



Players ›

ALON NECHUSHTAN

Combining Worlds

Recently, during his first West Coast tour, pianist Alon Nechushtan perched at the piano at Los Angeles' intimate nightclub Vitello's on a Friday night. The crowd was restless, but he quickly won them over. With unyielding assurance, he led his pick-up band through an extended set that touched upon blues, modal standards and closed with a swinging touch of klezmer propelled by drummer Chris Wabich's tambourine and Nechushtan's own percussive rattle. The Israeli-born musician consistently demonstrated his vast skill-set with confidence and humor.

It was the pen that brought him to the United States as a classical composition major at Boston's New England Conservatory. Today, more than a decade later, Nechushtan is part of a growing circle of jazz musicians bridging the musical realities of New York and Israel.

Nechushtan credits saxophonist Arnie Lawrence (1938–2005), a former *Tonight Show* band contributor and the founder of the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York, with expanding his and many other Israeli kids' horizons. In 1997, the saxophonist moved to Jerusalem and founded the International Center for Creative Music, where an impressionable young Nechushtan took in the sounds of swing. "He played a large role," Nechushtan said. "He's kind of a crusader in that manner. I remember hanging out with him and learning about jazz. He was very patient."

Jazz's presence in Israel, relative to the history of the genre, is a fairly new phenomenon. The rise

of internationally acclaimed artists like guitarist Roni Ben-Hur, violinist Miri Ben-Ari and the Cohen siblings (Anat, Avishai, Yuval) has helped broaden the appeal of swing in Israel, where jazz is now part of the sonic landscape.

The pianist is levelheaded when discussing the current state of the Middle East. He diplomatically avoids any comment on the summer's unrest, focusing solely on the sounds coming from the stage and his unrelenting desire to return. Prior to his gig at Vitello's, he shared a bill with the mighty Los Angeles-based Palestinian saxophonist Zane Musa. The two got along so well that Musa joined in the following night to blast through Nechushtan's newest material. Nechushtan is happy to welcome as many voices to his compositions as he can.

"From a very early age, I wrote for classical ensembles but I always wanted to write a big band chart," Nechushtan said. "Sometimes I keep the worlds separate. Sometimes I combine them. I went to school fascinated by Third Stream, classical and jazz. You have to go from lead sheets to incredibly descriptive music. When you work with a small combo, they are an integral part of making that music [come] alive. You don't have to have every gesture written down. My music is descriptive when it is a combo—not as much as when it is written down—but my creative process is the same."

As an undergraduate, Nechushtan began his jazz studies in earnest, taking up with pianists Danilo Pérez and Fred Hersch. "They were great

teachers, but I wanted to study with New Yorkers like Uri Caine and Henry Threadgill. My idea was to come to New York and try. I didn't know that I would love it and stay."

His new album, *Venture Bound* (Enja), is an upbeat homage to that decision to stay. (He has lived in New York City for the last 10 years.) A small ensemble of New York-based heavy hitters help deliver his message. The dual tenor saxophone onslaught of Donny McCaslin and John Ellis ensures a breathless display of honking soul, while drummer Adam Cruz can dance like raindrops or smash like polyrhythmic thunder. The entirely original set includes "The Gratitude Suite," which splashes Eastern European modes over tight harmonies aided by trumpeter Duane Eubanks, while "Haunted Blues" features the pianist's hard-bop swagger encircling the upper register. The engaging, accessible album is squarely focused in the pocket with the occasional sprinkle of ancient modes to reflect the pianist's diverse background.

Undeterred by the turmoil in his homeland, Nechushtan will continue to tour there. While he and his family have settled in New York, the lure of his roots is irresistible. "It's a matter of playing to people who want to go out and hear music," Nechushtan said. "If they are depressed and bombs are falling overhead, it's a challenge of a different kind. It's not a musical challenge. It starts to be a safety challenge. But I will be there no matter what."

—Sean J. O'Connell