

Peggy Stern - Reviews

"Luminous lyricism...the piano more caressed than played...with subtlety, nuance, warmth, effortless swing, beauty of line, and sophistication of harmony and dynamics."

- ***Sydney Morning Herald***

"Stern has her own voice -- she extracts a lovely timbre from the piano...refusing to waste notes"

- ***Jazziz Magazine***

"She has a Monk-like quirkiness in her playing; there is a sense of melancholia and wistfulness that opens windows to her soul."

- ***JazzTimes***

"Stern is eclectic to the nth degree."

- ***Philadelphia Daily News***



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Ed Bride, The Artful Mind, April 2006

"Peggy Stern,

Improviser, composer, pianist

"The key to success in the Jazz world can open the doors of life in general: have a direction, but know how to improvise. Growing up, our parents probably told us that direction is essential for any career; we later learned the importance of improvisation, also known as spontaneous, unscripted action (or in the musical world, performance. Indeed, a Jazz purist might define improvisation as "spontaneous composition").

"As a composer of choral works, interpreter of Brazilian music for duo and other configurations, creator of energetic piano trio numbers, and more recently leader of a salsa and samba group of varying sizes, Peggy Stern maintains a Jazz orientation by always holding that one definition." Jazz is improvised music, so within that umbrella, I consider what I do to be Jazz. When people think of Jazz, they often think of bebop, and while I do that for fun, that's not really what my focus is, what will be my legacy."

"Solidly grounded in classical music, Stern's legacy is likely to include a commitment to melody, something that is missing in some performers who try to impress audiences with finger acrobatics, technique and scales, in lieu of melody and harmony. Her technique is as varied as one can describe, from delicate to powerful, beautiful to angry. But always with a memorable melody, and usually with a solid beat. Audiences at her recent appearances at Castle Street Café in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, have described her as a "monster pianist," which is a major compliment in the music world.

"The pianist's website mentions that she has performed in some unusual situations, so that seemed a normal starting point for an interview. Though it's difficult for her to single out any particular example for its unusual character, "They're all unusual in their own ways," some of her appearances are clearly far from routine.

"Last Fall, for example, she did a duo tour with the legendary alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, with whom she has appeared and recorded (at Birdland here in the U.S., among other places). In the mountains of Sicily, they appeared in an old theatre in front of perhaps 600 people, with a repertoire that ranged from free, unplanned music to standards (Konitz had told her to learn "Cherokee" in every key, for example). Doing some solo time, she played a Sicilian tune, "Maruzella, Maruzze," one that was conjured by her previous visits to the Mediterranean. The striking venue and the impact on the audience comprised her fondest memories of the tour.

"Then there was the tour with a California-based band of Irish musicians, called Puck Fair, consisting of piano (naturally), percussion, and flute. In one planned stop, the venue had burned down the night before. For the gigs that did materialize on that tour, she was deeply engrossed in the Celtic music, and at the same time observed that the Irish reputation for vivacious living was well-deserved.

"The Puck Fair tour happened some 20 years ago, when Stern's skills as an improviser were just beginning to be recognized. She was living in Seattle at the time, and passed through a lot of musical doorways, both before and since.

"Stern's music has a particularly broad ethnic base. In addition to European and American classical music, it draws from Brazilian, African, Jewish, Irish, Cuban, and traditional jazz influences, all known for enchanting melodies and/or strong rhythms. She grew up in Philadelphia, moved to Rochester to study at the Eastman School of Music; to Boston for further study at the New England Conservatory, and then entered the world of the occasionally migrant working musician.

"After a stint on Cape Cod, she moved to San Francisco, a location that probably was the first to have a major influence on her adoption of Jazz: she took up improvisation, and it suited her well. She moved back East to New York, to become immersed in the essence of personal performance and Jazz. She became a frequent visitor to Bradley's, where the likes of Jimmy Rowles, Charlie Mingus, Hank Jones, and Tommy Flanagan would routinely play and/or hang out.

"In the 1980s, she moved to Seattle with her new daughter Sarka Mraz, and stayed for eight years, returning to New York in 1990. She lived in Irvington, West Chester, and then on the upper West Side of NYC, and part of that time was teaching at SUNY Purchase.

"Among the places with the greatest musical influences, or inspirations, Stern says "they all served their purpose." San Francisco was encouraging of improvisation; New York was great for intense learning; Seattle encouraged new music, and it was a supportive, nurturing environment for what she was doing. She attracted a following there, something which many musicians never achieve.

"I have consistently found that the West Coast is much more open to new ideas, much more supportive of new music." The East Coast, she finds, is more parochial. The Jazz community on the East Coast might not be very welcoming to something that they're not quite sure how to characterize, she suggests, but hastens to add that the quality of musicianship on the East coast outweighs the downside of the discipline.

"Why leave that accepting, nurturing environment? In a way, she was at the top of the Seattle creative music scene, "whatever that meant." In New York, it was easier to disappear and continue exploring and developing. "I could be really (BE) nobody." Now, she is "re-inspired" musically, and excited about making original piano trio music that leans heavily on salsa and samba.

