

Reviews/Interviews

THE MONK album

MOJO, November 2008 ** (4 stars)**

Israeli drummer leads prog-jazz power trio.

Known largely for his work with Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble, Sirkis has also led some superb albums in the last decade. The obvious reference point is the muscular drummer led fusion of Tony Williams' late '60s/early '70s trio Lifetime, and like Williams, Sirkis is not only an inventive drummer but also a composer of rigour, wit and surprising delicacy. The extrovert opener Stoned Bird and the haunting title track set the tone. Sirkis's neat firepower is showcased amid plangent guitar arpeggios from Tassos Spiliotopoulos, lyrical bass work from Yaron Stavi and berserk keyboard cameos from guest Gary Husband. These capable creative players produce a lot of music here, but there's air and expressive space too, especially in the quietly exploratory Without A Story and the ruminative End of the Circle in which Sirkis sketches fascinatingly elaborate and subtle percussive commentary.

Reviewed by Chris Ingham

The monk is the Jazz CD of the week in the Evening Standard, September 19th, 2008!

This combination of London talent is a direct result of the musicians' grapevine. Asaf Sirkis, talented composer and left-handed drummer, is an admirer of Gary Husband, a reclusive piano genius whose brilliant work too seldom reaches the record racks. A reminder of his dashing postmodern style, as recently heard on tour with John McLaughlin, adds at least one star to Asaf's power-trio with bassist Yaron Stavi and Greek guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos. Their gothic rock touches aren't up my street, but the overall jazz feel most definitely is.

Reviewed by Jack Massarik

Jazz UK, October 2008 (John Fordham)

A new group for drummer Asaf Sirkis, who has been raising the temperature of Gilad Atzmon's bands for years and latterly imparting new sonorities to pianist John Law's trio. Sirkis clearly has a fondness for 1970s heavy-electric fusion music, and there are definite echoes of John McLaughlin's Inner Mounting Flame or Birds of Fire sound in the early tracks here. Keyboardist Gary Husband, a fan of the genre himself, compounds the effect on a few guest tracks, but between the power-chords and tumultuous percussion there are slowly unfolding passages of Bill Frisell-like contemplation for Tassos Spiliotopoulos's guitar. A bit meandering at times, but Sirkis's drumming is dazzling and Yaron Stavi's electric bass is both tightly-grooving and improvisationally responsive.

Reviewed by John Fordham

Jazzwise' Preview September 2008

New Trio launches The Monk

Drummer Asaf Sirkis, best known for his work with saxophonist Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble launches his own trio album *The Monk* on 15 September with a special launch gig in Charlie Wright's club in Hoxton on 18 September. Sirkis, like Atzmon, an Israeli living in London, has put together the new group, a power trio of Tassos Spiliotopoulos (guitar) and Yaron Stavi (bass) with the intention of showing a new side to his musical personality, highlighting specially-penned material for the group. Following the launch the trio plans a mini tour in November including venues such as The Rhythm Station, Rawtenstall, The Bonington Theatre, Arnold, Sheffield Jazz Club, Taylor John's House, Coventry and The White Swan, Stratford upon Avon.
Jazzwise

John Fordham, *The Guardian* tour preview, Saturday November 1 2008

In his long and playful partnership with saxophonist Gilad Atzmon, a recent and more delicate one with piano virtuoso John Law, and in many other settings from improv to fusion, Israeli expatriate Asaf Sirkis keeps confirming that he's one of the British jazz scene's most creative drummers. Law says that the way Sirkis just touches a cymbal is an inspiration, long before he's played a beat. North African as well as Middle Eastern music played a big part in his early listening, and he was a bass guitarist as well as a drummer in his teens, so rock and fusion music from the Police to Weather Report and the Mahavishnu Orchestra went deep with him. This trio generates a compelling intensity, and the leader's percussion responses to their ideas are dazzling eruptions of drum mastery.

- The Rhythm Station, Rawtenstall, Tue 4; Bonington Theatre, Nottingham, Thu 6; Millennium Hall, Sheffield, Fri 7

John Fordham

All About Jazz review, September 2008

After exploring an organ/guitar/drums encounter of the most unusual kind with The Inner Noise on albums including *We Are Falling* (Konnex, 2005) and *The Song Within* (SAM, 2007), Israeli-born, British-resident drummer Asaf Sirkis turns, on the surface, to a more conventional line-up with *The Monk*. Still, Sirkis' writing, and a trio that eschews orthodoxy, keeps *The Monk* in line with the distinctive voice of Inner Noise.

"Stoned Bird" opens the disc with harmonic ambiguity, driven by Greek guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos' arpeggiated chords and Sirkis' muscular, tumultuous playing. But it's Israeli bassist Yaron Stavi who sets up the spare melody, leading into a guitar solo that's referential in tone and approach to guitar icon Alan Holdsworth, but with far greater economy. Gary Husband—a clear reference point for Sirkis—makes the first of four guest appearances on keyboards. With a reputation built largely around his drumming, in recent years Husband has placed greater emphasis on keyboards, whether it's exploring the solo piano possibilities of Holdsworth (with whom he still occasionally works) on *The Things I See* (Angel Air, 2004), layered, multi-track compositions on *The Complete Diary of a Plastic Box* (Angel Air, 2008) or touring with another guitar legend, John McLaughlin, and his fusion-centric 4th Dimension group. Here, his synth solo demonstrates the same kind of attention to tone as the late Joe Zawinul and an oblique melodicism all his own.

Husband's keyboards are also a defining texture on the title track, with Sirkis again fighting convention as Stavi plays the melodic lead over Spiliotopoulos' gentle voicings. Arpeggiated changes follow, but with an even darker mood than The Monk's opener. The vibe says fusion, but the attention to space and color says something else, as Husband's synth solo combines a blinding speed with visceral tension and release. Spiliotopoulos opts for a clean but slightly tart tone, winding his way through Sirkis' changes with ease.

Sirkis may be a powerhouse drummer but, as with Inner Noise, the writing is equally important. "The Bridge," is a solo piano miniature written by Husband, which segues into Sirkis' compelling rubato tone poem, "Without a Story," where Spiliotopoulos' abstruse theme sets up a drum solo which unfolds with nuanced inevitability, leading to a more jagged three-way improv between Sirkis, Spiliotopoulos and Stavi.

