

VALERIE NARANJO: Breaking Boundaries

BY MEGAN ARNS

Amidst the hype surrounding the 40-year anniversary of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, an individual was also celebrating her 20-year anniversary as a member of the famed SNL Band. Valerie Naranjo has been the percussionist and mallet specialist in the SNL Band for 20 years, and is in fact the sole person to have held this position.

Rhythm! Scene: *Playing on SNL's 40-year anniversary show must have been a milestone performance for you. How did you first land this gig?*

Valerie: This is my twentieth season at SNL, and it truly has been an honor. I met Lenny Pickett, one of the musical directors and tenor saxophonist for the band, through a mutual comrade in the Phillip Glass Ensemble, which I played in from 1988–2000. I ran into Lenny in *Drummer's World*, a drum shop in New York City. He said, "It's interesting that you and I are meeting right now, because we were looking for your name in the union book and we realized you weren't a member of the union!" Lenny was looking for two percussionists to accompany his band, the Borneo Horns, to Frankfurt, Germany. Needless to say, I joined the union shortly thereafter!

In August 1995, years

later, I received a phone message from Lenny saying, "We really hope that you're in town because we've been considering you for SNL all summer." At this time, NBC was about to drop the show, but they were giving the producers a year to

make changes that could bring the show back onto its feet. One of the changes that the music department wanted to make was to add a percussionist to the band. The production department said, "Oh no, we don't have money to add



PHOTO BY SALVINO CAMPOS

Valerie in her percussion studio

another person. We're cutting the budget. How can you add a musician at this point?"

While they were going back and forth, I coincidentally was also going back and forth internally in a crisis of identity all summer. I was thinking, "Maybe I shouldn't be a professional percussionist because I've been trying this for a long time and I wonder if my failures are outweighing my successes." This makes me laugh now because I was so young. I'm a Nichiren Buddhist, and because I was at the end of my rope, I was enacting spiritual means to really get to the bottom of it. I remember one day that I had finished my morning prayers and I had this feeling, "You know, I'm exactly where I need to be. I don't need to worry anymore." And

"Valerie Naranjo will be there every week, jamming in the usual whirl of energy and passion that makes her one of the most accomplished percussionists in New York."

—Jared Cobb, *DRUM! Magazine*

that's when I got the call to join SNL. It was a real metaphysical proof for me that we need to believe in ourselves.

RIS: *What does your percussion setup at SNL consist of?*

Valerie: I have two mallet instruments in drawers underneath an extended trap table. Extended above the trap table is a frame from which I mount cymbals, tambourines, two types of chime trees, woodblocks, and various instruments that I've gotten from all over

the world. One of the things Lenny wanted from a percussionist was unusual sights and timbres. I have Native American instruments from friends and family, three congas, two bongos, a djembe, a kpanlogo drum, timbales, and over a hundred traps—things from castanets and woodblocks to afuches and various shekeres and shakers.

RIS: *Do you use all of those instruments in each show?*

Valerie: I get a set list from our librarian the night before the show, which usually consists of about 30 to 40 songs from which are eventually chosen about 20 to 25. I go through these songs and make sure that all of the instruments are at my rig. If I have used them somewhere else, I need to bring them from my studio or from elsewhere.

RIS: *What kind of charts are you given along with those set lists? Is most music written out, improvised, or a combination of the two?*

Valerie: It's a combination. Some charts are very specific—especially mallet parts, because I'm



PHOTO BY DANA EDELSON

Valerie playing djembe in her setup at Saturday Night Live

often doubling horns or other instruments. Other charts just have bars and slashes and breaks, translating to: Do your own thing! In Lenny's opinion, one of the things a percussionist should provide is contrast. So something I might have played on congas last month might be bucked up this week against another piece that is played on congas, so I'll rearrange it for another combination of instruments. After 20 years it's pretty easy, but the first year I really sweated it out. I would take charts home and really try to think carefully about how I could best provide contrast. That's just my nature; I love to practice and I love to work things out.

