

## **HIROMI**

*Sonicwonderland*

(Telarc)

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Since Hiromi's debut album *Another Mind* (2003), the world-renowned pianist's sound has evolved with every release, erasing the lines between jazz and classical, composition and improvisation. Now she changes tack again with her heaviest, funkier album yet: *Sonicwonderland*.

Hiromi describes the hard-hitting nine-song set as "a new journey of adventure," one that began in her imagination. As motifs, phrases, and timbres blossomed in her mind, she began thinking about players who could help her realize this specific sound. "Making a record is like making a movie, and I'm the director looking for the perfect actor for each role." For her new quartet, Hiromi's Sonicwonder, she cast bassist Hadrien Feraud, drummer Gene Coye, and trumpet player Adam O'Farrill.

The genesis of Sonicwonder begins in 2016, when Feraud subbed for bassist Anthony Jackson at some gigs with Hiromi's then-current trio. "When I was playing with Hadrien in that setting, I started to feel like I wanted to write some music just for him," she recalls. "That was the first thing that made me want to go in this direction, and what made me want it to form this band."

For the drums she sought a warm, organic sound, rendered with joy and humor, and thought of Coye, who she'd met when they played shows together with the Stanley Clarke Band. Feraud and Coye both reside in Los Angeles, and had made music together many times, another important consideration. "I feel that it's always very important to have great chemistry between bassist and drummer."

As she continued composing, Hiromi heard one more instrument in her head: trumpet. Again, she wanted a very specific sound. "What I really love about the trumpet is its low mid-range, and I was looking for somebody who can play in that range with a beautiful tone." After reviewing some of O'Farrill's performances online, she invited him to a casual jam session, and the ensemble was complete.

The opening cut on *Sonicwonderland*, "Wanted," mirrors that assemblage. It starts with Hiromi's piano, followed by bass, then drums, and finally trumpet. "I was looking for these imaginary band members, and that's the order I found them in." Their origin story complete, the foursome's

adventure officially commences with the title tune – and another musical wrinkle.

Longtime fans may recall that earlier albums *Time Control* (2007) and *Beyond Standard* (2008), credited to Hiromi's Sonicbloom, emphasized electronic timbres. That's the case here, too. "When I use this word, 'sonic,' that's like my electric side. I'm playing a lot more keyboards compared to my other bands." "Sonicwonderland" celebrates sounds made with her Nord Lead A1 analog modeling synthesizer and Nord Electro 5D. "When I write on this keyboard, I always end up writing something totally different from when I write on the piano."

*Sonicwonderland* sounds worlds away from Hiromi's previous studio album, *Silver Lining Suite* (2021), which featured a string quartet, but the two records share one aspect in common: both expand on ideas introduced during her "One Minute Portrait" series of Instagram collaborations during the global pandemic. "I was playing mainly with people who improvised, and Instagram only allowed one minute of video, so you only heard about 20 seconds of what I'd composed, a certain motif or distinctive phrase, in each one." The original "Utopia" featured Feraud, "so that was an easy transition." The energetic "Go Go," previously a pairing with Metallica bassist Robert Trujillo, likewise lent itself well to further exploration by Hiromi's Sonicwonder.

Singer Oli Rockberger, a classmate from Hiromi's days at Berklee College of Music, joins the group on "Reminiscence." "We've been great friends for many years." So even though he didn't know at the time, he was there from the song's inception. "I called Oli and said, 'I've written this song and I'm hearing your voice in my head. Would you like to co-write the lyrics?'" The finished composition was initially set aside but came to fruition once Hiromi realized how well O'Farrill's trumpet could complement Rockberger's singing.

*Sonicwonderland* was recorded in just three and a half days at Skywalker Sound Stage in Nicasio, California, where she'd previously made her solo piano album *Spectrum* (2019). Pre-production was minimal but robust: two days of rehearsal in New York, followed by a dozen back-to-back shows in Minneapolis and Oakland. "It was a great way to slide into the session," she says. "We went into the studio and could play like we play live," right down to using the exact same piano from the Oakland club gigs which is prepared by the same piano technician Shintaro Hoshino.

For the finishing touch, Hiromi asked Lou Beach – the artist responsible for the look of classics by Weather Report, Bill Withers, and countless others –

to illustrate the album sleeve. "I've been a fan of his art for so long, and I sent him a couple of demos." Beach's response was immediate and enthusiastic: *I know just what to draw!* "He came back with this cover, and it's just amazing, like the sound becomes visual."

"Whenever I play shows or make an album, I feel like it's a journey to find the people who can feel a deep connection to what I'm doing right now," concludes Hiromi. "Hopefully, with *Sonicwonderland*, I can connect to fans that listened to my music before and to new listeners, too."

Born in Hamamatsu, Japan, Hiromi began studying piano when she was six years old. When she was 17, Chick Corea invited her to play with him at a Tokyo concert. She attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, where she was mentored by jazz legend Ahmad Jamal. A prolific artist, *Sonicwonderland* is Hiromi's twelfth studio full-length and second album of 2023; earlier this year she recorded the soundtrack to *Blue Giant*, an animated feature film based on the popular manga.

Hiromi is a perennial favorite on DownBeat's Annual Critics and Readers Poll, and has performed at the world's finest jazz festivals, including Montreux, Umbria, North Sea, Newport, and Monterey. Her work has been celebrated by media including the New York Times, NPR and NPR Music, and the Washington Post, and she was a featured performer at the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony in 2021.