From this open-ended middle point The Monk returns to more definitive form, ranging from the rhythm-dense "Alone," with guest percussionist Adriano Adewale, to the pensive "End of the Circle," insistent 5/4 "Dream" and abstractly impressionistic "The Journey Home." Sirkis and his trio possess great power and unbridled energy but unleash it rarely, making it all the more effective when they do.

The Monk signals a directional shift for Sirkis while continuing to build on his strengths as player, composer and conceptualist. Inherently lighter in texture than the keyboard-driven Inner Noise, it adds greater freedom to the mix, straddling the fusion fence with an appealingly uncharacteristic avoidance of unnecessary chops and purposeless displays of technique.

Reviewed by John Kelman

Jazz-Rock website featured review, September 2008

With the zest and zeal of a thunder and lightning storm, Asaf Sirkis takes his new electric trio into blissful states of improvisational glory... and all amidst a multitude of subtle musical delights that can only be described as "pure joy." THE MONK is simply Asaf's best recording to date and his drumming is just phenomenal... every beat... every phrase... every single second!

For this album, Asaf has assembled a truly outstanding group of talented musicians that features Tassos Spiliotopoulos on guitar and Yaron Stavi on bass with the amazing Gary Husband adding keyboards to several tracks.

As a composer, Asaf has branched way out from his gothic jazz journeys with the "Inner Noise," yet still manages to push the jazz-rock envelope into very fresh territory. As any great monk learns from his Masters, Asaf has fused the multi-directional influences of Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette with the adventurous song writing styles of Allan Holdsworth and avant garde composer, Erik Satie.

The overall mix of tunes on the CD runs the entire spectrum from harmonically gentle to brash creativity. Lightning does indeed strike numerous times throughout the album, but it is never overpowering... there is a calm and confident, almost illuminating attitude that is quite refreshing in comparison to Asaf's previous work.

The guitar work of Tassos Spiliotopoulos is gorgeously sparse and minimalistic on the title track, "The Monk" and "The Journey Home", yet can jump into hard rockin jazz genius at the drop of a hat on tunes like "Without A Story" and the very tasty "Dream". Check out Tassos' site at MySpace.com

On the bass, Yaron Stavi, holds down heavy hanging notes on "End of the Circle" and gets super melodic on "Stoned Bird", "The Monk", and "The Journey Home." Like the patience of a saint, Yaron, delivers a solid foundation for the music to build and grow upon. Check out Yaron's site at MySpace.

Not to be missed is the highly spirited fifth track, "Alone", which features soloing from the entire band, ending with an especially tasty bit of drumming between Asaf and guest percussionist, Adriano Adewale.

All in all, THE MONK delivers beyond expectations. It is an album by an ingenious composer and drummer who carries the listener into new and exciting musical heights! It's definitely not for the meek. This CD has balls, yet it is also very quiet and thought provoking. It's bold music coming from a higher plane and from a drummer's perspective, it is a major slice of heaven.

Thanks Asaf, you have learned well from your Masters and are definitely walking the path of an inspired Monk of Rhythm!

Highly recommended with 5 stars.

Reviewed by John Prichard

ejazz news review, September 2008

This recording marks the triumphant debut of the Asaf Sirkis Trio, enabling the Israeli-born London-resident drummer to step out of the shadow of compatriot saxophonist Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble. Joined by guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos and electric bassist Yaron Stavi, ace drummer Sirkis stretches out and unveils his influences: Guitarist Larry Coryell comes to mind in the roiling rhythms of "Stoned Bird", while Allan Holdsworth's imprimatur is firmly stamped in the mellow melodicism of "Without A Story".

That said, Sirkis (who wrote all but one of the CD's eight tunes) reveals himself as an intelligent and assuredly unconventional composer. Among The Monk's highlights are the spooky textures of guest musician Gary Husband's keyboards on "The Dream" and Spiliotopoulos's delicate dynamics on "The Journey Home".

Reviewed by John Stevenson

Another All About Jazz Review, October 2008

One thing that has perhaps been understated in some quarters when considering drummer Asaf Sirkis' recordings as a leader is just how lyrical and understated his music tends to be. The Inner Noise recordings, which aligned drums and guitar with church organ, drew almost as much attention for the unorthodox nature of the trio as they did for the music itself, which is as subtle as it is expansive. It is also quietly melodic and vaguely uneasy at the same time. On The Monk, an album of shades and contours, these same qualities are much to the fore.

The album opener, "Stoned Bird," revolves around simple, melodic guitar chords and Sirkis' animated drumming, which is always hugely impressive, yet in no way

overbearing. There's plenty of space for guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos and guest keyboardist Gary Husband to solo before the song closes with a very lyrical, measured contribution from bassist Yaron Stavi. Both Spiliotopoulos and Husband play within themselves, but with an edge that lends the tune a slightly dark tone. Husband's playing, here, on the title track and "Dream," owes a debt to the late Austrian keyboard maestro, Joe Zawinul.

On "The Bridge," Husband takes to the piano, revealing an almost classical deftness of touch and a wonderful ear for melody. At just under two minutes it is a lovely miniature which acts as a kind of pause at about the half-way point on the album.

"Without a Story" starts with a moody guitar voicing, gradually giving way to a King Crimson-esque improvisation, an impression heightened by Spiliotopoulos' Fripp-like sustain, rumbling bass, and by Sirkis' cat-o'-nine-tails stick work. His rolls, alternately crashing and sighing cymbals—a near constant characteristic of his style—and use of triangles and bells, sound like drummer Bill Bruford and percussionist Jamie Muir of Crimson fame rolled into one. Sirkis' long-term employer, saxophonist Gilad Atzmon, has described Sirkis as the best drummer in the world, and without wishing to kick off a pointless debate, suffice it to say there are occasions, when listening to his playing, where it sounds like he must have a third hand.

