

**You were born in Israel and grew up in Switzerland before moving to the States. Could you recap the main stages of your musical training? Did this cosmopolitan perspective help you broaden your horizon?**

I was actually born in Lyon, France, though remained there only for a few months, then my parents moved back to Israel and eventually settled in Geneva when I was 2 or 3 years old.

I was trained as a classical pianist-I graduated from the Geneva Conservatory. At that time, I was also in the close circle of virtuoso pianist Martha Argerich and her then boyfriend pianist/composer Alexander Rabinovitch - who eventually became my first composition teacher.

In 1987, I went to live in Florida for a few years and picked up the saxophone in high school. I came back to Geneva in 1989 where I started Musicology at the University and in parallel, started gigging in and around Switzerland. I quickly gave up studying at the university to engage myself fully as an active musician. I took on a growing passion for composing and arranging and started writing larger scale pieces by then for various projects; big bands, mixed jazz/chamber orchestra, etc. In 1995, I received a full scholarship to go study Composition at the Manhattan School of Music from which I graduated in 1997. Clearly, my upbringing has had a big impact on my musical identity, not only the multi-cultural side but also the fact that I grew up exposed to many different types of music. Being classically trained shows primarily in my composing and arranging.

I am basically a self-taught saxophonist but have been fortunate to be mentored by my great friend Lee Konitz who kind of "discovered" me when I was 20 years, during a recording session featuring him as a guest and where I was playing in the sax section. Having him in my musical - and personal - life until today has had as big an impact as one can imagine.

**The Israeli jazz scene is much more vital than one could expect. Nevertheless, some of its most qualified exponents, such as the Cohen siblings, Anat Fort, Omer Avital, Assif Tsahar, Gilad Atzmon live and work abroad. Now the question might sound brutal: is that a brain drain or a sort of musical Diaspora?**

Well, I have never lived in Israel as an adult and my connections to the musical scene over there are very limited. I know and play with a few of their "exports" in NY. I think that the local conditions are so constraining that there is only so much a creative musician can do over there without feeling caged in. Furthermore, Assif or Gilad are artists who have strong voices which extend beyond music into political and society issues. In many ways, they wouldn't be able to be themselves if they lived full time in Israel.

So I would say it is more of a brain drain. I feel I would be more representative of a musical "Diaspora": though my parents emigrated to Israel from Bulgaria & Romania in the 40's, they left to go back to Europe because

opportunities were better there and I now live in NY. Hence, I feel I belong to the Jewish community abroad at large, one with many unique cultural values, still connected to Israel though, but with somewhat limited bonds.

**You have shared several projects with Lee Konitz. How did that collaboration originate?**

My connection with Lee started in 1990, in Geneva. We met a few times each of the subsequent years where we would mostly play together privately, then in 1993 I started to accompany him on the road and play with him on stage. In 1994, I wrote an extended piece that featured him, a String4tet and Jazz ensemble - a 12 piece band, which toured Europe twice. It was my first real foray into mixing genres while imbedding real improvisation on a larger scale. After moving to NY, Lee introduced me to different musical situations that called for either an arranger or a composer and this led to the first String 4tet record, the "French Impressionist" one.

This CD blossomed into Lee asking me to write a repertoire for 3 distinct projects, which would feature almost exclusively his newly written original music: a Big Band, his New Nonet and String Project. Each of these features Lee, with my arrangements of his music orchestrated. Our collaboration culminated in 2007 with an evening at Carnegie Hall celebrating Lee's 80th birthday and all 3 projects featured the same night! It was incredible. Lee is truly "one of a kind".

**In your approach to the tenor sax one can detect some elements drawn from Warne Marsh. Could that be considered a further element of affinity with Konitz?**

Definitely. Lee and Warne have the Tristano lineage and share many core aesthetic aspects. Warne is one of the unsung heroes of modern jazz. An incredible improviser, master of his horn with a unique sound, rhythmic feel and melodic concept; I have been studying him for as long I have played. It is interesting that both of my tenor heroes: Warne and Wayne Shorter share so many similarities in their musical approach and I know that Wayne is very much fond of Warne's playing.

