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Extended Analysis

Asaf Sirkis Trio: Shepherd's Stories

By [JOHN KELMAN](#), Published: October 22, 2013

It's getting to the point where it's almost impossible to pigeonhole an artist into any one category---and that can't be anything *but* a good thing. Sure, some people like to think of the artists they love as jazz, rock or classical musicians, but the truth is that, more and more, musicians simply want to be thought of as people who play *music*. Still, there's an intrinsic need to categorize music, if for no other reason than to help provide some context in order to help others decide whether or not it's something they might like. There's little doubt, based on his pedigree and C.V., that drummer Asaf Sirkis is, if a category is necessary, a jazz musician. Whether playing with lightning-fast intuitive reflexes with the nearly decade-old trio most recently called simply Simcock Garland Sirkis and heard on 2012's stellar [Lighthouse](#) (ACT), recording seven albums with fellow Israeli expat [Gilad Atzmon](#)'s Orient House Ensemble or working with rising star [Nicolas Meier](#), Atzmon's continually building reputation as drummer/percussionist of choice remains unabated.



But as wonderful as his work with others has been, Sirkis has also established himself as a thinking man's leader with two groups: first, his Inner Noise Trio that, with keyboardist [Steve Lodder](#) and vastly underappreciated guitarist [Mike Outram](#), released three records, culminating in the particularly wonderful, church organ-driven [The Song Within](#) (SAM, 2007), an album that suggested how Olivier Messiaen might have sounded, were he to write for an improvising jazz trio. Since that time, however, in-between his busy schedule collaborating with others, Sirkis has focused on a more conventionally constructed guitar/bass/drums trio that, featuring Greek six-stringer [Tassos Spiliotopoulos](#) and fellow Israeli, electric bassist [Yaron Stavi](#), is anything *but* conventional.

Much has transpired since the trio's impressive debut, [The Monk](#) (SAM, 2008)—which also featured guest keyboardist [Gary Husband](#), a meaningful choice since he was also a reference point for Sirkis in his better-known capacity as a drummer. Guitar legend [Allan Holdsworth](#), with whom Husband also played, continues to be a touchstone, both for some of Sirkis' writing—in particular the buoyant opener, "1801," though through Spiliotopoulos' expansive voicings and legato approach, what this trio does that Holdsworth (especially in recent times) does not, is *breathe*. Spiliotopoulos can surely shred with the best of them, and Sirkis' nimble kit work both supports and suggests, while Stavi proves it's possible to be both an anchor *and* a melodic foil. But there's also an intrinsic lyricism at work, elevated into more atmospheric territory with the addition of [John Turville](#) (making the first of two guest appearances on Fender Rhodes). The end result is music that's more eminently accessible and less a pure exercise in testosterone and muscle.

Elsewhere the group's core melodism and penchant for space is even more evident on the

balladic "Eyes Tell" and, in particular, "Traveller," where guest vocalist Sylwia Bialas layers multiple vocals to create a simple but compelling theme that serves as a jumping off point for Stavi's equally focused, motif-centric bass solo.

"Meditation" begins, as its title suggest, in more ethereal territory, Spiliotopoulos' reverb-drenched guitar creating clouds both cirrus and cumulonimbus. Stavi once again assumes a core melodic role until Sirkis enters and drives the pedal tone-based piece into more decidedly rocking territory—the perfect setup for "Dream Sister," which follows, opening with some of the drummer's most incendiary playing of the set only to settle into a lighter-textured, cymbal-driven space where Stavi's theme is bolstered by Spiliotopoulos' expansive chordal support, leading to Turville's second—and best—guest spot: a slowly intensifying solo that sets the context for Spiliotopoulos to wax Holdsworthian, but again with a penchant for thematic constructs that both distinguish and define his playing.

The final guest on *Shepherd's Stories* is [Gareth Lockrane](#), whose impressive, rich-toned flute adds another dimension to this collection of Sirkis compositions already crossing numerous dimensions to occupy a broader continuum. With each recording by this trio, Sirkis has invited guests to expand its tonal palette, but without the strength of the three players at its heart, *Shepherd's Stories* would be merely an impressively performed selection of music ranging from firebrand to pastoral. Instead, what Sirkis has accomplished, with the help of Stavi and Spiliotopoulos, is to expand upon the music he first began with his Inner Noise group, building a discography that's positioning Sirkis as more than just a fine percussionist, but a bandleader and composer of increasing significance to boot.

Track Listing: 1801; Eyes Tell; Traveller; Meditation; Dream Sister; Together; Shepherd's Stories; Two Part Melody.

Personnel: Asaf Sirkis; drums; Yaron Stavi: electric bass; Tassos Spiliotopoulos: electric and acoustic guitars; Sylwia Bialas: voice (3); Gareth Lockrane: flute: (6); John Turville: Fender Rhodes (1, 5).