On the nostalgic "Alone," Sirkis is indeed lent an additional hand by percussionist Adriano Adewale, whose unobtrusive touch on congas and shakers add to a song which highlights the talent of Spiliotopoulos and Stavi, who both take impressive, carefully weighted solos. There's an almost serene air to many of the tunes—"End of the Circle" and the somewhat blue and sweetly melancholic "The Journey Home" in particular. But there are also timely injections of adrenalin, as on the album highlight "Dream"—a deceptively simple yet powerful track where Spiliotopoulos lets go a little on guitar, encouraged by the bustling stick work of the leader.

Sirkis's compositions, like his creative, elegant drumming, are inviting and challenging. The contrasting textures and moods slide in and out of one another seamlessly. The result is a pleasingly deceptive and quite distinctive listening experience.

Reviewed by Ian Patterson

Jazz.com track of the day review

TRACK: STONED BIRD, RATING: 90/100

I talk to a lot of jazz critics. Some of them are a bit older. Well, they are my age. But a lot of them are disillusioned. They don't believe there is any good jazz being made anymore. They seem stuck in the past to me. They need to open their minds a bit. Well, that's not our problem. Let's move on.

The Asaf Sirkis Trio (abetted here by special guest keyboardist Gary Husband) is damned good, and play exciting music that falls somewhere between the rungs of progressive jazz and fusion. The band is heavy on distinctive arpeggios, spatial anomalies and interesting melodies. I wouldn't call this a jam band because its product is jazzier. But that spirit of following a groove does seem to live in the music.

"Stoned Bird" begins with a circular arpeggio punctuated by some well-placed strikes from drummer and leader Sirkis. The tune settles down to become a reflective soundscape. Bassist Yaron Stavi plays a pointed solo. Guitarist Spiliotopoulos (promise me, Tassos, you will shorten your surname when you hit it big!) adds some cutting blues lines as Sirkis kicks ass behind him. Spiliotopoulos then goes insane playing through a ring-modulator. This is a very ugly sound. But when used right, it can be quite dramatic. The song fades away ready to be listened to again with a touch of the replay button.

Reviewed by Walter Kolosky

Jazz.com track of the day review

TRACK: DREAM, RATING: 90/100

A hypnotic note cycle introduces the number. You enter into a trance. Special guest keyboardist Gary Husband's synthesizer impersonates a flute being played under water. He is the pied piper of the technological age. An angular electric guitar solo follows. I'd mention the guitar player's name, but I only have a few minutes and there are too many letters to type. You can check out his name in the personnel credits above. At any rate, he prepares you for Asaf Sirkis's drum solo. I would say Sirkis is influenced by Tony Williams. His impressive turn is interrupted by a reappearance the opening note cycle. It is a reassuring if slightly uncomfortable feeling, as if we are going down a drain. The Asaf Sirkis Trio plays some rather enigmatic music. They should be watched very closely.

Reviewed by Walter Kolosky

Drummer Magazine review, **Four stars, October 2008**

With the opening track reminiscent of the fusion tracks of Vinnie's solo album and with Gary Husband as a special guest, this is modern fusion is at. Dynamic and 'out there' but at the same time not too far, the solos are musical as opposed to being the chops fest that this type of music sometimes attracts. The sine wave type pads now sound dated and it would have been great to hear more of the unusual sounds such as the Dulcimer on the track 'Dream'.

Reviewed by James Hester

Abstract Logix web site review, Oct 2008

If there were a 21st century band that most represents the influences of the legendary fusion group Mahavishnu Orchestra – the Asaf Sirkis Trio would be it. Interestingly, you can hear all four of the very different Mahavishnu bands in the trio's music. There are the grand off-kilter arpeggios of the original Mahavishnu. There are the long-form sensibilities of the second Mahavishnu as evidenced in the title cut. The roughness of the technologically-driven Mahavishnu quartet band that featured John McLaughlin, Narada Michael Walden, Stu Goldberg and Ralphie Armstrong can be heard in the opening cut "Stoned Bird." Guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos even evokes McLaughlin's ring-tone sound while Gary Husband captures some of the spirit of Goldberg's synthesizer forays. The 1980's comeback Mahavishnu band is even evoked in the playing of bassist Yaron Stavi, who sounds at times an awful lot like Mahavishnu's Jonas Hellborg.

Music is a comparative business. So, it is always helpful to point out influences and similarities so the listener can determine if this is music that he or she wants to listen to. But it is also very important to state that the band itself sounds very different from the Mahavishnu Orchestra. Much of the music sounds nothing like them at all. For starters the band is less inclined to get involved in any riff fests. The music at times is more spatial and prone to dissonance. The trio is not afraid to slow the RPMs down from time to time and play straight-ahead. But the influences are still heard.

Drummer, composer and leader Sirkis is quite adept behind the drum kit. There is a little Tony Williams and Narada Michael Walden in his strokes. (Yes the comparisons are necessary.) Throughout the album he also is proven to be an inventive composer. Guitarist Spiliotopoulos can shred. But he also offers plenty of fantastic jazz mainstream chops. Bassist Stavi is given the opportunity to introduce several of the tunes. He develops some low-down themes that travel up from your heels to your shoulder blades. They are muscular excursions – but beautiful.

The cuts on the album are all quite satisfying. But you should pay extra attention to "Stoned Bird" and "The Dream." Also of note is the generosity of the leader allowing for a beautiful solo piano piece from Goldberg entitled "The Bridge" which quite literally acts as a bridge between highly electric cuts.

The music on *The Monk* is 21st century fusion and progressive jazz presented in an absorbing and engaging way.

Reviewed by Abstract Logix

All About Jazz interview with Asaf by Ian Patterson

The Endless Realm - published: September 30, 2008

Since arriving in London from Israel at the end of the end of the '90s, Asaf Sirkis has earned a reputation as one of the world's premier drummers. His scintillating stick work has sparked saxophonist Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble since its inception, as well as coloring the projects of saxophonist Tim Garland in recent years.

*Yet this sensitive, cerebral drummer, who has drawn favorable comparison to legends Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette, is not easy to pigeonhole. His own projects, particularly *The Inner Noise* church-organ/guitar/drums trio, are as creative as they are perhaps unusual, and Mark Sirkis as an original creative force. As at home in the jazz idiom as he is in a traditional Middle Eastern one, Sirkis' new trio of guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos and bassist Yaron Stavi charts new territories on *The Monk* (SAM, 2008). Lyrical, subtle music, underpinned and shaped by Sirkis' searching drumming, it is an utterly distinctive listening experience.*

All About Jazz: Who is The Monk?

