

Special Feature: Asaf Sirkis And The Road To Shepherd's Stories (2013/04/08)

Rainlore on premier drummer/percussionist Asaf Sirkis, his music, and his Asaf Sirkis Trio's latest album, *Shepherd's Stories*.

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My first encounter with Asaf Sirkis happened, as it were, quite unconsciously, about 1993, in the form of an album by Israeli luminary and 'father' of Israeli free jazz (some would say, free improvisation) Harold Rubin, *Trialog*, which featured a young Asaf Sirkis on drums and Kobi Shefi on bass guitar in addition to Rubin himself on clarinet.

Sirkis impressed me greatly back then, but, always having had a bad memory for names, the name Asaf Sirkis somehow soon faded from my memory. The first class drumming, as well as the album, did not though, and I was of course delighted to be reunited with it last year. It still stands out and is timeless, and I can only recommend you get hold of it.

Thus, when I met Sirkis with Gilad Atzmon & The Orient House Ensemble (of which he was a founder member with Atzmon) years later in London, the name did not ring any bells for quite some time.

Meanwhile, Sirkis had already had an illustrious career both performing and recording in Israel, with such Israeli jazz, world music and other giants as the aforementioned Harold Rubin, Albert Beger, Yair Dalal, Christoph Spendel and Eyal Sela from 1990 onwards, and also forming his own first trio, consisting of Kobi Arad (now a major force in Third Stream in New York) on keyboards and Gabriel Mayer on bass, in 1995 and recording as a leader on *on One Step Closer* with his first Asaf Sirkis Trio in 1995, *Vagabond* with Sassi Mizrachi and Kobi Arad in 1997, and in a duo with Eyal Maoz, *Freedom Has It's Own Taste*, the same year.

Also in the 1990s, inspired by French Church Organ composers such as Olivier Messiaen, Sirkis formed a new band, The Inner Noise, consisting of Adi Goldstein on church organ, Amir Perelman on electric guitar and Sirkis himself on drums in 1996 and performed their first project widely around Israel during 1997 &

The 1990s then already saw Sirkis in great demand, and getting the kind of press that could be the envy of many, especially at such an early age. He was already critically acclaimed as Israel's greatest drummer and percussionist who ought not be confined to Israel alone but deserving of much wider international recognition. Naturally enough, for a drummer and percussionist of his caliber, Israel eventually proved too small and Europe or America beckoned.

1998 finally saw Sirkis leaving for first The Netherlands and then France, before finally settling in London in 1999. Sirkis very quickly established himself as a part of the UK Jazz and world music scene and soon took it by storm, a force to be reckoned with. Soon after his arrival in London, Sirkis also re-formed his trio Asaf Sirkis & The Inner Noise with Steve Lodder on organ and Mike Outram on guitar, eventually recording three remarkable albums with this band between 2003 and 2007.

A meeting in 1999 with saxophonist and clarinet player Gilad Atzmon was a meeting of musically like minds, both with more than a passing interest in the music of the Middle East, resulting in them founding the seminal band Gilad Atzmon & The Orient House Ensemble. Sirkis remind with the band until 2009, meanwhile recording seven albums with them, when it became necessary for him to leave in order to devote sufficient time especially to his own projects.

In the intervening years, Sirkis soon became probably the most in demand drummer/percussionist on the British scene as well as abroad, and he also established long term associations with, among others, Nicolas Meier, Tim Garland (becoming a founder member of the Lighthouse Trio), John Law, Larry Coryell, Jeff Berlin, Yuri Goloubev, and Simon Fisher Turner.

In 2007, Sirkis formed his second Asaf Sirkis Trio, an electric trio with guitarist Tessa Salkotopoulos and

When I first met a still young Sirkis as part of The Orient House Ensemble, my breath was immediately taken away by his incredible drumming and percussion. Ranging from mercurial and downright explosive to sensitive, subtle, tender and gentle, and everything in between and beyond. As for his time keeping, I shouldn't be surprised if you could set an atomic clock by it! Sirkis also boasts a huge palette of colours, whether on standard traps or special rigs using various frame drums and other percussion such as more recently the West African udu clay pot drum and the hang drum (aka steel drum). He also became a master of konakol, the Carnatic or South Indian vocalisation of rhythm, which he uses as a compositional aid as well as in playing. Over the years, Sirkis has only grown in leaps and bounds, establishing himself as the premier drummer of our times and in such demand he can pick and choose his collaborations.

Equally, his compositional prowess impressed right from his first album with Asaf Sirkis And The Inner Noise, *Inner Noise*, and again this progressed more and more.

Just as the drummer/percussionist, the composer Asaf Sirkis is intuitive and imaginative, working from the inside out as it were, letting the unconscious guide him rather than relying on 'clever ideas.' Sirkis' art reflects his personality. He is intensely spiritual, intense yet relaxed, and there seems to be an inner calm emanating from him. Sirkis is also a gentle, kind personality, and with a great sense of humour. And all in all, one of the nicest people you could hope to meet. All this shines through in his music.

Sirkis' music is hard to classify and impossible to rigidly pigeonhole. Essentially, it broadly falls into jazz fusion, but, especially with the early Inner Noise albums, also touches on Third Stream territory. There is a fairly clear progression through the Inner Noise and then the Asaf Sirkis Trio music and albums. The first of these, *Inner Noise*, is perhaps the most intense, full of inner tensions, living up to its title as it were. By the time of *We Are Falling*, the music is a lot more meditative, in search of inner peace, falling through a cosmic void, see what happens, where it takes him. The last of the Inner Noise albums, *The Song Within*, progresses further along those lines, seeking the music, the song, within, and through its expression finding greater peace and beauty.

electric trio with guitarist Iassos Spirotopoulos and Yaron Stavi on bass guitar. They released the albums *The Monk* in 2008 and *Letting Go* in 2010.

With the new Asaf Sirkis Trio, Sirkis explores the concept of the musician as monk on their first album, *The Monk*. A startling parallel that takes a bold next step in the evolution of Sirkis' music. Finally, with *Letting Go*, he has learned exactly that, and lets go, in many senses. Only letting go can give true inner peace and freedom, and leave you to progress freely beyond the mere quest for inner peace and beauty.

Thus liberated, Sirkis has moved on, the first result being his forthcoming album, *Shepherd's Stories*. It was a long and arduous road leading up to this, his finest album to date, a very different album from previous ones both conceptually and stylistically.

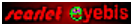
To be released in July this year, and launched that month at London's prestigious Pizza Express Jazz Club Soho, *Shepherd's Stories* reflects on Sirkis' long fascination with the way that melodies affect the mind and soul, and the way that 'music can connect us with our true selves.' Sirkis calls these effects 'the Shepherd Story Effect.' It occurs, for instance, when a melody reminds you of something you've heard before, or you somehow feel sure that you have heard a melody before, but cannot pinpoint where or when - a feeling of déjà vu, or when music reminds you of the way you felt at another time in your life. However, *Shepherd's Stories* connects with something larger than the self, with a forgotten truth or greater consciousness. These moments are a connection to our soul, important reminders or pointers of where we have come from.

As for the creation and recording of *Shepherd's Stories* and its evolution from the past, as Sirkis himself puts it, 'I think that there is much greater sense of deliberateness in this album when you compare to the previous albums we've made with the trio but at the same time a more effortless, natural and improvisatory approach throughout.' In other words, a result of the liberation achieved through *Letting Go*.

It's been a long, and fascinating, road to *Shepherd's Stories* for anyone who was along for the journey. A review of the album will follow shortly.

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