

Peter Zak | *Melodic Intention*

Although he is self-described as “not the type of person who wants to draw attention to himself,” Peter Zak belies that intention when he addresses his instrument. Consider *Down East*, the 46-year-old pianist’s fifth trio date for Steeplechase—you can’t help but be drawn in by his deep swing, mastery of tempos, horn-like phrasing, orchestrative savoir faire and ability to conjure melodic pathways through harmonic thickets. The repertoire includes three originals, as well as Duke Pearson’s “Is That So,” Thelonious Monk’s “Gallop’s Gallop,” Duke Ellington’s “I Didn’t Know About You,” Clifford Brown’s “Tiny Capers” and Ornette Coleman’s “Invisible.” Propelled by bassist Peter Washington and drummer Rodney Green, Zak faces the material head-on, personalizing with interesting chord choices and following his ears, rather than seeking new turf with radical reharmonizations and odd-metered time signatures as navigational aids.

“I want to be honest when I play, and not go on autopilot,” Zak said in late May, a few days after a trio engagement at the New York venue Smalls with bassist Paul Gill and drummer Justin Brown. “You can use your imagination within an idiom. People want jazz musicians to innovate, but you can’t just decide to do something new every three years. You’re always going to sound like yourself, anyway.”

An Ohio native who assiduously studied classical piano from ages 6 to 20, Zak “didn’t really know what jazz was” until his parents relocated to Oakland, Calif., when he was 16.

“I had records by Ellington, Tatum and Bill Evans, but I didn’t know what I was listening to,” he recalled. After his band director offered some progressions and listening suggestions, the process accelerated: “The first time I sat in with the jazz band, I was reading through a chart and had to solo. My ears weren’t very good, but somehow I did it.” By Zak’s senior year at University of California at Berkeley (where he majored in history), he was gigging locally in a band at the Jazz Workshop that included bassist Herbie Lewis. When in town on gigs, hard-bop-oriented contemporaries such as Winard Harper, Craig Handy and Cyrus Chestnut came by to sit in.

“I’d think, ‘This sounds different than what I’m hearing here.’” Zak explained. “I wanted to play that way.” He moved to New York in June 1989, met and gigged with guitarist Peter Bernstein and, as the ’90s progressed, formed further associations with hardcore main-streamers Ryan Kisor, Eric Alexander and Joe Farnsworth, burnishing his concept with frequent trips to piano rooms like Bradley’s and the Knickerbocker.

“At Bradley’s you could hear the way a pianist would think,” said Zak, who cites McCoy Tyner and Cedar Walton as influences and has the lexicons of Sonny Clark, Herbie Hancock and Wynton Kelly at his fingertips. “You’d hear Tommy Flanagan or Kenny Barron doing a tune—they were so in control, they’d hear what’s going to happen before it happens. Then there’s how you put a set together, how to keep playing without getting tired. I couldn’t play



trio 30 or 40 minutes [back] then without getting mentally exhausted.”

Zak’s Steeplechase debut was 2004’s *Peter Zak Trio*. “I could always play fast, but until a year before my first Steeplechase record, I was uncomfortable executing the melodies, guiding the form,” he said. “I got put into situations playing trio that forced me to think clearly about my ideas and adapt them to how I wanted to play. It meant stripping down a bit, integrating chords and single-note melodies, and really knowing the melody, which I’d kind of overlooked before.”

As for the future, Zak sees no reason to change. “It’s not a question of imitating,” he said. “It’s finding your own thing that will set you apart from the pack.” —Ted Panken

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