

Taylor Eigsti: Bending Jazz Boundaries

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Jazz piano wunderkind Taylor Eigsti has accomplished more before the age of 20 than many musicians achieve in a lifetime. In addition to sharing the stage with David Benoit at age eight and recording his first CD at thirteen, Eigsti has opened for such artists as Diana Krall, Al Jarreau and Natalie Cole. With a new album, *Resonance*, out on Bop City and another due out in early 2004, this is one young pianist to watch.

FOR EIGSTI, THE KEY TO MUSICAL GROWTH LIES IN EXPLORING STYLES OUTSIDE the standard jazz canon. “The next record will have elements of hip-hop and funk,” he says. “I may even do a Nirvana tune. I think of myself as a jazz musician, but ideally what I do is incorporate and assimilate other genres, using the mechanisms and integrity of jazz.”

Taylor actively seeks out new influences, sometimes from unexpected sources. “One of the things I’ve done over the years is to deliberately listen to music that I hate,” he explains. “And often I end up finding some element in that style or genre that I really like. Sometimes all it takes is listening to or playing with one person. For example, I developed a better appreciation of opera after playing with [mezzo-soprano] Frederica Von Stade. I never much cared for opera before, but listening to her made me realize there was a lot more out there than I’d been aware of.”

But despite Eigsti’s enthusiasm for rock, hip-hop, classical, and bluegrass, jazz remains his foundation. As he says, “What first attracted me to jazz is the fact that it’s all spontaneous storytelling. I was turned on to that sensibility at an early age. When I was really little, I’d be disappointed when I’d hear classical music and people would tell me they weren’t making it up on the spot. I liked stuff that sounded improvised and free and cool—it seemed fun, almost like a game.”

Like most musicians, Taylor reserves particular reverence for a handful of legendary artists. “I’ve gone through phases where I’d listen to different things,” he says. “When I was really young, I’d listen a lot to contemporary jazz. My idol was David Benoit—he’s still a great friend, a mentor, and a killer player. But then later on, someone turned me onto Art Tatum, and I couldn’t believe that one person could sit down and play the way he could. Then I also started listening to Gene Harris, who really influenced my style, and Oscar Peterson, Benny Green, Thelonious Monk, and Phineas Newborn. Also some of the people who weren’t pianists, like [saxophonists] Joshua Redman and Sonny Rollins, or [guitarist] Russ Malone. Basically I wanted to make sure there were no boundaries on what I listen to in jazz.”

The more Eigsti performs and records, the more he has come to rely on Yamaha pianos. “My favorite element of Yamaha pianos

is their profoundly consistent action,” he says. “I just don’t think there’s a piano out there that’s as consistent—it’s a balanced action, it feels nice. And I really like the tone you get from Yamaha pianos. It varies from instrument to instrument, of course, but overall they seem very balanced—not too bright and not too mellow. I’ve used Yamaha pianos on almost everything I’ve recorded. I especially like the Yamaha C7 grand—it has a great recording sound. It seems to record a little brighter than it plays, which is perfect, because you want that crisp, clean sound. That gives you a bit of leeway with dynamics when you’re recording.”

Taylor continues: “More and more when I’m playing gigs, I know I’m in good shape when there’s a new Yamaha there. It’s hit or miss with other pianos. I’ve played gigs where there’s a new piano that wasn’t a Yamaha, and it plays like a truck! At this point, I feel like I can just look at a piano and know if it’s going to sound good or not. With Yamaha, I’ve played everything from baby grands to nine-footers, and they all sound great.”

