Sumi Tonooka
Pianist & Composer

Biography

In his liner notes to pianist, composer and educator Sumi Tonooka’s fifth and latest CD, *Long Ago Today*, journalist Russ Musto restates his praise from thirty years ago: “. . . it has been a pleasure to hear her blossom into one of the most talented musicians of her generation.” Today, Tonooka (pronounced To-NO-ka) reignites her successes as an architect at the keyboard with *Long Ago Today* (Artists Recording Collective), released nationwide on March 25, 2008. She’s joined by bassist Rufus Reid (who has appeared on all of her releases) and the late drummer Bob Braye. Nine of the ten tunes are penned by her.

Born on October 3, 1956 in Philadelphia, a city that has few rivals in terms of its rich music history — jazz, gospel, punk, R&B, The Philly Soul Sound — Tonooka experienced unfettered freedom at the piano as a young child. She started piano and music instruction at the age of seven at the Settlement Music School in Philly with Ester Cinberg and then Gary Goldschneider. Tonooka, who grew up in a multicultural household, was introduced to the extramundane concepts and executions of pianist Thelonious Monk at the age of 13. “My parents took me to see Thelonious Monk ‘live’ at the Aqua Lounge for my thirteenth birthday and it was then and there . . . that’s when I decided to be a jazz musician.” He, along with pianist/composer Duke Ellington and close associate and admirer pianist Kenny Barron, have been her torches in the night as she’s glanced through and past many ideologies and perceptions of performance and tunesmithing.

Tonooka continued classical lessons with Madame Margaret Chaloff of the New England Conservatory of Music as well as jazz and composition with the renowned jazz instructor, Charlie Banacus in Boston Mass. In years to come, she would study with Bernard Peiffer, Susan Starr, Mary Lou Williams, Dennis Sandole, and Stanley Cowell. At eighteen, she tells of her “real initiation into the world of jazz” performing with drummer Philly Joe Jones’ quartet, Le Grand Prix. In connecting the dots in her journeys from Philly to Boston, from Boston to Detroit, back to Philly and then onto New York, Tonooka weathered droughts and occasional cloudbursts of opportunity when she gigged with Kenny Burrell, Little Jimmy Scott, Sonny Fortune, Red Rodney, Benny Golson, and David “Fathead” Newman. During this time, before her move to New York City, she received her Bachelor of Music degree from Philadelphia College of Performing Arts.

Her debut release as a leader, *With An Open Heart* (1986, Radiant Records), was the beginning of a long friendship with bassist Rufus Reid. *Taking Time* (1991, Candid), *Here Comes Kai* (1992, Candid), and *Secret Places* (produced by pianist Kenny Barron in 1989 and released in 1998 on his label, Joken) are ripe with her now familiar agile melodies, darting and daring rhythmic maneuvers, and interplay with her bandmates. A telling tale of Tonooka’s singular and unwithering disposition is the fact that she took chances early in her leadership and recorded her own material. To date, she’s penned almost fifty compositions.
Long Ago Today is Tonooka’s first recording as a leader in a decade. The resurgence of her creative grace and candor is felt in Cole Porter’s “All of You,” a familiar favorite “that keeps on evolving,” says Tonooka. She, Reid and Braye becomes a wild force of nature on “The Clinging,” a tune inspired by the I Ching, considered an oracle of natural events and occurrences. The creation of the iridescent “Dreaming of Tibet” was guided by a vision Tonooka had of herself walking about the country called “the roof of the world.” This tune is an invitation to see what she saw. The contrasting faces of “Be The Dance,” a sketchpad of the trio’s playful prowess and the title tune, a musing over “longing and nostalgia,” speak of the many-sided approaches Tonooka takes to, as one journalist notes, bridge “between the spirit of the world and her own soul.” What propels her playing, as noted by writer Herb Boyd, is her “unique way to constantly renew the rhythm.” Representative of that is “Moroccan Daze,” packed with flurried mechanized and free-flowing passages. Though we hear a focus of rhythm on Long Ago Today, in no way does this enervate her compositions. They’re identifiers for Tonooka and take their place between your ears, plugging you into her and not into her re-solving of standards. “It’s my strongest work,” declares Tonooka.

Though a celebratory air of accomplishment wafts about Tonooka with the nationwide release of Long Ago Today, it is not fully shared — on this earth — with drummer Braye, who passed away in February 2007. “I am grateful and honored that Bob’s musicianship and mastery was documented on this recording.”

