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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

Cellist Dana Leong to open Fillmore fest with trio

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Like many musicians, [Dana Leong](#) often finds himself in unusual situations.

When the trombonist-cellist performed in the Bay Area in September, he was suspended 40 or 50 feet in the air on the side of the Great Wall of Oakland, accompanying the aerial dance company [Project Bandaloop](#). Leong's gig kicking off the Fillmore Jazz Festival on Saturday is a little less daunting, though the hit is called for the decidedly unjazzly hour of 10 a.m.

After a decade as a singularly versatile player sought after by salsa legends, Latin jazz innovators, hip-hop stars and uncategorizable artists like Björk, [Ryuichi Sakamoto](#), [Yoko Ono](#) and [Lila Downs](#), Leong has started concentrating on his own projects. At the Fillmore festival, he's presenting a new combo "stripped down to a power trio," featuring Jazz Mafia drummer [Pat Korte](#) and Secondhand Serenade bassist [Lukas Vesely](#), both friends from childhood.

"We might have some surprise special guests to sing and rap," says Leong, 32, who studied at [Manhattan School of Music](#) with a double scholarship in classical cello and jazz trombone.

A Redwood City native, Leong at age 10 met Vesely, then 13, while attending the [Stanford Jazz Workshop](#). Before leaving for college, they had both joined the workshop's illustrious faculty. Korte grew up down the block from Leong's mother in Redwood City, and Leong watched the drummer evolve from an adequate accompanist into "a fantastic player with full understanding of electronics."

"He uses triggers on his drums and can sound like the electronic production of an old hip-hop or funk record. His sound, control and technique are incredible," Leong says from his apartment in Harlem, five floors above the recording studio he's set up in a first-floor unit.

Given his love of hip-hop, commitment to jazz and immersion in Western classical music, Leong seems like an ideal artist to open the Fillmore Jazz Festival, a free weekend event that features a stylistically encompassing array of acts on three stages. Vocalist [Kim Nalley](#) presides as the festival's jazz artist in residence, offering a preview of her Rrazz Room tribute to [Etta James](#).

Other bands include the uncanny chamber pop of Foxtails Brigade, the flamenco funk of LoCura and the ecstatic call-and-response Kirtan grooves of Jai Uttal and the Queen of [Hearts Orchestra](#).

Though Leong has toured and recorded with jazz masters [Henry Threadgill](#), [Paquito D'Rivera](#) and [Dafnis Prieto](#) (who built a band around his brass/string bi-instrumentalism), he's probably best known for his kinetic hip-hop/jazz quartet Milk & Jade. The trio marks a new phase of his musical life.

"I'm still playing trombone, but this is the time to let the cello shine," Leong says. "With Milk & Jade, we frame things around vocals, lyrics and grooves. But in the trio, I'm exposed and the cello is almost like two different instruments. The bow gives a lot of lyrical options. Pizzicato, I can pick or strum like a guitar, or walk like a bass and kick a groove."

10-11:30 a.m. Saturday. Free. Sutter Street Stage. (Fillmore Jazz Festival runs 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Fillmore Street, between Jackson and Eddy, S.F.) www.fillmorejazzfestival.com.

(photo by Mat Szwajkos)