**You have written several arrangements for string quartets. Which classical composers were most influential in this respect?**

Bartok, Stravinsky, Ligeti, Berg, Schoenberg, Debussy, Bruckner, Mahler, Beethoven and Bach were the ones who have had an early and lasting impact on my music. I always, in one way or another, go back to them.

**Both the Spring and Axis string quartets have recorded your arrangements for works featuring Lee Konitz. Which were the main challenges and differences in those initiatives?**

The music was very different for each case but both repertoires shared the same challenges as far as how to integrate Lee in the arrangements and make sure he was comfortable.

In the "French Impressionist" recording, my base material was a set of Classical masterpieces, mostly written for piano. Trying to orchestrate that

music so it would retain its identity without doing a note for note copy proved difficult.

With the Spring String 4tet CD, the music consisted mostly of Konitz melodies, or "fragments" as he likes to call them, and for which I had complete liberty into re-working. In many ways, this record is a logical continuation of the first one, better rounded and more achieved.

### **What urged you to undertake such a demanding project as "Mass Transformation"?**

The Mass Transformation project was a commission from the "BrucknerTage Festival" in St-Florian, Austria. My only constraint was to use Bruckner Mass No 3 as the base material and do anything I wanted with it, for any instrumentation-as long as the Festival could afford it! I looked for a formula that would allow me to refer to Bruckner's original orchestral instrumentation as well as be light and flexible enough to improvise freely. Since I had a long working relationship with the Spring String 4tet from nearby Linz, I used them. Then, in figuring out how to get maximum flexibility with as few people as possible I decided to rely my old 4tet-called "The Other Quartet" from my Knitting Factory days, with guitarist Pete McCann, drummer Mark Ferber and Shane Endsley on trumpet. Finally, the music being based on a Mass, I used the incredible singer Judith Berkson-who is also a Jewish Cantor besides being an incredibly gifted improviser, who plays Fender as well.

The music proved really challenging to re-construct. First, I changed the original Latin texts, for the most part, replacing them with either my late father's poetry in Hebrew, a Charlie Chaplin monologue from "The Great Dictator" and my own texts. Then, for each of the 6 movements, I explored a different musical genre and attempted to allow sufficient space for real improvisation to take place. We recorded and hope to have the CD come out on Zorn's Tzaddik label by early 2011.

### **There is a definite chamber music imprint also in your contribution to Steve Swallow's "L'histoire du Clochard". Was that a deliberate choice to blend the African American and European backgrounds?**

Yes, it was. This blend is very much part of my musical fabric.

### **What are the connections with Stravinsky's "L'histoire du Soldat"?**

When Steve asked me to write a repertoire based on his music, he was the one who actually brought up the idea of a group based on Stravinsky's Soldier's Tale. So the instrumentation is modelled after it, with the tenor saxophone playing the role of the bassoon and Steve playing the acoustic bass part. Beyond that, and a few humorous quotes from the original work, this project manages to have a sound of its own even though so much of my writing is indebted to Prince Igor's mastery of sounds.

### **Your interaction with Swallow and Adam Nussbaum on "Playing in Traffic" sounds subtle and absolutely spontaneous.**

Yes, I think this sums it up. This group doesn't overpower music, but rather lets it find its own way. Though we play tunes and some set structures, it is a highly interactive trio-with many completely open segments where not only the

melodies are improvised but the forms as well. It is not a typical repertoire for Steve and Adam but their approach to music is so open and strong that playing any music with them remains comfortable every time.

