

Stan Douglas and Jason Moran Episode 3 Transcript

[SOUNDBITE; STAN DOUGLAS: My name is Stan Douglas, and I'm fascinated by when things go wrong. . . . I'm Stan Douglas and I'm fascinated when things go wrong. That's better grammar. JASON MORAN: I'm Jason Moran, an improviser, and things always go wrong. (Laughter).]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is Dialogues—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; STAN DOUGLAS: Only I knew what was happening (laughs) because there wasn't the shared knowledge there. JASON MORAN: Nobody knew I was doing it, right? Like, that's so jazz (laughs).]

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, Editorial Director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

LZ: Today's pairing: Stan Douglas and Jason Moran. From film and multichannel video to photography and augmented reality, Stan is fearless in pushing himself into uncharted territory. He invents new technologies to make new bodies of work. He's also a master at recreating historical moments—shifting and mixing narratives, time, and space to create something entirely new. In a work from 2014, he meticulously remade the experience of recording a 1970s Miles Davis record, and it features a powerhouse lineup of musicians and the result is a mesmerizing six-hour video loop called Luanda-Kinshasa.

[SOUNDBITE OF LUANDA-KINSHASA]

Stan doesn't write music so he needed to find someone great to compose and perform this original piece and he found that person in Jason Moran.

Jason is a groundbreaking pianist and composer. In 2010, he was named a MacArthur Fellow. He runs his own record label, he's the artistic director for jazz at the Kennedy Center, and he teaches at the New England Conservatory of Music. He has scored movies and TV shows and he continues to be at the vanguard of experimental jazz, and more recently, visual art, too.

We got settled in the studio, and I asked Stan about the first time he met Jason.

STAN DOUGLAS: Yeah, it was kind of like fate, it seemed like.

JASON MORAN: Oh, wow, I like that.

SD: I was doing a talk at Columbia, and this handsome guy in the audience says, Hey, Stan, have you ever had the idea of doing a live thing? I said, Yeah, I was trying to make a direction of Lulu. I had an idea for doing Alban Berg's opera Lulu with a jazz orchestra, and it kind of fell through because I had artistic differences with the composer I was working with. And afterwards he came up and said, You know, I'm Jason Moran, and this is amazing because I've been studying that score for the last year. And then I said, That's amazing because our mutual friend Scotty Hard and I are gonna go see you at Birdland tomorrow night.

JM: Oh, right.

SD: And then the next day I see you on the street in Chelsea. So it's like, why do I keep on seeing this guy?

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SD: So I guess you had the band for how long? The Bandwagon?

JM: We've been together nineteen years now, yeah.

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SD: So it's like you're married.

JM: Yeah, we are. [Laughter].

SD: So how do you keep it interesting?

JM: [Laughter]. Oh, I don't know. We keep it interesting because I bring in these odd projects to do. In 2005, I made this piece called "Milestone." It was kind of a concert, but a concert broken up into halves. But where you saw what would happen in the break, in the intermission, for the band. So the audience would hear a band conversation and be looking at us on stage, but not with our instruments. And so they would listen to an eighteen-minute conversation that we had had backstage, but meanwhile we would just stare into the audience for eighteen minutes straight. And the conversation is mundane, it's us talking about chocolate and Zimbabwe, you know, it's stuff like that. But it's also like this is how it is on the road. And then you come back into the music. And we framed it in a way around the work of Adrian Piper at the same time. In her Mythic Being pieces, the way, you know, the way she wrote about it, the way she wrote about it as the character. And so you knew that there were kind of multiple cells that were at play.

SD: So did you play your banter? I mean, because there's that great piece where you play a bit of one of her lectures, "Artists Should Be Talking."

JM: Right, "Artists Ought to Be Writing," yeah.

SD: Ought to be writing? "Artists Ought to Be Writing."

JM: Yeah. Well every voice has a pitch. Boo doo doo doo duh. I mean, that was close, it wasn't really it, duh doo duh doo doo doo duh. You know, like, so you can play a person's language, and you can play their intent and their tone of their voice, right? So, and every once in a while, I record people and play their voice on piano because what it does is it awakens how conversation really sounds. Whether it's moving or still, or even these pieces, how do you keep that interesting?

SD: I've always loved materialist art. Like, say Agnes Martin paintings. I was seeing a show of her work in Paris in '93. And just like having it—my sense of the room, the light in a sense, I didn't have before, through the work. I could never paint but I do photography. How do I do a materialist photograph that will work the same way? And photographs have been done to death, since the beginning of the twentieth century, so I like really didn't wanna go there. And then I decided to decode, or reverse engineer the way in which JPEG compresses almost everything, like Netflix uses the same technique of discrete cosine transform. We're seeing it constantly but actually we don't recognize until it breaks down.

