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Canadian jazz artist brings wide range to Beijing

By Chen Nan ( China Daily )

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Canadian musician Laila Biali will make her China debut on Saturday, as part of the ongoing Meet in Beijing arts festival. Provided to China Daily

Canadian jazz pianist, composer and singer Laila Biali is getting ready for her debut performance in Beijing.

She will use the opportunity to introduce her dynamic range of songs, from lyrical ballads to high intensity, energetic pieces.

Joined by some of Canada's award-winning jazz musicians, including Kevin Turcotte on trumpet, Kelly Jefferson on saxophone and clarinet, Michael Occhipinti on guitar, George Koller on bass, and Biali's husband, Ben Wittman, on drums, Biali will perform at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing on Saturday.

Midnight Rose: Laila Biali and Her Jazz Ensemble will start at 10:30 pm, and an hour later, she and the band will move to the open space of the NCPA, offering ticket holders an impromptu performance at an after-party till midnight.

"This will be my first time visiting and performing in China. Needless to say, I am excited. I love to arrange material from well-known Canadian songs as well as pop hits, so I imagine some of

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the music will be familiar but presented in a fresh way," Biali, 35, tells China Daily. "The prospect of connecting with new listeners in China is especially thrilling."

A household name in her hometown of North Vancouver, British Columbia, Biali is now based in New York with her husband and her son. She has toured with Grammy winners Chris Botti, Paula Cole and Suzanne Vega.

She also has recorded and performed with pop icon Sting - an experience she recalls as "wonderful and life-changing".

Sting in turn calls Biali "exciting and unique". They met for the first time at Sting's estate in Tuscany, Italy, in 2009 before Biali performed on a companion DVD to Sting's If on a Winter's Night album. Afterward she joined him for concerts in the United States and Europe.

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"We are still friends and I was working with him as recently as this past January," says Biali.

Music has always been a great part of her life: Her mother often played church hymns on the piano when she was growing up. Her parents enrolled her in classical piano lessons when she was 4.

She wrote her first song at the age of 12, which was a "spooky Halloween piano composition" called The Spells.

Biali says she turned her passion for music into a career "organically".

"I received scholarships to go to university and pursue a degree in sciences, but I decided I would go to jazz school for fun, just to try it for a year. I ended up staying the length of the whole program and getting a degree in jazz performance," recalls Biali, who moved to Toronto to attend Humber College on scholarships at 19.

She now draws inspiration from the music she has been listening to over the years - her favorite classical composers plus a host of artists from genres as diverse as pop, rock, gospel and world music.

She's released six albums so far, including Tracing Light, which received a Juno (Canada's version of the Grammys) nomination in 2011 for best vocal jazz album of the year.

Biali considers each new album as an exciting chance to see "how the music connects with people. What moves them? How do the songs and arrangements touch their lives? Is the music having an impact?"

Biali and her jazz ensemble show will be part of the ongoing Meet in Beijing arts festival, the capital's oldest arts event, organized by China Arts and Entertainment Group, which was founded in 1957.

In its 16th year, the festival is featuring Canada as the guest country of honor.

During the past three weeks, famed Canadian artists have performed in Beijing, including the Ottawa Bach Choir, the Ensemble Caprice Baroque Orchestra and a troupe from Vancouver's renowned dance school, the Goh Ballet Academy.

Those performances were recommended and coordinated by the Canadian Fund for International Understanding Through Culture.

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