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# JAZZWISE

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Game On!

# HIROMI

**HITS THE  
NEXT LEVEL**

"The human voice is a magical instrument"

# Joshua Redman

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# SONIC BOOM



Japanese piano sensation **Hiromi**, is the kind of innately gifted musician who comes along but once in a generation. Mentored by Chick Corea and Ahmad Jamal, the one-time teenage prodigy has now become a master in her own right. Back with her Sonicwonder band and their thrilling debut recording, she speaks to **Stuart Nicholson** about her career and her upcoming EFG London Jazz Festival headline appearance

**H**iroimi is nothing if not methodical. "When I use the word 'sonic', that means I am on keyboard," she explains. So file *Sonicwonderland*, her latest album, under electric jazz. See, easy when you know how. But not quite. *Sonicwonderland* has been turning over in her head since 2016, so it took a while from conception to creation, but the pianist, speaking down the line from Japan, thinks the album is all the better for it. Recorded with her new quintet, Hiromi's *Sonicwonder*, it features nine originals which hold true to the values she was taught at the age of six by her first piano teacher, Norika Hikida. She came up with the concept of hearing sounds in terms of colour: "If the piece was something passionate," Hiromi explains, "She would say, 'Play red', or if it was something mellow she would say, 'Play blue', I could really play from my heart that way, not just from my ears."

It also explains why the covers of recent albums are a riot of colour – of changing musical mood swings and colours that characterise her

music. And it also explains, on *Sonicwonderland*, why she loves the colours that the Nord Lead A1 Analogue modelling synthesizer gives her.

"I can create the sound of how I feel in the moment," she says, "be it blue, green, red or yellow". Easy when it's all explained, methodical in fact.

Hiromi is one of those irrepressible musicians whose creative energy embraces jazz, classical and pop with equal enthusiasm, taking her playing and composing to new levels of complexity and sophistication.

"I really don't have barriers to any type of music," she says, "I could listen to anything from metal to classical music to anything else." Her inner ear hears details in diverse musical forms that mere mortals do not, and they charge and re-charge her music. She is always learning, something that she picked up from her early mentor Chick Corea when she was just 17: "I was taking lessons in one of the music facilities here in Tokyo," she says. "I heard from the teacher, 'Chick Corea is in the building! Let's go and say hello.' So we went to say

Hi, and he was so nice. He asked, 'What do you play, do you play, do you write?' And so I played one of the pieces I was writing, and he said, 'Do you improvise?' I think I was just smiling because I was so happy playing for him, and he said, 'just improvise', and then he was playing too, and after we finished he said, 'Do you want to play in a concert tomorrow night?' And I really don't remember my answer. I think I just kept smiling, so I ended up playing his concert next day. He calls me up on stage during an encore, and he talks about how he met me yesterday, and how we are going to do a little improvisation, so that was how I first met Chick Corea. I met him again in 2006, at a jazz festival

when we played together. He was always surprising me – this time, in 2006, he said, 'Do you want to make an album together?' Then we ended up making an album together in 2007, *Duet*. He was always like a gigantic library you walk into, with so much knowledge, and the crazy thing was he always kept learning, so that was a lesson I did not forget."

What Chick Corea first heard in Hiromi Uehara (as she was known then) was a talent so big it was impossible to ignore. When she entered Berklee College of Music in Boston to study composition and arranging, her professor was bassist/arranger Richard Evans, who among other things, produced Ramsey Lewis' massive hit, 'Wade

In The Water': "I played him a tape of something I wrote and he said, 'Who's playing the piano?' and I said, 'I am, I'm a pianist.' He said, 'I want my friend to listen to this, can I borrow this?' And he took my tape, and he played it for

**// He calls me up on stage during the encore, and he talks about how he met me yesterday, and how we are going to do a little improvisation... that's how I first played with Chick Corea //**

Sonicwonder in action at Dakota Jazz Club, US

Photo: www.weheartmusic.com



his friend, who was Ahmad Jamal! [Richard Evans was once bassist in Jamal's trio]

"I got a call from Ahmad the following week, and I met him and he hooked me up with a record company, management – he really set up my career there and then, it happened all of a sudden. He was always very supportive, always kept encouraging me – keep doing what you are doing, keep walking your way, because that path is your own. Looking at his career was always inspiring because he never looked back, always looking ahead."

Hiromi's debut album, *Another Mind*, produced by Jamal, came out in 2003 to a reception young jazz musicians can only dream about. It shipped gold in Japan, selling over 100,000 copies and was awarded the Recording Industry Association of Japan's Album of the Year award and enjoyed critical success in the USA; "She is nothing short of amazing," said Jamal. But that was just the beginning. With each succeeding release she was accumulating New Star, Rising Star, Album of the Year, and Pianist of the Year awards. In 2009, she appeared on bassist Stanley Clarke's *Jazz in the Garden* album, beginning an association that lasts to this day.

"I think it was probably through Chick that Stanley first called," says Hiromi. "When I got the phone call the first time, it was for a trio thing with Lenny White and Stanley, and we also did another album with a bigger band with a guitar player and another keyboard player, and drummer." That was in 2011, and The Stanley Clarke Band won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

"Every time I play with Stanley his energy, it really inspires me because he makes such a statement on stage. He's always there, giving so much in a show, it really, really inspires me. He mainly plays acoustic bass when I play with him, one or two songs he plays electric, but it's mostly acoustic, and his acoustic bass grooves so much, it always amazes me."