JM: Hearing you talk about this, this way of kind of moving past some of these expectations, maybe that a viewer might have. It did make me want to ask, how you were introduced to the camera? Like how were your parents a part of your process?

SD: I took photographs kind of late. I was at art school as a printmaker. And then as a sculptor. And then I photographed a sculpture and liked that better than making the sculpture.

JM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SD: And so I kind of went from there. Didn't really do it seriously until I was out of art school. Even though I did study photography. And then I got into it when I got a job as a photographer at a museum, by lying and saying I knew how to work a large-format camera. I could print well but then I said, Oh, yeah, I use 45s all the time. [Laughter]. And then the next weekend, I sort of like got the books out and began practicing to figure out what the hell this thing was. But through that process, I got to know the technique quite a bit better. But I didn't really make photographs as my primary work until much later on. I was raised by a single mother. She was always supportive of what I did even though relatives would go, He's going to art school. Is that okay?

JM: [Laughter].

SD: She says, Yeah, that's what he wants to do.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: So my worst nightmare was when there's an article of me in Time magazine, years ago, and the woman at one point says, So what did your

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father do? What did your mother do? I said, My father's a neurologist, my mother worked at the university. But she had a lot of books around so I was kind of like, there's no art involved but I got into reading these books that are around the house.

JM: Yeah.

SD: And then it just turned into the child of a neurologist and a well-read housewife.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: She worked every day of her adult life, and—

JM: [Laughter]. Oh my goodness.

SD: I got five copies for my mother, and I was like, Oh, I can't, can't show her this. [Laughter].

LZ: Oh, wow. That's crazy.

JM: I ask students a lot about their relationship with their craft and then their family, right? Because sometimes I feel as artists we can work in a certain mode and not ever really share with our family, this is kind of how deep I am going with this.

LZ: Jason, how did you transition into visual art? I mean now you are a visual artist among all the other things that you're doing.

JM: I went to a high school where, you know, there was visual art, there was theater, there was dance, there was orchestra, jazz band. Dating a girl for a while, you know, that'll also get you interested in a lot of things.

Then by the time I got to New York, as a young college student, being in New York and being able to go see shows, you know. So you go see a show at night in a club, and in the daytime on the weekend, then you go see a show at a museum. And I remember seeing things early, you know, as I still was practicing, just piano. But like, seeing Bruce Nauman retrospective at MoMA, kind of like messed me up in a great way. Or Jacob Lawrence, the Migration Series, they showed that in the nineties. Like, seeing some of these things, the Black Male show that Thelma Golden did at the Whitney Museum, I kind of like was stumbling into these kind of historic moments, for me. But I wasn't sure how that tied into what I was trying to, the blues I was trying to play.

SD: Right.

JM: No one had ever, there wasn't really a class on that at Manhattan School of Music. But then over the years, kind of finding a way of going to see a lot of work around the world as I toured. Then after a while, and kind of having a lot of these relationships, and also making kind of a body of work, collaborative work, then it became, Oh, well this is, this stuff is now living. And it should be addressed, kind of face on. And you were a DJ, too, you know.

SD: That was—

JM: I like to talk about that, even without ever hearing you DJ, but— [Laughter].

SD: That was kind of a key thing, it's like, and really you're making a situation, making a vibe, you're making a situation out of these preexisting things. At one point I came to New York and I saw Herbie Hancock and Grand Mixer D.ST. There was a mix of the Wild Style and "Rockit," and I learned how to do that, I could play that live. Then I go back to Vancouver and play it in a set, and nobody knew what those songs were, they had no idea what I was doing, that I was doing anything at all. Kind of drove me nuts.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: I'd also do pause button remixes of songs, but again, it was kind of frustrating. Only I knew what was happening [laughs] because there wasn't the shared knowledge there.

JM: Nobody knew I was doing it, right? Like, that's so jazz [laughs]. Right, you know, because it's so, in many places, many times, it's so subtle what is happening that people think you're doing nothing.

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SD: Right.

JM: They actually think you're just rambling, you know, like—

SD: But there'll be one person in the audience go, I know that.

JM: Yeah.

SD: I know what he's doing.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: Like when I showed that piece that has George Lewis in it, in Documenta, I didn't know if it was the right context, but then the janitor came by and said, Is that Albert Ayler? [Laughter]. And then, is that George Lewis? And it was like, he was my ideal viewer.

JM: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's great, that's great.

SD: I was gonna ask you a question, too, about context and genre somehow. This morning I was talking to somebody about pre-contact Columbian art, and she was suggesting that maybe this isn't really art in a true sense because they weren't artists, they were there for a function.

