

Linda May Han Oh

Present in the Moment

BY MATTY BANNOND

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The soles of bassist Linda May Han Oh's shoes rarely stay fixed to the bandstand floor for long. A restless performer, she bounces and sways to her polyrhythmic creations, dipping her instrument like a ballroom dance partner. "Music and dance are closely intertwined, and I play better when I move freely," she says. "But I resisted it for a long time." That resistance had its roots in the rigid discipline that shaped her earliest engagements with music.

Born in Malaysia to parents of Chinese heritage, her family moved to Perth in Western Australia when she was three years old. "The traditional Asian way is about rules...and fear," Oh says with a half-laugh. "I started learning classical piano in a strict school that emphasized discipline, but with that also the idea that, if you moved around too much, you likely weren't focusing hard enough on the material." More opportunities for movement presented themselves thanks to the Yamaha Music Program, which encourages youngsters to feel the emotions of music when completing ear training and improvisation exercises. Teachers ask students to describe the colors evoked when listening, for example. Those piano-based insights led to phases studying clarinet and bassoon before she eventually would switch over to the bass.

As a teenager, Oh played electric bass in rock bands covering Metallica and Rage Against the Machine. Her adolescent years would also bring exposure to jazz, plus encounters with New York City. She participated in the West Australian Youth Jazz Orchestra (WAYJO) and the global Sisters in Jazz program. "In 2004, I got the chance to play at the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE) conference when I was 19," she recalls. "It blew my mind and changed my life. I came back to New York a short time later, playing in jam sessions. That was when I knew I needed to move to this city." A third trip to the Big Apple found Oh auditioning for the master's program at the Manhattan School of Music. While most applicants wore formal attire, Oh showed up in jeans and a t-shirt. Despite this free-and-easy wardrobe choice (which the bassist attributes to her Australian upbringing), she got the thumbs up, enrolled and began a new life in Harlem.

During this time, she would first meet soon-to-be regular collaborators, including pianist Fabian Almazan, drummer Justin Brown and saxophonist Joel Frahm. Trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and drummer Obed Calvaire would also soon enter Oh's orbit. Both appeared on her 2009 debut release, *Entry (s/r)*, an airy album with a toe-in-the-water quality, where ideas are given time to germinate at their own speed. Her experiences of, and interest in, rock music can be heard in the bassist's pugnacious attack and close connection to Calvaire's drumming, in particular. "I remember leaving that session thinking: 'wow!'," says Akinmusire. "Linda has a rare combination of technique, skill, openness and being completely present in the moment. She can hear everything and at any time she's willing to switch directions if that's where the music wants to go. I think that's what makes her so unique. She has the chops, but at the same time she's a truly brilliant improviser. It has been beautiful to watch Linda grow into such a strong leader over the years."

Those stand-out skills quickly drew interest from senior figures across the NYC jazz scene. Her first show with a titan of the music was with pianist Kenny Barron at the Dakota venue in Minneapolis. Thanks to introductions via trumpeter Dave Douglas, she then built working relationships with saxophonist Joe Lovano, pianist Vijay Iyer and guitarist Pat Metheny. Oh's second and third albums as leader—*Initial Here* (2011) and *Sun Pictures* (2012)—were released on Douglas' label, Greenleaf Music. She is also featured on numerous recordings by the quintet Sound Prints, co-led by Douglas and Lovano. "When I first met Linda at the Banff Center for the Arts, she was already a highly-skilled composer and player," Douglas says. "Later, I saw that she'd moved into new spaces. Her trio recording with Ambrose and Obed was an astounding and impressive step. Soon after that, I invited her to be in my quintet and in Sound Prints. She continues to evolve and I am always excited to hear what she will do next."

Further evidence of Oh's evolution can also be heard in her work as part of a trio with Iyer and drummer Tyshawn Sorey, which has released two albums, both on ECM: *Uneasy* (2019) and *Compassion* (2022). The latter record is built around stripped-back compositions that the group unfurls patiently. The bassist plays lyrical improvisations that interrogate melodic shapes and patterns by leveraging a softer touch and a sharper clarity of expression than much of her earlier output.

