



Homework
Senri Oe (PND)
by Jim Motavalli

Pianist Senri Oe has had a remarkable trajectory, from being a huge pop star in '80s/'90s Japan to journeyman jazzman in NYC. He's credible in both roles, and jazz has been Oe's guiding light since 2008, when he first moved to the city.

Homework was recorded at Brooklyn's Bunker Studio, with Australian Matt Clohesy (bass) and Fargo, ND-born Ross Pederson (drums). The album's sixteen original pieces, mostly short and in both electric and acoustic trio settings, have the feel of standards whose titles you can't quite remember. They're pretty, but not schmaltzy. George Shearing would approve. Typical is "Rain Glass", which resembles the tender theme song to a two-hankie romance movie, something akin to Ryuichi Sakamoto's theme for *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. By contrast, the bright "Acha!" sounds like a soul-jazz tune tossed off by Bobby Timmons, and it features a marvelously compact Clohesy bass solo. "Mohawked" could be, should be, an inductee into the Great American Songbook.

Less typical is lead-off "Fresh Edge", which is no less catchy than the rest but has backbeat drums,

electronic keyboards and even some discreet vocal effects. The 41-second "Dear X" is similar, and it manages to get a lot done in a short time. The plugged-in "First Wish" is the closest thing to easy listening on the disc, but the melody is so strong and the performance so adept you forgive its commercial leanings. And then there's "Pure Scars", which sounds jagged but isn't; it's a suspended ballad with inner tension that benefits from excellent rhythm section work—soundtrack music for a character looking out the window on a rainy day (even the sound of a police siren is captured as part of the action). The funky "Amber Lab" has a real urgency to it, showcasing Pederson's drumming, with "Amber Lab 2" its brooding cousin. Clohesy shines on "Country Love", another electric keyboard earworm, while "Homework" could be a Weather Report outtake, though Joe Zawinul's keyboard style was much spikier. It's impressive that Oe *doesn't* try to impress with similar, fancy keyboard work. On this album, at least, he doesn't even seem to improvise all that much—the stellar compositions themselves are at the forefront.

Overall, the palette is varied, but *Homework's* tracks share a rich, melodic sensibility. Jazz musicians might want to give up on yet another take of "Body and Soul" in favor of mining some of the gold on this disc.

For more info visit peaceneverdie.com. Oe is at Birdland Theater Oct. 30-31. See Calendar.



Live at The Stone
Kevin Hays (AHT)
by Franz A. Matzner

This album, *Live at The Stone* (available digitally and as limited-edition vinyl), was extracted from Kevin Hays' 2024 residency at NYC's The Stone at The New School, and it captures a special moment in time. Each track presents a duet between the pianist and a different musician, and the result is a compelling window into Hays' craftsmanship and a sumptuous array of musical expression. The musicians maneuver the space between sound and silence with nuance, and Hays' gifts of deep sensitivity, adaptability and dynamic facility are evident throughout.

Duets of piano and drums are a rarity, especially ones exploring the instruments' subtler capacities. "Bob Dylan", featuring drummer Kenny Wollesen, begins with gentle cymbals, bells and piano, flowing like water over a stream's pebbled bed. Then, notes begin to fall more firmly, while Wollesen holds the beat with delicate cymbal strikes, snare strokes and bass drum drops. "Presence" follows, a fully improvised piece matching Hays' acoustic piano with Craig Taborn's keyboards and electronics. The tune's soundscape owes allegiance to ambient innovators such as Aphex Twin. Again, open space is a key factor. Calm and dissonant waves and winds compete, while Hays' notes hang like clusters of grapes. Bleeps and blips interrupt, as if R2-D2 were a guest vocalist. Guitarist Gilad Hekselman's prayer for peace, "The Dove Will Fly High", is an airy composition balancing a sober mood with underlying optimism. With Hays, the two exchange ruminative phrases that float and wheel before fading into a joint retreat. The album closer is Hays' original "Remember Me", performed with tenor saxophonist Ben Wendel. Wendel's subtones meld with Hays' soft touch,

traversing wavering meadows under sunlit, melodic skies.

Together, these four live duets from *Live at The Stone* offer invitations into an intimate space, based on a common commitment to graceful touches and refined gestures.

For more info visit ahtrecords.bandcamp.com. Hays is at The Pocket Oct. 9-11. See Calendar.



Beyond the Veil
Jason Kruk (SunGoose)
by Jason Gross

Religious music isn't always gospel, as John McLaughlin proved with Mahavishnu Orchestra. Drummer Jason Kruk also proves this point with the similarly muscular, spiritual-minded jazz-rock album, *Beyond the Veil*. Whereas his 2009 debut *Leaving Saturn* leaned on minimalist funk by a small core group, Kruk goes for a more varied selection here, utilizing a cast of seven rotating musicians, including two bassists and three guitarists, in different combinations and styles.

In title and sound, "Ascension" brings John Coltrane to mind. But Kruk's composition is a more low-key, wistful piece, led by Brian Donohoe's somber tenor playing and Art Hirahara's flowing piano attack. The slamming Meters-like funk of "Awakening" is a trio session with Adam Rogers' searing guitar taking the lead. "The Lion" starts with a grand, heavy metal entrance, turning into a more intricate funk trio piece, again expressively led by Rogers, who occasionally intertwines with bassist Fima Ephron. "The Ox" features a hard-bop melody from Donohoe over a '70s fusion groove, later taking flight with Hirahara's driving electric piano performance. "The Eagle" moves back into hard-rock trio format, with Wayne Krantz applying wah-wah guitar licks, before shifting into driving funk. The guitarist lets notes fly furiously before cooling down to Kruk's subtle brushwork. "The Man" is another trio piece with Krantz, whose heavy riffing and leads cross both roots rock and hard rock. "Dad" shifts gears into a calm trio, which features Rogers' thoughtful, considered guitar playing.

Beginning an elements-themed set of songs, the contemplative, Zen-like "Water" features Donohoe's low-key tones, then picks up into a hard-driving fusion piece, ending with brief, yet powerful solos from Hirahara and guitarist Bob Lanzetti. "Wind" starts slow, coiled with intensity, then breaks into a driving fusion theme with Hirahara's spacy piano, Lanzetti's fiery guitar and Donohoe's yearning saxophone over Kruk's tumultuous drumming. "Earth" is a slow-burn funk trio composition, featuring Rogers' sustained tones. The same trio then launches headlong into the straight-ahead funk-fusion of "Fire", with Rogers going into high-speed overdrive. "Creation" brings things full circle with a peaceful, early-morning vibe, led by Donohoe's slow-paced tones over Kruk's rumbling drums and Hirahara's ghostly synthesizers; it then evolves into a spacey, atmospheric segment, before revving back up into a high-energy finale.

Kruk's musical rollercoaster of *Beyond the Veil* provides a thrill-ride from beginning to end.

For more info visit songooserecords.com. The album release concert is at Ken's Jazz Attic (Larchmont, NY) Oct. 10. See 100 Miles Out.

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