

Tokoyo Jazz Pianist Plays Here

Toshiko Akiyoshi Is at Half Note Club With a Quartet

By JOHN S. WILSON

The spread of American jazz overseas has returned to us a charming dividend in Toshiko Akiyoshi, a pianist, who can be heard this week at the Half Note Club, 296 Spring Street. She is appearing with the Toshiko Mariano Quartet, a group she leads jointly with her husband, Charlie Mariano, an alto saxophonist.

Miss Akiyoshi is the first Japanese jazz musician to gain an international reputation. She came to the United States in 1956 on a scholarship granted by the Berklee School, a Boston music school that specializes in jazz. At that time she had been playing jazz for several years in Tokyo coffee shops, leading a group that varied from four to six pieces.

Her initial interest in jazz was aroused when she returned to Japan from Manchuria after the war and heard a record by Teddy Wilson.

Discovered 'Beauty'

"I hadn't known jazz could be so beautiful," she said at the Half Note the other night. "I had thought it was just noisy and loud."

Her knowledge of jazz increased through hearing V-Disks by Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Gene Krupa. She got her first taste of modern jazz from a radio broadcast of a record by Bud Powell, the pianist.

By 1951, when an American jazz group headed by J. J. Johnson and Oscar Pettiford played at an American officers' club in Tokyo and needed a pianist, Miss Akiyoshi had absorbed the idiom sufficiently to sit in with them.

Two years later the Canadian



jazz pianist, Oscar Peterson, heard her playing in a Tokyo coffee shop and was so impressed that he arranged a recording session with an American company. It was as a result of this disk that the Berklee School offered her a scholarship.

When she was first heard in this country five years ago, Miss Akiyoshi was strongly influenced by Mr. Powell's style, playing long, looping, multi-noted lines with her right hand and limiting her left hand to brief punctuations. She has now gone far beyond this derivative stage although this early influence still peeks through her playing with her quartet at the Half Note.

Miss Akiyoshi is still primarily a right-handed pianist but she does not depend on it to the extent that she once did. Her left hand plays more balanced role now. However, her right

Sharing Lead With Husband, Mariano, a Saxophonist

hand figures are so forceful, so structurally solid or, on other occasions, so dazzlingly fleet that the emphasis on her right hand remains. Her playing is strongly propulsive and when she is working close to a melodic line she brings a strong blues feeling to bear on it.

She is a compelling performer and fortunately so because Mr. Mariano is a saxophonist of such soaring, often searing, intensity that a lesser pianist might be hopelessly overshadowed in his company. For many years he was a featured sideman in Stan Kenton's orchestra and was known as a fluent alto soloist closely tied to the Charlie Parker style. Since forming the present quartet shortly after he and Miss Akiyoshi were married a year and one-half ago, Mr. Mariano seems to have felt the invigorating effects of release from big-band surroundings.

At the Half Note he is a musician deeply and thoughtfully involved in his playing, producing passages with a fervently swinging drive, some that glow with warm lyricism and some that are displays of inspired virtuosity.

Both Miss Akiyoshi and Mr. Mariano write original material for their quartet, pieces that are developed from inventively quirkish basic lines rather than the simple riff ideas that such groups normally use as the basis for originals. Both in conception and performance, their work is stimulating, a refreshing example of how a small group of this type can achieve direction and character without sacrificing any "blowing" freedom. The quartet is ably filled out by Gene Chirico, bass, and Eddie Marshall, drums.

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