RIS: *What is it like to work closely with SNL drummer Shawn Pelton?*

Valerie: He's amazing. He's like a very funky perfectionist, and a

“...a talented percussionist who gives the material an impressive textural depth and rhythmic flow.”
—Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

lot of times you don't get those two in the same person. It's always a pleasure to just be in his groove. He's really always about the groove, and he pays a lot of attention to detail. He's amazing, yeah. It's nothing but an honor to play with Shawn Pelton, and everybody else in the band for that matter. Shawn is one of my very favorite drummers of all time. He's really a rare combination of many, many, many styles and many kinds of perfection. And he's a great guy. He's a super wonderful person to hang out with. He doesn't take himself so seriously, you know. You feel very comfortable around him.

RIS: *Were there any specific moments of the 40-year anniversary show that were particularly memorable for you?*

Valerie: One of the most amazing things for me was that Paul McCartney was sitting right in front of the band for the entire three-and-a-half hours! Overall, it was just a total honor to be in the presence of some of the greatest comedians of all time. At the end, they asked the audience to come down onto the stage to take a group shot with those who had performed that night. No one wanted it to end; we were standing on that stage for well over an hour! I think there was not a person there that didn't say that it was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of experience.

And for the band, it was a real affirmation. The SNL Band is really a family. There's a kind of chemistry that happens when you are a band for a long period of time, and we're really fortunate to be able to have that experience together. It's not an easy experience to have nowadays.

MAKING HISTORY IN WEST AFRICA

Valerie has embarked on many trips to Ghana to study the gyl, a West African marimba made of



PHOTO BY BARRY OLSEN

Valerie performing on gyl at Kakraba Lobi's funeral; Ichitey James is to her right on gangaa (drum)

wooden keys with dried gourds for resonators. On her maiden voyage to Ghana in 1988, Valerie's desire to study and perform led to a chiefly decree in the Lawra region that women would be allowed to perform gyl publicly. She apprenticed with Kakraba Lobi, the Ghanaian gyl master who was a founding member of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, until he passed away in 2007. Together they toured the U.S. five times, produced four CDs, and published 15 of his gyl compositions transcribed for Western marimba.

RIS: *When did you become interested in the gyl, and how did you come to find the music of your mentor, Kakraba Lobi?*

Valerie: I first learned about the gyl when I was a freshman at University of Colorado. There was a doctoral composition student from Ghana who took it upon himself to teach a course in Ewe drumming to the percus-



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“Cat and Mouse” from *Song of Niira*, Mandara Music. Performers: Kakraba Lobi, Valerie Naranjo, Barry Olsen. This song tells the story of a momcat who tries to find mice for her babies. After repeated tries, she falls asleep. One brave mouse sneaks up to the sleeping cat and bites HER, causing her to cry. The moral: just because you're bigger doesn't mean you are a winner.

sion majors. Sometimes he would walk up to a marimba before or after class and play, and this person had a voice on that instrument like I had never heard. I commented to him, “Wow, your marimba playing is amazing!” He would just laugh and say, “Well, I don't play marimba,” and he would proceed to tell me about the gyl.

Years later, after graduate school, I found the record *Kakraba Lobi: Xylophone Player from Ghana* in the African

Music Center in Central Harlem. I transcribed Kakraba's record and various other field recordings, first learning on chromatic marimba and then on a pentatonic marimba that I found at a store in Brooklyn. I quickly realized there was not much scholarship on the gyl; even in the massive *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* there were only two paragraphs. I like to get the word from the horse's mouth, so to speak, so I decided that if I really wanted to learn about this instrument I'd have to go to West Africa.