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Joined All About Jazz in 2004

With the realization that there will always be more music coming at him



than he can keep up with, John wonders why anyone would think that jazz is dead or dying.

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Guy Grundy • 16 days ago

You make an excellent point John, in mentioning that this terrific group "breathe" and make "music that's more eminently accessible and less a pure exercise in testosterone and muscle."

As someone famous said, the notes you don't play are as important as the notes you do.

Contrast this to the output from say, the fusion label Abstract Logix where it would appear to be the standard to play as I often describe, "all pots and pans...all at once". It's all very technical, all very "impressive" and often at a hundred notes per second but utterly lacking in emotion and soul.

Have they not learned from the decline of Jazz/Rock/Fusion, whatever you want to call it from the mid to late seventies when punters simply got bored to death by over indulgent musicians?

It's a fine album, well reviewed...and boy, Spiliotopoulos does indeed sound like Holdsworth at times, perhaps even a touch of Samy Samaro in there as well. I must say though, I do miss Outram's playing with Asaf...I do hope they record together again in the future.

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John Kelman → Guy Grundy • 14 days ago

Hey Guy,

Thanks, as ever for the kind words. I really appreciate it. I also like your comparing Tassos to Samy - a guitarist whose music I really enjoy and for whom I feel more than a little guilty for not reviewing as I did a few years back. It's not for lack of interest, it's simply about time and that if other AAJ writers cover an artist, more often than not I'll pass on writing another review because the amount of incoming music is so high that I sometimes have to use that as one of the criteria for not reviewing an album (though I DID review this one, even though it had already been reviewed by one of my favorite AAJ reviewers, Ian Patterson).

The only thing I'll take you up on is your blanket criticism of Abstract Logix. While it's true that the label sometimes has a tendency to focus largely on chops/testosterone-heavy players, I'd hesitate to whitewash the label entirely. Jimmy Herring, for example, I think is a superb player and while he can at times play with a lot of virtuosity, I still think he's one tasty player. I also feel the same about Ray Russell. I'm also a huge fan of Alex Machacek who, while absolutely capable of chops-heavy playing, is just too damn fine a writer, imo, to be pigeonholed as strictly such. I also like Wayne Krantz a lot, for touch, tone and feel, and was surprised to find how much I enjoyed his vocal record, Howie 61.

[see more](#)

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Guy Grundy → John Kelman • 14 days ago

Hi John

The blanket "criticism" of Abstract Logix was really more of a generalization. Of course there are exceptions but I'd say that label is known best for a certain type of fusion...though it's interesting you mention Ray Russell. I've followed his playing for many a year and his 2006 album Goodbye Svengali was superb (It really is one of life's great mysteries that the man has not received the wider recognition he deserves). I thought his album for Abstract fell right into their familiar type and frankly was a disappointment....wouldn't life be tedious if we all agreed, eh?

I have the Martin Speake album you refer to and it's beautiful playing from all three musicians...still waiting of course, for the Mike Outram debut album :-). Hurry up Mike! Is there a finer guitar player on this planet?

There's so much Jazz around today and with so many musicians releasing albums it's hard to keep up with what's out there...AAJ helps out in that respect though it always surprises me that there are so few comments registered? Funny old word...

Sounds as though there are exciting times ahead for AAJ...Michael, yourself and all the contributors should be very proud of what's been achieved over the years.

All the best

Guy

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



John Kelman → Guy Grundy • 14 days ago

"There's so much Jazz around today and with so many musicians releasing albums it's hard to keep up with what's out there.."

Indeed.....though it's what keeps me going :)
Thanks again, Guy!

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Avatar



Mort Weiss • 18 days ago

No John, Jazz isn't dead or dying-it's the musicians that try to pay there rent by playing it -who are dead and dying--dig? Mort

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



John Kelman → Mort Weiss • 18 days ago

Mort, I'm not totally clear on what you're saying. If you're suggesting that music like this is making it difficult for what you suggest are "real" jazz musicians - and I really hope not - then, like this music or not you've not heard the full breadth of Asaf's work. He's a jazzier if ever there was one. Check out the Lighthouse Trio with saxophonist Tim Garland and pianist Gwilym Simcock, that I refer to in the review. Absolutely monster players who I'm sure you'd absolutely dig.....YOU dig? :)

As for this trio? These are all deep players, just not coming as directly from the American tradition is all.

Cheers!
John

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Mort Weiss → John Kelman • 18 days ago

No John, wasn't referring to your article per sey--just to the condition of the scene as I percieve it, M

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



John Kelman → Mort Weiss • 18 days ago

Ah, perhaps you never noticed my byline before.... :)
Cool, just wanted to be clear - but you really should check out the Lighthouse Trio, I think you'd be especially impressed by Tim Garland, one of Britain's leading lights on saxophone, bass clarinet and flute.

Cheers!
John

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