

July '05 All About Jazz New York:

Pianist Peter Zak is something of an unknown quantity to New Yorkers, but on his SteepleChase debut, he makes a considerable first impression. On this disc, which is comprised mostly of originals, he displays a style, which, although clearly touched by his major influences, remains vibrant and singular. During a great gig last month at Smoke, Zak showcased several of the tunes (and one that isn't on the disc, a burner with the hilarious title, "The Cream and the Clear", that hopefully will be on a future release).

Zak's mastery is evident from the first tune, "Better Late Than Never", an original in which he dances along the keys with deftness and facility, accompanied ably by bassist Paul Gill and the estimable Al Foster on drums. The tender "Laughing With RZ", clearly influenced by Wynton Kelly, is both understated yet elegant.

Zak's arrangement of "Ugly Beauty" follows Monk's original recipe but adds his warm highlights to the coloring. "Namely You" is played with maximum economy. Gill's plucked bass solo tells a story in itself, with Foster bouncing on brushes behind Zak's bright opening statement. Zak follows his warm, thoughtful solo turn on "Blue Gardenia" with the supple, Oscar Peterson-flavored blues of "Grandpa George". "Maiden Lane" is a somber but lovely ballad, composed in memory of the 9/11 tragedy. "Tyner's Corner" is a perfect rendering of the great pianist's style, with Zak laying down his McCoy-like chords in homage, not imitation. The disc closes with "Below the Rim", with Zak's deft left hand setting a roadrunner tempo for Foster and Gill to follow. Zak sets off no pyrotechnics here; he and his trio simply opt for conciseness and clarity, a hallmark of all fine composing and playing.