

BRAITHWAITE & KATZ

Communications

NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Ann Braithwaite
(781) 259-9600
Ann@bkmusicpr.com

Innovative Third Stream Pianists Ran Blake and Claire Ritter Celebrate Thelonious Monk's 100th Birthday on First Duo Outing

***Eclipse Orange*, due out February 15, 2019 on Zoning Records, captures a stunning live performance at Queens University in Ritter's (and Monk's) native North Carolina, along with guest saxophonist Kent O'Doherty**

"[Claire Ritter is] an under sung jazz master, with each engaging melody buffed up like a little jewel."
– Dan McClenaghan, [All About Jazz](#)

"Ritter approaches the keyboard as a painter, applying splashes of color, dabs of contrast and subtly adjusting tempo and dynamics to create masterful soundscapes." – Nancy Ann Lee, [JazzTimes](#)

The mere fact that two such innovative and inventive pianists as **Ran Blake** and **Claire Ritter** weave their singular voices together so beautifully would suffice to make this stellar recording a very special occasion. But the stunning performance captured on ***Eclipse Orange*** (due out **February 15, 2019** from **Zoning Recordings**), recorded live at Queens University in Ritter's native North Carolina, celebrates a number of other landmarks, all of which flow into the music's transcendent tapestry.

First and foremost, the October 2017 concert honored the 100th birthday of fellow North Carolina native Thelonious Monk, a key influence for both Blake and Ritter. It also coincided with the 50th anniversary of the North Carolina Arts Council, (the recording sponsored by the Charlotte Arts & Science Council) – making the performance a living testimony to the important work being done by the organization in supporting the state's vibrant arts and culture scene. Informally, but crucially, the evening marks the latest flowering of the three-decade collaboration between the two pianists, one that has evolved from mentorship to collaboration. If that weren't enough, add in homages to trailblazing female painters, the influence of the legendary Mary Lou Williams, and the thrill of newly-forged partnerships, as represented by the appearance of Australian-born saxophonist **Kent O'Doherty**.

"This performance was a very special, once in a lifetime opportunity, to say the least," Ritter says. "It was a unique opportunity to not only record my first two-piano performance album, but to do it with my mentor and at Queens University, where I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in classical piano. To be able to share all of that with my own students and a hometown audience really brought everything full circle."

The two pianists actually met in 1981, when Ritter arrived in Boston to study at New England Conservatory, where Blake has now taught for more than 50 years. Ritter later joined him on the faculty of the Department of Contemporary Improvisation (formerly the Department of Third Stream, founded by Gunther Schuller), where she taught a contemporary songwriting class in the 1990s. But Ritter dates their collaboration as peers to 1988, when Blake was a guest on her debut album *In Between*. "Ran is a great motivator and stimulator of the imagination," Ritter says. "His genius lies in his harmonic structures, in recomposing any kind of piece in any kind of idiom. He stimulated the composer in me, bringing out a lot of color, unpredictability and ways of thinking about melodic phrasing in more interesting ways by encouraging me to listen to a very wide range of different types of music."

Blake begins the concert by navigating his own circuitous path through three of his former student's compositions. All three of Ritter's eloquent pieces are title tracks from her catalogue, beginning with the present album: "Eclipse Orange" flows into "Waltzing the Splendor," then ends with the aforementioned "In Between," thus spanning her 30-year recording career in just over four minutes.

Ritter joins Blake for the first Thelonious Monk composition on the program, “Blue Monk” (later followed by “I Mean You” with Kent O’Doherty). The iconic pianist is also the inspiration behind pieces by both composers: Ritter dedicates her tunes “Blue Grits,” “Cool Digs,” “HighTop Sneakers” and “Integrity” to Monk, while Blake’s “Short Life of Barbara Monk” pays tribute to the jazz legend’s late daughter. Mary Lou Williams, another former teacher, receives a nod in Ritter’s newly composed monk-like “Backbone.”

Monk’s spirit hovers over the entirety of the proceedings, however, and not just due to the occasion of his centenary. “Ran and I have certainly both been very influenced by Monk,” Ritter explains. “His love of space has been incorporated into my compositional language. I also love his unique phrasing and his angular, unusual intervals. To me, his work is the most original of any jazz composer.”

The dramatic theme of Ritter’s title track returns for a full duo outing. “Eclipse Orange” was originally composed following the solar eclipse of 2014, while this two-piano version was created in the wake of the summer 2017 eclipse. Nature is a strong source of inspiration for Ritter, as on “Emerald & the Breeze,” which reflects on the Makah Indian Reservation of Cape Flattery on the far Northwest point of the Washington coast.

Several of Ritter’s works draw inspiration from other women’s interpretation of beauty through visual art: her new piece “Karma Waltz” was inspired by Maria Helena Vieira da Silva’s painting “La Scala – The Eyes,” while “Waltzing the Splendor” interprets Georgia O’Keefe’s “Orange and Red Streak.” Blake’s solo “Improvisation of Selma” carries that theme into a spontaneous reaction to Barbara Pennington’s “Selma,” a painting in the collection of Charlotte’s Mint Museum.

“I think of paintings as windows to the soul,” Ritter says. “The artistic vision of these masters is definitely an inspiration, leading us to embrace the moment of creativity on a higher level through sound and color and combining the two.”

Melbourne-born saxophonist Kent O’Doherty during his recent visit to Charlotte in 2017, reached out to Ritter as one of the local jazz community’s leading lights. Their lively duo jaunts through Ritter’s “Blue Grits”, “HighTop Sneakers”, and “Cool Digs” reveal an instant spark for this newly-minted collaboration. Blake also brings his unparalleled artistry to the transformation of several standards, including “Summertime” (a propos for this excursion into the south), Hubert Powell’s “There’s Been a Change,” and a medley of Brazilian favorites by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Ary Barroso. Ritter rejoins him for the classic “Over the Rainbow” before closing the evening with her own Monk-inspired “Integrity.”

Whether exploring the paths forged by foundational jazz composers, her own mentors or gifted artists in other media, Ritter recognizes and is galvanized by a kindred spirit. “In the work of all of these masters, I find an equivalent independent artistic vision, which symbolizes unique personal experiences and transforms them into many abstract forms of expression.” The same is undoubtedly true of Ritter and Blake, two artists of the piano who transform their inspirations in myriad dazzling forms throughout *Eclipse Orange*.

The music of Charlotte, North Carolina-based composer/pianist/educator **Claire Ritter** is regarded among “the most successful Third Stream synthesis of jazz & classical musics” by author Ed Hazel. Ritter is the author of over 200 compositions which have been performed in festivals, concert halls, and museums in the US, Canada, Europe, and Asia. Her discography includes 12 CD/DVD recordings on her own Zoning Recordings imprint. In 2017 Ritter was the recipient of an artist grant awarded by the North Carolina Arts & Science Council, her fourth, as well as a previous NC Arts Council Jazz Composer Fellowship. Beginning with the great Mary Lou Williams at Duke University in the 1970s, Ritter has studied, worked, performed & recorded with some of the music’s most revered artists, which includes over a decade with MacArthur Grant Genius recipient Ran Blake at New England Conservatory in Boston.

claireritter.com

#