Her steady on the bull fiddle has been Reid, her friend and colleague of over twenty-five years. He’s a much-in-demand clinician as well as session player. His extensive jazz background and discography reads like a Who’s Who in jazz. From 1990 to 2001, Rufus co-led TanaReid with percussionist Akira Tana and released five CDs during their tenure. As a member of The Rufus Reid Quintet, Tonooka appears on the CD and DVD The Rufus Reid Quintet: Live at the Kennedy Center (Motema). The group appeared at Dizzy’s Club Coca Cola at Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York in 2007 for the CD release performance. She has enjoyed a simpatico relationship with jazz violinist John Blake and his quartet for some twenty years. Their recorded output includes A New Beginning: Live at The Village Gate, Kindred Spirits (as a duo), and most recently The Traveler featuring Boris Koslov on bass and Johnathan Blake on drums.

She has added to her talents scoring music for film. She’s composed over a dozen film scores, some of which have recently been aired on PBS, such as the Academy Award-nominated Family Gathering by Lise Yasui and Daring To Resist by Martha Lubell.

Tonooka’s career has been chronicled in several highly regarded jazz books, including Living The Jazz Life by Royal Stokes, In The Moment by Francis Davis, and Madame Jazz by Leslie Gourse (all on Oxford University Press). She is currently teaching piano at both Bard College and Dutchess Community College in The Hudson Valley of New York. Initiation, featuring saxophonist Erica Lindsay, Reid and Braye is scheduled for release nationwide on October 15th, 2008.

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PIANIST SUMI TONOOKA AND SAXOPHONIST ERICA LINDSAY RELEASE THEIR FIRST STUDIO ALBUM

Featuring Tonooka with Bassist Rufus Reid and the late drummer Bob Braye

“Sumi Tonooka brings to the music a formidable presence as a composer, player and leader that cannot be denied… a must listen…” — Cadence

“[Erica’s] profound soul-searching technique straddles Coltrane’s spirituality and Joe Henderson’s fiery versatility, making hers a name to watch”— Bob Margolis, Ulster Publications

Initiation, the dynamic new Artists Recording Collective CD by pianist Sumi Tonooka (pronounced To-NO-ka) and tenor saxophonist Erica Lindsay, showcases their shared skills as composers and bandleaders. Though they’ve been playing together since they first met in the spring of 1994, this is their first in-studio collaboration. “We wanted to document and reveal something of our musical dynamic together,” says Tonooka.

Initiation features bassist Rufus Reid and the late drummer Bob Braye, both of whom were on Tonooka’s previous trio release, Long Ago Today, which earned critical acclaim and a place on numerous top CDs of 2008 lists. Initiation will be released on October 20, 2009.

An underlying sense of swing and drive, with commanding bass lines and a strong sense of form and harmonic structure create the binding threads in the music of these two female performers/composers. As Tonooka puts it, “we have been pursuing similar paths as jazz musicians and have happily met up on that path…” They saw early on in their association that their differences would strengthen their artistic visions and desires.

Their initial collaborations took place at Justin’s, a casual and intimate jazz club in Albany, NY when they were brought together by a quartet lead by drummer Hal Miller. Over a period of a few years their creative process solidified as Tonooka and Lindsay shared and developed their compositions in a supportive quartet setting. Tonooka observed that “Erica’s compositions drew out something different in my playing and my compositions brought out something else in hers. We felt that together we could create a strong and vital musical expression.”

In 2005 Tonooka’s friend, composer and pianist John Hodian who was leaving for the summer on a European tour with his wife, vocalist Bet Williams gave her the keys to the Woodstock studio. “I knew this was an opportunity to record that I did not want to miss,” Tonooka remembers. “It had been awhile and there was a lot of music-making, compositions composed and life lived to draw from. Erica and I got down to the business of producing two recordings - my trio CD Long Ago Today…and Initiation.” Both artists collaborated equally in producing and each provided five compositions for the project, while Lindsay took on the job of mixing and mastering.

On Initiation, you’ll hear how the music flows through the hands and hearts of both artists. As a composer, Lindsay writes what she knows – herself. She has a brawny, definitive voice, similar to tenorman Joe Henderson’s sound. Shooting straight from the hip, Lindsay’s “Yes,” originally an improvised piece” inspired by a poem by Janice King, dives forward and hits hard. Braye lays down an unrelenting pounding on two and four and then wheels the ensemble into a speedy 4/4. A spontaneous freeing-of-the-minds interlude between Tonooka, Reid and Braye, followed by a collective surge of brilliance brings them back to their previous pace.
Lindsay and Reid carry on a conversation that careens between coffee table banter and serious business at the onset of “Serpent’s Tale.”

