

Alon Nechushtan to play Summer Jazz Stroll

by Mary Wade Burnside LIFESTYLES EDITOR | Posted: Sunday, June 14, 2015 12:00 am



CLARKSBURG — Jazz pianist Alon Nechushtan was vacationing back home in Tel Aviv, Israel, last August when he decided to scour the Internet for events he would like to play.

He came upon the West Virginia Jazz Society, which books concerts in and around Clarksburg, and decided to give organizer Eric Spelsberg a call.

“A lot of friends were touring at the time, and West Virginia was a place I hadn’t been yet,” Nechushtan said during a telephone interview from his home in New York City.

“It looks very interesting and very manageable. New York to West Virginia is not a very big commute. I thought, ‘It’s been on my radar for a while, to tour and venture out to these areas. Why don’t I look into it?’”

So Nechushtan and his jazz quartet will be one of seven acts appearing at five locations during the 2015 West Virginia Jazz Society’s Summer Jazz Stroll, which will take place beginning at 6:30 p.m. Friday.

Nechushtan’s quartet will be playing three hour-long sets at Washington Square beginning at 8 p.m. At that venue, Cappellini Quartet will kick things off at 6:30 p.m.

Other acts and venues during the Summer Jazz Stroll will be the Bob Thompson Trio beginning at 6:30 p.m. at the Fifth Floor Lounge, the Davin Seamon Band beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Kelly’s Irish Pub, The Mendoza Brothers opening at 6:30 p.m. and then the Lee Covington Quartet playing three sets beginning at 8 p.m. at the Main Street Cafe and Robert Redd & Sharon Clark beginning at 6:30 p.m. at the Starving Artist Studio.

A graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Nechushtan is a jazz pianist and composer of traditional contemporary improvisation, a concept developed at the New England Conservatory.

The concept first was called “Third Stream” by former school president Gunther Schuller because of the idea that modern jazz music was a hybrid of other music.

“The first stream was classical and the second is jazz, and the third integrates them both,” Nechushtan said. “It’s a term he founded in the 1960s, and now it’s been changed to contemporary improvisation.”

As a composer, Nechushtan writes pieces for himself but also for others, including right now two orchestral works that will be premiered in the Philippines.

“It’s music that doesn’t have any piano, but it has improvisation, which is the foundation of jazz, and it has a more modernistic approach,” Nechushtan said. “Strings and French horn and bassoons are not the kind of instruments you find in jazz per se. When you are asking musicians to improvise or play scales that have blue notes, there are hints and melange of jazz. It’s a more modern approach to what is jazz.”

During his performance in Clarksburg, the quartet, consisting of a saxophone, bass and drums, in addition to himself, will be playing music from Nechushtan’s most recent album, “Venture Bound.”

“I like the idea of touring with that project,” he said. “I like the idea that it’s always a new venture.” Nechushtan grew up in a small town outside of Tel Aviv in a musical family. His mother is a music teacher and his father is a violinist.

“Music has been in my family from day one,” he said. “It’s part of the Russian Jewish tradition — to have the kids playing. The Jewish education really wants the kids to have some kind of musical background, so mom insisted and I spent my early years practicing classical music and looking for a creative way to express myself.”

In order to branch out into other types of music, Nechushtan and his friends would go to a used record store that allowed them to play the vinyl before purchasing it, and he ended up stocking up on jazz albums, including those by Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock.

“I would buy all kinds of records,” he said. “I have thousands of records in my house. For a few shekels, we could buy all the records we would like.”

“That was affordable and fun, and I listened to a lot of music as a teenager. The next thing is I would listen and try to play along.”

Eventually, Nechushtan decided that the New England Conservatory was the place for him, so he auditioned and won a scholarship.

“The department thought I was a really good candidate for that department,” he said.

The acceptance allowed Nechushtan to study with three important jazz pianists and composers in the contemporary improvisation field, Paul Bley, Danilo Perez and Fred Hersch.

Late last year, Hersch was nominated for a Grammy Award for his latest album, “Floating,” as was his song “You & the Night & the Music.”

After Nechushtan finished at the New England Conservatory, he decided to move to New York City, which reminds him of home.

“There is a lot happening,” he said. “Boston seemed to be a very mellow place. New York is a little more the lifestyle to what I’m close to, so that felt like a natural move.”

In addition to his Friday appearance at the Summer Jazz Stroll, Nechushtan has a busy few months planned. After West Virginia, he will be traveling to the Savassi Festival in Brazil. Then he will return home for the Red Sea Jazz Festival in Eilat, Israel.

And in September, he will take part in a centennial celebration of Billy Strayhorn, composer of “Take the A Train,” at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

“I love playing my own music, but as you probably know, running around New York I have to wear lots of hats,” Nechushtan said. “Some of the hats are as a composer, and some of the hats that I wear are as a performer and I play other compositions with joy. I try to balance being in my own ensemble and playing other pieces.”