I had heard stories of people being robbed, people getting sick, and those kinds of stories kind of deterred me for a couple of years. I remember my husband, Barry, driving me to the airport on my first trip to Ghana, and I was sobbing. He said, “I could probably catch a flight tomorrow and join you.” I told him, “No. This is something I really have to do alone.” As soon as I was there for two or three days, I said, “Oh my gosh, I should have done this



PHOTO BY BARRY OLSEN

Chitayeer Yardide, one of Burkina Faso's foremost gyl masters and one of Valerie's teachers, in Saaru, Ghana.

when I was 18.” Ghana is a beautiful and friendly country. I didn’t know that until I went there; I just had to experience it for myself.

RIS: *Were you in touch with Kakraba before you went to Ghana for the first time?*

Valerie: Yes. Once I got the courage to write him, he wrote back inviting me to come and study with him. At the time we didn’t have Internet service like we have now, so it took three to four weeks for a letter to reach him. When I first traveled to Ghana to study with Kakraba, he had been hired to perform in Japan, so he wasn’t there! This turned out to be fortunate, because instead of starting my gyl studies in the

capitol city where Kakraba had relocated to, I went to Ghana’s Upper West where the instrument actually originated and saw how important it was to the people there. I started to study with teachers who really set my right foot forward by teaching me relatively less complicated music and having me perform it in public right away.

RIS: *But women weren’t allowed to play gyl in public. Was your desire and ability to perform controversial?*

Valerie: Absolutely. When I first played for Lawra chief Karbo, he was sitting with his council of 20 male elders. There was a huge uproar when I finished; some council members were

of the mind that times are changing and women should have the kind of role that I was taking. Others were more traditional and said that this had never happened before, and that it should never happen again. Dagara people in Lawra are very polite, so there weren’t too many people directly scolding me, but there was a lot of private controversy.

Women have been playing in public since then, so I think that I learned that there will always be controversy where changes are made, and that’s okay. I think it’s a mistake to try to avoid controversy and therefore not enact any change. Fortunately for me, I had no idea that women didn’t play until I was in that meeting! So it taught me that people should do what they love and try to encourage others; that alone can bring change.

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Valerie Naranjo performs “Gmeng Se Naa Eee” on gyl

RIS: *Can you describe the effect Kakraba Lobi had on you as a percussionist?*

Valerie: Yes. His lessons were like nothing I had ever experienced. We didn’t speak much; it was all about music. He had a way of stretching your mind, and just when you thought you were going to lose it, he’d say, “Okay, we’re finished now.” [laughs] Great West African pedagogues believe that human beings have incredible capacity greater than they themselves know, and it is

the job of a great mentor to expand that capacity. Kakraba was always doing that.

I remember going to his house one day after I had pulled too many hours of practice and was so tired. I was thinking, "I just really want to go back to the hotel room and get some sleep." He said, "I think we should go to TV3 [one of the television stations in Accra] and show them what you do." I said, "Okay, when would you like to do this, Kakraba?" He said, "Now." I remember telling him, "Well, maybe it would be better to do it tomorrow," because I didn't feel like going, and he said, "No, now." We got in a taxi, went over there, and what we recorded ended up being picked up as an international CNN spot!



PHOTO BY SALVINO CAMPOS

Kakraba Lobi, Barry Olsen, and Valerie Naranjo in 1999

RIS: Ron Grunhut documented your groundbreaking trip to Ghana in his film *Knock on Wood*. How did you connect with Ron, and where can we see this film?

Valerie: Ron Grunhut was a very well known wind player on the scene in New York for a long time. After he developed Parkinson's disease and could no longer play professionally, he decided to redirect his creative potential to filmmaking. *Knock on Wood* was his first documentary. It has been in numerous film festivals and has won several awards. We did not expect it to have so much success, but in retrospect I think the message is a strong

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Valerie Naranjo and Barry Olsen perform at El Taller Latino Americano in 2011 (Film credit: Demian Palombo)

one and resonates with a lot of people; as women we need to affect change and have a positive impact as much as we can. You can find more at www.knockonwoodthefilm.com.

RIS: You mentioned that you worked

with transcriptions early on in your study of the gyil. When did you and Kakraba decide to actually put these transcriptions into set arrangements and publish them?