Asaf Sirkis: For me, being a musician has always been a little bit like being a monk. It's something spiritual I think.

AAJ: *Do you mean that music is like a calling to you?*

AS: *No, I don't think it's a calling. It's definitely something that I always wanted to do. From a very early age I realized that was what I am going to do. Music for me is a window onto another realm. It gives me legitimacy to be who I really am. When you are there, you feel at home, but at home not in a sense of a place or a place in time, in a sense of something much more familiar than that even.*

AAJ: *Tell us a little about the writing process for this album.*

AS: *I had tendonitis for a period of time two years ago and I stopped playing for a while. It was very difficult for me because my whole life was built around my occupation as a musician and my love for music. I couldn't play, but I could write and I wrote the music for *The Monk* and also *The Song Within*, (SAM, 2007) which is my favorite album with my other band, *The Inner Noise*.*

When I write music I am trying to concentrate on not interfering with it. What I do basically is I improvise and record myself. Improvising, and not worrying about anything that needs to come out as a tune. If I have a great idea and need to develop it, well, I don't develop anything. I improvise and then edit. Of course 99 percent of my improvisation I don't use. So I'm not really a composer, I am an improviser and an editor of my improvisations. That's what I do.

AAJ: *The music on *The Monk* is quite minimal. Was that your concept from the outset?*

AS: *Again, when I write music I do not have any concept or any idea. If anything, if I have an idea about writing music I would stop writing music. I've said this before, but to me music starts when ideas finish. I try to write music as if it is a blank page and not to come with any ideas. If you try to do it, there is someone who is trying to do it. [laughs] It's either there or not. That is why I improvise so much because basically I am waiting for that second, for that shift to happen, and when it happens the music comes out.*

AAJ: *There's a slightly dark, edgy feel to a lot of the music on *The Monk* which reminds me, particularly in the guitar chords, of guitarist John McLaughlin's playing in the first *Mahavishnu Orchestra*. Is that a fair comparison?*

AS: *Yeah, definitely the music I am playing is colored by that: John McLaughlin, (guitarist) Allan Holdsworth and some of the prog-rock bands. I was really fascinated by the *Mahavishnu Orchestra*, and Allan Holdsworth, the *I.O.U* album. (Restless Records, 1985) This music basically changed my life.*

AAJ: *Drummer/keyboardist Gary Husband guests on the album, and brings some lovely playing, particularly on "*The Monk*" and "*Dream*," playing which is quite Joe Zawinul-like. Could you tell us a little about your relationship with Gary Husband?*

AS: *Gary is a good friend. He's one of the greatest musicians around, and in music theory too. I've been listening to his drumming, his piano playing, his theory, for*

many years now and I have been influenced by his drumming. I met Gary in Israel when he played the Jazz on The Red Sea festival, which I played when I was living in Israel as well. I think it was '98 when he came down to the Eilat festival on the Red Sea with Allan Holdsworth, which was a really great thing for me after all those years of listening to Allan Holdsworth.

Believe it or not, I transcribed everything he played on four or five of Allan Holdsworth's albums and I gave him quite a large book when he arrived to Eilat. We had a long chat in the hotel we were both staying in. We're in touch. I play with him occasionally and we meet sometimes. It's been really exciting to get to know him as a person.

I think his contribution to the album is immense. He makes the album special. Of course the trio is a wonderful thing, but he adds another dimension to it. Although we haven't played together that much we connect in some kind of strange way. It was never an effort for me to play with him, although he's an immaculate musician. When you play with somebody at that level, usually you're in awe of the talent and the capability, but with Gary somehow it feels like home, again.

AAJ: The inclusion of the piano piece, "The Bridge," as lovely as it is, seems an odd inclusion in the context of the music of the album as a whole.

AS: Initially, I was planning Gary would play a piano introduction, just a short thing as an introduction to the piece "Dream," but he improvised in the studio and it was so beautiful I thought: "OK, I'm going to take this and make it as a separate piece." I also thought it would be great to have a sonic rest after the title track, which is quite long. I thought it would be really nice to have the piano playing after that.

AAJ: I'm interested about the photograph in the inner sleeve of the bridge in Heidelberg. Is there a story behind that photo?

AS: Definitely. When I designed the cover I was looking for an idea. I have a friend, an Israeli artist who lives in Holland, his name is Nissim Men. He's a good friend and he gave me a reproduction of one of his works. It's called "Anonymous." I was looking for an image on the Internet, and I lifted my head and there was the reproduction of one of his works [laughs]. I thought, ok, that's the one! It sparked something in my mind, and with the monk thing it's connected. There is something about being a monk, that spiritual search which is very anonymous. You stop being yourself, but in a sense you are your true self.

He also has another series of work, which is basically his impression of cities from around the world. It's like a photo-shop collage. It looks a little bit wrong when you look at it, and then when you look at it better you see so many details. There's a lot of mystery in that, and I really loved that image. It really connected to the idea of Gary Husband coming to play on the album. Somehow, and I named Gary's piece "The Bridge." Having Gary play on the album was very special and unique moment for me, and his improvised piece, that bridge, was a very important point on the album.

AAJ: The musicians on the album, bassist Yaron Stavi you have of course played with for a number of years in Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble, but tell us

something about guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos. I have to say I love his name, he sounds like a baddie from a Tin Tin movie.

AS: [laughs] I know. Tassos Spiliotopoulos. Tassos is a really great musician. I met him through Mike Outram, the guitarist on the Inner Noise CDs

AAJ: A tremendous guitarist. Mike Outram has been a real find for me.

AS: Indeed, yes. I think he's one of the best guitarists anywhere. Tassos was studying with Mike, and Mike recommended I use Tassos whenever he couldn't do a gig. I met Tassos and we had a little play, a rehearsal before one of the Inner Noise gigs, and I said to myself: this is not just the best boy of Mike, he is a bit more than that. I had in mind to do something with him for a couple of years. And we finally did this trio and I'm very happy that he's a part of it.

