

Profiles

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Smith's essential dilemma is the Faustian contract. "I was having a number of conversations with different artists about this very subject. How much do you have to compromise? Is there a machine or some unseen illuminati out there? I don't know any musician who hasn't had this conversation with some conspiracy theorist, and trying to align this with what it means to be an artist is a very profound question . . . I think it is part of my nature as well as an artistic decision to lambast power and mock the mighty, and satire works a lot better for me than the finger-wagging approach."

Kinch is deeply respectful of the jazz tradition, intelligently placing hip-hop culture in its historical context. "It's easy to put leftfield hip-hop in its own little box, with jazz as this pristine cerebral art form that never existed for social and revolutionary purposes. I was listening to Don Redman the other day, a tune called *Shakin' The African*, where to all intents and purposes he's rapping in 1926! Cab Calloway, the Beat Poets, not to mention Gil Scott-Heron – they all connect jazz with social commentary through the spoken word."

A formidably talented saxophonist, Kinch is acutely aware of the potential to alienate sections of his jazz audience. "It certainly hasn't always been smooth for me, but it has been a deliberate choice not to silence one form of expression for the other. It goes back to a specific conversation I had with [singer] Eska Mtungwazi. We were just about to perform and were talking about the set. Should we keep the jazz separate? We agreed to put it all together and let the audience be the arbiter. Now I feel more vindicated as older members of the audience tell me how much they liked the hip-hop, and younger kids saying 'If that's jazz then it really spoke to me!'"

A highlight of Kinch's live sets is invariably the free-style raps, where words suggested by the audience are woven into topical improvised narratives. "I've been rapping as long as I've been playing the saxophone. There's a



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certain amount of 'shedding' and jam sessions within the hip-hop world – the speed of thought, picking up on cyphers within a room, responding in the moment. The process of Mastering Ceremonies, MC-ing, is much older than hip-hop. It goes back thousands of years. It's about engaging an audience, holding a crowd.

"Jazz has the power to bring people to tears and hip-hop should be doing the same," says MC Kinch, but for now his eyes are fixed firmly on the current project. "I have grand ambitions for *The Legend Of Mike Smith*, which premieres as a fully staged work at Birmingham Rep this September [12-28]. It will have audio-visual projections, a cast including dancers, a band, and a whole lot of interesting choreography by Jonzie D. It potentially supersedes the whole question of 'Are you a jazz or a hip-hop guy?' It's like, here's a story, the primacy of the narrative. Within the arc of the story I think my musical ideas will start to make a lot more sense."

Fred Grand

ASAF SIRKIS

"If I just play the great American songbook and everybody takes a solo and people are eating and drinking, I come out of the gig and say, 'Did I actually play or not?'"

Israeli-expat Asaf Sirkis has built a formidable reputation as a jazz and fusion drummer since he moved to London in 1999. A composer as well as a player, he has just finished work on his third album, *Shepherd's Stories*, with his trio featuring bassist Yaron Stavi and guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos, following on from 2010's *Letting Go*.

"We have been playing together so much, the band's sound has evolved quite a bit," says Asaf. "On this album there is more room for improvisation so it is a little less composed. The sound that Tassos has developed over the years, I heard that in my mind when I wrote the music and the same goes for Yaron's bass playing. He's got that very special, simple, melodic way of playing and I've tried to let it be heard in the new album."

Yaron has a deep pocket that often provides the foundation for Asaf's rhythmic explorations on the drums. "He is known more for his jazz playing but he can really groove," says Asaf. "What I like about him is that he really gives the band a good contrast. All the modern classical harmonies that I sometimes use really take it to a more cerebral, Western classical dimension and he brings it back to the ground."

Joining the trio on *Shepherd's Stories* are vocalist Sylwia Bialas, pianist John Turville and flautist Gareth Lockrane, adding their own flavours to the sound. "The flautist really takes it to a very jazzy context and the singer on the track *Traveller* takes it to a smooth Pat Metheny thing, but it's me so it can't be that smooth," says Asaf. In addition to drumming and writing, Asaf produced the album himself and releases everything on his own label. "In

Asaf Sirkis



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our day and age, this is something I think I'm going to have to get used to for a while," he says. "To be honest, I feel more comfortable doing that than giving my music production to someone else unless it was someone I could really trust. I did have a lot of help from the people at Eastcote Studios where I usually record and Andrew Tulloch at the Blue Studio who mastered the album. I still produce everything and it's hard work sometimes but it's better this way for the music."

When he's not leading his own group, Asaf is a busy sideman playing with the likes of The Lighthouse Trio, Maciek Pysz and The Alex Hutton Trio. Hutton has said that what he likes about Asaf is the drummer's talent for bringing the energy of rock to a jazz context.

"I'm in between jazz and rock in terms of energy," confirms Asaf. "I really like the sophistication and finesse you can get on the drums, the dynamic level and control when you play jazz. There is something amazing about all good jazz drummers, that they all have a particular and very accurate balance between the drums. It's great to be doing that as well as just kicking the band, which I really like too. In a way you can say that I'm a fusion player or a jazz-rock player. I've always been interested in how you can play the drums with a lot of control but also a lot of energy. You can play something that is not necessarily very loud but it can drive the band which is very exciting."

"If I'm doing a pure, traditional jazz gig where you just play the great American songbook and everybody takes a solo and it's all the same and people are eating and drinking, I come out of the gig and say, 'Did I actually play or not?' If you kick up the energy on a jazz gig, if you go crazy it's too loud and then you can't hear the bass or the piano. It's a real challenge and it's something I'm still learning."

"The solution that is best for me is playing original music written by players that I'm working with who are open for me to have an input that will change how the music sounds. With the Lighthouse Trio, when our saxophonist Tim Garland is writing a piece he will think about my sound and how we blend together as a band. I have been very lucky to be working with musicians who are open for me to have an input into the music and to bring that finesse and energy together."

David West