

A trusted musical partner isn't always easy to find. But for "One Mind," pianist Peter Zak's twelfth recording as a leader, he has come up with just such a person, in his featured bandmate, bassist Marcos Varela. The new album will be released in May, 2018.

"Marcos and I hit it off right away," says Zak, "and not just on the bandstand. Even though he's younger than I, we found we not only had very similar tastes, but shared some of the same ideas about music, musical trends, and the scene itself." Marcos had been a student in the jazz program at the New School in New York City, but as a faculty member at the school then and now, Zak never actually crossed paths with him; it was only later that guitarist Tom Guarna—with whom Zak has recorded twice on the SteepleChase label under Guarna's name—got the pianist and bassist together for a rehearsal. Since then the two have been performing and rehearsing with each other in various configurations, including Zak's own trio.

"We've played around New York mostly, including at Smalls Jazz Club, but also overseas, such as in Prague and a couple of other places," Zak recalls. After this body of live performance it seemed only natural to get together in the studio to document what they had going together.

The band revisits Zak's composition "George Washington" on this session (it originally appears on his trio album, "Eternal Triangle"). The pianist also came up with three new compositions for the date, including "For Sonny," which was conceived as a tribute to one of the pianist's primary influences, Sonny Clark. "The main theme was inspired by Sonny's own tune, 'Melody in C.' I thought Marcos and Billy hit on a great groove on this one."

Speaking of Zak's longtime drumming collaborator, Billy Drummond, (see again "The Eternal Triangle," and the quartet date "The Decider," among others): "He comes up with some great sounds and colors on 'I Wish I Lived in LA.' By the way, I don't really wish I lived there...or maybe I do," Zak says. About another original in the set, "Backseat Driver, "I've always wanted to play with (saxophonist) Seamus Blake, and I think the listener can see why on this one." And on "Moonlight Over Saturnveien," Zak says he was trying to evoke an area in southern Norway that he has visited many times over the years.

As for the least harmonically structured piece in the session, Varela's composition "Where the Wild Things Are," Zak remarks, "I really enjoyed Marcos' date as a leader, 'San Ygnacio,' and that tune in particular really stood out. It seemed natural to recreate it here."

"So in Love" is a tune Zak says he has played around with for years. "The band really put it together on this track, on a not-so-easy arrangement," he points out. "Textures" is a Herbie Hancock piece that Zak had discovered again for a course on Herbie that he used to teach at the New School; as for "Reflections": "Marcos and I are obviously both huge Monk fans, and that song is one we both particularly love. We thought it would be a good idea to change things up by tackling it as a duo."

According to Zak, "It's rewarding to get together with a collaborator with whom you not only see eye-to-eye, but implicitly trust as a musical bandmate. Marcos is a (short!) generation younger, but this isn't an 'elder in charge' project; the exchange of creativity is definitely mutual and therefore more rewarding."

*The Peter Zak Quartet, featuring Marcos Varela, will be performing album release shows at Smalls Jazz Club in New York City, on September 14 and 15, 2018.*