I and Yaron are also members of Tassos's quartet. He's also an amazing composer. We did a CD for him, Wait for Dusk (Konnex, 2006). About Yaron, of course I've known him for a few years since we've been playing with Gilad. He's also from Israel, although I didn't play with Yaron while he was in Israel. I met him in Europe and started playing with him here. We've played a tremendous amount of gigs over the years with Gilad's band. We used to play an average of 150 gigs a year with Gilad's band, so there's a very strong bond there. Like Tassos, Yaron's an amazing musician.

Musical Influences

AAJ: Does it please you that music journalists struggle to give a name to the music you make, particularly The Inner Noise project, or is it a source of annoyance?

AS: I'm not annoyed by it, neither am I happy. Of course it's nice to be unique or whatever you call it. Sound travels in me and when it hits the page it sounds in a certain way and that's what I have in my mind.

AAJ : Your music does sound refreshingly unique. Do you think this is down to the fact that you started writing your own material at a relatively early age?

AS: Well, no. I think it's hard to say why the music I write sounds the way it sounds, except for my influences and so on. I think it's because I never let anything interfere with my writing. As a drummer, I went to study with a drum tutor for many years and practiced and transcribed, and I still do.

I still practice and I still try to develop my playing, but when it comes to writing, it's a sacred thing. I don't try to touch it. I don't try to improve it, I don't try to learn more, and I don't try to write for anything. I write for nothing and music comes from nothing. It was always sacred for me, that element in music. I don't let any, how can I say, conceptual contamination enter. That sounds a bit much, maybe, but I've always been a bit extreme about that. That's why I think the music I wrote from a very early stage took its own road, and never came back. [laughs]

AAJ: *Let me take you back to Israel. Who were the important Israeli jazz figures when you were starting out?*

AS: *I've been lucky to play with some of the leading musicians in Israel. One whom I played with for some years is Albert Beger. He's a great saxophone player. Also Harold Rubin, a very interesting figure. He's a clarinet player, originally from South Africa, and he's an all-round artist. He's an architect; he's a painter, a poet, a composer, a musician, whatever. I worked with him for quite a few years when I was in Israel. Both Albert [Beger] and Harold [Rubin] were very important figures for me because I started to play with both of them when I was very young. I think I was 22 when I started to play with Harold. We did some albums together. He's quite amazing. He's in his 70s now, and he's still very active. A very energetic person.*

AAJ: *Israel has produced a steady stream of talented jazz musicians in recent years who now play outside the country. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the jazz idiom doesn't seem to have penetrated the Palestinian musical culture to the same degree. Is there a simple explanation for this?*

AS: *It's hard to say. Being in touch with some Palestinian musicians, like oud player Adel Salameh, who I recorded with when I came across to London, and others I've come across and played with, have a very, very strong musical background of their own culture. There's a beautiful tradition of Arab music, and playing with Adel Salameh, I learnt so much about that tradition. It's funny, you know here in London I learned how little I knew about it in Israel.*

AAJ : *That's not entirely surprising.*

AS: *Yeah, in Israel there is a kind of segregation, such a strong element of separation that you really don't get to understand what it's all about. When I came to London, it was a neutral ground to study a little bit of that amazing culture, that amazing music. Coming to London was for me a real eye-opener in many ways. The first thing I encountered was that I met my Palestinian neighbor, and I realized that we are talking here about people, and that was really great.*

The other thing that I realized was what identity is really all about, the extent to which people are immersed in the idea of being somebody, and what it does to them. The difficulty with identity, I realized, is that when you go too far, at a certain point you become blind. You stop to see what is going on around you. Basically, for me, identity is a dream. It's a collection of ghosts from past lives of other people. It doesn't even belong to you. To say I am Israeli, or I am a jazz drummer—it's not yours, it's somebody else's and we cling on to it and say: that's mine. It's me. That is me. The whole idea of identity was a great revelation to me here. It changed the way I think about things.

AAJ: *There's a great video on YouTube of Gilad Atzmon's Orient House Ensemble playing, I think it's "Autumn in Baghdad," with the Palestinian oud player/singer Nizzah Al-Issan, which is really very beautiful. Do you have any plans for further collaborations with Arab musicians, such as Adel Salameh?*

"Play like it's your last gig; play like it's your last day on this earth.' I have always cherished that."

AS: Not at the moment. If something like that comes along I would definitely do something with it. As far as my music is concerned, again, the music that comes out decides for me where I should put it. [laughs] If I go now and write a piece for oud and bandir, I'll play it with an oud and bandir. But if the music is for The Inner Noise or for the trio—and again, I don't write it for, that's just the way it comes out. So, no plans to collaborate, just to keep on writing music. I definitely feel that there is more to come from this new trio with Tassos and Yaron.

AAJ: You've described in previous interviews your three years of military service in Israel as a complete waste of time, but did it not inspire or provoke any reaction in you musically?

AS: Yes, it did. I think you've already mentioned it, that my music is a little bit dark. I think it might be one of the things that colored my activity as an artist. It had a tremendous effect on me. I can't ignore it really, even if I wanted to. All I wanted is to make music. In Israel there is a very strong social pressure on you to do a lot of very difficult things. It's quite extreme when you think about it, from the age of 18 to 21 you have to go and...

AAJ: Be a soldier.

AS: Exactly. The army is not a place where you learn about yourself or become mentally more mature or anything. I think that life presents us with enough challenges already. It's a killing machine. That's what an army is. Not only that, but it has a big effect on the social structure and the social behavior in Israel. And it's very difficult for someone who wants to make music, to make art, to deal with that. It was very difficult for me.

AAJ: Had you opted to be what they call a refusenik, if you had refused to do your military service, how might that have subsequently affected your career as a musician in Israel? Is there a lot of prejudice against people who refuse to do military service?

AS: There is and there isn't. Of course there is, but I know if I hadn't done my army service I would definitely be three years ahead in my musical career. A lot of musicians, or artists, a lot of people who don't want to do it, go to live somewhere else, or just don't do it. There are many ways not to do it, but I don't want to get into that. [laughs] Some of them are kosher, some of them are not. [laughs]

AAJ: I just wondered if perhaps refusing to serve later makes it difficult for musicians, or anybody, to get ahead professionally with whatever their career choice may be.