### **On the other hand, to what extent did Jimmy Giuffre and John La Porta's pioneering works influence your writing?**

I've always admired Giuffre's musical world, though I only had a limited knowledge of it until George Schuller asked me to be part of the "Whirr" project, which is dedicated to Jimmy's music. I saw him play live once in the early 90's, with his trio with Swallow and Bley and was impressed by the depth and simplicity of his music. George, who is a scholar in this respect, gave me hours of Giuffre's music to listen to, as well as some rare scores and that's when I got to really study his music. He was a phenomenal composer, much ahead of its time. There is a through-composed piece he called "Threewee" which sounds (and looks!) like a Webern composition-yet it was part of his trio's repertoire in the mid 60's. So in a sense, Giuffre's work is making more of an impact nowadays. I am not very familiar with John LaPorta's music

### **Could you give some details about the "Whirr" project?**

George Schuller and guitarist Joel Harrison put "Whirr" together. It is a sextet also featuring Jacob Garchik on trombone and accordion, Marty Ehrlich (or Billy Drewes) on clarinet and Cameron Brown on bass. We focus exclusively on the music of Giuffre or composers closely associated with him. For i.e. we also play a couple of tunes by Carla Bley she wrote for Jimmy's trio back then. George, Joel and I share the arranging duties and this particular instrumentation allows for many orchestral colours. This band is also a mix of an older generation; Cameron played with Giuffre and a newer one, with Jacob and I, and this mix contributes a fresh approach to his music.

### **Newsreel features some talented musicians like Shane Endsley, Miles Okazaki and Dan Weiss. What are the main objectives pursued by this group?**

My 5tet NewsReel is my main creative outlet, allowing me to merge the playing and the composing in one place. We have been playing together since 2005 as a group but I have known all of these musicians since 1996.

I feel very strongly that these musicians, who besides the ones quoted above also consist of Jacob Sacks on piano and Matt Pavolka on bass, are at the forefront of what is happening in creative music today. In many ways, they embrace a demanding yet unwavering musical philosophy grounded in complete mastery of not just one genre, but a multitude. Typically, Dan is not only one of the best jazz drummers of his generation; he is also an accomplished Hindustani Tablas player, a death-metal drummer who in his off time, will hang out with me to practice Beethoven sonatas....I can say similar things about each one of the members of this group. So it is a highly motivating crew to be around, one which forces me to sublimate my musical limits! I am able to write very challenging material and know it will be played brilliantly and open doors I had not suspected originally.

Further more, a lot of my music is now rooted in my study of North Indian music - I play the Bansuri (bamboo flute) as well, and this music has influenced me deeply. A lot of NewsReel's repertoire explores this merging.

I look forward to the release of our first record, which should be out by the summer of 2011 on Auand Records, the great Italian label.

### **Was it easy to find a common ground with the Brazilian members of the Blue Seven group?**

Yes, very easy. My good friend Denis Lee introduced me to them and I have been working with these guys since 2002. Our first project was a repertoire of Dexter Gordon music, which we then recorded. After that, I hired four of the Blue7 musicians to play with the Konitz New Nonet for the Sao Paulo/Rio de Janeiro Jazz Festival in 2003 (we only flew in the rhythm section consisting of Matt Wilson & Bob Bowen).

Since then, I wrote an entirely new repertoire, which we recorded as well ("Blue 7 plays the Blues") which should come out on Fresh Sound Records by the end of 2010.

The pool of incredible musicians in Brazil is enormous and playing with some of them is truly a privilege. They have so much to teach me and are so open to being taught as well. Every occasion we have to play together-which is at least once a year- always results in great music. And not to mention that they know how to have fun!

### **What are you working on at the moment?**

I have just completed a Piano & Drums Double Concerto for Symphony Orchestra and Big Band. Jason Moran on piano, Dan Weiss on drums, the Porto National Orchestra and the OJM Big Band premiered it a few weeks ago in Lisbon. This piece took me over 6 months to write and kind of took over whatever else I was doing at the time. So now I am back into a more balanced routine, playing more.

I am currently working on some new music for a "reinforced" version of NewsReel with trombonist Jacob Garchik. We have a concert at the Jazz Gallery at the end of April.

There are concerts with Swallow and Nussbaum for the summer festivals I have a couple of nice Big Band projects coming up: one with SoundScape - an ensemble based in Sao Paulo which commissioned me to write an entire repertoire based on Choros - a traditional Brazilian song form.

Also, I have been named Musical Director of the "Big Band de Lausanne" in Switzerland, which gives me full artistic license for their next 3 projects; one of original music, one with harmonica player Greg Maret and finally a "big band concerto" for Joe Lovano featuring his new saxophone, the Aulochrome.