In 2011 she formed a trio with Anthony Jackson on bass, who had been recommended by Stanley Clarke, and Simon Phillips on drums, and the albums *Voice* (2011), *Move* (2013), and *Alive* (2014) followed. When *Spark* (2016) came out, with Jackson's flowing, glow-in-the-dark bass lines buoyed by Phillips' drumming, *DownBeat* magazine said the trio was, "one of the most exciting groups working in any genre today", while *All About Jazz* claimed, "Hiromi continues to be one of the most inventive and awe-inspiring pianists in jazz today."

In 2017, Hiromi veered off in a new direction, exploring a wholly new sonic palette in collaboration with the Columbian harp virtuoso Eddmar Castañeda on *Live in Montreal*.

"I got to play with him in 2017, at the Montreal Jazz Festival, and the way he played harp was like magic," she says. "I never even knew harp could be played like that, he revised all my expectations about this instrument. Watching him play was like watching *Fantasia* by Disney, playing a harp like magic, and then I had to write a song which worked for harp, and in many ways the harp and piano are the same shape. If you put the harp sideways on the floor it's the same shape as piano, I told him that. I thought playing with him was an interesting progression, I didn't think I could

do it, but we really, really listened to each other so much, we just had great chemistry together."

Then, in 2019 she recorded her second solo album, *Spectrum*. "Every 10 years I do a solo album, I did my first solo album in 2009, and another in 2019. I wanted to set these milestones so that I can see from the outside how I have changed and grown. I wanted to do that before I started a new band, and when I finished my solo album and the tour, I said, 'Okay, now is the time I form a new band.'"

Hiromi had been planning...

"I met bassist Hadrien Feraud in 2016, he subbed for a couple of gigs I had with my trio. I immediately felt a very special chemistry when I was playing with him. He was playing songs I wrote for the trio with Anthony Jackson on bass, and I just felt that I wanted to write for Hadrien, I had that idea. Then Covid hit, and I couldn't really pursue that idea – but I kept writing the music because I had a lot of time at home, like everybody else, and I just kept writing, imagining who could be the drummer, then I knew it wouldn't be a trio, but I didn't know what the fourth instrument would be, but I kept writing and writing, and started hearing the trumpet, and that's how I formed the band, with Adam O'Farrill on trumpet and Gene Coye on drums."

On *Sonicwonderland* Hiromi changes tack again with her heaviest, funkier album to date. Using the aforementioned Nord Lead A1, she conjures up a whole spectrum of electronic tone colours: "I really love this synth, I use it a bit more like electric piano, and the sound of the instrument really inspires me to write something I wouldn't write on the piano, so it's quite an inspirational device, I would say."

Covering a whole range of moods, 'Utopia' is a piece she wrote with bassist Feraud in mind, who is featured extensively throughout the album. It was written during the pandemic, when she began a series of 'One Minute Portraits' on Instagram, collaborating remotely with other musicians. "I was playing mainly with people who improvised, and Instagram only allowed one minute of video, so you only heard about 20 seconds of what I'd composed, and then improvisation, in each one."

'Utopia' began life as a 60-second Instagram 'Portrait' featuring Feraud; "So that was an easy transition," says Hiromi.

'Reminiscence' sees the mood swing towards quiet reflection that builds and builds, featuring Adam O'Farrill on trumpet with vocals by UK singer/songwriter Oli Rockberger,

Photos: Mitsuru Nishimura

"I think it was in 2020 or 21, originally I wrote this piece for piano, and I started hearing Oli Rockberger's voice. I studied with him at Berklee in Boston, so I called him, and said would you like to co-write the lyrics? I wanted this to be the song that you sing to somebody who is really important to you, who you're not able to see as often as you want to."

In contrast to the rest of the album is 'Bonus Stage': "In Japanese it's like the word you see in [computer] games, for added games, and is the stage where only good things happen, and in the beginning it starts with a really old school game sound".

Hiromi will be debuting *Sonicwonderland* at the Barbican in London as part of the London Jazz Festival on 13 November, splitting the bill with her Piano Quintet.

"The actual birth of the Piano Quintet, as I call it – a string quartet with piano – was in 2021 during the pandemic when I started writing for piano and string quartet. I kept writing and it ended up being an album called the *Silver Lining Suite* [2021]." Although Hiromi poses on the album cover in red, there are far more colours on offer, including, 'The Silver Lining Suite' plus five originals, with Hiromi's piano sometimes in oblique counterpoint, sometimes in solo, sometimes fractious and

sometimes in melodic accord with her string arrangements. It's one of the most interesting additions to her discography to date. Upon its release, Hiromi was invited to perform 'The Silver Lining Suite' in New York in October 2021.

"Then I started to do more tours overseas," she continues, "but travelling with all the Covid regulations [was difficult], every country had its own regulations. So I had a string quartet in each continent – one in Asia, one in the States and one in Europe.

"And the one in Europe was assembled by the cellist Gabriella Swallow from London. We did a bunch of shows in Europe, and they always wanted to play in London but we never did. Then I had this show with my new band Sonicwonder, and I thought, my string quartet are all from London so perhaps we could do a double bill. I talked to the London Jazz Festival and they loved the idea. So it will be fun to do both projects in one day, two London debuts, it's going to be great!"

**Hiromi's Sonicwonder and Piano Quintet appear on 13 November at the Babican, as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival**



**// She is  
nothing short  
of amazing //**

– Ahmad Jamal  
on Hiromi