



Helen  
Sung  
*(re)conception*

Peter Washington  
Lewis Nash

**SteepleChase**

After 15 years of pretty austere and rigid classical training, studying both violin and piano, Helen Sung discovered jazz rather later than many of her contemporaries. But once she found our music, she soon made up for lost time, and is now a firmly established and admired pianist on the intensely crowded and competitive New York jazz scene.

Helen was born in Houston, Texas, and began learning both violin and piano at the early age of four. She showed a natural ability, and although her parents were not musical they encouraged her interest. She attended Houston's Performing Arts High School, where many talented jazz players like Jason Moran, were educated. Then she went on to the University of Texas at Austin to take classical piano performance.

One day a friend invited Helen to accompany her to a concert by Harry Connick Jr. She enjoyed the big band set, but was really wowed by a couple of piano solos that Connick played. *"It seemed that he was doing everything I was taught not to, but the music was so visceral and so much fun,"* Helen recalled.

That same week the jazz piano teacher at the university played a concert with a trio, and Helen was struck by the beauty of the music. A jazz class was just being started so Helen promptly enrolled, and was soon playing catch-up, listening to the recordings of all the great pianists, and studying the written history of the music.

Her parents were not too thrilled by this development and wanted her to train as a doctor. But then she gained a place at the New England Conservatory, and obtained a scholarship to the newly-established Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz programme which, as she suggests, *"sealed the deal"*.

*"Boston was a Godsend, just what I needed, and made me the player that I am today. The whole philosophy was learning in 'master to apprentice' fashion. There were only seven students on the course and our tutors were the likes of Clark Terry, Jackie McLean, the Heath brothers, Ron Carter and Barry Harris.*

*"From the age of nine to 18 I had been taught by a Russian classical pianist, who would listen only to classical stuff. That type of person wants to run your life. So I had encountered nothing like jazz, and swing was a completely new feeling."*

At the end of the two-year masters course, Helen had a good grounding in the architecture of the music, and lingered in Boston for a further year, gaining professional experience with local groups. Then in 1999 she moved to New York, and gradually eased into the scene. *"I knew quite a few musicians and was lucky enough to get some amazing opportunities to work with Wayne Shorter and Clark Terry."*

Her parents were worried because there had never been a "freelance" in the family. *"But I had this do or die attitude, no plan worked out, and one gig seemed to lead to another. I can't believe I've been in New York for 11 years. I know I've been very fortunate."*

Now in her late thirties, Helen cites a number of pianistic influences. *"Herbie Hancock was a huge influence. He can do anything super well. I really admire his openness. Thelonious Monk was a genius. When I first heard him, I thought 'what is he doing?' But then I grew to love it. What I like about him is that he never sounded like anybody but himself in his composing and playing.*

*"Then I had to get into the whole bebop repertoire and style of Bud Powell which I learned to appreciate through Barry Harris. I loved Tommy Flanagan for*

*his wonderful touch and swing. McCoy Tyner impressed me, and Bill Evans was very special - touch, sensitivity and use of colours. Wynton Kelly was another master of swing, and such a great compere. I want to get to that level as an accompanist, and swinging is so important too. I keep working hard on that aspect also."*

This is Helen's fifth CD under her own name. The date was called at short notice, but the pianist had a bunch of standards in mind. She also knew the musicians she wanted for the session. *"I had played with Lewis Nash a lot, but never with Peter Washington. However, for me they are one of the Rolls Royces of rhythm sections. I called them up and happily both were free on that Sunday so I was really blessed. These two play the standards so well and I knew I'd have the best possible support.*

*"We didn't rehearse. I listed the tunes and told them what I wanted for each one. It worked out just right. I gave the pieces my own touch and did some new arrangements. I'd played most of the tunes on gigs, but it was the first time I'd done 'Wives And Lovers'. I hate that title, but I love the melody."*

Helen chose a judicious blend of material from the 1940s and 1960s, bringing a new piece of her own to the party. George Shearing's 1949 bebop opus **Conception**, was restyled by Helen - hence the (re) - splitting the theme between piano and bass, although the full melody is not stated until the end. *"It's a very busy tune so I wanted to put some space in it. I was inspired by both George's original version and the Bill Evans treatment."* Also from 1949 is the gorgeous ballad, **Crazy, He Calls Me**, sung definitively by Billie Holiday. Helen regards it as another beautiful melody.

Duke Ellington's **C Jam Blues** became a classic overnight when the maestro recorded it in 1942. A good chance for Helen to step out swinging. A later,

though less well known, leaf from Duke's book, **Everything But You**, was written in 1945 and was a feature for vocalist Joya Sherrill. This is a further creation that appealed to Helen's lyric sense.

Switching to the 1960s, Helen picked Frank Loesser's **I Believe In You** from the 1961 musical *"How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying"*. She loves Loesser's tunes and saw this as a good swinger in 12/8 but with a grooving bridge. *"I was so entranced with Peter's line I almost stopped playing!"*

*"Fiddler On The Roof"* was a 1960s hit show, transferred to film in 1971, which yielded the haunting Jerry Block melody **Far From Home**. As for **Wives And Lovers** it was the title tune of a 1963 film, and a massive success for composer Burt Bacharach. *"I Liked Nancy Wilson's version. I like the shape of the melody and enjoyed soloing over the vamp."*

The fourth 1960s entry is the untypical Thelonious Monk piece, **Teo**, penned in 1964 as a tribute from one TM to another - Monk's Columbia producer Teo Macero. *"It's a quirky tune, fun to do and a swinging thing."* When I pointed out to Helen that Monk would never have played it so fast, she laughed. But it does work at this tempo.

**Duplicity** was composed by Helen as she recalled a relationship which didn't end well. *"It switches back and forth, changing metres without commitment to a set pattern. I guess you would describe its atmosphere as skittish. Lewis and Peter did a great job on it for me."*

Nine pedigree performances "Sung" superbly by a well named and richly resourceful contemporary pianist at the top of her game. Helen may have been a late starter, but she is now clearly in hot pursuit of the keyboard front runners!

*Mark Gardner  
(Contributor to Jazz Journal since 1962)*

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