



NOAH HAIDU

Subversive Soul

In his sideman days in the early to mid-'90s, Brooklyn-based pianist Noah Haidu had a lot to consider. The jazz scene was booming with an array of new artists who were setting out to make new statements about the future of jazz. But Haidu kept to his own identity.

"I didn't feel like I had to follow any trends then, and I still don't," he said over tea and a macchiato at the Kos Kaffe Roasting House in Park Slope. "I keep an open mind about music, but I don't jump on any bandwagon. I'm following my own path."

That's apparent with his third recording as a leader, the succulent and subtly insurgent *Infinite Distances*, released on the Vancouver imprint Cellar Live after two impressive Posi-Tone albums (2011's *Slipstream* and 2013's *Momentum*). For this outing, highlighted by the dual saxophone drive of Sharel Cassity on alto and Jon Irabagon on soprano and tenor (and with guest Jeremy Pelt on trumpet for three tunes), the 44-year-old Haidu takes advantage of the harmonic soundscape to create a sumptuous record that swings and grooves with far-out moments and rhythmic devices that jolt with cross beats.

"Noah writes so that we can envision the blends he's hearing," Irabagon said. "He creates an environment that's really comfortable so that recording with him feels like a bunch of friends playing his high-flying music."

At its heart, *Infinite Distances* pulses with soul. An early highlight includes the lead-off tune, "Subversive," with its fast gait and muscular bounce. "It's a great way to start it off with

the hard-bop lines," Haidu said. "But then it's got an abrupt 7/4 vamp and chords that sound abrasive. I like the tension and the idea behind it. Everyone wants to categorize you—straight-ahead or modernist or avant—so that what you're doing becomes marketable. But I don't want to be categorized. I'm not in any one camp. So, in my mind, that's subversive."

Haidu absorbed a wide range of music growing up. He started playing classical piano, but switched to guitar because of his fascination with the blues and then switched back to piano when he discovered jazz. Living in L.A. with his father, who had a large record collection, Haidu went to dozens of live shows, from Herbie Hancock and Oscar Peterson to Sting and Eric Clapton. "My dad made sure that I heard it all," he said.

Haidu studied at Rutgers University with Kenny Barron, but he left after two years to move to Philadelphia. "I decided to investigate the scene Kenny grew up in," Haidu said. What he discovered working with such locally based players as pianist Eddie Green, saxophonist Tony Williams and especially drummer Mickey Roker was that there was a vital and trusting connection to the community. "It wasn't hipster jazz like New York," he said. "It was the soulful music for a neighborhood that had grown up with jazz. There was a connection between the musicians and the audience. No one was putting on airs. It wasn't about technique or tricks or playing your greatest hits. It was just playing music that people really responded to."

After Haidu moved to New York in 1993, he discovered a similar vibe in Queens, where he looked for work. He started at the now-defunct club The Village Door and other small venues like The Skylark and Club Tamara in the then-active jazz scene, linking up eventually with drummer Walter Perkins. "Again, there was a community feeling," he said. "You had to learn how to play soulful and not be erudite, which would alienate the neighborhood folks who hung out there."

Haidu returned to school, finishing his undergrad at New School, then gaining his master's at SUNY Purchase, where David Hazeltine had him transcribe and learn solos by the jazz greats. "David put me under fire," Haidu said. "But at the same time I knew I wanted to write my thesis on Kenny Kirkland, who I had heard with Branford [Marsalis] and Sting." When interviewing Marsalis, he was surprised to find out that the saxophonist wasn't all that close to his late longtime pianist. He then paraphrased the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Among the closest people there remains infinite distances."

Haidu reflected on that for years, eventually composing the six-song suite that is at the core of *Infinite Distances*. In his liner notes, he wrote, "The resulting work is a musical reflection on relationships, loss and self-realization."

That takes on a deeper, soberer meaning for Haidu, as a few days before the album was released, his father died. "He always took great pride in my recordings and performances, and he loved the new one," he said. "That's why I dedicated this album to him." —Dan Ouellette