

## CULTURE

**Alon Nechushtan: Jazz music with Israeli roots** by [KirkSilsbee](#) July 6th 2014



The history of jazz is rife with junctures where the music received an infusion of creative innovation from the far-flung provinces: Louis Armstrong turned Chicago on its ear in the 1920s; the Count Basie Orchestra and Charlie Parker hit New York in 1936 and 1941, respectively; and Ornette Coleman left Los Angeles to “change the century” at New York’s Five Spot in 1959.

In the last decade, an influx of Israeli musicians has been invigorating New York City and the larger American jazz sphere. They include saxophonists Eli Degibri, Danny Zamir and Ori Kaplan; violinist Miri Ben-Ari; guitarist Roni Ben-Hur; bassist Omer Avital; sibling reed players Anat and Yuval Cohen; their brother, trumpeter Avishai; and bassist Avishai Cohen (no relation). Are you getting all this down?

Add the name of pianist and composer Alon Nechushtan to that list. The 39-year-old Tel Aviv native has released a half-dozen beautifully vital recordings since he immigrated to New York a decade ago. The newest album, “Venture Bound,” is part of the push that brings him to the West Coast for his first visit. Nechushtan’s quartet will be on display for three nights: July 10 at the Levantine Cultural Center in Los Angeles, July 11 at Vitello’s in Studio City and July 12 at Curve Straight Space in Los Angeles. His recordings usually feature small band configurations,

and that can be a bit misleading. Nechushtan is a composer who has equal parts classical music and jazz under his fingers, and he's written a fair amount of music for orchestras.

The elements that roil around in Nechushtan's musical stew account for much of its savory appeal. Rollicking jazz that can dance as easily as it can offer meditative interludes collides with klezmer's minor-scale abandon or a sonata-like piano. Gypsy strains and Middle Eastern modes foment in the same pot. The offset metric complexity of "The Traveler" (from the 2011 "Words Beyond" album) further loosens Thelonious Monk's treatise on rhythmic displacement, "Evidence." Or does it nod to Bartok's folksy modernism as well?

Nechushtan's studies at the New England Conservatory of Music brought him into contact with strong musical presences: pianists Ran Blake, Paul Bley, Danilo Perez and Fred Hersch. Hankus Netsky, leader of the Klezmer Conservatory Band, inveighed upon Nechushtan to seriously address klezmer.

Pausing before the start of his current tour, Nechushtan took time to speak by phone from Manhattan about his music.

"I owe Hankus a lot," Nechushtan said. "He got me to play in klezmer ensembles; I didn't know that music before that because we didn't hear it much in Israel."

"Ran Blake is a real theoretician," he continued. "He's thought a lot about improvisational piano. Paul Bley is almost shockingly nonacademic, but we had some great talks. Danilo exposed me to new rhythms and options of composing in the moment. And," he added with enthusiasm, "I love his sense of humor! Humor is very important: If music is too self-important, it loses something for me.

"Jewish music has humor and sadness at the same time," Nechushtan clarified. The son of an Uzbek mother and a Hungarian father, Nechushtan heard a lot of the Soviet postmodern composers, and he even speaks a little Russian. Igor Stravinsky's music is a continuing source of enjoyment as well. Nechushtan holds that in contemporary music, "Everything is plural in a way. It definitely is a global village."

So, is Nechushtan a composer who plays piano, or a pianist who composes? He paused before answering. "That's a heavy question," he conceded. "I started as a composer before I went onstage. Before that, I gave my music to other performers; I had written some classical guitar pieces and chamber works before playing my music publicly. If I can't be up there, that's fine with me; a lot of my music is best understood in performance.

"I don't have to be inside the music," he continues. "In fact, it's an important part of the process for me to see how it's interpreted by conductors or big bands. It's good to step outside yourself to see how other people hear your music."

Nechushtan said the concept of dance is important to his music. "I like the joy and the humor of klezmer, which is balanced by the minor-scale sadness. Bartok said if there's no motion, then there's no emotion. The joy in the music is to move you to dance — it's very hard to stay still when you're listening to a *horah!*"