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REVIEW

Shepherd's Stories

[Asaf Sirkis Trio](#)

Wednesday, July 24, 2013

Reviewed by: Ian Mann

ALBUM

4 out of 5





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Asaf Sirkis Trio

“Shepherd’s Stories”

Since settling in London in 1999 Israeli born drummer, percussionist and composer Asaf Sirkis has become one of the most in demand musicians on the UK jazz scene. He first came to prominence as a member of Gilad Atzmon’s Orient House Ensemble before eventually leaving to concentrate on both solo projects and other commitments. Sirkis has toured and recorded with a wide variety of UK based musicians and is currently a member of trios led by pianists John Law and Alex Hutton, guitarist Maciek Pysz and the high profile Lighthouse trio alongside pianist Gwilym Simcock and reeds player Tim Garland.

As a leader Sirkis made his bow with The Inner Noise, a trio that explored the sonic possibilities of the church organ within a jazz/rock context, the keyboards being handled by Steve Lodder and with powerful guitarist Mike Outram completing the group. The group’s third (and to date final) album “The Song Within” (2007) represented the zenith of their achievements and is reviewed elsewhere on this site.

Since 2008 Sirkis has concentrated on his current trio featuring his compatriot Yaron Stavi on electric bass plus the Greek born guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos. The group’s début album “The Monk” was generally well received but this was topped by 2010’s excellent “Letting Go” which featured Sirkis’ most mature writing to date.

Both Inner Noise and the current trio reflect Sirkis’ early love of pop and rock and can broadly be regarded as jazz/rock or fusion groups. Sirkis has always been a phenomenally skilled drummer but his solo records have sometimes placed a greater emphasis on technique than on the quality of the compositions. As he has matured Sirkis’ writing has become more melodic and descriptive with “Letting Go” possessing some particularly strong themes that to these ears made it the most satisfying of Sirkis’ solo albums thus far.

“Shepherd’s Stories” develops the ideas that made “Letting Go” such a success. There’s more than a hint about the new record’s ambitions in the title, Sirkis is trying to make each individual track a self contained short story. His album notes refer to the “Shepherd’s Story effect”, the feeling you get when a melody sounds like something you’ve heard before, a kind of folk memory. Thus the new record is intentionally highly melodic with the trio’s already remarkably rich sonic palette being expanded by judicious guest appearances by Polish born, Germany based Sylwia Bialas (voice) plus Brits Gareth Lockrane (flute) and John Turville (Fender Rhodes).

My review copy was kindly given to me by Asaf at the recent Alex Hutton gig in Shrewsbury so I don’t have an accompanying press release. I therefore can’t relate the significance of the title of the lively opening track “1801”. What I can tell you is that it’s classic Asaf Sirkis trio, a blend of melodic electric bass, crisp and imaginative drumming and distinctive Allan Holdsworth inspired guitar. Spiliotopoulos fairly soars on his solo, treading the line between control and abandonment as Sirkis’ precise but powerful drumming spurs him on. Guest John Turville shares the front line duties, providing good contrast with his inventive soloing on Fender Rhodes. Of even greater significance than the soloing of the individuals is the quality of Sirkis’ writing, a strong melodic

theme offers evidence of the sought after “Shepherd’s Stories” effect and there’s a good level of dynamic contrast with the piece ending with a feature for the dynamic Sirkis.

The gentler “Eyes Tell” is closer in spirit to a jazz ballad with Spiliotopoulos’ guitar rambling gracefully above springy electric bass and neatly calibrated drumming. In keeping with the overall mood of the album it’s highly atmospheric.

“Traveller” features the wistfully soaring wordless vocals of guest singer Sylwia Bialas and there’s also a first solo outing for Stavi’s melodic, liquid, Steve Swallow inspired bass. It had seemed for a while that Stavi had been replaced by Patrick Bettison but I assume that this was after all a temporary arrangement to cover Stavi’s frequent absences with Gilad Atzmon’s Orient House Ensemble. “Traveller” is a true road tale with Sirkis’ composing exhibiting something of Pat Metheny’s epic scope and flair for melody. Spiliotopoulos solos with a choked intensity and Bialas’ graceful vocals are an appealing addition to the trio sound.

