



Music

JAZZ

Regattabar showcase is pianist Yoko Miwa's well-earned reward



CAROLINE ALDEN

Yoko Miwa will celebrate the release of her first album in five years with a May 19 performance at Regattabar.

By **Jeremy D. Goodwin** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 12, 2017

CAMBRIDGE — Pianist Yoko Miwa has traveled far on her way to becoming one of the hardest-working musicians in Boston's jazz scene.

The native of Kobe, Japan, is long established as a weekend fixture here: She and her eponymous trio have held a Saturday night residency at Les Zygomates in the Leather District for 12 years and have played the Sunday brunch at Ryles in Cambridge for about 15 years. The group has filled out its weekend with a Friday night residency at Thelonious Monkfish ever since that Cambridge restaurant added a dedicated performance space in 2015.

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She augments her residencies with annual shows at Scullers and the Regattabar, and a date at the latter venue May 19 celebrates the release of her first album in five years. In short, Miwa and her group always seem to be playing somewhere — and that's before you count her work as a full-time faculty member at Berklee College of Music, where she gives private lessons.

Still, gigs like the upcoming date at Regattabar are a special treat for Miwa, drummer Scott Goulding, and bassist Brad Barrett.

"That's a listening audience, so you can do anything you want. You can play really quiet or you can do something really subtle and they can hear. That way we have more fun," Miwa says.

The new album, "Pathways," is bright and accessible, largely composed of originals but augmented with selections by Joni Mitchell and the Beatles. Miwa's technical chops are evident, yet she's anything but showy; she prizes space in her sound, and leaves room for the deep interplay her group has honed over the years.

Miwa started studying classical piano at age 4, but it wasn't until she was 19 that she heard the standard "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" in a movie and started wondering what was up with jazz. "I didn't know anything about it but I knew I wanted to play this music," she says.

She continued her classical studies at Osaka School of Music while waitressing at the jazz club owned by organ player Minoru Ozone, who became her first mentor in the genre. After the devastating earthquake that hit Kobe in 1995 destroyed the music school where she'd been working, she

entered Kyoto Conservatory of Music and started focusing on jazz. She was 27 when she traveled to the States to enter Berklee. She didn't really want to leave home but she resolved to study here for one year. But one year turned into two, and soon enough it seemed to make sense to stick around long enough to graduate. Eventually, she realized the move to Boston would be permanent. She took lots of pick-up jobs, sitting in with R&B and reggae groups, and playing Top 40 at weddings.

"It was too many gigs with everybody. I didn't want to be somebody else's pianist," Miwa says. She formed a stable trio with Goulding, whom she met at Berklee, in the drum chair. Though the group has had a few bassists, it's achieved an intimate level of musical communication through all the hours its members have logged together on the bandstand.

And Miwa and Goulding continue the musical conversation at home: They're married, and live together in Brighton. "Music is our passion and it's our life," Goulding says. "The trio is our baby."

The group has occasionally ventured beyond its local haunts, touring Japan and playing special events at the Kennedy Center and Jazz at Lincoln Center. But regular work as a national and international touring group has thus far eluded the trio.

At a Friday night gig this month at Thelonious Monkfish, the Yoko Miwa Trio is backing famed vocalist Sheila Jordan. The group plays with its accustomed sensitivity to its setting, and Miwa looks to be having a grand old time. A Japanese television show recently profiled Miwa as an example of a native who left home to follow her dreams. But she looks right at home on the bandstand, where she sets up at least three times a week. If it's the weekend in Greater Boston, you know where to find her.

YOKO MIWA

At Regattabar, Cambridge, May 19

Tickets \$25, 617-395-7757, www.regattabarjazz.com

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