



East Comes West

The female far-eastern invasion of jazz

Many Japanese men have found a home in baseball – America’s pastime – and recently, a noticeable number of far easterners have been establishing themselves in jazz, America’s only indigenous art form. While millions of major-league baseball fans have learned to pronounce names like Ichiro Suzuki, Hideki Matsui, and Daisuke Matsuzaka, jazz fans are trying to acquaint themselves with an infusion of musicians named Hiromi (Uehara), Tomoko Ohno, and Akiko Tsuruga.

There are a handful of males on the scene, but nearly all of the Japanese jazz musicians who are gaining considerable attention are women – and pianists, or keyboardists if you consider fast-rising Hammond B3 organist Akiko Tsuruga. Pianist Ohno explains that the gender gap results from the fact that Japanese girls are encouraged to study music, whereas boys must prepare for careers with greater stability and earning power. Research shows there are a dozen or more female Japanese jazz pianists performing and recording with some regularity in the United States today. If you expand your search to Asian players, the number increases by at least one, the excellent Chinese-born Helen Sung, called by some critics “one of the brightest emerging stars in jazz today.”

Japanese women pianists are not new to the United States. Toshiko Akiyoshi arrived in the states in 1965, greeted by jazz impresario George Wein and by Lawrence Berk, founder of the famed Berklee College of Music in Boston, where many Japanese jazz musicians have studied. Akiyoshi, just 26 when she came on the recommendation of the legendary pianist Oscar Peterson, went on to an outstanding award- and poll-winning career as pianist, composer, trio leader, coleader of a big band with tenor saxophonist husband, Lew Tabackin, and eventually sole leader of the large ensemble.

A pioneer, not only as a Japanese but also as a woman in jazz, Akiyoshi received 14 Grammy nominations and in 2007 was named a National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Master. Nearing 80, she remains active, particularly as a solo pianist. Ohno believes Akiyoshi could be called “mother of ‘em all,” acknowledging that all Japanese women – not just jazz pianists – regard her as an icon.

Decades after Akiyoshi’s emigration, Ohno says a wave of Japanese female pianists hit our shores in the late 1980s during Japan’s economic boom. “I heard there were as many as 400 students at Berklee at one time,” she says.

Ohno says Hiromi is probably closest to being the Akiyoshi of today. “She does so many different things so well and has tremendous visibility,” says Ohno. Hiromi, 30, can claim the legendary pianist Ahmad Jamal as a friend, mentor, collaborator, and huge fan. “She is nothing short of amazing,” said Jamal in a previously published article. “Her music, together with her overwhelming charm and spirit, causes her to soar to unimaginable musical heights.” Hiromi has had a solid recording career that began in 2003 on Telarc, and she is touring major venues this month with a trio led by the brilliant bassist Stanley Clarke and drummer Lenny White in support of the group’s new CD, *Jazz in the Garden*.

If there is a common denominator among the Asian female pianists, it would be their excellent training and contemporary attitudes as players and composers. “I can’t think of anyone who didn’t go to college,” elaborates Ohno. “Everyone has a strong European influence in their training and incorporates elements of classical and contemporary musical styles like funk, R&B, hip hop, and so on in their writing and playing.” ELM

— Bob Protzman

CD Review

Grace Kelly:
Mood Changes ★★★★★
(Pazz Productions)

The jazz prodigy soars on her latest effort

Early on in *Mood Changes*, it is clear that 17-year-old Korean-American saxophonist Grace Kelly is a prodigy. She produced *Changes*, wrote



four of its ten songs, did nearly all of the highly original arrangements, and – are you ready for this – sings two tunes in a lovely voice and hip style, including some scat and other wordless vocalizing. Given the excellence of the band, Kelly also gets high marks as a leader.

Not everything clicks here, but there is so much to like. You’ll smile during her cheerful opener, “Happy Theme Song,” and marvel at how she turns the familiar “Comes Love” on its head and plays warm tenor on “Tender Madness” (a play on Sonny Rollins’ “Tenor Madness”). She also gets funky on her own “101,” writes and sings knowingly about lost love with “But Life Goes On,” delivers an exciting rendition of Bill Withers’ “Ain’t No Sunshine,” and bops way up-tempo on “I’ll Remember April.”

Though her talents are not fully developed, Kelly’s aggressiveness, boldness (going for difficult notes and passages), and playful sense of humor would make many veterans envious. If you’re a jazz fan, make it your duty to pay attention to what Ms. Grace Kelly does from now on.

1. Hiromi, by Muga Miyahara 2. Akiko Tsuruga, courtesy of Akiko Tsuruga 3. Yoko Miwa, courtesy of Yoko Miwa 4. Keiko Matsui, courtesy of Keiko Matsui 5. Helen Sung, by Jason A. Cina