

From Ben-Shir, a tasty sampling of Israeli jazz

By Heather Porter
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When you think of jazz musicians, Israeli names might not pop immediately into mind, and yet there are so many great ones – some based here in Boston. While it's no secret that Berklee College and New England Conservatory have had famous students like Keith Jarrett (Berklee) and Hankus Netsky (NEC), the schools also boast a steady stream of Israeli musicians.

One recent example is Berklee alum, jazz clarinetist and sax-player Anat Cohen, whose First Night performance last year served as kick-off for NPR's "Toast of the Nation."

This year, composer/bassist Shimon Ben-Shir, will hit the stage of the Boston Public Library's Rabb Lecture Hall for two 45-minute First Night performances. Joined by veteran musicians Amir Milstein (flute), Eyran Katsenelenbogen (piano), Duncan Martin (sax) and Dani Danor (drums), bassist Ben-Shir will perform original compositions spanning nearly two decades, including charts from his two solo CDs, "Shades" (2002) and "Ways" (2007), and a new song from "Encounters," a CD due out in 2011.

The group will also do "Bustan," a work premiered on the debut recording of the famed Israeli Jewish/Arab group Bustan Abraham ("The Garden of Abraham"), with

whom Ben-Shir was a founding member in 1990 and Milstein played until it disbanded in 2002.

"I chose [these pieces] because they are kind of world-beat," said Ben-Shir. "'Bustan' [is] very Middle Eastern, and we're going to swing it a little bit. ... 'Gliding' [is] a song that I wrote for the Space Shuttle Columbia when it crashed [reflecting] my fascination with space exploration ... triggered by the tragedy."

Ben-Shir puts his own instrument, the bass, to work in melodic and rhythmic roles, notably in "Gliding" and "Orange Sky." There is a "mutual understanding between me, as the bass player, and the drummer," he said.

Like Israeli society, his music is a melting pot. Moroccan in background, Ben-Shir has created a distinct musical voice that draws from such varied genres as Latin, Middle Eastern, bebop, post-bop, smooth jazz and even flamenco.

"I don't feel there should be any boundaries or distinctions between Middle Eastern music or jazz," said Ben-Shir. "The jazz part of my music is improvisation ... but there are a lot of other improvisatory forms out there."

Milstein echoed that sentiment. "Jazz means take things, combine them together, improvise and call it jazz. ... Many genres borrow the title jazz," he said.



Shimon Ben-Shir will appear at First Night.

Shimon Ben-Shir at Boston Public Library's Rabb Hall, Dec. 31 at 7:30 and 8:30 p.m.

Like Ben-Shir, the other members of this group are juggling multiple projects.

Milstein – who has appeared with such musicians as Tito Puente, Shlomo Gronich and Yehoram Gaon – teaches at NEC and performs and records with the Tucan Trio, a Brazilian/Israeli group.

Katsenelenbogen teaches at NEC and has recorded many solo CDs. Hailing from a classical background (Felix Mendelssohn sits on a branch of his family tree), he has performed at New York's Iridium

Jazz Club and locally at Scullers. A current project, "Classical Meets Jazz: Pictures at an Exhibition," has taken him around the globe, including a Jordan Hall performance just released on DVD.

Danor, who is completing a degree program at NEC, has appeared at the Red Sea Jazz Festival in Eilat and a host of hot clubs in Israel. Locally, he has played The Beehive and Wally's Jazz Café.

Martin, whose 50-year career makes him by far the elder statesman of the group, has performed and recorded with Ben-Shir for 15 years. A Berklee grad, he has been on the faculty of the John Payne Music Center in Brookline since 1980. He cofounded the Harvey Finstein School of Music at Lasell College in 1992, serving as its director until 2007.

Looking over the collective talent of Ben-Shir's ensemble, one wonders about the evolution of the Israeli jazz scene. From all accounts, it owes much to Israeli musicians who studied in America (predominantly in New York and Boston) and then returned home as teachers and performers.

A prime example is Gil Dor, the iconic Israeli guitarist, mentor, and long-time collaborator of international singing sensation Noa (Achi-noam Nini). After attending Berklee and then moving to New York, Dor

returned to Israel and in 1985 cofounded the Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music. Today, Rimon boasts more than 550 students, 65 faculty members and courses in jazz, R&B, bebop, rock and pop.

Yet, for all of the remarkable Israeli performers, traditional jazz is still inextricably bound to America. "If you grew up in New York or Chicago ... you would hear the blues and jazz [as] a natural part of your roots," said Milstein. "What would be natural for someone who grew up in Israel to do? Play bebop? No – he would come back home and look at the [sights and] smells of Tel-Aviv...and the orient...and create music with that in mind. Israeli jazz is more Israeli than jazz."

As more and more talented Israeli jazz musicians emerge, it will be interesting to see how trends in the international and Israeli music scenes will change, grow and develop. "[Though] many listeners may still find jazz an esoteric musical language, if you are listening to jazz it means that you are exploring different territories and trying to find something deeper," said Ben-Shir.

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