Tonooka’s rhythm-based and harmonically striking compositions embrace the mysticism, sadness and wonder that come out of life, as well as the sparks that ignite it. On the title tune, she addresses the unpredictability of life and what we can learn from it. “Life happens and many unforeseen events and experiences can thrust us forward (whether we like it or not) to grow, to learn and ultimately share and help others through the trials of life,” she says. She wrote “The Gift” after her mother died “to celebrate her life and... specifically about the time spent together.” Braye’s gentle mallet work and cymbal swishes, like the flicker of a candle’s flame, add solemnity to the occasion. Lindsay sings as Tonooka dances through each note that they play.

Both artists praise the contributions of Braye and Reid. “Bob and Rufus play a critical role in this CD as the music is approached as four equal voices,” Lindsay notes. She and Braye already had a musical history before Initiation, as did Tonooka and Reid. Braye died the January following Initiation’s recording date. Initiation, Long Ago Today and his duo recording with Lindsay, Oceans, were his last three record dates. Tonooka sings his praises as drum master and “an amazing human being. We miss him deeply.”

In addition to playing music together, much goes on in the lives of these two leaders. Tonooka’s worlds of jazz and philanthropy intersect in “A Note of Hope”, a documentary from Citygate Films on the youngest victims of HIV/AIDS in Africa. She tours as part of a sextet featuring her musical compadre of two decades, jazz violinist John Blake, Jr. The group also features Gerald Veasley on electric bass, Rosella Clemmons on vocals and Butch Reed on drums, all musical ambassadors for this cause. You can also hear her with “The Rufus Reid Quintet-Live at the Kennedy Center” CD/DVD on Motema Records.

Lindsay, a faculty member of the Music Department at Bard College in New York, leads her own quartet and performs with the Oliver Lake Big Band, the Baikida Carroll Quintet, the Howard Johnson Hojo5 Quintet, the Jeff Siegel Quartet and the San Francisco-based group, Trace Elements.

Artists Recording Collective (ARC), is an independent label powered by the idea that artists need a home base for their music.

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The technically brilliant trio opened with the evergreen “I Hear a Rhapsody”, before the gutsy and sensitive Sumi Tonooka dug into the keys, presenting two spell-binding original compositions: the ballad-like “Shadow Waltz” and the grooving “Taking Time”…. Both with very exacting titles such as “Evidence” by Thelonius Monk, and well-known pieces like “Night and Day”, this high-class trio secured its position in the highest echelon through its unusually quick rapport, arrangements that shed new light on standards, and virtuosic improvisations…. Both with very exacting titles such as “Evidence” by Thelonius Monk, and well-known pieces like “Night and Day”, this high-class trio secured its position in the highest echelon through its unusually quick rapport, arrangements that shed new light on standards, and virtuosic improvisations…. Both with very exacting titles such as “Evidence” by Thelonius Monk, and well-known pieces like “Night and Day”, this high-class trio secured its position in the highest echelon through its unusually quick rapport, arrangements that shed new light on standards, and virtuosic improvisations…. Both with very exacting titles such as “Evidence” by Thelonius Monk, and well-known pieces like “Night and Day”, this high-class trio secured its position in the highest echelon through its unusually quick rapport, arrangements that shed new light on standards, and virtuosic improvisations…. Both with very exacting titles such as “Evidence” by Thelonius Monk, and well-known pieces like “Night and Day”, this high-class trio secured its position in the highest echelon through its unusually quick rapport, arrangements that shed new light on standards, and virtuosic improvisations....
Performance Venues Include:

Kennedy Center, Washington DC
Academy of Music, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Philadelphia PA
Tribeca Performing Arts Center, New York NY
Monterey Jazz Festival, CA
JVC JAZZ Festival, NY
Celebrate Brooklyn Festival, NY
Asian Jazz Festival, San Francisco CA
Portland Jazz Festival, OR
Houston Jazz Festival, TX
Ottawa Jazz Festival, Canada
SumArts/Houston Jazz Festival

Lectures, Seminars, and Master Classes

Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
Reed College, Portland OR
Bently College, Waltham MA
Roanoke College, Roanoke VA
Williams College, Williamstown MA
Haverford College, Haverford PA
Swarthmore College, Swarthmore PA
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA
Long Island University, Southampton NY
University of Virginia, Charlottesville VA

Awards, Fellowships, Commisions, and Honors

Meet the Composer Jazz Commission, 1993–1994
National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Fellowship, 1993
JACL Kurahawa Arts Fellowship, 1988
Panelist, National Jazz Network, Lila Wallace, 1994
Panelist, Arts Midwest Jazz Master Comm., 1994
Panelist, Midatlantic Arts Foundation, 1999

For More Information

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