"It makes sense to back up a bit, and explore what got her into Salsa in the first place. She traces it back to San Francisco, where one of her first gigs after switching from classical piano was to fill an empty chair in the band called SuperCombo, in the mid-1970s. She did that for a year, six nights a week. The rhythm section was entirely Cuban, and "they were putting up with none of my nonsense." They were pure-enough Cuban that she couldn't even get away with playing something in McCoy Tyner's mainstream modal Jazz vein. "Don't do that," they'd tell her. So, "I learned the real essence of Salsa, I had to fit into that group, do things certain ways, or it just wouldn't work."

"As a cog of the rhythm section, the piano player didn't have the freedom to wander, or dabble in other genres during solo time, because then the wheel wouldn't turn.

"I could see the whole room dancing. I would look out there, and it was just so beautiful." The combination of music and visual appeal sparked an interest that is today's flame.

"But as to the SuperCombo gig itself, she relates, Eddie Henderson came into the club, invited her into his band, "and that was that," she joined the jazz trumpeter's band.

"Once she came to New York, she also worked in the legacy band of the late Cuban percussionist Machito. Four months pregnant, coming home from work around dawn didn't really fit a safe, healthy lifestyle. So, after Sarka arrived, it was off to Seattle.

"Fast forward to today, where she calls upon all those past experiences, especially learning the Cuban rhythms, in the salsa and dance and funk music of her group, Estrella Salsa and Samba. Listeners to her group wonder where all the music comes from, suspecting her of hiding an additional pianist behind the curtain; upon close examination, it can be verified that she only has two hands, each equipped with only ten fingers. But all that training, the work with the Latin groups, and the solid classical education, obviously gave her a solid grounding in melody, harmony, and rhythm.

"She has been concentrating on salsa and samba for a couple of years now, and it is no temporary orientation for the next album, "This is what I really want to do, where I live rhythmically. I like making heads bob up and down, it means a lot to me. Music should dance, at least my music should. It's just another form of swinging. Everything should swing; even classical music should swing."

"Among her musical influences, Stern names Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, and Bill Evans. "I listened to Bill every day...I must have picked up a lot, there. And Horace Silver, his music dances. He is not the greatest technically, but I love his composing. He's great, and composing is so hard."

"A musician makes a living in two or three principal ways, one feeding on the other: performing, recording, and for some, composing. Performances in concerts and clubs provide energy that nurtures creativity, and helps sell the recordings. Hard, lonesome work is also necessary for any recording of original music: creating the material that will be recorded and performed. Towards this end, there are at least three Stern projects in various stages of gestation.

"She has an idea that draws on her classical training: a solo album of classical themes. An unusual approach for most Jazz artists, someone who has heard her a dozen or more times is convinced she can do it. A trio album of Salsa and Latin-flavored original music is first, however, and she will be in the studio on that project this month.

"Perhaps most ambitious on the "maybe" list is a work for chamber orchestra that she will compose. The idea came after one of her small-group concerts, after which the French Horn player suggested that the material could be expanded to a full orchestral version, and the rest will be history. Not a symphony, but a few woodwinds, a chorus, strings, a couple of brass instruments and, of course the piano.

"The Peggy Stern of today is no longer a city-dweller. As occurred with so many people in other professions, the September 11 terrorist attacks drove her to move from New York City, to her retreat in the mid-Hudson valley. That part-time residence is now permanent...at least for now.

"It's a story worth telling, because it reveals another side of her: the teacher, the committed citizen.

"A few years ago, she got her public school certification, and withdrew from Jazz for awhile. "It was really rewarding, and it allowed me to do something constructive for the community at large." Teaching wasn't exactly new to her. She had taught part-time at Purchase for seven years; at Cornish in Seattle for six, and at the Walden School in New York City. 9/11 happened when she was teaching music at a high school in Englewood, New Jersey.

"I got a call in class about the first plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. We could see the smoke from the school. I sent one of the kids down to the resource room to get a television, which we turned on just in time to see the second one hit. I had to stay with friends in New Jersey for two days; I couldn't get back because the bridges were closed. Some of the kids had parents who worked in New York, so that was a problem for them, too."

"When she did get back home to her apartment on 97th Street, "we could see the green cloud in the middle of the night; and it had this stench of vaporized concrete, and death. Once they evacuated Penn Station, and the Empire State Building, that was enough for us."

"So, she and her boyfriend at the time started thinking about just packing it in, and heading for what was then their part-time home in Boiceville; they relocated full-time by summer of 2002. Then, came the New York certification, and she taught part-time in Kingston, where she now lives. She wrote a musical about the Mars rovers, "What Happened on Mars?" performed with great enthusiasm, she recalls, by the 8-year-old students.

