

Shanghai Nights: Victor Noriega's Journeys in Jazz

By TODD MATTHEWS

When Seattle pianist Victor Noriega recently traveled to Shanghai, China, one aspect of his journey posed a big hurdle.

Finding work wasn't a problem: Noriega had a friend who recently opened one of the most popular jazz clubs in Shanghai.

Finding musicians with whom to work was also easy: Noriega plugged into the city's rich music community, working with Chinese jazzmen, as well as musicians from around the world.

The biggest hurdle, according to Noriega, was the language. "Looking back, I just realize it's about the language," Noriega recalls during a recent interview in Seattle. "If you are going

attention to what's going on."

For Western musicians, performances in Asia are equally appealing. The cost of living is inexpensive and Asian audiences and musicians with a feverish interest in America's signature music turn out en masse for performances. For Noriega, who arrived in Shanghai January 17 and returned to Seattle March 14, he found a steady booking at JZ Club in Shanghai. "People come out to JZ Club because it's *the* jazz club," he explains. "People wanted to hang out there and check it out. I was fortunate. There are a lot of gigs in Shanghai that are strictly contract gigs. You work six nights a week at the same place, and it's usually at a hotel where there is kind of a set repertoire. Or a blues club, where they want

Despite a lack of jazz records and instruction, many Chinese jazz musicians nevertheless impressed Noriega. "They were amazing," he adds. "I worked with a few guys there who were really great instrumentalists."

NORIEGA WAS BORN in Vancouver, B.C., raised in Portland, Oregon and moved to Seattle as an adolescent. Music was a big part of his life at an early age. "My dad played piano," he says. "He wasn't necessarily a jazz player, but he was into jazz. He played standards by ear and he improvised. They were standards that most jazz musicians know. I heard all of that stuff growing up." In middle school, Noriega played bass in a rock band — an experience that informed him of the camaraderie of working in a group.

That experience led him to play bass in a blues band in high school. He then developed a deep interest in jazz piano through the jazz program at Lake Washington High School. He also began searching for jazz records and learning more about performers who created the music. "That's when I really started to study," he says. "Lake Washington had a really great program. A lot of care was put into the program and the director was really doing different things. We were able to play great music, the environment was good, and there were a lot of good players there."

Noriega then went to the University of Washington, where he studied under the direction of Marc Seales. While in college, Noriega joined the popular funk / hip-hop group "Hi-Fi Killers" (the group's music appeared on the motion picture soundtrack for "Chicago Cab"), and the acid jazz group "The Sharpshooters." He graduated from the University of Washington in 2000 with a Bachelor of Music degree in Jazz Studies. After graduation, he studied with pianists Dave Peck and Jerome Gray, and went on to build his repertoire in a wide range of gigs, both as a soloist and in various ensembles, in the Seattle area and throughout the Northwest. In 2004, Noriega received an invitation to participate in the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music. There he continued to hone his skills studying and working with international musicians Dave Douglas, Bill Frisell, James Genus, Clarence Penn, Brad Turner, Mike Murley, Jason Moran, Han Bennink, and Mark Feldman. He also recorded and performed in concert and club settings with George Lewis and Mark Turner.

His real interest — and arguably his strongest talent — is his songwriting. It's something that he has been doing as far back as high school. In summer of 2003, he entered the studio with bassist Willie Blair, drummer Eric Eagle, and producer Charlie Smith to create a record of Noriega's tunes. That album, entitled



to travel in other parts of the world, being able to communicate is extremely important." By the time Noriega left Shanghai to return to Seattle in mid-March, he knew enough Chinese to give vague instructions to cab drivers and order his favorite meals at restaurants.

Fortunately, there is one language in which Noriega is fluent: the language of jazz. It's a language that translates well. For several years now, many Seattle-based musicians have made the trek to Japan and now, increasingly, China, finding plenty of places to perform and numerous musicians with whom to work. With China's greater openness towards the West seems to come a growing curiosity about jazz.

"For Chinese people, jazz is kind of a new music," Noriega says. "They're paying

more bluesy stuff. The beauty of JZ Club is that I got to play jazz there."

The other beauty was the opportunity to perform with Chinese jazz musicians. The only music school in Shanghai is the Conservatory of Music, which focuses on classical and conservatory music — not jazz. Still, Noriega found a number of jazz musicians to work with. "I was thinking, 'How did they learn to play like that?'" he says. "These guys, they just liked the music so much that they learned it off the old records. They did it the old-fashioned way. And they can't really get too many records out there. I brought my I-Pod with a bunch of stuff and it was a pot of gold, as far as they were concerned. They were like, 'Wow, you can't get any of this stuff here.' That was cool."

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Stone's Throw, was released in March 2004.

That album is a clear representation of Noriega's talents, and was well received by several critics. "*Stone's Throw* is an impressive debut recording from a pianist and composer of considerable talent," said Gordon Todd, Jazz Music Director at KBCS-FM, who invited Noriega to discuss his album on the air shortly after its release. "Noriega's tunes crackle with individuality, making it clear that his ambitions reside in innovation not imitation. Introspective at times, energetic and boundary-stretching at others, these tunes seamlessly blend jazz and modern classical influences, expertly rendered by Noriega and his trio. Ranks with the best jazz CDs of the year so far. Victor Noriega is a player to watch."

Critic Jason West, reviewing the album in *All About Jazz*, compared Noriega and *Stone's Throw* to pianist Brad Mehldau and *Anything Goes*. "Like Mehldau," wrote West, "Noriega draws inspiration from various musical styles. His playing is adventurous and without pretension. Loud and clear is the sound of his trio having fun on this recording."

Indeed, the album works well on several levels. Noriega approaches the music from a classically-trained perspective (though he isn't classically-trained, he admits there are similarities and has a certain fondness for that music). The songs on *Stone's Throw* aren't your basic head-solo-solo-solo-head jazz format common among jazz trios.

Instead, the tunes are layered, complex, interesting and rhythmic. The songs aren't formulaic or pre-determined. Noriega has so much up his sleeve, the end result is a richness that is exciting to hear from a young composer like Noriega. It's very original songwriting that leaves a listener feeling that he or she has gone on an uncharted musical journey of sorts.

IN SHANGHAI, NORIEGA brought charts from *Stone's Throw* and performed those songs during his stint at JZ Club. He worked with a group of Chinese musicians, in addition to American performers already living in Shanghai — musicians from Santa Fe, San Francisco and New York City. Because musicians can live cheaply in Shanghai, Noriega found that he had more time to spend rehearsing and focusing on music. "It was a very healthy musical mind-set," he recalls. "Whatever financial distractions you might have here, there's less chance of that happening in China. There was always something to do involving the band. We rehearsed as much as we could and put some time into it. I really got to stretch out and do the things I always wanted to do."

At press time, Noriega was preparing for a spring tour with his *Stone's Throw* trio (bassist Blair and drummer Eagle), with stops in San Francisco/Bay Area, Los Angeles, Eugene,

Gresham and Portland. He also recently received a grant from the Jack Straw Artist Support Program to arrange an album of traditional Filipino folk tunes. "I'm not trying to jazz up the Filipino songs," he explains. "I'm trying to do something that I think is positive and breaks the boundary. It's a challenge because these are traditional folk tunes that I grew up listening to. They're simple, beautiful and straightforward. I'm trying to do something different with them."

Is Noriega planning a return trip to Shanghai?

"I'll say yes — though I'm just not sure when," says Noriega. "Shanghai is a great city. I made some great connections and some wonderful friends there. I got to play my own music with good musicians. Being there

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Stylish jazz vocals 7:30pm

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