

Rachel Z

As both an artist and person, Rachel Z's life and career is all about expecting the unexpected, never settling into one frame of mind or musical style for long before reaching higher to explore the next creative and spiritual level. Rachel Z, one of the most stylistically diverse pianists in music, continues the excitement on her new project in which she and her trio honor the tradition and spirit of the lineage of Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter.

The Manhattan-born and -raised Z (nee Nicolazzo) had music practically ingrained in her genetic code. Groomed to follow in her mother's operatic footsteps, she began voice lessons at two, started classical piano lessons at seven and attended the opera by age nine. "My first doll house was a Metropolitan Opera House complete with the stage and dolls which were the performers," she recalls. "Then I heard Miles Smiles when I was 15, started rebelling against the classical by improvising, and played with a band which covered Joni Mitchell and Steely Dan songs."

Listening to Herbie Hancock's harmonies over Wayne Shorter's compositions helped her bridge the gap from her classical training to jazz. "The way my jazz chops developed was twofold. I played acoustic straight ahead and electronic fusion equally, developing my own style over time, " she says. After launching a quintet called Nardis, she studied with Brackeen and Richie Beirach and began hanging out at the Village Vanguard where she saw and heard masters like Dexter Gordon and Bill Evans.

Rachel Z graduated from The New England Conservatory with a "Distinction in Performance" award while working professionally in the Boston area with performers like Bob Moses, Miroslav Vitous and George Garzone.

Returning to New York in 1988, she toured with New England Conservatory schoolmate turned rhythm & jazz superstar saxman Najee and later co-wrote the album Tokyo Blue. While performing and recording steadily with the fusion band Steps Ahead from 1988 through 1996, she also worked with Al Di Meola, Larry Coryell, Special EFX, and Angela Bofill, and began a fruitful association with producer/vibraphonist Mike Manieri, currently head of NYC Music Group. Manieri produced her Columbia Records debut Trust the Universe in 1993. Reflecting the influence of Corea, Hancock, and Pat Metheny, the CD featured the jazz radio hit "Nardis".

Her connection to saxophone great Wayne Shorter grew from major influence to full-blown collaborator over the two years she worked on his hit comeback album High Life (1995), for which she built a synthesized orchestral framework to crystallize his musical vision. Rachel also played acoustic piano on the album and was musical director for the tour that followed. The CD won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

1996 saw the release of her NYC Records debut, A Room of One's Own, which she dedicated to the many women artists who have played an influential role in her life. Among the many inspirations Rachel Z celebrated were contemporary dancer Judith Jameson, African-American novelist Zora Neal Hurston, and Billie Holiday.

A throwback to the days when jazz musicians would tour 300 days a year, the constantly gigging Rachel Z took bassist Tracy Womrworth (Rosie O'Donnell Show) and drummer Cindy Blackman (Lenny Kravitt, et al.) on the road for weeks on end. It was during this time that the seeds of the new trio were formed.

The young Allison Miller and Miriam Sullivan subbed on many smaller venue gigs and gradually took over when their mentors left to pursue their own illustrious careers. The chemistry of this group became the foundation for the "Tribute to Wanye Shorter" project because the band became an artistic home in which to freely experiment and grow. "We all agreed that our favorite springboard for study and innovation was the music of the classic Miles Davis group of the mid-60's." The seed had sprouted.