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MARGHERITA FAVA FROM ITALY, WITH LOVE

Knoxville, Tennessee, seems an unlikely locale for one of jazz's most promising and enterprising young pianists. For Margherita Fava, however, the Marble City is a great place to live and work.

"It's a hidden gem," the Italian-born, 27-year-old says, speaking by phone from Knoxville. "The pandemic has been a catalyst for the scene here. A lot of natives that used to live elsewhere moved back to Knoxville, and then me and some other people, through just a series of weird events, also ended up moving here. And so I can say that we have a pretty good nucleus of gigging musicians."

Call Fava a diamond in the not-so-rough, then. But, says tenor saxophonist/clarinetist Greg Tardy — her friend, frequent bandmate and former teacher at University of Tennessee, who plays on the pianist's self-released debut album *Tatatu* — she's a diamond nonetheless.

"I have had many students come through my classes, and every now and then, I'll get someone who just really stands out," he says. "And I'd say that Margherita was a standout among standouts."

Specifically, Tardy was impressed by her compositions, six of which (along with two standards) feature on *Tatatu*. "Every single composition she wrote in my class, no matter what the parameters were, sounded like something very mature that could be re-

corded on a project," he says. "And they just kept on getting better and better." However, he is equally admiring of her piano playing: "She's a great player, and I'm expecting great things as she continues to evolve as a player as well."

If Fava's landing in Knoxville is unlikely, it's no more so than her point of origin — Follina, a village in Italy's Alpine foothills with a population of less than 4,000. That she would become a musician is less surprising, since her parents are both Baroque players (her father a violinist, her mother a cellist and singer). Indeed, her first musical memories include singing Latin canons with her mom. However, they were so determined not to push her to follow in their footsteps that it was Fava who pushed to take music lessons.

She started learning classical piano when she was 10, though she soon tired and as a teenager tried her hand at the electric bass. When she was 17, Fava's parents enrolled her, completely cold, in a summer jazz workshop in Venice. "I showed up not knowing anything about jazz," she recalls. "I didn't even know there was an audition. I was

supposed to play a standard. I didn't know a standard, so I played a classical piece that I was studying at the time."

As fate would have it, pianist Aaron Goldberg was judging her audition and heard potential. During his ear training class later that same day, he assigned Fava to learn Miles Davis's trumpet solo on "So What" — a song she had never heard before — for the next class. She did.

"That was it," she recalls. "Just the rush and the excitement and the satisfaction of being able to do that, and understanding what that meant, I was starstruck. I was like, 'OK, this is what I want to do from now on.'"

Her newfound devotion paid off just a year later, when she received a scholarship to attend Michigan State University. Bassist Rodney Whitaker, director of the school's jazz studies program, became her mentor. "I still have the notes that I took from his jazz history class, and every once in a while, I just go back and read them. It really, really shaped my perception of jazz and of music."

After earning her bachelor's degree, Fava arrived in Knoxville as a student in UTK's master's of music program. She met Tardy in the saxophonist's composition class, which she credits as being crucial to her development by forcing her to write a new piece each week. From Tardy's standpoint, however, her development was already well advanced.

"It became obvious to me very quickly that she had a real natural gift," he recalls.

Completing her degree in 2022, Fava stayed in Knoxville, working with Tardy and other musicians around town and planning her first album. *Tatatu*'s title is a word Fava coined as a toddler, annoyed when her mother tried to help her with basic tasks. "In my language at the time, it meant, 'Let me do it by myself.' It was my first way of voicing independence and autonomy," she says. "And since this is a self-released, self-produced, self-financed album, the title felt fitting."

Fava's playing and writing talents, coupled with the presence of jazz heavyweights Tardy and Whitaker (who produced the album), drew the interest of more than one label. It wasn't to be — though she says plans are in the works to release her next album with a label.

Fava is focused on promoting *Tatatu* (with tentative plans for a Midwestern tour) and on her steady work in Knoxville. She is associated with a local nonprofit organization, the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra, which both administers the titular big band in town and produces concerts and events there. A concert series called NXT GEN has regularly featured Fava and her compositions and arrangements; she has recently begun coordinating the series.

"There are other parts of art that inspire me, like visual art," she says. "I definitely want to find a way to put together different disciplines in the arts going forward. —Michael J. West