

# ASAF SIRKIS

Asaf Sirkis has been chasing his musical dreams all the way from Israel to become one of the hottest players in Britain's jazz fusion scene. David West catches up with him...

It's been a long road for Asaf Sirkis to create the music he was carrying around in his head. Growing up in the town of Rehovot in Israel, Asaf had an exceptionally eclectic musical upbringing in a town that is home to a large Yemenite community. "They had some amazing drumming going on there," says Asaf. "The Yemenite style is a cross between the Middle East and North Africa. I was very influenced by that. I would hear all their parties and sometimes goes to Yemenite weddings where they would play these rhythms. I wasn't actually aware of that influence until the last four, five years. It was within me for a long time but I'm slowly becoming aware of how much I was influenced by that."

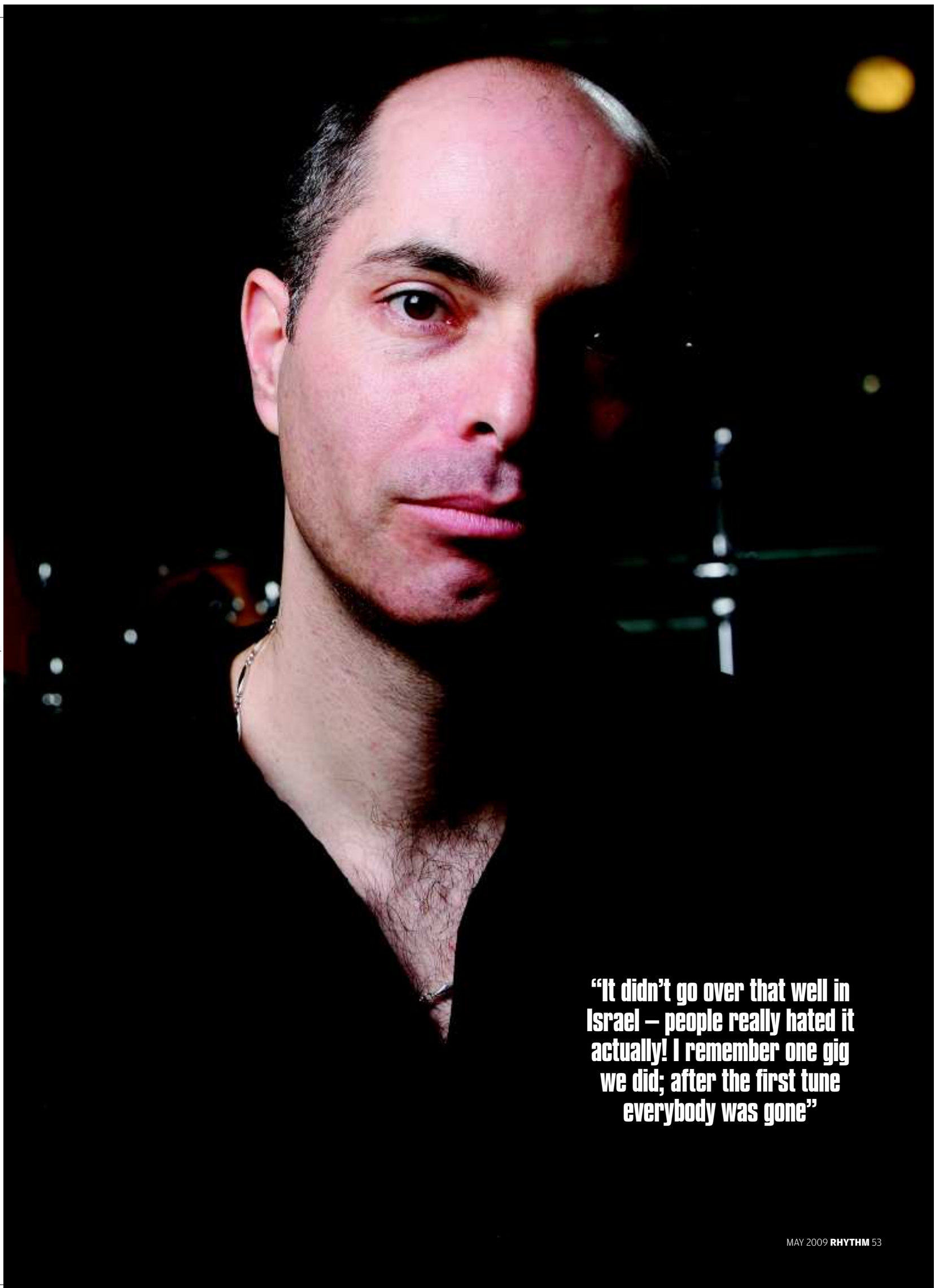
Asaf's earliest heroes were Ringo Starr and Stewart Copeland before he discovered the glories of prog rock, which in turn led him to fusion. Soon he was hooked on Weather Report, Mahavishnu Orchestra and Allan Holdsworth. "That is where I really got into playing and practising and transcribing. I transcribed a lot of stuff from Allan Holdsworth's drummers, Gary Husband, Chad Wackerman, Tony Williams and that is when I got into that style of music."