JM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SD: And I said, Yeah, just like the Sistine ceiling by Michelangelo.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: Is that really art? You know, it was there to sort of have a didactic function, sort of a spectacular function, devotional function. But there was a kind of a change I was thinking of, hearing your talk last night, going from swing to bebop. Where it's not about making people dance, it's about making people listen.

JM: Right. And you know, and of course, I also didn't wanna paint it so polar that people weren't also dancing to bebop. They still were but not like they were to Chick Webb and his big band.

SD: Yeah.

JM: And Savoy Ballroom. And I always felt like, you know, that there was a certain insistence that Charlie Parker or Thelonious Monk, that these musicians were having on now we're gonna change it, and you'll have to pay attention much closer. Because it might fly by. And though we've built all this kind of like rigor into the nuance, you might actually miss it because we're not gonna show you the show. The show is over [laughs]. You know, like we're here as human beings right now in front of you.

SD: Yeah.

JM: And there's a really kind of beautiful change of how African-American performers were dealing with the stage. Watching them go from this kind of functional part, right, to then okay, here's this, I wouldn't call it art part, but I'd call it, wow right now we might say, you know, they're going hard, you know?

SD: Right.

JM: And they also changed the language in a scary way, I think in a threatening way too.

SD: Yeah, I don't really make divisions between art and popular culture. They all produce meaning in some way.

JM: Yeah.

SD: But I have sort of a funny thought about folk music in general, where there's not really happy folk music. Folk music's always about the

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music you make when you're sitting around a fire, and there are things in the dark that might kill you.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: That folk music allows you to deal with that, that condition. And you don't really get happy music until there's like, the safety of a city. And the safety of industrial reproduction. Where you can just sort of not even deal with those situations. So fear is not involved in happiness of industrial pop music.

JM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SD: But then somehow fear comes back in bebop.

JM: Yeah. [Laughter]. That's interesting. I mean, fear is definitely back in bebop. And it comes also in the form of things that people put in their veins. You know?

SD: Yeah [laughs].

JM: There's a thing that also people are trying to relieve, by having to, not only jump on stage, but also mess up the notion of that this is a reliable show. Like, like even that Thelonious Monk might not show up to his own show. And that people traditionally were not showing up to their gig.

SD: And that's the show.

JM: And that's the show. [Laughter].

LZ: Where are we today with popular music?

SD: I mean there's a lot of things happening because there's a lot of possibilities, a lot of technology is accessible to people in a way it was not before. But somehow because of the accessibility, a lot of people have lost the creative synthesis they had otherwise. If you only have this record and that record, you've got ten records in your collection, and your friends who play music, these are your influences, what do you do with that? It's gonna be quite unique, I think.

JM: Yeah.

SD: As opposed to like, knowing everything. And I can do an exact pastiche of this or that thing. If people want the genre, they'll be given that genre. And more and more with social media, it's enforcing that thing, where it's like, you're only shown the news you want, you're supposed to see, you want to see.

JM: Yeah. It's been quite bizarre to look at that because now you know students they used to like, have stuff all on their iPad, or iPod, or whatever, but now they just say, I just go to Spotify. Right? So, that means that Spotify is the ultimate library? Wow, you know, like, it's totally not the case, right? Gaping holes in that, in that library. So much so, I don't even put my new records up on Spot—I mean I don't put it on any streaming service [laughs]. So I'm like, if you gonna find it, you gonna find it on this website [laughs]. And you're gonna pay for it [laughs]. You know? But the other part was, you know, there's always just been, I mean popular music is what it is. I have one theory, which is people like popular music because the grid is so strong in it, right? So it gives us all the comfort we need because the beat is steady, the message is on point, right? The resolutions are on point. It does not like, make us go nuts, right? So people listening to jazz, where none of that is defined that clearly, right? Where the abstraction is actually the destination, then it kind of challenges like what we know.

But then you have somebody like Kendrick Lamar come in. And his relationship to jazz musicians is like this—he and Herbie Hancock are making a record right now. They're working together, or all his friends, the way he's constructed those last couple of records of his have put together sounds that no jazz musician could come up with, and also no hip-hop band could come up with. So he kind of found this strange meeting point and put all these people together and somehow has made these products that for me, still, like somehow he continues to charge the public, in a shocking way. And good work fucking stands out. You know, against the backdrop of such trash, you know? So, and I, you know, and his work ain't perfect either. But you know, but when it shows up like on point, it's shocking.

SD: And it resonates, too. I mean, it's not the kind of work where . . . A lot of pop music works on being recognizable. So, I like this because I've heard this before, somehow. But this stuff is like, it's something you haven't heard before.

