

exile's song

How Linda Sharrock went from

60s sonic warrior to 90s Seoul singer



"This place is a bit awful, isn't it," says Linda Sharrock, looking around the plastic plushness of London's Plaza On Hyde Park hotel. "It's full of Americans — and they're *so loud*."

It's a measure of how Europeanised she has become that vocalist Sharrock — once one of the loudest Americans on the free jazz scene in the late 60s — can make a comment like this without a hint of irony. She has lived in Europe — mostly in one of its quietest cities, Vienna — since 1983 and says: "The only way I would go back to the States now would be if I won the lottery — which is what you'd need."

Sharrock has covered a lot of ground since she left New York at the end of the 70s. By that time, with her guitarist husband, the late Sonny Sharrock, she had for 11 years been at the epicentre of the Lower East Side 'New Thing', the avant garde community of musicians who blew a hole through black music by taking giant leaps into unheard-of areas of improvisation, energy and intensity. After her divorce from Sonny she left America to explore other musical directions and in addition to Vienna she has lived and worked in all manner of settings in such places as Istanbul, Korea, Bangkok and London. She even gave up singing altogether ("not singing a note") for a couple of years in the 80s.

She was born Linda Chambers and grew up in a musical community — singing, inevitably, in her local church and school choirs — in a musical city: Philadelphia. She moved to New York when she was 17 to study painting at the Arts Students League, but after just two weeks abandoned her studies. She had met Sonny Sharrock, nine years her elder.

"I sneaked into this club on the Lower East Side, and on stage was Sonny and Pharoah [Sanders] and Milford Graves," she says. "Sonny was doing something that I had never heard and it was like... Wow! You know? So I just went up there and asked if I could sit in. That was the start of my career, and three weeks later Sonny and I got married."

She moved in to Sonny's flat on 3rd Street. Living around them were the sonic warriors of the 60s jazz revolution. Across the hall was Byard Lancaster; upstairs Dave Burrell. Sun Ra lived across the street; Pharoah Sanders around the corner; Marion Brown a couple of blocks over. She began singing in groups with Sanders, Graves, Joe Bonner, Sirone and others, and co-led Sonny's ensembles including The Band Of Outlaws and Band Of Savages. She toured with Sonny in flautist Herbie Mann's critically underrated fusion groups. And, again with Sonny, she recorded some of the most uncompromising albums of the era — *Black Woman* (1969), *Monkey-Pockie-Boo* (1974) and *Bird Of Paradise* (1975) — landmark records of Herculean power on which Linda Sharrock's was always the loudest cry.

"Back in the 60s and early 70s, we thought we were going to achieve racial equality through self-expression, and eventually receive recognition for our abilities on the same level as other people. Usually, live, Sonny would tear all his strings and many times by the end of the set he'd be playing with only two left and I would have to scream because everyone else was playing so loud. Even in the circle we were involved in, we were considered 'out'. They would say, 'Oh, here come those Sharrocks!'"

She split up from Sonny, she says, primarily because of musical differences. "We just grew apart musically and both of us being the kind of people we are, there's no way we could have remained married. It was like a 24 hour thing for us — being married and the music and everything was connected."

Moving to Istanbul (because her best girlfriend came from there), she moved from obscurity to relative stardom, working with one of Turkey's most popular singers of the day. "It was an enormous show with 45 musicians. We had to have police guards — she was like the Madonna of Turkey."

She eventually moved to Austria — almost on a whim — becoming part of Vienna's Improv community and working with saxophonist and Vienna Art Orchestra co-founder Wolfgang Puschnig. The collaboration has echoed her time with Sonny Sharrock in that they have formed various groups together, including The Pat Brothers (whose album, *No 1*, is one of the great one-off records of the 80s), AM4 and Red Sun with Jamaaladeen Tacuma. They have also married.

She has two new records out this month. The first, *Like A River* (Amadeo), is a London-based project produced by former Loose Tube trombonist Ashley Slater. It's a wilfully (occasionally too wilful) eclectic mix of jazz, Indo-funk, soul-pop, country blues, even something close to Dadaist cabaret. But if the production seems at times too schizophrenic, Sharrock's dense, remarkably versatile vocals serve as the one unifying force, infusing the album with adenoidal blues slurs, breathy, soaring, torch-soul dramatics and all manner of calls, cries and whispers.

The second release is *Then Comes The White Tiger* (ECM), the second album to be realised from an ongoing collaboration between Red Sun and the Korean master percussion ensemble SamulNori. Recorded in Seoul, the collaboration has been built up over seven years and relies on musical communication alone — neither group speak each other's language. The result is a thunderous free association of near-Test Dept reverberations, freeform alto flights, harmolodic bass and guitar work and expressionistic vocals interspersed with quieter, more peaceful vocal and flute laments.

"I'm interested in a lot of different things and I have to experiment with different combinations," she explains. "The most important thing is to express what you're feeling inside — and accept the consequences. That kind of liberation has slipped away from many people; it hasn't slipped away from me. That is Sonny's gift to me." **PHILIP WATSON**

