

ROPEADOPE RECORDS

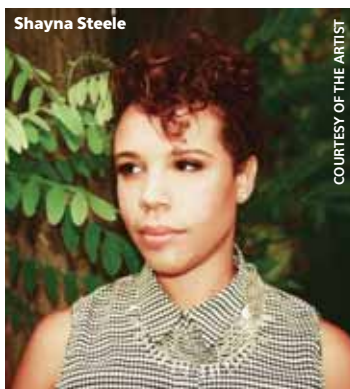
FOSTERING WIDESPREAD COLLABORATION



The Pollyseeds includes Chachi (left), Rose Gold, Terrace Martin and Wyann Vaughn, as well as other musicians.



Trevor Lawrence Jr.



Shayna Steele

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



ZACH GROSS

Maurice Brown

Ropeadope Records was founded in 1999 as a feisty Philadelphia-based upstart that created a seminal music blog to promote its artists while also establishing a stylish merchandising presence. Today Ropeadope has evolved into something much larger, joining myriad artists and their fans across the globe in a true community environment.

“We think of ourselves as a distributed collaborative network,” Ropeadope owner Louis Marks said. “It’s a reflection that today people are connected through the Internet. We want Ropeadope to mirror the culture that its musicians share. Many are connected, and each has their local and global online networks. We try to plug those together so they can share resources instead of going it alone.”

Ropeadope’s success as a music company and

tastemaker is attributable to an eclectic, diverse array of artists. In the past Ropeadope worked with The Philadelphia Experiment (featuring drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, keyboardist Uri Caine and bassist Christian McBride), which released an acclaimed self-titled album in 2001, and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band (which recruited New Orleans icon Dr. John and a little-known singer named Norah Jones for its 2002 album, *Medicated Magic*).

Ropeadope’s current roster includes pianist Eddie Palmieri; trumpeters Nicholas Payton, Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah and David Weiss; vocalists Malika Tirolien and Shayna Steele; drummer Nate Smith; guitarists Matthew Stevens and Grant Green Jr.; pianist Mark de Clive-Lowe; and the bands Slavic Soul Party and Fresh Cut Orchestra.

Forthcoming Ropeadope releases include two albums from pianist Richard X Bennett—the quintet disc *Experiments With Truth* and a trio effort, *What Is Now*—both out Oct. 6.

Ropeadope’s artists share resources and audiences via Bandcamp and SoundCloud web pages. Ropeadope’s extensive website—which lists 13 labels, including Sounds of Crenshaw, Mobetta Music and Paytone—has a Rad TV page that compiles video webisodes and a store that sells vinyl.

Ropeadope’s motto, “Music Culture Clothing,” bears explaining: “It’s a holdover from the early days of Ropeadope, but it still applies,” Marks said. “We were one of the first labels to maintain a full blog, from 1999 to the mid-2000s. That’s where the culture comes in. We used to write about happenings in the market and the



Mark de Clive-Lowe (left) with Nia Andrews, who appeared on his album *Church*



Adam Turchin



Eddie Palmieri

world. And our T-shirts and hats have become collector's items." (At press time, the Ropeadope store offered six T-shirts, including the "Renew Orleans" design, with its clever shout-out to the Crescent City.)

In an ever-shifting marketplace, Ropeadope has managed to successfully navigate the demands of a decentralized record industry. That includes partnering with many imprints.

"The relationship with our imprints is more complex than simply distribution," Marks said. "We release and distribute their records, but we also collaborate on their marketing; we coach the labels as they grow. Snarky Puppy's Ground Up label was our first imprint. There are entire communities [built] around a single artist."

Trumpeter Maurice "Mobetta" Brown, who enjoyed an acclaimed weekly residency at New York's Jazz Standard in April, is one of Ropeadope's rising stars. His diverse resume reflects his musical versatility: Brown has recorded and/or toured with Aretha Franklin, John Legend, George Freeman and Lalah Hathaway. He wrote horn arrangements for Tedeschi Trucks Band and appeared on its Grammy-winning album, *Revelator* (Sony Masterworks). Brown's new album, *The Mood* (Ropeadope/Mobetta), features rapper Talib Kweli and an ensemble that recalls both The Headhunters and A Tribe Called Quest.

"My goal to create jazz that is contemporary," Brown said. "I love the classics but why regurgitate the music? I took my experiences producing hip-hop and r&b, rock and blues and jazz, and put it together. It's an honest sound. I wasn't pulling out my hair to get it to sound smooth; that's the way I hear music."

