

Scritto da Nico Conversano
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Apollo Sounds - APLS-1510 - 2015

Hitomi Nishiyama: piano
Ryoji Orihara: fretless bass
Manabu Hashimoto: drums

Interview with [Hitomi Nishiyama](#)

There is nothing as far from the concepts of swing, interplay and improvisation, unavoidable elements of jazz, as hard rock and heavy metal. The unbridled virtuosity of Eddie Van Halen, the eerie vocals of Ozzy Osbourne or the solid guitar riffs of a power trio have little, or nothing, to do with the delicate touch of Oscar Peterson or the improvisational catharsis of John Coltrane. Yet pianist Hitomi Nishiyama tries to drop a connection line between these far off distant planets paying this jazz tribute to some of the most extreme classics of rock.

Hitomi Nishiyama, prolific and eclectic musician as she is, after playing with different sets as duo, trio and quartet, often crossing the paths of some of the finest musicians in Japanese and European jazz scene, digs out her early interest for the energetic sounds of heavy metal to offer an uncommon and brave interpretation of this music genre. For this occasion, Nishiyama listened again to about an hundred hard rock records searching for some tracks that can fit her jazz restyling, facing a work that, given the hard task, was full of risks.

Like a modern King Midas of greek mythology, who turned into gold everything he touched, Nishiyama transforms the raw matter of rock into inspired melody, searching through the folds of rhythmic ostinatos or in the enraged vocal performances of the original tunes, to take out thematic or melodic ideas in order to create her own improvisational vehicle, yet keeping unaltered her remarkable and personal melodic sensibility and great versatility. Through this process the original tracks, even if recognizable, come out dressed in an aura of elegance and refinement that pay the right homage to a genre, so far, not much approached by other jazz musicians.

Dead of Night, a classic of early progressive rock, written at the beginning of 80's by UK, band composed by formerly members of the King Crimson, here keeps the original time signature in seven that Nishiyama, arranger of all tunes, skillfully elaborates. In

Man on the Silver Mountain

by the Rainbow, band led by guitarist Ritchie Blackmore, founding member of the more renowned Deep Purple; the main melody is especially underlined and used as a launching pad for a long and inspired collective improvisation.

Even the most extreme forms of hard rock like trash metal, of which Pantera represented in the 90's one of the most celebrated band of this style, are not left outside from this jazz revisitation that transform its aggressive **Walk** in a tune whose central riff becomes the firm ground for a modal-like improvisation. The rough voice of Megadeth's leader, singer and guitarist Dave Mustaine is replaced by singer Tomomi Oda, the first of a serie of guest musicians of the album, who turns their

Skin o'

my Teeth

in a dynamic, but more reassuring, pop song, singing the bloody and horror-like original lyrics in a playful and seducing way.

The following **Fear of the Dark** of Iron Maiden, that in the original track opened with an acoustic intro, features guitarist Takayoshi Baba, who reshapes the theme with his delicate six strings contributing to perform it as a soft, Mediterranean-tinged ballad. Fathers of heavy metal such as Deep Purple gets celebrated with their **Demon's Eye**, a simple, circular and blues-oriented track whose theme, originally sung by singer Ian Gillian, is developed and explored by excellent trumpet player Hikari Ichihara who plays an inspired and visceral solo.

From the roots of heavy metal to the most modern forms of this genre, represented here by the Babymetal. Fully embracing the spirit of this atypical and very popular band of Japanese idols, composed by three girls singing accompanied by "power metal" riffs, Nishiyama rearranges their **Akumu no Rinbukyoku**, exalting the distinctive, gothic side of their melodies. Much more complex and structured is **Upper Levels** by Brazilian band Angra, provided with many, difficult and virtuosic sections which Nishiyama's trio manage to handle in a flawless way, making it one of the most interesting track of this recording. The album is closed by

The Halfway to

Babylon

, the only

Nishiyama's original composition of the album, and

Green-Tinted Sixties Mind

by Mr.Big, an enjoyable tune belonging to the most "cantabile" current of heavy metal, featuring the good-sounded alto sax player Ryosuke Hashizume.

But this recording wouldn't have been the same if by Nishiyama's side there wouldn't have been a rhythmic section like the one composed by bass player Ryoji Orihara and drummer Manabu Hashimoto. The gifted Orihara plays its fretless bass using all the potentialities of this instrument: from a rhythmic approach made of grooves, bourdons and "walkings", in many cases replacing the guitar riffs of the original tunes; to a more melodic expression, through effective solo excursions and refined melodic textures. In the same way, drummer Hashimoto knows how to create the right support to Nishiyama's pianism through a drumming able to sketch out the personality of each tune, building a rhythmic amalgam perfectly homogeneous with the other members.

Among others, a special merit is due to Nishiyama for pushing the usual jazz listeners to discover the original tunes which inspired these renditions and, at the same time, to move the fans of metal closer to these jazz arrangements of their heroes' favourite songs, creating a bridge between music genres on the opposite sides, yet playing for once on the same field, and

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thus widening the views of jazz for the new millenium.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWBPGWJZSdI>