

NOVEMBER 5-11, 1980

SIXTY CENTS

11.00 outside U.S. and Canada

# SOHO NEWS

WIT & WISDOM  
OF CAMPAIGN '80

**HOLLYWOOD  
GLAMOR:  
SEX  
WITHOUT  
LAUGHS**

by Carlos Clarens

**I'M SINGIN'  
IN THE  
MUDD**

by Stephen Saban

**LAURIE  
ANDERSON**  
PERFORMANCE GENIUS

by Don Shewey

65495

# THE UNITED STATES OF

Think of Laurie Anderson as a high-tech Lily Tomlin. It's not enough to identify her as one of the world's most prominent performance artists. Yes, she does combine several media, and like other performance artists, she uses her self as subject, addressing the audience directly, even confidentially. What distinguishes Anderson from anybody else — and what made her recent performance *United States Part II* at the Orpheum Theater one of the most exciting performances on a New York stage in the last decade — is her superior grasp of complex technology and her incredible charm as a performer.

Onstage, Anderson is serene, mysterious, beautiful, androgynous, mischievous. She looks like James Chance crossed with Joan of Arc, only with dimples that dazzle when she dares a sly smile. She has a mellifluous, seductive voice that she never raises. In performance she often runs it through various phasers and filters — a Vocoder that more or less computer-programs it à la Kraftwerk, and harmonizers that double-track it or drop it two octaves or loft it helium high. She straps on a contact microphone and knocks on her head so a microphone like a castle door. She lies on the floor and murmurs romantic fantasies ("Your eyes — it's a day's work just looking into them"). She plays violin exquisitely — and then puts a \$1.79 pillow speaker in her mouth and "lip-synchs" the same solo. She tells outrageous stories with great comic timing.

No wonder every performance artist in Soho wants to go home and come back after seeing her perform.

What a most impressive, though, is Anderson's associative brilliance. The stunning final image of *United States Part II*, which she projected on a screen built up for. First, the projected photograph of the Statue of Liberty, and the Manhattan skyline. (Onstage musicians in quiet poses provided ominously beautiful accompaniment.) Later, there was a sequence in which a film of the videogame *Asteroids* rolled over a map of Iran and Iraq, while a shouted hand pantomimed Putting on the Gloves, Rolling Up the Sleeves, Flexing the Biceps, Making a Fist. Then a dream about grown-ups with oversized heads like babies; a vision of suburbia with barbecues as a giant battlefield; a story about how during last summer's drought, American farmers began to rent their silos for storage of missile heads, and how they referred to the government's decoy silos as "the scarecrows."

The final image was that Anderson facing the huge screen on which the photographic Statue of Liberty, glowing in the dark, was superimposed on a film of the American flag going round and round in a clothes dryer. While she played an eerie, keening solo on electric violin she became a nuclear-age Nero fiddling while the city burned with radiation, the sounds of sirens and the mournful moaning of mutant cattle gnawing America in tatters, 1987.

There are 10 million stories in the naked city — but no one can remember which one is theirs.

Laurie Anderson is heavily into words. Also voices. Also music. Also jokes. But especially gestures. *United States* is conceived as a four-part series, and Anderson can explain the outline of the series only in terms of gestures.

*Americans on the Move*, the first part



*"I dreamed that I was Jimmy Carter's lover, and I was somewhere I guess in the White House. There were lots of other women there, too, and they were supposed to be his lovers, too, but I never even saw Jimmy Carter and none of the other women ever saw him either. And there's this big discussion going on*

of this that I did at the Kitchen last year, was about transportation, and the gesture for that was an arc. Visually everything was built on that. You saw this image of an arc many times in one way or another — a windshield wiper, a hand waving ("This is the way we say hello"), this sort of astronomic thing going on — and the stereo sound crossed in that pattern. Part two, which is psycho-socio-political, is more of a gravitational situation; the axis shifts to a kind of up-and-down thing but held by a circle. The third part is about money, and the axis shifts to a more frontal situation. The hand position is front-to-back; the physical idea is deep space. Then the last part, which is about love, is a crossed-axis kind of thing, an intersection of two different elements. All the pieces will link up in ways I don't expect right now. I like to collect stuff for a while, to think roughly in terms of the diagram and then just start putting it together. The materials always suggest other things.

The central gesture in *United States Part II* is pointing upwards with one hand. It comes from the Statue of Liberty, but it's also familiar from political campaigns.

That's the difference between the altitude of this country in the '60s and now," says Anderson. "JFK was going" — she demonstrates the pointing-upwards gesture — "this is where we're going, the moon, and nothing can stop us. Now you see Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan doing the same thing, and they say, 'I'm appealing to the Great Being up there,' and they don't know what they're pointing to. They're appealing to their own very vague interpretations of a force. They're being very cagey about it, they're not being specific — anyone can plug into that any way they want. When I re-edit this section I'm going to try to make that more clear in a political sense — the oddness and the appeal of that gesture, what is being pointed to and when."

She pauses for just a second. "I'm just, in a way, babbling about it because I don't really understand it right now. I've never seen the piece. The only thing I really have a great view of, and feeling that I am in, is the last section. I really forget that anybody else is there. There's a kind of suction or vortex working for me, and I'm absolutely pulled into it."

Ah! Another image: the Statue of Liberty as the White Rabbit, the spinning dryer as the Looking Glass onto America, Anderson as . . . "Yeah, Alice Down the Missile Silo or something."

Why is it when we talk to God we're said to be praying, but when God talks to us we're schizophrenic?  
Lily Tomlin

When love is gone, there's always justice  
And when justice is gone, there's always force  
And when force is gone, there's always Mom  
Hi, Mom!

