

# LAURIE ANTONIOLI

## *Short Biography*

A Bay Area native, Antonioli started playing guitar and writing songs as a teenager in the early 1970s, inspired by the era's definitive singer/songwriters, particularly **Joni Mitchell**. She caught the jazz bug listening to her grandmother's 78s of **Nellie Lutcher**, the jazz pianist and vocalist whose sassy style resulted in numerous R&B hits in the mid-1940s. Her jazz investigations led her to **Billie Holiday**, who inspired Antonioli to start singing standards and improvising.

Laurie studied for two years at Mt. Hood Community College's pioneering jazz vocal program in Portland, Oregon. She started absorbing the seminal recordings of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Lee Morgan, while soaking up musical wisdom in person listening to the brilliant vocalist **Nancy King**. Back in the Bay Area, she had a chance to put her rapidly maturing scat chops to work at the age of 20, when **Mark Murphy** started inviting her to sit in at his weekly gig at The Dock, a music spot in Tiburon.

"Nancy and Mark used their voices like instruments, improvising with ease, while also being able to touch people deeply with a lyric. This was very provocative to me," she says. "Mark was so generous about inviting me on the bandstand, always inviting me to sit in and sing. At that young age I was into bebop, big time, and all that scat singing led me to **Pony Poindexter**."

Poindexter, a marvelous musician, deft vocalist, and dedicated entertainer, provided Antonioli with invaluable bandstand training and insight into the jazz life. The New Orleans-born saxophonist had cultivated an avid following in Europe, where he had lived for much of the 1960s and 70s. He recruited the 22-year-old Antonioli for an extensive European tour that turned into an eight-month sojourn in 1980.

"Pony taught me in the oral tradition, all those Bird and Diz tunes—scat syllable for scat syllable," Antonioli says. "We'd do two sets. We sang bop syllables in tandem. I got to sing one song per set with lyrics. I'd usually do a ballad. In fact, at that time, the song 'Left Alone,' by Mal Waldron and Billie Holiday, was one of my favorites. Meeting Mal in Munich during this time was synchronistic."

Antonioli recorded her debut album for Catero Records, 1985's ***Soul Eyes***, a ravishing duo session with piano great **George Cables** (the title track features Mal Waldron's lyrics for his oft-played standard, which he gave to Laurie after hearing her sing in Munich). Throughout the decade, she was one of the region's most visible singers, booked at leading venues and festivals with her own band, performing regularly with Bobby McFerrin and sitting in with luminaries like Tete Montoliu, Jon Hendricks, and Cedar Walton at Keystone Korner. She forged particularly close ties with Joe Henderson, a creative relationship that lasted some two decades until his death in 2001.

"I'm so grateful I got in at the tail end of a scene that no longer exists: the opportunity to interact and absorb the music from the masters," Antonioli says. "That's how I learned. Teaching as much as I do, I'm always trying to make sense of things I learned through osmosis, and translate that into information for students."

***Songs of Shadow, Songs of Light*** isn't Antonioli's first innovative foray into her musical roots. Her second album, 2004's ***Foreign Affair***, is a bracing blend of post-bop jazz and Balkan music created with players from Serbia, Albania, Germany, and the U.S. A collaboration with bassist and composer **Nenad Vasilic**, the project draws on her Montenegrin roots, an interest ignited by

the Eastern European music she heard growing up. She then discovered the Bulgarian Women's Choir—a “life-changing” experience, says Antonioli—and assembled a band with Balkan musicians while living in Austria.

In 2005, her long-running partnership with **Richie Beirach** culminated in the release of *The Duo Session* on Nabel Records, a critically acclaimed album featuring Miles Davis jazz standards and Antonioli's lyrics set to the pianist's compositions. “The quality of this record is almost unrivaled,” *Concerto* magazine wrote. “And if we were to hear something better we'd have heard the new Ella.” A second duo album with Beirach, featuring his originals with lyrics by Antonioli as well as spontaneous duets, is scheduled for release in 2015.

Antonioli's work as an educator kept her off the U.S. scene for some years. At the recommendation of her mentor Mark Murphy, KUG University hired her as a professor for the vocal jazz department in 2002. Founded by **Sheila Jordan**, the prestigious program had featured a succession of vocal masters, including Sheila Jordan, Mark Murphy, Andy Bey, and Jay Clayton.

In the summer of 2006, she returned to the Bay Area to run the Vocal Jazz Studies program at the California Jazz Conservatory in Berkeley (formerly the Jazzschool). Antonioli developed a unique eight-semester Vocal Performance program for the “solo” singer, and the Conservatory was recently accredited as the only stand-alone jazz institution in the United States, Antonioli's curriculum holding up under the rigors of reviewing committees.

“I've poured a great deal of my creative energy into developing this program,” she says. “Jazz has allowed me to travel in the world, record, teach. It's been an amazing form of practice and discipline. But ultimately, it's the ‘feeling’ of the music I hope to capture and bring to the classroom. The classroom, you see, is one of the few places students can access learning this music anymore. I hope to keep it from becoming a sterile academic art form, which is, frankly, a big problem in jazz education. My recipe: the singers perform weekly with the best instrumentalists I can hire. Hands-on experience with musicians who are better than they are: simple, and how we all learned ‘back in the day.’ Ultimately it's on the students to find their way. Becoming an artist is a solitary pursuit and no amount of education can “make” someone into an artist.”

Antonioli gained widespread attention with the release of 2010's *American Dreams*, a project encompassing unlikely jazz fare like the cowboy lament “Dreary Black Hills” and “America the Beautiful” as well as her extraordinary collaborations with Austrian pianist/composer **Fritz Pauer**, best known to American jazz fans as the longtime accompanist of trumpet legend Art Farmer. The album served as a potent reminder that Antonioli is a major talent, an artist with a global vision rooted in American soil. “It is not hyperbole to say that Laurie Antonioli is emerging as the most important *vocalist*, let alone jazz vocalist, this decade.” wrote C. Michael Bailey in his review of the album.

With *Songs of Shadow, Songs of Light* Antonioli once again extends the possibilities of jazz, providing new insight into some of the era's best-loved songs. Joni Mitchell is no longer performing but Ms. Antonioli is in her prime as a vocal artist. Having carried Joni's music with her for over forty years, she is a profoundly appropriate interpreter of this multifaceted, poetic, and deeply personal music.

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