

## Maureen Choi Quartet: Spanish jazz at The Bop Stop

by Mike Telin



How did a first-generation Korean-American from Ann Arbor, Michigan find her way to Spain and form a Spanish Jazz quartet? “I’m not sure why, but from an early age I have always been drawn to Spanish melodies,” Maureen Choi said by telephone. “Growing up studying classical violin, my favorite pieces were the violin concertos with a little bit of Spanish flair. And when I started studying jazz I discovered Latin rhythms and became intrigued by their complexity.”

On Thursday, June 20 at 7:00 pm at the Bop Stop, you can hear the [Maureen Choi Quartet](#) — Maureen Choi (violin), Daniel García (piano), Mario Carrillo (bass), and Michael Olivera (drums) — performing music from their latest album [THEIA](#). Tickets are available [online](#).

“I’m proud of this album,” Choi said. “It’s honest, it’s natural and it’s who we are right now.” The ten tracks were recorded in only two days. “I wanted to capture the feeling of a performance, and it sounds very close to how we play live.”

The album’s title is reflective of who the ensemble is. “In astronomy, the planet Theia collided with the Earth, and the debris formed the Moon. There’s this idea of creating something new out of chaos.”

Choi said that since she’s been living in Spain, folklore and flamenco have been seeping into her ears. “I have to say that *THEIA* is a combination of Spanish melodies, flamenco rhythms, and jazz. The freedom, the amount of space you have for improvisation — all those elements are in this album and make it close to who I am as a musician.”

I asked Choi to talk about track No. 5, “Dear Paco” (Cepa Andaluza), which highlights her formidable technique. This was an interesting piece to learn,” she said. “There aren’t a million flamenco violinists running around, so I took all of the sounds and techniques from flamenco and Spanish classical guitar and transferred that to the violin. But it was hard to figure out how to emulate the things that Paco de Lucía was doing.”

I tell her that track No. 8, “Bok Choi” (Pajarillo), is a wonderful play on words. “Thank you for recognizing that, because many people don’t realize that it is,” she said. “I decided to call it that because I didn’t want to be so obvious and write ‘B-A-C-H.’ But it was the idea that I would play Bach with a Venezuelan rhythm called *zoropo*. And since this is fusion and it’s me playing Bach, and since my last name is Choi and bok choi is my favorite vegetable, I thought, why not.”

After earning a degree from Michigan State, Choi went on to study at Berklee College of Music. It was there that she began developing friendships with people from South America and Spain. “I also met my husband Mario, who is the bass player in the quartet. Since he’s from Madrid, I told him that I wanted to go live in Spain. He wanted to stay in the States a little bit longer, but I told him that if I didn’t like it we could always come back.”

Choi immediately fell in love with every aspect of Spanish culture — the people, the food, and the quality of life.

They also began forming the quartet. “Our pianist Daniel is also from Spain, and he and Mario were roommates at Berklee, so we called him and said, ‘hey, we’re in Spain, we have to form a band.’ We found our Cuban drummer Michael Olivera a few months later, and the Maureen Choi Quartet was born six years ago.”

What is it about Spanish culture that Choi finds so attractive? “Like Koreans, they are very fiery, and the music is just handsome — that’s the only word I can use to describe it. It’s all about food and family, and that is exactly how it is for me and my family. And since my favorite thing to do in the world is eat, in Spain you can eat for hours, and you’re constantly celebrating life and friendships. The people are warm, and that warmth is what makes you feel so welcome from the beginning.”

Though so many wonderful things are happening in Choi’s career, she noted that there once was a time when she questioned whether she wanted to be a violinist, and decided to take a self-imposed hiatus from music in order to figure things out.

“I had to discover who I was as a first-generation Korean-American growing up in Ann Arbor. My mother is very conservative and having a boyfriend at 16 was a big no-no. Doing things that are ‘more normal’ in the Midwest was something that my mom couldn’t understand, because it wasn’t normal for her. I always felt like I had to pave my own way and figure out what worked for me and what didn’t. But I have had the luxury of choosing everything that I love about the Korean culture and everything that I love about being an American. Now I can choose what I love about being a little more Spanish.”

Choi began studying the piano at age four. She also danced ballet and has always been curious about culture. “I knew that being a classical violinist at the level I wanted to be meant that I had to commit to practicing five hours a day — I had already been to Meadowmount many times and had serious teachers and training the majority of my life. I already knew what that was about.”

When Choi stopped playing the violin, she started playing piano again and got back into dancing. “I also started studying other things and worked a bunch of jobs. But in the end, I came back to the violin.”

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