Brown feels at home on Ropeadope. "Unlike

most labels, Ropeadope has a stronger sense of community and camaraderie among its artists," he said. "We all support each other and play on each other's projects and share our fan bases. Often, musicians can be standoffish if they share a label. But not at Ropeadope. Everyone is cool."

Marks is optimistic about the company's future. "It's a ridiculous challenge, but we're scalable to weather the storm," he said. "People used to ask, 'Where is your office?' I said, 'We're in a small store behind the railroad tracks. We're not anywhere.' Today we pay close attention to changes with social media, the Internet and the streaming model. We approach social media differently: Rather than a broadcast medium, we have a chain of tastemakers—like old-school radio DJs—who talk directly to fans and music lovers to create a dialog. Our goal is to carve out a micro-business inside the current environment—like a microbrewery."

INVENTIVE POLLYSEEDS

Ropeadope is championing one of the most anticipated albums of the year, *Sounds Of Crenshaw Vol. 1*, the debut from The Pollyseeds. The band consists of what Marks called "a rotating cast of producers and musicians." The group is fronted by multi-instrumentalist Terrace Martin, who earned rave reviews for his 2016 studio album, *Velvet Portraits* (Ropeadope/Sounds of Crenshaw). Martin and other members of The Pollyseeds appeared on Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-winning album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (Top Dawg/Aftermath).

The Pollyseeds include vocalists Chachi, Rose Gold and Wyann Vaughn, guitarist Marlon Williams, drummer Robert "Sput" Searight, keyboardist Robert Glasper and saxophonist Kamasi

Washington. The collective also features a couple of musicians who have their own new leader projects on Ropeadope: saxophonist Adam Turchin, who plays 10 different instruments on his album *Manifest Destiny*, and a drummer Trevor Lawrence Jr., who has more than 70 recording credits and who recruited Brown, Martin, Payton and Washington to play on his album *Relationships*.

Sounds Of Crenshaw Vol. 1 opens with the atmospheric "Tapestry," and then The Pollyseeds get down to business with "Chef E Dubble." Offering a relaxed groove with Glasper's swelling Rhodes keyboard and Searight's pulsing rums, "Chef E Dubble" also incorporates a low-end hum, Williams' guitar and Washington's bluster tenor, creating an ethereal ride. That quickly changes with the distorted Linn LM-1 drum machine beat of "Intentions," which has got a big dose of P-Funk ladled with contemporary rapping from Chachi.

Gold takes the spotlight for the hip-hop/quiet storm ballad "You And Me," followed by the twinkling keyboard merriment of "Believe," which features keyboardist Chris Cadenhead, drummer Curly Martin, bassist Brandon Eugene Owens, and the percussion, alto saxophone and Minimoog of Martin, with a tenor solo courtesy of Washington. "Don't Trip" closes the record with yet more Rhodes plushness, ethereal vocals and Lawrence's big beat.

Mixing elements from old-school r&b and 21st-century hip-hop, *Sounds of Crenshaw Vol. 1* showcases a bevy of West Coast talent crafting compelling art for a 2017 audience. It's yet another example of Ropeadope's skillful way of identifying intriguing artists and helping them flourish.

—Ken Micallef

YOKO MIWA



CAROLINE ALDEN

Yoko Miwa's new release is a trio album titled *Pathways*.

ONE FAN AT A TIME

In May, when pianist Yoko Miwa played to a sold-out house at the Regattabar jazz club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her trio, she looked out at an enthusiastic audience she had meticulously built, one fan at a time.

The Japanese-born Miwa, 47, has been working in the Boston music scene for years—teaching, performing as an accompanist and then leading her own trio. At the Regattabar, she was celebrating the independent release of *Pathways*, her seventh album as a leader, and her first in five years. A recent feature in *The Boston Globe* and a spot on *JazzWeek's* radio chart had created demand for the new album. But there was the kind of screw-up that any indie artist would recognize: Buyers weren't able to order the physical CD online (due to a restocking snafu that was later resolved).

"Yoko was overwhelmed with email, texts, Facebook messages and tweets from fans saying they wanted to buy the CD, but it was unavailable," recalled Scott Goulding, Miwa's husband, and the drummer in her trio since its inception.