AS : It's not so much a problem in music, but if you're doing other jobs, like governmental jobs, then you have to do the army.

Inner Noise

AAJ: Let's get back to music. The Inner Noise project actually started in Israel with Adi Goldstein on organ and Amir Perleman on guitar. How did that idea for a church organ-centered trio come about?

AS: When I was in Israel I made my first album, One Step Closer, (Self Published, 1995) I had a trio then. But after recording the album, I immediately started to write new music, very different music. It was a real shift. Waking up the day after the recording session, I had the very strange feeling that I was somebody else. It was really quite eerie actually, and I started to write different music.

At that time I was listening a lot to the music of Olivier Messiaen, mainly listening to the organ works. I was absolutely obsessed with it. I would come home after a gig and I wouldn't listen to any jazz, or anything else, just Messiaen's organ works. [laughs] I was completely obsessed with that music for a long time, for two or three years. And I started to hear church organ in my head. I had a keyboard and when I wrote. I wrote church music. And I thought, "How about adding drums to it?" So, I tried it one day with Adi Goldstein, who is a very talented musician from Israel. Then we added a guitar, for the melody to come out. That is how The Inner Noise was born.

That project has been a strange one for me because it was always very difficult to gig with it. In Israel, we didn't have an organ. but we played with a specially adapted keyboard setup. The Inner Noise was a total flop in Israel, by the way. [laughs] Nobody really wanted to listen to it. I remember one gig in Israel in some kind of art center, quite a nice place with a good audience. I closed my eyes and before the first piece was finished I opened my eyes and everybody had gone, except my girlfriend at the time. [laughs] They just couldn't take it.

We did some church gigs in London and elsewhere, but it was difficult for that project to gig, because the music is so specific, and you have to find a venue with good acoustics. But we are doing some concerts here and there.

AAJ: That project was commissioned by the Arts Department of Tel Aviv City Council, and it reminds me that you receive support today for your touring from the Arts Council in England and the charitable organization Jazz Services Ltd. Could you tell us something about Jazz Services Ltd. and just how significant this support is to you and other musicians?

AS: Jazz Services is a really wonderful organization. Basically, it offers tour support for musicians in the UK, touring around the UK. It's the first time I applied for funding and I got it and it was really quite helpful. So you kind of cover the petrol expenses, the hotels and top-up the fees so they are kind of reasonable. It's really great. It's amazing that there is something like that.

Touring

AAJ: On the subject of touring, I see from your gig list that from September through to the 19th December 2008 you are playing about fifty gigs in no fewer than twelve different lineups. Do you ever look up from your drum set and think, "Oh it's these guys tonight!"

AS : *[laughs]* No, I've got quite a nice setup with a few bands that I play with. Most of these bands, like Gilad Atzmon, or *[guitarist]* Nicolas Meier or *[saxophonist]* Tim Garland's band, are bands that I've played with for a long time. We've made a lot of CDs together and done a lot of tours together. I love it when things integrate, musically crystallize in a certain voice.

I've been working with some great people here for a long time and I'm really glad about this. I like to keep busy, I like to play all the time, and I like to go out there. I make my living playing gigs, which I always wanted to do. It's what I dreamed about when I lived in Israel. It is a dream come true for me.

AAJ: *Of all these gigs, and I counted 50, only five of them are the trio with Yaron and Tassos to promote The Monk. Why so few gigs to promote this album?*

AS: *It's because of a few reasons. One is because of my history as a solo artist. A lot of promoters are still not so sure they want to book me because they are a little bit afraid of the music, a little bit afraid of what I'm doing. When I came out with the first Inner Noise record, people were in shock and didn't know what to think about it at all. They looked at this drummer who came from Israel that played with Gilad Atzmon, a kind of Middle Eastern, jazz-fusion thing, *[laughs]* and with Adel Salameh, traditional Arabic music. So they expected it to have at least a world flavor, but it had nothing of that. Instead they got gothic jazz. *[laughs]**

Many people in the industry here were put off by that. I'm quite sure of that. So it's still a little bit of a struggle to get gigs. The second reason is just that I am extremely busy playing a lot of gigs. It's hard to find time in my schedule to do gigs or time where I can hustle for them. You need to be around to do it.

Collaborators

AAJ: *When you came to London in '99 you hooked up with Gilad Atzmon fairly soon after, and you've been playing with him ever since in the Orient House Ensemble. He's obviously a tremendous musician, and he's also a courageously outspoken advocate of Palestinians' rights to a state, or a shared state. Does being in his band make it problematic for you to return to Israel and to gig there?*

AS: *No. For me it's not a problem to go to Israel. I go to Israel every year to see my family. I don't have any problems. Most of the people don't have a problem with me. I never encountered any kind of hostility. If I were Gilad himself, maybe I would be careful. *[laughs]**

AAJ: *I was really quite struck by Gilad Atzmon's notes on the inner sleeve of Refuge (ENJA, 2007), where he says that he admits, or he recognizes, that he had been mistaken to think that music could be a successful messenger of peace in uniting, or reuniting, feuding peoples. Rather it is not the messenger, but the message itself. Would you care to comment on that?*

AS: *That's something that I've been talking about with Gilad for many years now. I have a very different take on the subject of what is going on in the Middle East, in that*

I really don't think, and I have never thought that music can change anything for people that can't be changed. If the change is already happening within you, then the music will be only a little trigger for that change to be a more inspired change. I really think there is nothing I can do to harm or to help. It might sound a bit harsh, but I really do feel that way. I do agree that there is nothing we can do to help except to inspire and to be inspired.

AAJ: I feel that the statement by Gilad, about music being not the messenger but the message, is one of the most beautiful statements ever made about music.

AS: Yes, really. Gilad is a very profound person .in that sense.

AAJ: As well as Gilad, you play and have played with another of the really great figures in jazz today, saxophonist Tim Garland. Can you compare Gilad and Tim's approach to making music? What have you learned from playing with them?

AS: Tim is a very different figure, I think. He's a very different kind of musician, and kind of person. Extremely different I would say. I find Tim an extremely inspiring person and musician, and mainly as a composer. In fact, the first tune on the album, "Stoned Bird," was kind of inspired by him in a way, by his energy and by his writing.