Spiliotopoulos’ introduction gives “Meditation” a similarly spacey feel to some of the Inner Noise material. His delicate, texturally rich interplay with Stavi’s bass then exerts a quiet fascination with Sirkis only entering the piece a couple of minutes in. Subsequently Spiliotopoulos’ guitar heads for the stratosphere propelled by churning rock rhythms. Surely this is a piece that is destined to become something of a favourite at the trio’s dynamic live shows.

Turville returns for the alternately driving and wistful “Dream Sister” adding his Rhodes sound to that of Stavi’s electric bass. Spiliotopoulos also spins his unique melodic inventions, his acknowledged chief influence is Allan Holdsworth but at times I also detect something of Hatfield and The North’s Phil Miller in his sound. Spiliotopoulos is a tasteful and inventive guitarist who deploys his effects with intelligence and imagination. Using the rhythm section of Stavi and Sirkis plus reeds player Robin Fincker he has cut two quartet albums as a leader, “Waiting For Dusk” (2006) and “Archipelagoes” (2010). Both are reviewed elsewhere on this site. Turning again to “Dream Sister” the piece climaxes with a fiery flurry from Sirkis at the drums.

The drifting, shimmering “Together” is fragile, wistful and melancholic and consequently one of the most openly beautiful things Sirkis has recorded as a leader. Gareth Lockrane’s flute adds a folk music element but in a totally unclichééd manner. His playing, and indeed the track as a whole, is simply lovely.

The title track takes snatches of folk melody and develops them organically through two typically slinky and mellifluous Stavi electric bass features and a spiralling Spiliotopoulos guitar solo. The piece also features some astonishing polyrhythmic drumming from the leader. Always a supreme kit drummer Sirkis has become increasingly interested in a variety of ethnic rhythms and instruments over the years (Yemeni, Indian etc.) and he brings elements of that to this album. However his best work in this context can be heard with Lighthouse and most recently with guitarist Maciek Pysz’s trio.

The album concludes with the ten minute “Two Part Melody” which unfolds gradually through gently circling melodies and grooves via solos for guitar and bass. It’s all about creating a mood rather than barnstorming solos and Sirkis himself plays a relatively low key role, all a sign of his growing confidence and maturity as a composer.

“Shepherd’s Stories” builds on the success of “Letting Go” and adds a cinematic quality to Sirkis’ writing on another strong collection of themes. The playing by the three main protagonists is excellent throughout but the guest musicians also make significant contributions and each adds much to the success of the album as a whole. Overall the album ranks alongside “The Song Within” and “Letting Go” as being among Sirkis’ best work.

The trio will be touring this material extensively (dates below) and I’m looking forward to catching them at the wall2wall Jazz festival in Abergavenny on September 1st 2013.

TOUR DATES:

SEPTEMBER 1st: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - ABERGAVENNY JAZZ FESTIVAL

SEPTEMBER 14th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - KAVALA FESTIVAL, GREECE

SEPTEMBER 16th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - THE VORTEX JAZZ CLUB, LONDON

SEPTEMBER 17th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - DEMPSEY’S, CARDIFF, UK

SEPTEMBER 18th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - THE QUEENS HEAD, MONMOUTH, UK

SEPTEMBER 19th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - THE CINNAMON CLUB, BOWDON, UK

SEPTEMBER 20th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - BIRMINGHAM JAZZ, UK

SEPTEMBER 21th: ASAF SIRKIS RHYTHM WORKSHOP- 4-6PM AT DORCHESTER ARTS CENTRE, UK

SEPTEMBER 21th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - DORCHESTER ARTS CENTRE, UK

SEPTEMBER 28th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - HUHAI, CHINA

SEPTEMBER 29th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - GAUNGHOU, CHINA

OCTOBER 1st: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - HONG KONG FESTIVAL

OCTOBER 4st: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - JARASUM JAZZ FESTIVAL, KOREA

OCTOBER 5st: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - KOREA

OCTOBER 11th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - THE QUEENS ELIZABETH HALL FOYER (FRIDAY TONIC), LONDON

NOVEMBER 6th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - THE INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL, THE FLORAL PAVILION, WIRRAL, UK

NOVEMBER 15th: ASAF SIRKIS TRIO - TANGENTE, LEICHTENSTEIN

Further information at <http://www.asafsirkis.co.uk>

5 Foods you must not eat :
Cut down a bit of stomach fat every
8+1 by never eating these 5 foods.

Never eat

