

## **NINA OTT, Pianist/Composer/Arranger/Educator**

**Roots** Detroit born and raised pianist Nina Ott grew up in a very musical household and knew she would be a musician from a very young age. "My dad was a jazz trumpet player and was always playing records in our house- everything from Sergio Mendez to Basie, Duke Ellington, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Joao Gilberto, Beethoven-everything!"

**Classical** Nina began playing piano at age 7, eventually attending Western Michigan University on a scholarship and graduating with a degree in classical piano performance. "I am really glad that I studied classical piano in college. Western has a great music program and the teachers were superb. I had an affinity for playing Ravel, and Debussy - and that has influenced me in my writing and playing."

**Jazz** Ms. Ott moved to Boston to pursue jazz and study with renowned teachers such as Jerry Bergonzi and Charlie Banacos. "They helped me to understand how to approach practicing jazz by giving me exercises to build a vocabulary, like be-bop scales, playing in every key, transcribing and writing lines, shapes, comping. They talked a lot about feel and swing. They emphasized the importance of being organized- like digesting small amounts at a time very well and having big ears and a great attitude."

At that time, Boston had a very fertile jazz scene with quite a few local clubs that featured local and international artists. "In Boston you could hear people like Roy Haynes, Jaki Byard, Mulgrew Miller, David Kikoski and Donald Brown play live on a regular basis in very intimate environments. Hearing masters play live is the best way to hear jazz. There was a lot of sitting in and comradery amongst the players."

**Big band** Nina's first steady gig was with White Heat Swing Orchestra, which featured charts by Duke Ellington, Basie, Mary Lou Williams and Fletcher Henderson. The band featured some of Boston's top jazz players.

**Chicago and Singapore** After living in Boston for a few years Nina moved to Chicago to gain experience on that scene, which had quite a different feel and sound. She soon began playing steadily with the jazz musicians there. Nina played at the clubs like The Get Me High, The Bop Shop and became a house pianist at the

famous Green Mill Cocktail Lounge late night jam session."Great jazz musicians would come and sit in. People like Jack McDuff, Nicholas Payton, Rufus Reid, Bobby Broom, Ira Sullivan, Eric Alexander and George Fludas would come by and sit in after their gigs in town and I played with all of them. The gig went until 5 am-it was a true jazz scene and that gig is still going strong."

While in Chicago, she was invited to be musical director and lead a trio plus a vocalist for an extended engagement in Singapore. Playing 6 nights a week presented an opportunity to develop rapport as an ensemble and further her arranging and bandleader skills.

**Boston** Eventually, Nina moved back to the east coast to lead a trio at the Boston Harbor Hotel. She worked there steadily for two years playing with drummers Nat Mugavero, Take Toriyama, Joe Hunt and bassist and husband Chris Lopes. "I learned a great deal there about the art of trio playing and choosing repertoire, pacing and arranging."

She also played several steady solo piano gigs at places like the Four Seasons, Ritz Carlton and The Bostonian. "I love playing solo piano. I listen to people like Hank Jones, Jaki Byard, and Monk. Also Denny Zeitlin and Clare Fischer for their harmonic depth and creativity. Solo playing has it's own special set of challenges. I am still expanding my book and evolving that way, trying new things."

**Salsa and Latin Jazz** An important part of Nina's musical development began when she started playing afro-caribbean music. She began playing in trumpeter Carlos De Leon's band in 2002 when he needed a pianist. Once again a willingness to have a beginner's mind played an important role. " I was a pretty fully developed jazz player by then so it was hard but I really wanted to learn- I love the language of salsa and latin jazz very much. It was quite a challenge- because the rhythms, the forms and the feeling was so new to me. The role of the piano and the phrasing with the clave is very important, very deep and beautiful!" Nina studied percussion to help her learn the rhythms and of course, listened many recordings, transcribing arrangements and solos, transcribing montunos and percussion parts. She learned to speak Spanish, too.

**Teaching** Nina joined the faculty of Berklee College of Music in 2002 and taught there for 6 years before moving to San Francisco. While at Berklee, Nina

taught arranging courses, ensembles ("Mary Lou, Monk and Bud"), harmony and whatever else was needed. She is a natural teacher and had great rapport with students there. While in the SF bay area, she taught at the Stanford Workshop and did workshops for SF Jazz Organization on Latin Jazz Piano and the music of Mary Lou Williams. She continues to co-lead workshops with bassist Chris Lopes.

As a teacher, Nina has a lot of insight into the issues people can face when going from playing purely written music to improvising. "It can be intimidating at first. There are misconceptions about the process of improvising. There has to be a willingness to go through a period of sounding bad and there is really no way of getting around that. Learning music is like learning a language. You must be very kind to yourself and disciplined at the same time. The task is ongoing and lasts a lifetime. It is never boring!"

**San Francisco** She has since played with a large and impressive roster of some of the world's finest jazz, latin jazz, salsa and other musicians. She and her husband Chris Lopes recently spent a few years in the San Francisco bay area to participate in the vibrant latin jazz and salsa scene there. "SF is unique in that there is a living breathing salsa dance community with live music. The community was very welcoming and we had fun playing at places like El Rio in the Mission District, Cafe Cocomo, Cigar Bar, The Ramp, The Glas Kat with 14-piece salsa bands and a huge dance floor. What a great experience to play for the dancers."

While in San Francisco Nina played in flautist John Calloway's Latin Collective, with percussionist Louie Romero and Mazacote and with Latin/Sephardic vocalist Kat Parra. She played the San Jose Jazz Festival, Stanford Jazz Festival and the Chinatown Music Festival. Ott and Lopes started their own Latin Jazz funk group, Astronomico, while in San Francisco. The group played at Birdland Socialista Club in Berkeley and other local venues and included Eric Crystal on sax and Alan Hall on drums.

Nina has earned the reputation as an amazingly versatile and comprehensive player that can move between styles while retaining her own unique identity. Her skills as a composer won her a grant from RI Council for the Arts. She has recently completed her second recording as a leader made at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, CA.

What's next? "My funk project. I am playing organ and clavinet and getting deeper into keyboards and those sounds."

