
Profiles

Bebop pianist **Peter Zak** and songbook singer **Zoe Francis** find inspiration in New York; drummer **Marcus Gilmore** thinks the key may lie in Ghana



Peter Zak

PETER ZAK

Of New York: "It was clear that was where the best music was being made and where there was the best chance to learn and be influenced and pushed to reach full potential"

Pianist Peter Zak was taught piano and acquired a taste for jazz while a teenager in the American Midwest. Moving back to his native California at 16, he completed his education at University of California, Berkeley and garnered valuable playing experience around the Bay area before striking out for New York at the age of 24 in 1989. He says "It was clear that was where the best music was being made and where there was the best chance to learn and be influenced and pushed to reach full potential".

He soon established himself in that most competitive of jazz environments, and his career has progressed impressively in the past decade, bolstered by a series of SteepleChase CDs and now one on Fresh Sound (see review page 37). Blessed with a distinctive touch, acute harmonic sense and rhythmic ease, Zak favours a melodic approach to improvisation. His solos flow, driven by clarity and logic.

Zak's first real jazz recording was as a sideman with trumpeter Ryan Kisor on his date *The Usual Suspects*. This date led to more sideman recordings with Ryan for Criss Cross and other labels. The pianist had thought he would record as a leader for Gerry Teekens at Criss Cross but after sev-

eral years he realised it would not happen. "I decided to self-finance a trio recording with drummer Al Foster and bassist Paul Gill. I had started writing music about five years earlier and some of the better compositions were beginning to stack up, so I wanted to document them".

He shopped that trio session around, and Nils Winther at SteepleChase was one of the producers who showed interest. Winther released that initial trio set (SteepleChase 31578) in 2005, and promptly signed Peter as a contract artist. Zak subsequently recorded 14 CDs for the Danish label and made many appearances as a sideman. "Each recording I've done for SteepleChase has its moments, but I find that *For Tomorrow*, *My Conception* and *The Disciple* are particularly representative".

A few years ago, at the suggestion of Nils Winther, Peter teamed up with saxophonist Stephen Riley in a duo (sometimes expanded to trio by the addition of a drummer). "I really enjoy playing and recording with Stephen. He is one of the few true originals in that he has total command and a modern feel, but still incorporates a great knowledge of standard material and earlier styles, including his tone quality, particularly on ballads. Nils heard this and put the two of us together".

He really enjoys playing trio, because he has put in so much work within the format over the last decade to be able to play melodies to tunes and to orchestrate them. "That's a whole aspect of jazz piano playing that has really interested me, but which I used to be apprehensive about. I also enjoy being able to control the direction of each tune more than I would with a larger group with a front line. There's much more room for interaction with the rhythm section in a trio, with less taking turns soloing, which I like".

Recently, Zak invested in a "new old" piano – a Steinway A, dating from 1892 which had been newly rebuilt. "My only regret is not getting a better instrument at least 10 years ago. I had been hunting for a Steinway off and on for a few years. There were a lot of ins and outs with the finances and the logistics of getting my enormous Kawai out of my apartment, but it's been worth it. I'm practising a lot more and some new sounds are opening up for me. It's a physical thing too; I'm able to play much more without getting tired or distracted".

He generally practises every day, when his

schedule permits. "I find that an hour is the minimum I need for maintenance, and if I do two to three hours I can get into a zone where I'm developing some concepts and getting more creative. At this point technique isn't an issue for me, but I do want to make sure I can play what I hear and that I can hear more to begin with".

Peter still listens to records for fun, but not excessively – probably for less than an hour a day. "Sometimes just a track or two. Much of my listening is at the piano, where I try to transcribe a tune or a fragment of something. If I have more time, often I will seek out things I've never listened to before. Sometimes I just like to go back and check out a Lee Morgan record or something like that. Even though I've heard it dozens of times I will hear something fresh in it. Lately, I've been playing Andrew Hill sides from the 1970s. I also enjoy some modern classical music".

Travel is one of the banes of the musical life. "Of course getting through airports and sitting through flights is a whole issue on its own, and never fun", says Peter, "but I won't complain about that too much. It doesn't get me down to travel with a band like that. In fact I find it energising and stimulating. I do get a little down sometimes when I'm working as a single, and have to reacquaint myself with different side musicians. It can feel like spending more energy to get the same or lesser results".

Away from music, Peter is a big movie fan and has been since childhood. "I wrote about film when I was in college. I even seriously considered being a film major. I see all kinds of stuff – old, foreign, new, you name it. I also read a lot – fiction, non-fiction, classics and current. I'm a big sports fan as well – baseball, American football and basketball, college and pro. In addition to watching sports, I try to stay active, exercising at the gym at least four times a week".

Mark Gardner

ZOE FRANCIS

Born on the seriously wrong side of the schism that fragmented the popular music scene in the late 50s, Zoe emerged firmly on the side of class

When I met recently with singer Zoe and her husband, the guitarist Jim Mullen, I knew she had impeccable taste: of the 20 songs on her first two CDs (*Looking For A Boy*, 2012, and *The Very Thought Of You*, 2014) 19 are indubitably standards, each representing a page in *The Great American Songbook*. I ventured to comment on the rarity of someone of such tender years even *knowing* numbers like these (with verses, yet) let alone performing them so sympathetically.

When I've encountered similar phenomena in the past there's usually a solid explanation – parents subjecting offspring to *The Great American Songbook* from the cradle,

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