Tim is a tremendous composer. What really strikes me about Tim is that he's a real dreamer. If he gets up in the morning and thinks that he hears in his head a piece of music for a jazz trio and the London Symphony orchestra, the day after it will happen. He just makes his dreams come true. He is always full of new ideas, new things which he eventually does. It's not like he just pokes away at it.

Gilad is a very different person. He's more into playing with a band than playing with a project. The band has existed for many years now. He's more of a player/personality/entertainer. If you haven't seen him live, he's an immaculate entertainer. Really very sensitive, and quite amazing. Yes, Gilad and Tim are very different. You know, Tim hasn't got any political aspiration of any kind, or maybe he has but it's not in the music.

AAJ: To my ears you use the cymbals a lot. They are a fairly constant voice in your music. Is there a particular drummer whose cymbal work has influenced you?

AS: Jack DeJohnette was somebody who influenced me a lot, and he's got quite an amazing cymbal thing going on. The thing that really made me play that way is: the drums have very little sustain. It's like, "tomp!" And I've always wanted longer notes to be heard. The cymbals give that longer note. That relates a lot to the organ, for me. The organ can also have a very long sustain, unlike the piano, the harp or even the guitar. With an organ, you can sustain as long as you want. The length of the note was one of the things I really liked about it.

AAJ: The great [drummer] Roy Haynes described drumming as like riding a horse, letting the reins out a little bit, pulling them in, keeping it tight but loose. How would you describe drumming?

AS: *I think the role of the drummer is a very psychological role. A drummer can provide a sense of spirit, a positive, complimentary spirit in the music that can uplift the music to another level, the way [drummer] Elvin Jones plays. He just lifts the spirit. If you listen to Roy Haynes playing with [saxophonist] John Coltrane. There's a lot of cymbal going on there, all the time. The cymbal is like the spirit, it's like the sea, it's like water the way it surrounds you with a positive environment in a sense*

Sun Ra

AAJ: *You've cited Olivier Messiaen as an influence, particularly on The Inner Noise project. I'm interested to know about your relationship to [pianist/bandleader] Sun Ra, whom you quote on the inner sleeve of We Are Falling.*

AS: *I've been into Sun Ra's music, and a lot into his writing as well. I was always intrigued by his writing and poems and so on. The thing I like about that quotation is that it speaks about non-identity, about what it really is. We live our life, we are "something" and we go from point A to B. We've got a future and we've got a past and so on. Yet in a sense, all we are doing is just falling into a bottomless pit. [laughs] It sounds a bit ...*

AAJ: *Nihilistic?*

AS: *Maybe nihilistic, not so positive. But I do really feel that we do everything in our life to confirm something that doesn't actually exist. We are basically just falling and falling into a vast hole. [laughs]*

AAJ: *I'd better review my insurance policy. Have you seen the Sun Ra movie, the first one, from 30 years ago or so? There's this great scene where he walks into what looks like a Harlem youth center, where these young kids are shooting pool and hanging out, and he's dressed in his silver robe and hat and so on and says, "Greetings black youth of the planet earth. I am Sun Ra, ambassador from the intergalactic regions of the council of outer space." It's quite an entrance, and one teenager looks at him and responds, "Why are your shoes so big?" I thought that kind of summed up the incomprehension that surrounds him.*

AS: *[laughs] I've got the movie. The striking quotation is a scene when one of the kids asks him: "How do we know you're for real?" And he answers, "How do you know I'm for real? I'm not real. I am just like you." [laughs] He was quite a genius.*

AAJ: *Another video from YouTube, and it's from a concert with you, Yaron and Tassos in a Romanian restaurant in London...*

AS: *[laughs] Yeah, that's right.*

AAJ: *You guys are playing your asses off to what looks like about ten people in the audience. This reminded me of a comment saxophonist Steve Marcus made to me a few years back at a very poorly attended gig. I felt sorry for the guy for the low turnout, and I asked him how it felt to play such a low-key gig. He said, "There's no such thing as a low-key gig." Can you relate to that comment at all?*

AS: Sure. I am very passionate about music. Harold Rubin once said to me when I was very young: "Play like it's your last gig. Play like it's your last day on this earth." I have always cherished that. It is very important for me, and I am very excited about playing, wherever I'm playing, with whoever I'm playing.
Ian Patterson

Jazzwise review/interview (with Andy Robson)

Hot foot from his inspirational times with Larry Coryell's power trio, Sirkis has created his own largely guitar driven threesome with long time compatriot Stavi from the Orient House ensemble (but here on electric bass) and the relative newcomer Spiliotopoulos. The guitar man was a student of Mike Outram's at Trinity and Outram of course played guitar in Sirkis' extraordinary inner noise outfit. The trio eschews the deep Messiaen influences (and the church organ!) that were signature sounds of Inner Noise and is in many respects less ambitious in scope. On the other hand the trio is tighter, more sure-footed in its aims, more chamber-like in mood, and less prone to prolix moments of Inner Noise.

Spiliotopoulos in particular plays with lyrical, tender touch, avoiding effects or fleet-fingered showboating. Indeed he's often content with simple but moving arpeggios, resides contentedly within mid register and privileges taste and feeling over technical razzmatazz. And more to the point it works, in a late John Abercrombie kind of a way. Stavi likewise couldn't be further from Jeff Berlin, but between the three of them they create a rain forest rich sound world, teasing, giving, warm-hearted and generous. Husband's keyboards are especially welcome. Not surprisingly it can all come over as exceedingly Holdsworthian (notably 'Dream'), but its cheering how far Sirkis the writer can bear witness to his influences without slavishly copying them. Sirkis continues to be not only an outstanding drum practitioner, but his writing, enigmatic and mysterious, is equally fascinating in its elusive melancholy.

Jazzwise talks to Asaf Sirkis about his album

Why The Monk?

I find a lot of similarity between the way a monk lives and the Jazz musician. Not that I'm a monk! But for me monk symbolizes great devotion to something that's not material.

And the music was born from personal hardship?