Laurie Anderson

The foot-bone's connected to the shin-bone  
And the shin-bone's connected to the knee-bone  
And the knee-bone's connected to the thigh-bone  
And the thigh-bone's . . . etc.

# LAURIE ANDERSON

DON SHEWET  
PHOTOGRAPHY



which is probably my least favorite country in the world. I have tremendous conflicts about it because they've been the most supportive to me. They say, 'Ve love your work! Come! Do it!' And you just go and everything's set up for you, every piece of equipment works, they are ready, and it is so automatic it is frightening! I mean, I'd rather be blowing fuses in Italy, I really would. At the same time, I like to do things that don't have technical fuck-ups, so I do a lot of things there. I had some real weird experiences a few years ago, though. I was in Germany performing with a dancer who was completely, legally slandered by the press because she was Jewish. The reviews would start, 'Anderson, oh yes, yes, very good,' and then go on to describe this dancer in the most fascist terms I've ever heard in my life. Our mouths were just hanging open.

What did they say? They said, 'Semitic, paranoid creature who is dirty she's just dirty.' You couldn't believe it. We said, listen, you can keep your money, we're just gonna go, and here's our letter saying why we're doing this. Our next concert was in Copenhagen, and when we went up there it really felt like some kind of flight. I swore I would never work in Germany again. Then, like a complete idiot, the next time somebody called and said they had some wonderful opportunity for me in Hamburg, I went. Because it was a wonderful opportunity, I'm really embarrassed about it: it's a terrible conflict. The funny thing is the French call Americans the New Germans. So do the Dutch, though it's getting a lot easier to work in Holland since the Moluccans came over.

'Do you know about that? The Moluccans were a Dutch colony, and the government said, 'Well, we know that we gave you a hard time and stole all your spices and worked you to the bone, so if you want to come back to Holland you can be on welfare.' Well, hundreds of thousands of Moluccans got on the boat. Now, you have to understand that those countries are totally homogeneous. The Dutch are all pleasant little blond people with the shoes and the hair, and here came all these wild men and wild women. Suddenly, Holland is, like, a quarter black. And they don't know what to do. They've been totally critical of American racial problems — you know, 'Why can't those Americans get it together?' They're finally going, 'Ghh — it's really hard, isn't it?' It's really, really hard when someone who's so totally, basically different from you is every way is living next door. It's such a cliché, but there isn't a pluralistic society like the United States in Europe. I think that's why I've been focusing on the subject in this series: since I'm away so much and I'm identified as an American, I have to come to terms with it when someone calls me a New German.'

As we speak, the final image of *United States Part II* comes to mind again in a different light: the flag in the dryer in America cleaning up its act (how hopeful!), Lady Liberty is lavishing folks into the melting pot. Or is it the meltdown? And is Old Glory having to wipe up the nuclear waste?

Keep your distance  
And, uh, keep the change  
Check, please!  
Nurse! Nurse!

Picture this: you're a cute fuzzy dog  
And you're trying to get out of the dog pound

And you only have one phone call

Continued on next page

**because Jimmy had decided to open up the presidential election to the dead. That is, that anyone who had ever lived could have the opportunity to become President. He said he thought it would be more democratic that way — the more democratic it would be.**

Laurie Anderson, who is 33, has been doing live performances in New York and abroad for almost 10 years. Her penchant for technology in both legendary and eccentric. She's probably best known for her invention of the tape-bow violin — a violin with a playback head instead of strings, bowed with a strip of tape. (A recent Anderson work performed by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra featured elegantly dressed musicians whose violins emitted the sound of bongo drums.) And she has utilized more lavish hardware in each piece.

*United States Part II* was no exception. Its 13 sections were actually 3-D songs, dense with musical and verbal information, layers of irony, streams of seemingly random but subliminally connected images. The title, and at least the spirit, of the introductory rap ("Welcome to Difficult Listening Hours") to "Language Is a Virus From Outer Space" came from William Burroughs, the wild, dissonant yet melodic music seemed an amalgam of all the odd sounds heard at 1978's Nova Convention (where Anderson first met Burroughs) and the accompanying slides

illustrated the title's premise by listing the strains: "A frame, B flick, C note, etc."

Almost every number comprised just such a confluence of beams, rays and exterior images. The electronics included two film projectors, two slide projectors (with dissolve unit) and two different Harmonizers (910 and H93) accomplished by four technicians — not counting the band of two singers and five musicians including such semiluminaries as guitarist Wharton Tiers, keyboardist Rome Baran (who was once half of a team with Kate McGarrigle) and drummer D. Sharpe, whom Anderson noticed in Carla Bley's touring band. That's a lot of forces to marshal.

When we meet, Anderson greets me in front of her Canal Street loft with a flashlight (the elevator is broken and she has to lead me up five treacherous, pitch-black flights of stairs. The top floor is safe, spacious, sunny. We settle down with coffee.

Anderson is more fragile in person than she is onstage. She looks like a baby chick; her features are delicate; her skin almost translucent; and when she comb

her punk-cropped hair with her fingers she simply pulls it straight up in the middle. But her manner is the same everywhere — soft-spoken, quick, intelligent. You want to ask her: Why do you perform? What is your musical background? What does love mean to you? How did you get on the international poetry/art circuit? Who does your hair?

Instead, she tells you stories. There's no such thing as a brief answer; every detail must be recounted. She's not saying life is complicated. Life is complicated, but that's not what she's saying. It's that every story is full of dozens of other interesting and illuminating stories, none of which she is too busy or too impatient to tell. She's saying life is like that — one thing leads to another. Luckily, life agrees.

But the phone interrupts every few minutes. Anderson doesn't have an agent, prefers to handle all the requests for performances and lectures herself. She tours a lot, she says, mostly in Europe.

"I feel most comfortable working in places where there are no electrical power problems, and that means Germany,