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Pianist Rachel Z's jazz life a fusion of many styles

Jerry Karp, Special to The Chronicle
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Jazz-rock-fusion pianist Rachel Z had a week off from her duties playing synthesizer for Peter Gabriel during the rock superstar's extended tour of European arenas -- more than 40 concerts, from England to Bulgaria and back again.

So, naturally, she went to Japan to play a series of dates with her acoustic jazz trio.

"It was hard," reported Ms. Z (real name: Rachel Nicolazzo) recently, "but it was fun. You go from a little

jazz club -- where it's extremely intense because the people in Japan really know jazz, so you have to be on point -- to Peter Gabriel, and it's no less intense. Peter is a great artist who's very developed, and the fans are rabid, so you want to be absolutely at your best every night."

Rachel Z, who brings that same acoustic trio (including bassist Chris Luard and drummer Bobbie Rae) to Pearl's in North Beach on Friday and Saturday, has forged a career of moving among musical genres and fusing disparate styles.

Eclectic mix

Her two latest CDs, both acoustic trio outings, are "Moon at the Window" (2002), a spirited jazz set of early Joni Mitchell songs, and this year's "Everlasting," featuring jazz renderings of rock songs from the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun" to the Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight," with the Stones, Soundgarden and Johnny Cash worked into the mix.

The release before these, "On the Milky Way Express" (2000), was a collection of compositions by Z's friend and mentor, contemporary jazz maestro Wayne Shorter.

Neither "Moon at the Window" nor "Everlasting" offers simple instrumental re-creations. Both collections get full-on jazz interpretations, with, in many cases, creative reimagings reflective of Z's post-bop influences, pianists like Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner and Keith Jarrett.

All three CDs offer Z's graceful, lively soloing, plus intriguing interplay between Z and her band mates.

Z says the goal for "Everlasting" was to find songs the band liked that could be effectively reinvented in a jazz vein.

"Bobbie suggested 'Here Comes the Sun' with a McCoy Tyner/Elvin Jones groove," she says, "and it sounded really cool. 'Wild Horses' seemed obvious to do as a slow, Bill Evans-style ballad. 'Black Hole Sun' I wanted to do because I love Soundgarden and 'Tonight, Tonight' because I love Smashing Pumpkins."

As for her connection to Joni Mitchell, Z says, "As a young woman, her lyrics were really instructive to me. Like in the song 'River,' Joni sings, 'I made my baby cry. I made my baby say goodbye.' You didn't often hear a woman singing that she made her man cry, taking that responsibility."

When asked about the Mitchell reworkings on "Moon at the Window," Z says, "We really like 'Ladies Man' because we added Coltrane changes. We used 'Confirmation' (Charlie Parker) changes on 'All I Want.' Those are really fun to play live. And the song 'Moon at the Window' has a natural, swinging feel."

Z was born and raised in Manhattan, where her mother was an opera singer and her father a visual artist. She began singing and classical piano studies at an early age, but was smitten by jazz as a teenager upon hearing Herbie Hancock's solos on the classic Miles Davis record "Miles Smiles."

"It was hearing Herbie on [the song] 'Circle,' " she remembers. "It sounded like classical and jazz together, because of the Debussy-esque treatment Herbie gave those solo changes. It was awesome, and that was it."

Converted, Z attended the New England Conservatory of Music from 1980- 1984, studying jazz with masters like Joanne Brackeen and John Hicks and delving further into classical playing. But fusion jazz was covering the Earth in the '80s, and Z found she had to go electric to support herself.

Inspired by the synthesizer

"If you didn't play synthesizer, you were not going to work," she says. "I was in a band, and one day I showed up and the piano was gone, and there was a Fender Rhodes. My bandmates said, 'You're going to play this now.' I said, 'No, I'm not,' and they said, 'Yes, you are.' So I had to learn synthesizers. At first, it was just to keep working, but then I got inspired. Now I really like the way you can color a song, and the warm sound you can get if you really know how to program a synthesizer."

Helped by such colleagues as Lyle Mays, who gained fame in guitarist Pat Metheny's band, Z gained an expertise in utilizing the synthesizer's full sonic pallet, including a full understanding of the technology.

Z returned to New York in 1988 and parlayed her feel for the synthesizer into tenures with headliners like Al Di Meola and Larry Coryell, and the high- profile fusion group Steps Ahead. It was while playing with Steps Ahead at the Northsea Jazz Festival that Z met Wayne Shorter, who would become one of her most important musical and personal influences.

"I just happened to talk to him," she remembers. "He asked me to send him a video, which I did. Then I called and asked him to play on my first record. He said, 'I can't because of my contract, but would you like to play on my record?' I thought, 'Oh, that's a much better idea.' "

That record became the Grammy Award-winning "High Life" (1995), on which Z did much more than just play. Shorter asked her to create the electronic orchestrations for the album and to perform on the subsequent tour.

In recent years, Z has made the decision to ease what she refers to as a musical "schizophrenia" by concentrating her synthesizer playing on her rock activities, like her three-years-and-counting association with Gabriel, and keeping her jazz performances acoustic.

"I have been mentored through some amazing music by masters, so I'm starting to have something to share that's mature. When I worked with Wayne, he'd look at me and say, 'Do you know when you sound good?' It's not when you're thinking, 'Am I impressing all my friends? Am I playing every lick?' It's when you concentrate. When you're playing your soul, that's when you're sounding good. When you're playing your enlightenment."

Rachel Z performs at 9 and 11 p.m. Friday and Aug. 28 at Jazz at Pearl's, 256 Columbus Ave., San Francisco. Tickets: \$15. Call (415) 291-8255 or go to www.jazzatpearls.com.

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