Valerie: Studying transcriptions is not only a good way to make

great music, but also a good way to gain an understanding about how an instrument can work. When I heard the music of Kakraba, I was really excited about a new voice for Western marimba. It took a while before I garnered the courage to approach him about my transcription idea, because I perceived him as a traditionalist. I thought, "Oh, this idea of a completely different instrument is really going to be strange to him." But I posed the question, and his reaction was quite different than I expected: "No, no, part of the tradition of music is that it has to bring people together," he said. "So if this can bring your people and our people together, then this is great."

The transcriptions are somewhat of a snapshot of a certain way that a piece can be played. We had to make a lot of decisions about how to start a piece, how to end it, and how to give it the kind of continuity that we Westerners are used to, while still honoring the tradition. I actually shipped a marimba to Ghana so that we could work together to make these decisions. You can find these transcriptions through [Bachovich Publications](#).

RIS: And some of these transcriptions have been arranged to play with orchestra?

Valerie: Yes, the concerto arrangements were born out of Kakraba's dream to work with



PHOTO BY GEORGE VUUR

Valerie with current teacher Ba-ere Yotere in Accra, Ghana



George Vuur, Ba-ere Yotere, Valerie Naranjo, Ichitey James in Accra, Ghana



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"Lo Ben Doma," which translates to "The Breadwinner's Hoeblade," performed on Western marimba by Valerie Naranjo

an orchestra. He never realized that dream before he died, unfortunately. He died suddenly in 2008. He had expressed interest in working with a “big, big, big, big band.” [laughs] He loved stringed instruments, so I arranged one of his favorite solos as the first piece in honor of him. It is called “Do Not Play Favorites.” I went back to West Africa with these orchestras and played them for some of the master musicians and they agreed, “This is beautiful music and you should do it.” So it has that seal of approval.

BUSKING TO BROADWAY

When Valerie is not playing gyl in Ghana or jamming with the SNL Band, she can be found giving clinics and master classes around the world, performing with her quintet project Mandara, teaching at NYU, or playing in *The Lion King* on Broadway. But it’s not easy to make it as a freelance percussionist in New York City.

RIS: *What is life like on the New York City freelance music scene?*

Valerie: My parents instilled in me early on that if you can create things, you will be much richer than if you try to put things around yourself. So, for several years in New York, that meant living in a 480-square-foot teeny-weensy apartment with my husband, Barry. Our simple means weren’t important. What was important was

the music, creativity, love, and camaraderie that filled that space. Along those same lines, if something came along but didn’t pay a lot of money, I would ask myself, “Is this going to help me as a creative person and as a musician?” I’ve been very fortunate that this has served me well.

I busked on the street for

my first five years back in New York City after grad school, and I had a blast. I had to be really careful to play well, because you can form bad habits when you’re constantly performing and not practicing. I was constantly meeting people and hearing about tons of projects. The ’80s were a very ripe time for wacky projects. New York



Valerie performing at the X Festival Nacional de Marimbistas in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico



Presenting at New York University's Broadway Summit before joining the faculty at NYU

PHOTO BY PAUL ASCENZO

City can be a really amazing place; everybody here has a project.

I tell my students, no matter where you are, it's really important to be an innovative person and to have something that's your own that you're creating, because that will put a lot of fire into your life and make you a desirable person to be around. There's nothing like being around a person who's inspired to move forward, and there are a lot of people like that in New York, constantly doing new projects. That's why I stay here. It's not easy, though. I was in New York for seven years before I got my first off-off-Broadway show. Then it was another seven years before I did anything like *Lion King* or SNL.