Yes, this is very personal to me, this music. Some two years ago I had to stop playing because of tendonitis problem in my shoulder. It was the first time since being 12 I was separated from my drums. I had real concerns that I wouldn't be able play again. So that's when I composed the music for The Monk and also The Song Within for the Inner Noise.

But The Monk is very different album from The Song Within, as indeed the trio is different from The Inner Noise?

Sonically they are very different - The trio obviously doesn't have a church organ, but much of the music of not dissimilar. I try not to think of a 'concept' ... it is very sacred for me: I've never studied harmony or the piano - music comes from 'nowhere', not 'somewhere'. When it needs to come out it does...it is a spiritual experience for me.

And Larry Coryell has influenced the trio?

Playing with Larry really inspired me to have this trio. It brought me back so much of the fusion and rock music I loved while growing up in Israel. It was Gary Husband who recommended me when he couldn't make the gig with Larry. I've followed his (Husband's) career since Allan Holdsworth days, listening to him in the heat of Israel. When you admire someone like that for so long, and now I can bring him into my zone, that's really amazing.

You're very at home with the brit scene now?

It's got so exciting here over the last three years. There's still no money and less places to play: it's like Israel was. There's no support so you have to have a strong vision to make it. But the people coming through that I've been lucky enough to play with, Gwilym Simcock, Kit Downes, are great, as well as guys like Gilad (Atzmon) and Tim (Garland). You go for a jam at Charlie Wright's these days and you get your arse. I leave there thinking I'd better go home and practice.

Andy Robson

DRUMMER Magazine interview, September 2008 (Issue 130)

The Final Word

BBC award-winner Asaf Sirkis blends Middle-Eastern influences into his jazz playing. Oh, and probably a bit of Jackie Mason too...

the debut album by my new group The Asaf Sirkis Trio. It's an electric bass-electric guitar-drums trio and we play a mixture of hard rock-ish improvisations and jazzy ballads. It's been really exciting working with that band. My other band, The Inner Noise, is a rather unusual combination of instruments: church organ, guitar and drums – kind of like an organ trio but with a twist. I love that band. We make a big sound and it's only three of us. We have three CDs out in all.

Have you any tours coming up in the UK?

I'm going to be touring with my new trio in the UK in November for the release of our new CD, and next spring in the UK and Europe. It's the first time I've really started to get more gigs with my own project, so I'm looking forward for that.

What are you listening to at the moment?

South Indian music. I'm seriously into Thavil drumming and the Nathaswaram. Plus Yemenite Music, as I grew up in Israel in a Yemenite area.

Most inspiring album in your collection?

Atavachron by Allan Holdsworth. I got to know that album when I was 17 and it really blew my mind. I transcribed every note of the drums on that album, immaculately played by Gary Husband, Tony Williams and Chad Wackerman. It's a very significant album for me. It influenced my playing, my writing and my development as musician.

Favourite drum groove?

I love Bernard Purdie grooves. Anything he plays is killer!

Song do you most wish you'd played on?

'Looking Glass' by Allan Holdsworth. It's such a drummer's feature tune!

Favourite current drummer?

Jack DeJohnette, as he's a real natural and spiritual musician. Gary Husband because I like his focus and spirit.

Main inspiration to take up drumming?

When I was around 11, I started to look for a way to express myself. I wasn't very good at school and I wasn't great with girls either, so that probably affected things. At first I wanted to play electric bass, but there were no bass teachers where I grew up in a small town in Israel. So the next best thing was the drums. I loved the physical side of it and started taking lessons – and soon fell in love with it. Ringo Starr was my first inspiration.

What have been your career highlights?

Playing with Larry Coryell's trio – I started playing with Larry a few years ago. When bassist Jeff Berlin joined us for a tour in Germany this year, it was a real treat as I grew up on Larry and Jeff's playing. Winning the BBC jazz award a few years back with Gilad Atzmon's band was also a unique experience. We only played there for seven minutes, but they were seven minutes to remember...

What is your current set-up?

I change my set-up every now and again, though at the moment I'm trying to go for one that allows natural movement avoiding imbalanced sitting and placing the ride cymbal in a comfortable place. I like to think of the drums as being a melodic instrument. I tune them so they produce a pitched note rather than a mass of sound. I've recently been using a mix of some old and new Gretsch drums: 20 x 16" bass drum; 12 x 8" tom; 15 x 14" floor tom; 18 x 16" floor tom; 14 x 5.5" wood snare; and a Rogers 14 x 6.5" metal snare on the side, near the hi-hats. I tune it really low and use it more like a tom. It sounds almost like a 13" tom. For cymbals I use Istanbul Agop: 20" Turk Ride; 24" Ride; 17" Crash; 15" hi-hats; and some really nice bells, 6" and 8".

What is the band's current project?

I'm just about to release The Monk The Asaf Sirkis Trio. It's an electric bass-electric guitar-drums trio and we play a mixture of hard rock-ish improvisations and jazzy ballads. It's been really exciting working with that band. My other band, The Inner Noise, is a rather unusual combination of instruments: church organ, guitar and drums – kind of like an organ trio but with a twist. I love that band. We make a big sound and it's only three of us. We have three CDs out in all.

Favourite tour bus DVD?

The Ultimate Jew by Jackie Mason and some Israeli comedians you probably don't know.

Which sticks do you use and why?

I use Vic Firth SD10 swingers for the quiet stuff. I get the best sound out of my cymbals with them. I'll use SD9 drivers for when I have to go for it – I get a bigger sound and they feel really good. Do you have a hole in the front head of your bass drum?

Yes, first time since a long time. My new Gretsch bass drum is a 20 x 16" and it'll be too loud without a hole. I use very little muffling on the bass drum. I actually bought one of these 'cut it yourself' hole kits. It was very expensive and I couldn't help getting a bit philosophical about the idea of buying a hole. Is nothingness a commodity?

Who would you most like to play with?

Allan Holdsworth. That'd be a dream come true.

CD or vinyl?

CD.

iPod or CD?

CD. I'll go for iPod soon.

Curry or kebab?

Kebab, Turkish-style. Or Greek souvlaki, please.

Best thing about touring?

Music, music, music.

Worst thing about touring?

Sleep deprivation.

Drummer

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<http://www.asafsirkis.co.uk>

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