It was a typical complication of being one's own distributor. Like a lot of independent musicians, Miwa has to balance music-business neces-

sities with her day job as assistant professor of piano at Berklee College of Music and performing. "People ask me, 'How do you do it?'" said Miwa. "I tell them, 'Because we have to.'"

By any standard, Miwa is decidedly accomplished. A child prodigy with perfect pitch, she seemed destined for a classical career when she entered Koyo Conservatory in Kobe. But then a chance encounter at the movies with the standard "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" (which appears twice in the soundtrack to the 1989 Steven Spielberg romantic comedy *Always*) put her on a path to jazz. She got a job at a jazz club owned by musician and teacher Minoru Ozone (father of pianist Makoto Ozone) and began her long jazz journey.

In 1997, she came to Berklee on a full scholarship. She soon fell into a busy freelance life—giving piano lessons, playing jazz shows with faculty members and taking plenty of pop gigs. But at a certain point, she felt she had to focus on her own music and not just be "someone else's pianist." She formed the trio with Goulding, whom she had met at Berklee, and in 2001 they released their first CD, *In The Mist Of Time*, a collection of nine Miwa originals.

That album showcased Miwa's impressive technique and a tuneful lyricism that combines an Oscar Peterson-ish hard swing with Bill Evans-like introspection. Following her first three albums (originally released on the Japanese Polystar label), she has mixed her originals with inventively arranged covers.

Pathways includes two songs by bassist Marc Johnson, a rendition of The Beatles' "Dear Prudence" and an epic, exploratory take on Joni Mitchell's "Court And Spark." At 11 minutes long, it's the kind of track Miwa says is frustrating for her radio-promo man, who's desperate for shorter tunes. "But it's what we do," Miwa said. "We go for it."

Miwa's original compositions are equally capacious. The theme of "Lickety Split" follows the rhythmic pattern of Sonny Rollins' "Pent-Up House," but the piece soon veers into wide-open harmonic and rhythmic vistas that suggest McCoy Tyner. "The Goalkeeper" is a playful mix of bebop themes. The ruminative "Lantern Light" is quintessentially Miwa, featuring a lyrical main theme and a contrastingly dark, foreboding bridge.



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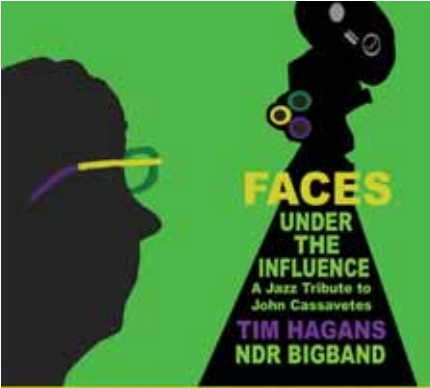
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WAITING MOON RECORDS



Miwa (left) and her trio perform at Scullers Jazz Club in Boston.

CAROLINE ALDEN

Miwa said she wrote the piece “in 10 minutes,” on her lunch hour at Berklee, with pencil and paper, avoiding the piano, not wanting the tune to be dictated by familiar finger patterns.

Miwa supplemented her income for years as a Berklee teaching accompanist as well as instructing at the small, all-ages Brookline Music School. But in 2011, she got a call from Berklee’s then-piano department chair (now chair emerita) Stephany Tiernan regarding a part-time teaching position.

“I hadn’t met her,” Tiernan recalled. “But she was someone I needed to pay attention to because I was hearing about her from a lot of different places.” Seeing Miwa perform, Tiernan was impressed by her technical mastery and emotional honesty. “She really connects with her audience. She came in and proved herself to be an extremely popular teacher.”

In 2015, following the deaths of legendary Berklee jazz-piano master Ray Santisi (1933–2014) and longtime classical teacher Ed Bedner (1936–2014), Berklee began an international search for a full-time faculty member. The school fielded 182 applicants before hiring Miwa. She was, Tiernan explained, someone who could fulfill the needs of students from both jazz and classical backgrounds. Plus, it was extremely important to Tiernan that the new hire could serve as a role model as both an instructor and a performing/recording musician.

These days, Miwa teaches full-time three days a week and devotes her weekends to the trio. She and Goulding hire publicists and radio promoters to help with each new recording, but mostly they’re on their own. (They’ve released all the albums independently in the States, except for 2012’s JVC/Victor Japanese release *Act Naturally*.)

Still, there’s always the danger of becoming, as Goulding put it, an academic “lifer,” a musician whose performance career has been impeded by teaching duties.