RIS: *In addition to performing on Lion King, you also orchestrated the African percussion score, incorporating your deep knowl-*



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“Your Inside Out,” composed by Barry Olsen and performed by Mandara: Valerie Naranjo, percussion; Barry Olsen, piano; Vince Chericco, drums; Bryan Carrott, vibraphone; Leo Traversa, bass

“(Mandara) led by the delicate, intense, incantatory Valerie Naranjo, makes a kind of music in which sound is inseparable from dance... Mandara’s players fling their entire bodies into executing their fantastically complicated lines... The prayerful, otherworldly quality of these patterns reveals that contemporary minimalism owes as much to African as to Indian parentage. In every piece the ripe, refreshing clatter of Mandara’s instruments—and the rapt concentration of its players—made for a deeply absorbing evening.”

—Mark Adamo, *The Washington Post*



Valerie Naranjo Latex Mallets

VN 30 are the mallets I’ve always dreamed of using to play the transcription series “West African Music for the Marimba Soloist.” They unleash the articulatory potential of the marimba, as if hearing a person speak clearly after having heard them with their hand over their mouth.

The marimbists who use VN 10 and VN 20 at “The Lion King on Broadway” have said “I never thought that a marimba could sound this way”, “... Best sound for this instrument”.

—Valerie Naranjo

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edge of West African music and instruments. How did you get involved with this show?

Valerie: I have always been interested in musical theatre since I was an undergraduate student at the University of Oklahoma. I got involved with *Lion King* through Julie Taymore, the director, with whom I worked on other musical productions. To me, when an actor walks out on stage and is supported by an orchestra, a sound crew, a set designer, and a costume department to deliver a specific message, that's a very powerful thing.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER PUEGO

Valerie playing gyl

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LOOKING BACK

Although she has spent most of her professional career in New York City, Valerie was born and raised of Native American heritage in Southern Colorado. She has two degrees in music from the University of Oklahoma (vocal and instrumental music education) and Ithaca College (percussion performance). Some of her primary keyboard percussion teachers include Leigh Howard Stevens, Dave Samuels, and Gordon Stout.

RIS: When and how did you start playing percussion?

Valerie: I started in the school band program when I was nine. I wanted to play flute, but my mother convinced me that I would have just as much fun, and more gigs, if I played percussion. But what she never told me until I was a professional was that she herself



Valerie Naranjo with Ba-ere Yotere at PASIC 2013

wanted to be a drummer. My grandfather had deflated her dream when she was about 14, because in Southern Colorado, basically the live music venues available to you after you leave school are either bars or places where people hang out and

drink. He decided this was not the right place for her to be as a young woman, so she never got to realize her dream.

RIS: Looking back at the two degrees you earned in music, how did your time in school pre-

pare you for your professional career?

Valerie: It taught me how to observe deadlines. To be honest with you, most of the music and instruments I play now I didn't learn in school. However, I did learn the invaluable skills of self-discipline, and developed the ability and desire to keep learning. I was fortunate to be told over and over again, "If you're not self-motivated you shouldn't be a musician," so I had a feeling that I knew what I was getting into. Also, I had some amazing teachers that provided me examples of how to teach well, how to pay strict attention to detail, and how to perform well.

RS: *Do you have any advice for percussionists who are currently in school?*

Valerie: Be a great person; strive to be helpful, compassionate, and the type of person that makes those around you feel comfortable. In the professional world, you don't often do a formal audition for a job; your comrades refer you. Before bandleaders, producers, and other prospective employers hear you play a note, they hear about your personality and about your strengths and weaknesses. Employers don't hire people that they don't perceive are going to be great to work with. Besides, acting as the person who "brings the sunshine into the room" makes your own life more pleasant.

Do as much as you can to perfect your basic skills. I can't tell you how many auditions I have sat in and seen percussionists who are fairly well along in their careers, yet they lack basic skills and therefore don't get the gig. Most importantly, pursue what you love. When I first started playing gyil, I played at the neighborhood public library for a buck and change, and people would say, "Oh, this is strange. What is this?" That didn't matter. I loved to do it, and I knew in my heart that I had to do it. It's that kind of love that will take you through those hard points in your musical career. You've got to love what you do and do what you love. **RS**