David Zwirner

LZ: Let's hear a little bit about Luanda-Kinshasa, how did that unfold?

JM: Let's see. I think you—

SD: I gave you a call.

JM: Yeah. And you know, Stan, we kind of always stay in contact with each other because also you have a show kind of fairly frequently.

SD: Right.

JM: And so I'll always check in to see like, so Stan is up to something, whether I know it or not.

SD: Right.

JM: So, go see a show, give him a call, let's hang out and talk. And then you started talking about Miles Davis.

SD: Yeah, I mean, my favorite record of all time is On the Corner. I have multiple copies which I wear out. And to me, this is what utopia sounds like. I always felt that Miles retired and didn't come out of retirement in the seventies. Like I don't believe the eighties thing is really what he was, it's something else.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: That's my position, I'm sticking to it.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: So I thought what if he didn't go out of retirement, what would be the logic of what we do next? And it would seem to be he would pick up on the Afrobeat being part of the disco scene. And maybe that would be the way of getting the kids into it.

[SOUNDBITE OF LUANDA-KINSHASA]

SD: I had an idea of what the installation would be. Has to be the bandleader. Find people you knew.

JM: Yeah, and there was a long process of kind of looking at musicians, you know. You know, also finding musicians who I knew would be open to this.

SD: Yeah.

JM: Because it entailed some rigor and some, a belief system.

SD: [Laughter].

JM: Because we wouldn't actually really play with everybody at the same time.

SD: Yeah.

JM: So I couldn't even explain much of this stuff to musicians that we'd call, but we really spent a long time looking at people.

SD: Yeah, they had to trust you. Trust you that you would not make them look bad in the end.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: Because the bed track people, on the first day, they had no idea what was gonna happen later on.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

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SD: Yeah, people think it's actually a session, that's a live session. But actually the two halves of the group never played together. We shot one side of the studio with the rhythm tracks one day. Next day all the leads, and played back the previous days' tracks to them. The drummer, Kim Thompson, had a click track, so everything was in the same, same tempo.

JM: Right.

SD: Which was, surely worked out to be—I wanna remember now—it's like two seconds in twelve frames. So I could actually divide it up evenly, in terms of video cutting, so I would never like, go to phase in the video editing. And then the next day we played back those tracks, and sort of, you know, got what we needed. And then over the next months, I worked with Scotty Hard to recombine these tracks into new songs. And then somebody decided to change the key partway through the second session.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: And then we had to deal with that.

[SOUNDBITE OF LUANDA-KINSHASA]

JM: Well, that's actually when it gets really interesting like as a piece. I mean walking into the room to, to see it, I'm talking about in the space where you were recording—

SD: Yeah.

JM: And then when you explained, I felt like that was one of the first times I heard, you know, okay, so this is how it's gonna be. And I wasn't even sure, you know, like much of I think what musicians do is we kind of trust the vision because we never really know . . . Because we're only a part, a bit part, in a larger kind of scope, so this piece was, I felt like that. And, you know, I remember I came in the first day and I got my hair done. [Laughter].

SD: I made, I made everybody like, not shave.

JM: Yeah.

SD: And grow their hair out. [Laughter].

JM: And that was the thing to kind of tell people, was like, Yo, you know, so Stan says . . . [Laughter].

SD: Stop shaving, you can't, stop shaving.

JM: And I was, here I was, growing my hair out for four months, and my beard, in the summer in New York, and I was like, Oh. I was like, Only for Stan would I do this.

SD: Yeah.

JM: And then we walked into the space and we saw, we saw the piece. And I think, I mean it was shocking. Well, one, because of the scale of it, you know? Like, you might think that, Oh, it's gonna be on like a little, you know, video screen, you know? But now we see it in a large room—

SD: Yeah.

JM: On a large wall, with a pumping sound system, and spaces to sit down. And so my friends are like, Yo, man, I didn't know it was gonna be like this. You know, like as, and excited.

SD: Right. I was so happy when The New York Times, they had a review of it. And it wasn't in the art section who said "pop." It was in the pop section.

JM: [Laughter]. You made it.

David Zwirner

LZ: Exactly, you made it. I mean one of the things is that you're an actor in the piece and a musician. I mean is that, what was that playing experience like?

SD: It's like being a porn actor.

JM: [Laughter].

SD: Because it's gotta be real.

JM: I don't know about all that. [Laughter].

SD: I mean, you can't fake it. It's gotta be—

LZ: I didn't say that, Stan said that. [Laughter].

SD: If it's not real, we know. [Laughter].

