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Go on an Adventure With Virtuoso Jazz Pianist Hiromi and Take a Journey to Lowcountry With Ranky Tanky and Lisa Fischer at Strathmore

Strathmore's Windows Series aims to deepen audiences' understanding of performers with preshow discussions on women in jazz and Gullah music and culture.



by MITCH RYALS
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Jazz pianist Hiromi plays with her four-piece ensemble, Hiromi's Sonicwonder, on Oct. 19 at the Music Center at Strathmore; Credit: Mitsuru Nishimura

If you can make it up to the Music Center at Strathmore tonight (Oct. 19), **Hiromi** promises an adventure. She'll be your captain.

The virtuosic jazz pianist, with her four-piece ensemble, released nine tracks featuring **Hadrien Feraud** on bass, **Ge**

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“What I aimed for in this album is like a new musical journey, an adventure that I can take with the band and the audience,” Hiromi tells *City Paper*. “It’s almost like you’re visiting places in Wonderland, like we’re taking a trip together to places we’ve never been before.”

Sonicwonderland, released Oct. 6, blends acoustic and electric (Hiromi plays two synthesizers and a piano), jazz and funk, as it takes surprising turns through improvisation and veers into what sounds a lot like a video game soundtrack.

One of the tracks, despite its name, isn’t influenced by D.C.’s homegrown genre. Rather, “Go Go” is heavy on improvisation, which means it could go anywhere.

“We take risks, and this song changes so much,” Hiromi says. “It’s so elastic. Every night, we don’t know where it’s going, and we really enjoy it. It’s like a magical mystery tour.”

But before the **Grammy-winning** pianist’s 8 p.m. performance at the Music Center, the venue has invited two local women to set the stage—not with work of their own, but with a discussion of women in jazz piano.

The preshow talk begins at 6:30 p.m. and is part of Strathmore’s **Windows Series**, which seeks to deepen audiences’ understanding and appreciation of the artists that stop by the North Bethesda venue. Duke Ellington School of the Arts and Howard University grads and renowned local pianists **Janelle Gill** and **Amy K. Bormet** will lead the discussion. Gill performs **throughout the D.C. area** and beyond and recently **directed the music** for the musical *Chuck & Eva: Songs from the Other Side*. **Bormet**, also a prolific performer and teacher, **founded** the Washington Women in Jazz Festival.

“Hiromi is just such a remarkable artist. Not only is her musicianship top-of-the-line, but she brings in all these rock and funk influences,” says **Lauren Campbell**, Strathmore’s vice president of education and community engagement. “Hiromi is so much more than a woman in a male dominated field. She’s an iconic woman in her own right.”

The 30-minute preshow discussion will take place in Strathmore’s Education Room, a converted dance studio, which holds about 110 people. Everyone with a ticket to the show is welcome to join until the room fills up.



Ranky Tanky; Credit: Peter Frank Edwards

Following Women in Jazz Piano, the next Windows Series show is scheduled for early November and will take audiences to South Carolina’s Lowcountry for a taste of Gullah music and culture. **Ranky Tanky** will **perform** with special guest **Lisa Fischer**, a **Grammy-winning singer** who spent decades as a backup singer for **the Rolling Stones** and **Luther Vandross**, among others. She was also featured in the 2013 Oscar-winning documentary *20 Feet From Stardom*.

Quiana Parler, lead vocalist for Ranky Tanky, calls Fischer “music royalty.”

“I idolized Lisa Fischer since I was a little girl, when she was singing background for Luther Vandross,” she says. “I started out as a background singer, and she’s been a great part of my life as far as learning and singing. Her voice is unmatched.”

Along with Parler, the **Grammy-winning** quintet (whose name derives from the Gullah phrase “get funky”) includes **Quentin Baxter** on drums and percussion, **Kevin Hamilton** on bass, **Clay Ross** on guitar, and **Charlton Singleton** on trumpet; all of them were born and raised in South Carolina.

“I like to say Gullah is the root to all music,” Parler says. “It dates that far back. Everybody has Gullah in them.”

Their soulful, folksy, gospel sound is a modern take on the Gullah musical tradition that originated with enslaved people in the southeastern Sea Island region of the U.S.

“The Gullah culture has always been a way of life for us,” Parler says. “The Gullah people were brought here through the **transatlantic slave trade**, and they were people who held high jobs: doctors, healers, artists, farmers; they were brought here for their skills, and we’re just keeping the culture alive. We’re so proud to represent our culture and history.”

Dr. **Melissa Cooper** and **Doug Peach** will lead the *Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and ti* the Library of Congress. He's also a Ph.D. candida **Gullah Geechee people**.

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Cooper and Peach will lead a conversation they're calling "Critical Jukebox: Gullah Music." They will discuss the history of the culture and music, explain how Fischer and Ranky Tanky contribute to the style, and explore some of the problematic interpretations by those outside the community.

Parler doesn't want to spoil the show by revealing any of the set list (except to emphasize that Fischer used to tour with the Rolling Stones). But, like Hiromi, she says to expect to go on a journey.

"You don't know where you're going if you don't know where you came from, and that's why we're here," Parler says. "We're here to spread the good news of the Gullah people."

Tonight's Windows Pre-Concert Talk: Women in Jazz Piano starts at 6:30 p.m. followed by Hiromi's Sonicwonder at 8 p.m. at the Music Center at Strathmore.

Ranky Tanky play with special guest Lisa Fischer at 8 p.m. on Nov. 3, following the Windows Pre-Concert Talk: Critical Jukebox: Gullah Music at 6:30 p.m. at the Music Center at Strathmore. strathmore.org. \$28-\$68.

