

Anderson: I was in a state of depression, suicidal. I was living in L.A. at the time—1969. As a matter of fact, I have since passed the building many times where I tried to commit suicide and where I started practicing. As I said, I was suicidal and very, very unhappy. My life was at its lowest. Very shortly after I started running into Buddhists wherever I went; even if I went to someone's house, there would be a Buddhist there. Pretty soon it started to sink in that there was something going on here; someone was trying to tell me something. I made up my mind that I would find out whatever I could about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism from the next person to tell me about it. Well, sure enough, some friends of mine who lived in the same building had joined (SGI-USA). I happened to go up to their apartment a couple of weeks later and saw the Gohonzon and asked them about it. At the time I hadn't connected the chanting people had been telling me about with the Gohonzon.

But anyway, they shared how things had been changing for them since they started. One was an actor and the other person was a songwriter. They just went on and on about how they were suddenly receiving residual checks they hadn't expected, things like that. They knew I hadn't worked for a long time because we used to all get together and compare notes. The actor who hadn't worked was now getting called for auditions. Commercials that had been canceled began playing again, so that's how he started receiving well-needed residual checks. I asked them how I could get the Gohonzon. So they put me in touch with the lady that introduced them and it started from there. After attending my first meeting, I realized my first benefit was that all the anxiety I had just left, and I was happy inside for the first time in my life, you know, just a real good happy feeling from inside. Something I'd never ever known before. I knew then I was on to something good, something real.

LB: Were you able to keep up the practice all these years?

Anderson: I stopped for about three years. That was after my first three years. I started slowing down. Little by little, before you knew it, I wasn't practicing. I moved to Seattle from L.A. and it took a while to start practicing again. But there wasn't a day I didn't live with the knowledge of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in my heart. I knew I had to get back to an active practice, but it wasn't easy. So I started chanting to be able to get back into it. And just like when I first started, I began to run into people who helped me get back on track.

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In 1993, I found myself focusing on a new release with Quincy Jones' label, Qwest. It took us a year and a half to do the album. I had chanted to be able to work with Quincy, a goal that I had almost given up on. But then it happened. That showed me something I had always known—never give up. Never. If you want something and don't compromise, just hang in there and continue to chant about it, and it will happen. Maybe not when you want it, but it will happen. I'm not with Quincy Jones anymore. I've moved on, in fact, some music I recorded ten years ago with the Metropole Orchestra, a sixty-two piece orchestra in Holland, will be released in September on an independent label.

LB: So you've been able to use your practice to move your career the way you wanted it to go?

Anderson: It's not there yet. My career is a work in progress. Just like President Ikeda told me, not to improve is arrogant.

LB: Obstacles?

Anderson: Oh yes! Many, many. Mucho! Mucho! In all aspects of my life. From raising a family with the help of my parents. They looked after my children so I could pursue a career, but after they became teenagers, we lived together full-time. We had to get to know one another because I had been in and out of their lives for their entire lives.

LB: How many children do you have?

Anderson: Three children. Thirteen grandchildren. Two great-grandchildren.

LB: How would you classify your music? Is it jazz or blues?

Anderson: It's hard to categorize what I do that way. My roots are gospel and I noticed over the years more and more gospel in my style. I started out singing in the church. As I said before, I didn't realize I was a jazz singer until my godmother entered me in a contest in Houston. At the time I only knew two pop songs and the piano player asked me what key did I do those songs in, and I told him "C," which turned out to be the wrong key. So in order to save face, I improvised on the melody and when I finished, one of the musicians told me I was a jazz singer, and that was my introduction to jazz.

LB: What was the first label to sign you?

Anderson: A label called Black and White. It's older than I am. Later I was on Mercury Records with Dinah Washington.

LB: She, too, was a legend. Were you friends?

Anderson: Oh, Dinah was just wonderful to me. She took me under her wing. The first time I was going into the Apollo (in New York's Harlem), she bought me a complete wardrobe. You know, I don't remember how many gowns, gowns with shoes to match. She even bought me some jewelry to go with those gowns and stuff. I don't remember who introduced me to Dinah, but she and I hit it off from the start. Dinah had an incredible sense of humor. She loved doing pranks and putting people on, and making people think just the opposite of what she really was.

LB: You were also friends with Sarah Vaughn, weren't you?

Anderson: Yes. I was very fortunate, you know. Whenever our paths crossed and we had time, we'd hang together. She once wrote me a four-page letter that she left in a club we were working, telling me that she knew I would enjoy working at the club because everyone was great there and would take care of me and she knew I would like the room. You know, just on and on and on. Over the years we became really good friends. She knew I admired her work. Also, there was a point in my career when I tried to sing like her. I said, "If I'm going to sing, I'm going to sing like Sarah." Some

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musicians came through Seattle and told me that I sounded like Sarah Vaughn, some even said we looked alike. Of course I was thrilled when they'd say something like that to me. Then somebody said to me, "You know, you're a good singer but if you expect to make it in this business, you must find your own identity because there can be only one Sarah Vaughn." At first I was upset. How dare he say this to me, I thought. I was hurt. But when I thought about it later, I knew he was absolutely right. And it was then that I started to think about what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go. I stopped listening to other vocalists altogether and only listened to instrumentals. In that way I developed my own identity.

LB: So now there's only one Ernestine Anderson.

Anderson: Well, I guess so. My dad told me once that when he was driving with some friends of his and one of my songs came on the radio, he said, "That's my daughter." He came home and said to me, "Well, I guess you found your identity, because I could tell it was you."

LB: You seem to really enjoy your life.

Anderson: I do. Due to my Buddhist practice, I'm now able to enjoy all aspects of my life. I've also experienced great protection. For example, I was on the Bay Bridge during the big earthquake in 1994. I missed the freeway collapse by four minutes. We were about four or five car lengths behind where the bridge broke and where the car that you saw on television was hanging over the edge. That same year I was in a plane crash on the runway in Denver. When its landing gear collapsed, the plane turned on its side and skidded down the runway to within a hundred feet of the end of the runway. The wing broke off and everything. We had to evacuate down the chutes. The plane didn't catch fire, but there was a lot of smoke. And I walked away from that. That was, I think, a tremendous benefit. Around that time both my parents were sick and I was able to take care of them and continue to work. I grew closer and closer to them in those years—they were happy and I know it's because of my practice. It was my goal to make their final years the happiest, and they were. That was my big benefit.

LB: You seem to have very strong relationships with people.

Anderson: I think so. I have friends all over the world; as I was saying, my Buddhist family all over the world and friends who are not Buddhist. I'm very fortunate to have so many beautiful friends and friendships.

LB: It's as if you're an ambassador with a portfolio of song. What is the one thing you'd like to leave our readers with?

Anderson: If you don't know what it is you want, chant to find out what it is, chant to find out what your mission is. And seek the wisdom of others. I also think it's very important to stay connected with people. Otherwise, it's like a CD without a player. One's no good without the other.

LB: Thank you so much.□