Fortunately, the Yoko Miwa Trio is a steadily working band—for the past 12 years, they’ve had a weekly Saturday-night gig at the downtown Boston bistro Les Zygomates, and they’ve been a regular at the Sunday brunch in Cambridge’s Ryles Jazz Club for 15 years. Two years ago, they added a Friday night at the Thelonious Monkfish restaurant in Cambridge, where the menu has a cocktail named in honor of Miwa.

Restaurants are not necessarily the most artistically rewarding gigs—they’re often about socializing and food, not listening. But Miwa has learned how to convert those regular restaurant patrons into fans. She found early on that people wanted to talk to her between sets, something she at first resisted, asking Goulding to meet people instead. “But they want to talk to you,” Goulding told her.

Over time she learned that if she talked to people after the first set, they’d pay closer attention during the second. “It helps to connect with the audience,” she said. And those restaurant regulars would show up for the trio’s gigs at jazz rooms like the Regattabar or Scullers in Boston. “They know it’s special,” Miwa noted.

None of the restaurant owners have pressed their will on the trio’s set list. The only limits are self-imposed. “Are you really going to be able to hear my brushes?” Goulding is likely to ask when Miwa calls a ballad during a particularly noisy set.

On a Friday night in June at Thelonious Monkfish, the trio played for a crowd that talked noisily while dining on sushi and Asian “fusion” dishes. But they also applauded and cheered loudly after solos by Miwa and the trio’s formidable bassist, Brad Barrett, especially after a long, mood-shifting journey through “Lantern Light.” Thanking the audience at set’s end, she encouraged them to try a Yoko Miwa cocktail. And then she stopped by a table down front—making another crucial, one-on-one connection with an appreciative fan.

—Jon Garelick

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DRIVEN & DETERMINED

For Berta Moreno, the path to fulfilling her lifelong dream of becoming a working jazz musician has been one of little steps—incremental advancements that, one after the other, brought the Spanish saxophonist to New York and the release of her debut album, aptly titled *Little Steps*.

Moreno, a 33-year-old native of Madrid, has lived in Manhattan for three years. During that time, she earned a bachelor's degree at City College of New York, where she was a star student of saxophonist Steve Wilson, who appears as part of the sextet on the richly textured, thoroughly swinging *Little Steps*. Wilson plays alto and soprano in the triple-sax front line, alongside Moreno on tenor and Troy Roberts on tenor and soprano. The rhythm section includes rising pianist Manuel Valera, plus the simpatico team of bassist Maksim Perepelica and drummer David Hardy. Moreno composed all the tunes, along with co-producing the album with Perepelica and releasing the record herself.

"I've been in love with jazz since I can remember," Moreno said. "Someone put on that Cannonball Adderley album *Somethin' Else* when I was little, and it was immediately, 'What is this?!' It was so beautiful that I recall almost crying. After that, I listened to a jazz radio program every day, listing all the names I heard in a little notebook with my limited English then—like, 'Dexter who?' As much as I liked learning classical clarinet at the time, I just had to switch to saxophone—it was a burning [desire] inside. I would fall asleep with headphones on, the sounds of Cannonball, Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, Sonny Stitt, Kenny Garrett seeping into my consciousness.

"I played along to records, then went to workshops and took lessons," Moreno recalled. "But I had high ideals from all my listening—it was painful when I couldn't realize the sounds on the horn that I had in my head. It seemed like such a slow process, but looking back, it was truly


lots and lots of little steps that got me here. The struggles are worth it, as long as you keep at it."

Moreno moved to New York from the Netherlands, where she earned the first of her degrees in music. She came with Perepelica, a Latvian with whom she had a prize-winning band in Holland called Kind of Brown (named after bassist Christian McBride's 2009 album with his band Inside Straight). Perepelica is now her fiancé.

Seated at an East Village café, Moreno radiated openhearted optimism and a can-do spirit. "To move to another country with a partner in both music and life was a huge help," she said. "Maksim and I share the same aspirations and support each other. I really wanted to be in the hustle here; I couldn't wait. It can be challenging to live here, though, with the expenses and the competition. After growing up in Spain, where it's so community-oriented, it can be hard to make friends here at first, as everyone is working all the time just to make it. But you can definitely feel the jazz vibe in New York. All the different music is so inspiring."