"I believe in making a contribution to the community; it bothers me that the Jazz community spends a little too much time navel-gazing; we can tend to be a little ego-based and not community-based. I feel really good about teaching school children and turning them on, and having them turn me on with all their crazy energy. I'm sure I'll go back to that, in some way, even if it's truncated. I really enjoy elementary school students, they're so open. It's great fun, and it's cleansing."

"A few years ago, Stern became interested in jazz chorus. Having been raised singing in choirs, she began writing for vocal groups, both standards and originals. One of her compositions, "Lunasea" is featured both in choral form on Konitz' album Brazilian Rhapsody, as well as being the title tune of her own 1992 quintet album with Lee Konitz. A couple of years later, "New Rain" and "Sunbath" (first recorded by Woody Shaw) were featured with chorus and sextet on her album Actual Size. Two more choir originals, "Delfine" and "Bore Me With Your Love," will appear on her next CD, with the trio.

"A writer suggested to Stern that the process of composing music is the most original form of art, starting from nothing and finishing with a work that can be appreciated, if not understood, by all. "I don't think of it that way, but it's an interesting theory. I just know it's hard, and it's frustrating." Where does that inspiration come from, then?

"Usually it comes to me when I'm not thinking specifically about it. All of the really great moments come when I'm in a semi-conscious state, at the piano. I may just be playing, with the idea that I would like a new tune to come out. I may be under a deadline, then I'm playing, and all of a sudden there's a germ of a motive a little bit, a piece; I can hear it...it's the truth. That is a trip.

"But how do I make that into a composition," she continues. "Where does it go from here? And then you have all these veins of possibilities, going every which way. If you're intelligent, you can make anything work. But then you might come back to it a couple of hours later and recognize that while it works, it isn't good. Or, it doesn't work, after all."

"The inspiration could also happen while shopping, or sleeping, even. But when that happens, "usually it's gone when I wake up. Some things just escape into the air, and maybe they'll appear in my next life...or next week."

"Besides being frustrating, the process of writing is delicate, she asserts. "The piece I'm working on now is called 'Precious Little.' I'm fighting for every measure; each measure has a whole bunch of possibilities, and then when I land on it, how do I get to the next measure?" The very next day, she wrote "Sonnet," and "it just fell out of the sky, perfect, nothing needed to be done to it." That's "the best kind of moment" she knows.

"Sometimes, she may know how a composition is supposed to finish, and she might work backwards. Unlike a symphony, there is no blueprint for the structure of a Jazz composition. But there is a process. Once she has that germ of the melody, the next step is to "getting it into some form where I can improvise with it."

"Even her Jazz compositions display her classical underpinnings. One of her best, she feels, was the aforementioned "New Rain," from the CD Actual Size. The music was the result of her trying to figure out

an interesting way to introduce "Here's that Rainy Day." Hence the title, which actually has nothing to do with the lyrics, an original poem of lost love.

"Besides her personal accomplishments, among the things that make Peggy Stern proud is her daughter Sarka Mraz, now 28. After graduating from University of Texas with a degree in mathematics, Sarka was scooped up by Teach for America, instituted by President Clinton as a sort-of domestic Peace Corps for schools.

"At age 22, Sarka was teaching high school math to troubled students in a tough Baltimore high school, then moved to the D.C.-based SEED School, the first public charter boarding school in the country. (A SEED school is based on a model created by The SEED Foundation that integrates a rigorous academic program with a nurturing boarding program. The academic program is college preparatory in focus, while the boarding program teaches life skills and provides a safe and secure environment 24 hours a day.)

"She worked there for two years, and is now working for the American Institutes for Research, a behavioral and social sciences think-tank, also based in Washington.

"Whether composing is merely creative or is divinely inspired is a matter for the philosophers to settle. But Stern does offer some insight on the question: "There is nothing that is more wonderful than hitting that place where the music comes down and out through your fingers, unobstructed. That is God, right here on earth. The rest of it is us all trying our best to do that."

"But no matter what she is doing, the music is going to inspire dance; "the audience doesn't have to be just staring, they should be moving, up and moving. They just shouldn't be talking."

"If she were in the audience listening to Peggy Stern, she would be up dancing. "I know what it means to have a whole room of people, all feeling it, experiencing the same thing. Salsa music does that in a really healthy way. The trick would be to solo, do my thing, have my compositions head in that direction. Maybe it's a little too progressive to call the music pure salsa, melodically and harmonically. It's not imitation Latin music, though; rhythmically, it's the real thing."

"As part of her immersion into mid-Hudson community life, Stern is the artistic director of the Wall Street Jazz Festival, whose third iteration takes place Aug. 5, in Kingston's uptown business district. Featuring female-led bands, a rarity in the Jazz world, the free festival is sponsored by the not-for-profit Sostenuto Association, and is supported by underwriting grants.

"The festival is not the only thing she is doing in bringing Jazz artists together with the community. She is also the creative force behind the forthcoming Jazz Vespers at the Old Dutch Church in the center of Kingston.

"So, she is beginning to show the makings of a producer not just of albums, but of concerts and other "live" happenings.

"All for the love of Jazz, of course.

"Or at least improvisation."