Oh has picked up multiple high-profile awards, especially over the last half-dozen years. In 2022, she won the German Jazz Prize in the International String Instruments category and was declared *JazzTimes* "Bassist of the Year." 2023 brought the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. The Jazz Journalists Association (JJA) announced Oh as "Bassist of the Year" seven times between 2018-2025; last month she became the newly-crowned *DownBeat* "Bassist of the Year." In 2023 she released *The Glass Hours* (Biophilia), with support from Chamber Music America, a quintet she describes as her most ambitious project as leader due to the use of blended vocals, doubled bass parts and piano effects to generate a fuller overall sound. That dynamic gives the written material a density and heft that arrives with irresistible momentum like molten rock surging down the steep sides of a volcano.

Last year, Oh returned to the trio format that has marked much of her work. On *Strange Heavens* (Biophilia), the bassist reunites with Akinmusire and Sorey. "I wanted this record to be less composed, more open," she says. "Improvisation is a group agreement but it involves resistance, too, which is what makes it so beautiful. These songs are more of a framework or vehicle to discover things. Ambrose and Tyshawn have such great ears and they're so quick about reacting to anything that happens in terms of the direction that we go with each piece."

This month, Oh swaps trio for duo, with a week residency at The Stone, appearing with various partners each night, including tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana. The duo's newly released *Beneath Lifted Skies* (Biophilia) examines much-loved standards by jazz luminaries including John Coltrane, Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk. The album also features three solo bass tracks,

as well as three free improvisations. The two forward-thinking players marry their reverence for the music's tradition with excitement about its future possibilities. "I first met Linda many years ago and she immediately became one of my role models," Aldana says. "Over the years she has remained a source of inspiration for me. Linda has one of the most distinctive voices in music. I admire the honesty and depth she brings to everything she plays...There is so much intention, generosity and beauty in her sound. Every time we make music together, I come away inspired. I'm grateful to have crossed paths with her as a musician and a person."

Oh's other duo partners at The Stone this month include up-and-coming guitarist Emmanuel Michael and electronicist Pamela Z. For the final show of the bassist's residency, she welcomes saxophonist Greg Ward, pianist Almazan and guitarist Mark Whitfield. "This is my third or fourth residency at The Stone and I'm excited about playing with people I admire so much," Oh says. "We're lucky to have John Zorn curating this venue that has gone strong for two decades." Other concerts featuring the bassist in August include her quartet in Prospect Park for the first annual BKLYN Jazz Festival, and as one of dozens of guests for the "Celebrating Jack DeJohnette" tribute at Ulster Performing Arts Center in Kingston, NY.

On top of her busy performance schedule, she is also working on several new ventures. As the winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship this year, Oh is investigating interdisciplinary projects that bridge science, data and music, including collaborations that were a result of the Jazz Artist-in-Residence program at the Zuckerman Institute with neuroscientists to create music that matches data with emotional narratives—starting with a focus on communication between elephantnose fish, which have the highest brain-to-body mass ratio of any known vertebrate. Another project is exploring data about the planet's shifting climate. She is also plotting to team up with Chicago-based group Third Coast Percussion in the coming months. The long and varied list of eminent projects and performances indicates the bassist's popularity among peers in the NYC scene, but it is also a reflection of her willingness to examine new themes, instrumentations and associations.

Oh plays with freedom and embraces opportunities when they arrive—always moving, always restless and rarely fixed in one place for long.

For more info visit lindamayhanoh.com. Oh is at LeFrak Center at Lakeside Aug. 8 (part of BKLYN Jazz Festival) and The Stone at The New School Aug. 19-22. She is also at Ulster Performing Arts Center (Kingston, NY) Aug. 9 (part of "Celebrating Jack DeJohnette"). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Linda Oh—*Entry (s/r)*, (2008)
- Linda Oh—*Sun Pictures* (Greenleaf Music, 2012)
- Linda May Han Oh—*Aventurine* (Biophilia, 2017)
- Vijay Iyer, Linda May Han Oh, Tyshawn Sorey—*Uneasy* (ECM, 2019)
- Linda May Han Oh, Ambrose Akinmusire, Tyshawn Sorey—*Strange Heavens* (Biophilia, 2025)
- Linda May Han Oh/Melissa Aldana—*Beneath Lifted Skies* (Biophilia, 2026)