

# Rachel Z: On the Milky Way Express

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**Repertoire: Pinocchio, El Gaucho, Fall, Footprints, Delores, Iris, Black Nile, Witch Hunt, Black Swan, Three Marias, Milky Way Express.**

The road to success for a female jazz instrumentalist is a ninety-degree climb straight up. And even when an artist such as Rachel Z gets a leg-up by being associated with male artist of legendary stature (in this case, Wayne Shorter), the climb is still fraught with obstacles such as the biases and preconceptions of reviewers and audiences, compounded by the use of supposedly descriptive labels attributed to ones work. Labels such as fusion, avant-garde, straight-ahead, and bop may be useful to the sales force, but they do little to illuminate our understanding.

Having said that, I admit that the “fusion” label usually provokes my swift departure. So when this CD arrived with the word Fusion in big letters on the promotional package, I decided to read the printed materials before listening. I found that Rachel Z has had a number of diverse experiences (including early childhood classical voice and piano training) and an eclectic array of artists such as Bill Evans, Dexter Gordon, Joanne Brackeen, and Herbie Hancock influences her musical thinking. She graduated from the New England Conservatory with a “Distinction in Performance” award and has been recognized for her work with many excellent artists such as Najee, the group Steps Ahead, and Wayne Shorter. Because these fine musicians are not on my list of personal favorites, I would not have thought to seek out a recording by one of their cohorts. That would have been my loss, one averted only by the happy accident of a reviewing assignment for this magazine.

On The Milky Way Express is a tribute to Wayne Shorter. Shorter’s compositions are notoriously complex and lend themselves to lengthy explorations. You are unlikely to walk away whistling the melody of one, but you will not leave untouched by the emotions they evoke.

In this spare acoustic trio setting, recorded live to two-track, all three ladies – Rachel Z on piano, Miriam Sullivan on bass, and Allison Miller on drums – exhibit their harmonic savvy with a sureness and confidence in their touch. Note the clean lines and fine technique in “Pinocchio” and the loping cowboy groove of the bass and drums passage in “El Goucho.”

In the ballad titled “Fall,” the glory of the season is depicted with beautifully voiced chords, deep contrapuntal bass notes, and lilting phrases. The meandering mood of an unhurried journey continues with “Footprints” and slowly builds to a smoldering intensity.

After picking up the tempo again, with “Delores,” the trio does a 180-degree turn into “Iris,” a very slow moving ballad notable for its delicacy and vulnerability. Breaking out of the sadness, the up-tempo “Black Nile” has an infectious energy that carries you swiftly down the river.

Some jazz bassists should never pick up a bow, but Sullivan is one of the exceptions, proving her prowess in “Witch Hunt.” Rachel Z holds forth in “Black Swan,” a short solo piano offering with chordal richness that evokes a peculiar sense of majesty. A free-flowing Latin-tinged rendition of Three Marias follows. Sullivan again shows her versatility, this time on electric bass. The set concludes with the trio reaching for the stars on “Milky Way Express.”

Jazz is an evolutionary art form, not just in the grand historical perspective, but also as viewed within the internal maturation of a single artist. The development of a creative art usually proceeds from imitation, to emulation, and finally to innovation. “On the Milky Way Express” is evidence that Rachael Z has taken that last step and is clearly out there on her own – and in very good company, too.