

MATT BAKER



MEG OKURA

BETWEEN WORLDS

BY JR SIMON

Meg Okura defies easy definition. She's a classically-trained violinist with an irrepressible sense of groove, a composer who never formally studied composition and a musician who moves from Japanese and Jewish cultural influences to jazz, classical and everything in between. Okura has spent two decades saying yes to opportunities that take her into unfamiliar territory, absorbing what she finds and carrying it into whatever comes next. The result is a body of work that is exuberant, restless, deeply melodic, occasionally contradictory and never easily categorized. "I am a living oxymoron," Okura says. "And my music is an unrestrained manifestation of that."

That multiplicity is on full display in three projects this year. *Isaiah*, the fifth album by her Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble, includes music honored by the ISJAC (The International Society of Jazz Arrangers & Composers) Fundamental Freedoms Commission and the Symphonic Jazz Orchestra's George Duke Commissioning Prize, and brings disparate musical languages into the same joyous space. *Uncommon Tones – Live at the Stone* captures Okura, pianist Angelica Sanchez and soprano saxophonist Sam Newsome, with guest vocalist Basya Schechter, following improvisation wherever it leads. And this month, Okura revives the Michael Brecker Quintet (MBQ) at Birdland, two decades after she first played in the ensemble, this time not only as its violinist, but as its musical architect. Donny McCaslin will fill the tenor chair, and Okura will introduce new arrangements of MBQ staples.

Okura says she has always been a composer; at five, she told her mother she wanted to be one. Her mother played classical records every morning and discovered her daughter's perfect pitch. By second grade, Okura fantasized about a synthesizer and sequencer so she could make her own music. Instead, her mother decided her daughter would become a violinist, and, as a dutiful child in a strict Protestant household, Okura obliged. She debuted in Japan at age 16 and moved to the US to study classical violin at Juilliard, earning two degrees. Theory professors encouraged her to pursue composition, but the formal world of contemporary classical music didn't appeal to her.

Jazz, which her family had treated as something forbidden, became her unofficial graduate school. She slid into NYC's downtown scene in the early 2000s and said yes to everything. "Because I knew that that was going to be my school," she explains. Okura had evenings when she'd go from playing Cuban-Jewish music with Roberto Rodríguez and David Krakauer to big band music with Vince Giordano. Refusing to acknowledge genre barriers led to gigs with Steve Swallow, Lee Konitz, even David Bowie. "Jazz isn't jazz if you don't go out and play it with others," she says. Without formal jazz training, she learned by listening, adapting and delivering.

Newsome, her husband and longtime collaborator, had a front-row seat to Okura's evolution. "When I first met Meg, her goal was to be the next Regina Carter," he says. "Fortunately for her, and for us, she became Meg Okura." That personal voice extends beyond music. On

her Substack, *UnKosher Notes*, she writes candidly about the challenges and rewards of making art. Okura doesn't consciously set out to combine genres. "I just start hearing stuff. So then I let it happen organically," she says. Seemingly inconsistent elements occupy the same space because, according to her, they aren't contradictory at all. On *Isaiah*, she simply lets those different worlds coexist. For an artist whose life has unfolded between cultures, traditions and musical languages, that isn't confusion; it's truth. *Uncommon Tones* explores another kind of freedom, with Okura less interested in predetermining where the music *should* go than discovering where it *can* go. Schechter, a frequent collaborator, describes Okura's playing as almost impossible to capture on paper: "She plays things you can't actually score. No one takes you on a journey the way Meg does."

The MBQ revival is a kind of departure from that freedom. Okura immersed herself in the musical language of Brecker and pianist-accordionist and arranger Gil Goldstein, painstakingly reconstructing the original scores and preparing two new arrangements. The project isn't nostalgia, but another opportunity to learn. "I've had this freedom of non-school, but that's not an option anymore," she says. Okura manually entered every note of Goldstein's arrangements into notation software and with Ryuta Yoshimura worked to restore and re-engrave the scores and recover articulations, dynamics and other details from the archival performances, which are preserved at William Paterson University's Living Jazz Archives.

Brecker's untimely death in 2007 cut short what Okura describes as the best musical job she ever had. Losing that future pushed her toward building her own ensemble and becoming the composer she yearned to be as a child. Now she returns to Brecker's music, not as the violinist who left it, but as the multifaceted composer she has become. Her ambition for MBQ extends beyond Birdland: she envisions a continuing ensemble that commissions new music for the Quintet's distinctive instrumentation. Darryl Pitt, Brecker's longtime friend and manager, immediately embraced Okura's idea. "Meg is, in the truest sense, an explorer," Pitt says. "With her, I knew we weren't simply going to hear an interpretation; we were going to hear something original and exciting, which at the same time honors Mike's intent."

For all the musical languages Okura has accumulated, she's less interested in displaying their breadth than in what she can communicate through them. "Whenever I play the violin, I always try to give something extra," she says. "It's an invisible gift from the bottom of my heart to whoever might be listening." After decades spent moving between musical worlds, perhaps the point was never to reconcile them. They are simply the vocabulary Okura has acquired to give that something extra.

For more info visit megokura.com. Okura is at Birdland Oct. 6 (with the Michael Brecker Quintet) and Ibeam Brooklyn Oct. 7 (with Angelica Sanchez and Sam Newsome). See *Calendar*.

Recommended Listening:

- Meg Okura and The Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble – *Meg Okura's Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble* (s/r, 2005)
- Meg Okura and The Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble – *Naima* (s/r, 2009)
- NPO Trio (Sam Newsome, Jean-Michel Pilc, Meg Okura) – *Live at The Stone* (Chant, 2016)
- Meg Okura/Kevin Hays – *Lingering* (Adhyâropa, 2022)
- Meg Okura – *Isaiah* (Adhyâropa, 2022)
- Uncommon Tones (Meg Okura, Angelica Sanchez, Sam Newsome) – *Live at The Stone* (Adhyâropa, 2025)

FREE CONCERTS
www.jazzfoundation.org

National Jazz Museum in Harlem*
58 West 129th St., 2PM

10/1 - aRT (Scott Robinson, Pheeroan Aklafl, Julian Thayer)
10/8 - Robert Kimbrough, Sr. Blues Connection
10/15 - Kuni Mikami

*and livestreaming on JFA Facebook and YouTube

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NYC Cultural Affairs **HOWARD GILMAN FOUNDATION**

Monday Night Jam
National Jazz Museum in Harlem
58 West 129th St., 6PM

10/26 - Monday Night Jam

Danbury Library
170 Main St, Danbury CT, 6PM

10/22 - Stephen Blum
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Coming up in November:

Recirculation
870 Riverside Dr, 1PM

11/14 - **Rare Thing**
celebrating improvisation w/
Cooper-Moore, Dick Griffin,
Karen Borca, Melanie Dyer
New Muse Trio, Kelvyn Bell
and more TBA

THE MARGARET SLOVAK QUARTET

Concert celebrating the vinyl release of her 1989 NYC album of 8 original compositions, **For the Moment**

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2026 @ 4:00 PM

Margaret Slovak (guitar)

Gary Versace (piano)

Simón Willson (bass)

Michael Sarin (drums)

SOAPBOX GALLERY

636 Dean Street, Brooklyn, NY 11238
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Tickets: \$25 General Admission
For more info: <https://margaretslovak.com>

"Recorded in 1989 with pianist Fred Hersch, bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Michael Sarin, this gem showcases guitarist Margaret Slovak's delicate, deliberate lines, warm tone and lyrical touch along with her painterly compositional style."

– Bill Milkowski: *JazzTimes Magazine*, January 2009