## Military Rudiments

Not that Israel was any kind of fusion hotbed. "There's a lot of talent in Israel but unfortunately they don't have a lot of places to play," he explains. "The good side about it is everybody played everything. I would play rock'n'roll, then a rock'n'roll drummer would play a jazz gig, then the next day a Klezmer gig, then Arabic music. Everybody played everything because you had to, to make a living. I made my living mainly from playing Jewish weddings." Like all Israelis, Asaf had to take a three year break from his musical aspirations to complete his compulsory military service. "Luckily I didn't do any combat," he says. "My job was administrative and I had the chance to have a practice pad in the office where I worked. I practised quite a lot in the army, a lot of rudimental stuff and developed roll techniques."

## A Lonely Business

After the army Asaf tried to get his career off the ground in Israel with the first incarnation of the group Inner Noise. The music has been described as gothic jazz with the line-up comprising drums, bass and a church organ. It was not a hit. "It didn't go over that well in Israel. People really hated it



**“It didn’t go over that well in Israel – people really hated it actually! I remember one gig we did; after the first tune everybody was gone”**

## ASAF'S KIT

### DRUMS

Gretsch USA Maple Custom: 20"x16" bass drum, 8"x8" tom-tom, 12"x8" tom-tom, 13"x9" tom-tom, 14"x14" floor tom, 14"x5½" wood snare

### CYMBALS

Istanbul Agop  
20" Turk Jazz ride,

21" China, 6" Alchemy Bell, 15" hi-hats, 23" Custom ride

### PLUS

Remo heads: Coated Ambassadors on the tops, Clear Diplomats on the bottoms; Pearl pedal; Protection Racket cases; Vic Firth sticks.

Asaf's well-used Gretsch USA Maple Custom kit

▶ actually! I remember one gig we did in an art centre. After the first tune everybody was gone. It was quite lonely doing that music in Israel." So Asaf decided it was time to take his show on the road in search of a warmer reception. After stints in Holland and Paris, Asaf came to London just to dip his toes in the waters. "I had never been to London before and the great thing about it was that I came here just to check it out and within 10 days I had already played gigs. I was constantly invited to sit in."

### All Aboard The Orient Ensemble

A vital figure in Asaf's introduction to the London circuit was saxophonist Gilad Atzmon, a member of

## Inner Noise

### ASAF ON HIS GOTHIC JAZZ TRIO



Asaf's gothic jazz band may have baffled the folks in Israel, but has found a new lease of life in London. With Steve Lodder on church organ and Mike Outram on guitar, Inner Noise's first recording session remains one of Asaf's favourites. "We went to St Michael's Church in Highgate. Steve was sitting at the organ, I was in another room and Mike was in the kitchen with his guitar. We couldn't see each other at all. I had to re-arrange some of the music because it was based on cues. That was one of the greatest sessions I've done."

## "I had a 20" bass drum and I put the snare and tom inside... I used to take that on the tube. That was not so great for my back, but I learned a lot about playing jazz"

The Blockheads and jazz composer. "When I came to London I had a drum set and Gilad's phone number. I called him and we met and had a jam. We played on and off for a few months and he called me and said 'hey, let's try to do a band together', so we started the Orient House Ensemble." The group sprang from a desire to meld together the disparate influences that Asaf and Gilad shared. "We were trying to see how we could incorporate Middle Eastern influences, from where we were born, into what we do as jazz musicians", explains Asaf. "It's not like you take a darbouka and put a fretless bass in and a fusion drummer. We didn't want to go that route. We wanted to do something more organic and it is still a work in progress."

"First the blend has to be there within you before you try to do it in music, rather than trying to randomly meet someone from Timbuktu and someone from India and someone from Norway and trying to do a band," says Asaf. "Then you play the music without trying hard or being too conceptual about it. We have a deep understanding of each other's playing and musicality. It just works in a magical way."

### Making The Monk

The bass player in the Orient House Ensemble is Yaron Stavi who joined Asaf and guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos to form the Asaf Sirkis Trio, who have garnered acclaim both live and for their first release *The Monk*. "It was very important for me to do it. I wrote the music when I had to stop playing because I had a tendinitis problem in my left shoulder. I couldn't play so I used that time to compose music."

*The Monk* allowed Asaf the opportunity to play with one of his idols when Gary Husband agreed to play keyboards on the album. "That was pretty much a dream come true, because for me Gary is one of the most amazing drummers ever," Asaf enthuses. With *The Monk* garnering glowing reviews, Asaf has come a very long way from carrying his kit around in a trolley to get to jam sessions. Those days have served him well, though. "I had a 20" bass drum and I put the snare and the tom inside, closed it and put the cymbals on top. I used to take that on the tube. That was not so great for my back, but I learned a lot about playing jazz." ■

[www.asafsirkis.co.uk](http://www.asafsirkis.co.uk)