"A striking thing about Berta is her sincerity," said Wilson, who, in addition to being an associate professor and co-director of the jazz studies program at City College of New York, is a faculty member at The Juilliard School. "Berta invests emotional content into whatever she's doing, something you can sense whether you're in the audience or on the bandstand alongside her. She's smart, focused, dependable—serious about her music but an affable person, the sort you want to work with. She's all about making the music as good as it can be.

"There are more and more young women in jazz, from all over the world—not just Europe but also Japan, Korea, South America," Wilson continued. "In the 1980s, when I started out, that wasn't the case. But these women are every bit as capable as the guys. Berta has a special quality in her playing—an emotional vulnerability. You don't hear a lot of



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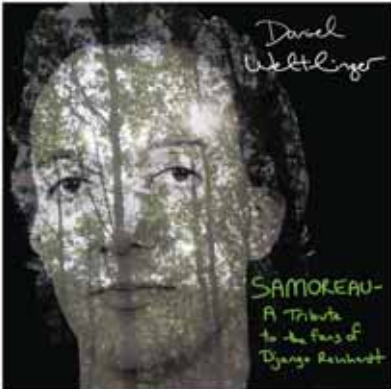
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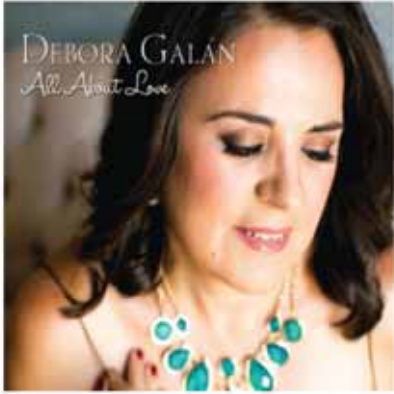
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that today, when there are a lot of thinkers and technicians in the music. To me, it's essential to reveal something of yourself in your sound. That's what a lot of us love about the jazz greats. It invites people in."

It took Moreno a few years to save the money to record *Little Steps* at Systems Two in Brooklyn. The bulk of the funds for the release came from a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$12,000, which she used to pay for mixing, mastering, pressing, printing, a photo shoot, cover design, a promo video and a publicist. "I could've done a more homemade record, just using friends and a cheaper studio," she explained. "But having invested so much time in writing the music, the recording was important to me; I wanted to do it right. And the crowdfunding ended up being about more than money. It was also about getting people involved. I had no idea that I had fans not just in Spain, Holland and the U.S. but also in Japan, Brazil, Greece, Switzerland, Germany. It was so encouraging for me—you know, 'I'm not alone.'"

The recording session—which was completed in one day, lasting eight intense hours—was made easier thanks to the support of Wilson and the other veteran musicians in the room. "Steve is the sweetest guy, and I've learned so much from him," Moreno said. "He's such a wonderful musician, with that beautiful, personal sound on the horn that just lifts you up. It was so exciting to hear [Wilson] and the other guys play my music, with all their powerful solos. I thought through the arrangements carefully beforehand and wanted to make a swinging record, with the sound of a real band. The guys helped me realize that."

Moreno turned to CD Baby for manufacturing *Little Steps*, as well as digital distribution and physical distribution in the United States. For European distribution of orders via her website, she's using a mom-and-pop shop—literally. She shipped a batch of CDs home to Spain, where her mother fulfills the orders. As for live gigs, she has played clubs in multiple New York City boroughs, along with such alternative venues as the Queens Public Library. The saxophonist is also a teaching artist with pianist/bandleader Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Alliance.

Last year, Moreno traveled to Kenya with her soprano saxophone to teach music and Spanish to small children through the Bilingual Birdies program. "It was life-changing to see how these people who live such challenging lives are so happy day to day, singing, dancing and laughing, with a real sense of community," she said. "I want to write music inspired by that experience. It's just the seed of an idea, but I know now that little steps can help you realize what's in your imagination."

—Bradley Bamberger

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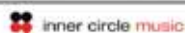
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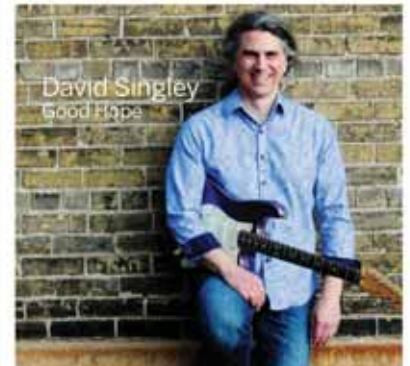
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