JM: You know music kind of can pull you out of like whatever weird psychological state. And also being around a bunch of friends and kind of knowing that we're all in something a little bit odd together, you know? So everybody's like, Oh, okay, well cool. So we'd look across the room and see each other and be like, Oh, okay, you look just as real as I do. [Laughter]. You know? But we could not really see each other, I mean we couldn't see ourselves, so we could only kind of go off of that energy. But then as we started to play, that then became the real thing for us.

SD: So it wasn't about you acting at all, it was about you performing?

JM: Yeah, because that's the only way it's gonna be good. And it's so solid. What was the studio that you were basing—?

SD: It was called, they call it The Church, it was a desacralized church on 30th Street, where Miles Davis did all of his recordings until the early eighties.

JM: One of the magical properties of him is that he's able to pull people together. And you know, I play with a fair amount of musicians who played with Miles, and they'd talk about what that felt like, and—

SD: What did it feel like?

JM: I mean, you felt like you could be yourself, but also then he would come in your ear and demand to scale it up. And like, yeah, do that other thing which is like, okay, so now I'm gonna change how you interact with this instrument. So I'm gonna take the piano away from you. You know? And I think always combining another, maybe like a free agent. There's always a couple of free agents in the band—functioning in a way.

SD: In what way?

JM: Someone who's gonna like apply the pressure, to the situation so that then like this other extract comes up. Having a saxophonist like Wayne Shorter in the group. You know, Wayne Shorter had played with Art Blakey, but then, by the time he gets to Miles, he really kind of finds this way to slither on the ground. And Miles plays like that but Wayne plays like that with a very different kind of sensibility. Or John Coltrane when John Coltrane was in the group. Most famously, Coltrane loved to take these long solos and then Coltrane said, Well, how can I play shorter? And Miles, his quote is, Well, just take the horn out of your mouth.

SD: [Laughter].

JM: So, you know, but he always has a free agent in the group.

SD: So kind of treating musicians like ready-made materials. And assemblage, he recombines them in a way. As opposed to being a group, where it's like the same group over and over again.

LZ: Any kind of stuff that's coming up that's worth mentioning, or talking about.

David Zwirner

SD: I just finished writing a new play called Locus Standi, that's a verbatim play. A verbatim play is where you take the words spoken at events, so it's like a documentary. This was an extradition hearing of Leonard Peltier, who was a AIM activist, he was a Native American leader who was, in the seventies, involved in South Dakota, accused of killing two FBI agents, which was probably not the case because other people accused with him were set free. He escaped to Canada, was caught, spent a year in Vancouver in jail. There was a hearing, and they sort of explained . . . The US basically had a very, very flimsy case. The defense claimed it was a political trial, and the whole community in South Dakota's being terrorized by both the FBI and the elected government that was there, opposing the sort of traditional government that they had lived with. The transcripts were on my desk for about six months. About 1,000 pages. And I just sort of was afraid it was not good enough or I was not good enough. But when I got into it, it's like the stories being told were so vivid and so, you know, horrifying. And the characters were so well drawn, just by their dialogue, their syntax, that it was quite compelling. And we just had a reading in Toronto, in February, a reading, a table reading. And if all goes well, it'll premiere in 2019.

JM: That's stunning.

The next piece we're working on for the fall is based on the musician and bandleader named James Reese Europe, who was maybe the father of modern jazz. So one hundred years ago he led a battalion into World War I called the Harlem Hellfighters. But he was writing some extremely dense music for his band and, you know, they were kind of a syncopation jazz group. But he wanted to go to war and he wanted to work with the best musicians. So they went to fight in France and they are responsible for bringing jazz to Europe. So his name is James Reese Europe, it's a very bizarre story. But I'm working with the canon of music that he was writing while they were fighting. And then he returns to America, and at intermission during a concert he's giving in Boston, he's murdered by his drummer. And he was still quite young, so . . . But he is like the hero of Duke Ellington. He, you know, he sets up the notion of this is what a big band can sound like. And everyone follows his motto. I mean he had a concert at Carnegie Hall, maybe in 1912, with one hundred musicians on stage. So an African-American composer with that many musicians on a Carnegie Hall stage [laughs], so he was really like a progressive kind of artist. I'm really not sure what this piece will become, but we're performing it at the London Jazz Festival in the fall, and then in DC at the Kennedy Center.

LZ: Amazing.

SD: You should make a movie too.

JM: Yeah. [Laughter].

LZ: That's it.

JM: Thanks.

LZ: Thanks so much.

SD: Thanks for doing that.

LZ: That was awesome. It was really fun.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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I'm Lucas Zwirner. Thanks so much for listening. I hope you'll join us again next time.