

jazz picks

BILL BEUTTLER

The clubs are branching off from jazz a bit this week. The Regattabar has rock-guitar guru **Johnny A.** tonight, while Thursday the jazz-funk **Boston Horns** celebrate the release of "A Thousand Souls." . . . Scullers has trumpet great **Clark Terry** and his vocalist goddaughter, **Shawnn Monteiro**, wrapping up a two-night stand there tonight, with Swiss smooth-jazz **Alex Bugnon** in to play piano Thursday. . . . At Ryles, the **Red Riders** offer jump and swing tonight, followed by **Calypso Hurricane** Saturday, the **Berklee Concert Jazz Orchestra** directed by **Greg Hopkins** Tuesday, French-bred drummer **Jean-Marie Corrois** leading **Tim Miller**, **Ben Schwendener**, and **David Zox** Wednesday, and the moonlighting **Compaq Big Band** Thursday. . . . Zeitgeist Gallery hosts NEC Prep's prize-winning **Midday Quartet** Sunday, the **Midnight Shovelers** Monday, and the **Kyle Nasser Group** Tuesday.



BILL POLO/GLOBE STAFF

Benny Sharoni recorded "To Life," from "Fiddler on the Roof," for an upcoming album. He left Israel for Boston in 1986 to study at Berklee.

When Benny Sharoni plays the saxophone, it's a toast to life

By Bill Beuttler
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WALTHAM — "L'chaim," says Benny Sharoni, raising a pint glass one recent afternoon at Watch City Brewing Co., a few blocks from his home here. It's a simple Hebrew toast: "to life." But for the tenor saxophonist it has added resonance.

Sharoni moved to Boston from Israel in 1986 to study at the Berklee College of Music. Not long afterward, one of his teachers, saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi, gave him a cassette tape of Cannonball Adderley's "Fiddler on the Roof," on which the great alto saxophonist and a quintet of all-star sidemen offered exquisite hard-bop interpretations of eight songs from the popular musical.

"He knew I was from Israel and thought maybe I'd like it," says Sharoni, who grew up on a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip. "And I think for five years I just couldn't stop listening to it. I think it's some of Cannonball's best playing, and

the quintet was just unbelievable."

Topping Sharoni's list of favorite tunes from the album was "To Life," which Sharoni has now recorded for a still-in-the-works sextet album of his own. Guitarist Mike Mele, pianist Joe Barbatto, and drummer Peter Moutis from that sextet will join Sharoni at Zeitgeist Gallery in Cambridge tomorrow night, along with bassist Erik Privert. (Joe McMahon plays bass on the recording, and Barry Reis is added on trumpet.)

A sampler of "To Life" and two other high-spirited tunes from the forthcoming CD reveals Sharoni's music to have more in common with Adderley's uplifting hard bop than the experimental stuff Zeitgeist is known for. "He plays with a lot of fire," says Barbatto of Sharoni. "Con brio," as they say.

Barbatto chuckles at the unexpected aptness of the music terminology and adds, "That's definitely one of his influences: Jerry Bergonzi and his group Con

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Tenor saxophonist's mission is both musical and spiritual

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Brio back in the day."

Sharoni's path to making such music was highly unusual. His father and mother moved to Israel from Yemen and Chile, respectively, and Sharoni didn't first hear jazz until his mid-teens.

"Something happened, I don't know when, and I heard Sonny Rollins and Zoot Sims," he recalls. "Somebody had a record in Israel on the kibbutz. One of the guys from America had a record collection, and I listened to it. I was playing flute back then, classical flute, and I heard that thing and I said, 'OK, that's it. I'm done playing this. This is my new direction.' I think I was about 16, 17."

First, though, Sharoni had his mandatory three-year hitch in the Israeli army to get through. It was a particularly harrowing time to serve. Sharoni was with the troops sent to drive Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Beirut in the summer of 1982, at the height of the Lebanese Civil War, and saw a close friend killed in the fighting. He remained in Beirut during the infamous massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Christian militiamen at the refugee camps Sabra and Shatila a couple of weeks after Arafat's departure.

"I came out of that," says Sharoni of his time in Lebanon, "and thank God I'm still alive. From then on, I had a mission."

That mission seems as much spiritual as musical, perhaps in reaction to the ugliness he saw in the war. Sharoni's conversation is heavily sprinkled with earnest talk of his interest in Kabbalah, reincarnation, and other mystical ideas.

Jazz, he contends, is a particularly mystical music.

"Music is something you can't touch," Sharoni explains. "You can hear it, but you can't touch it. And you can't explain why four guys, five guys

are put together and all of a sudden there's this music that's really cooking. Everybody's doing their part, and it's very spiritual."

That's not to say Sharoni lacks a practical side. Since dropping out of Berklee after a single semester — his plan all along, he says; he knew he was too free-spirited and headstrong to have endured four years of college — Sharoni has supplemented his income from playing jazz by teaching music in Newton's public schools, performing on cruise ships, and, currently,

playing jazzed-up covers of Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan, and Aretha Franklin with his wedding band, East Groove.

He plays jazz at Zeitgeist a couple of times a month but also performs occasionally in New York, Florida, and overseas, including on annual visits to his parents. ("Tel Aviv is a much better jazz scene than Boston," he says. "There's so many little clubs there that play jazz.")

Sharoni also bought and rebuilt a ranch house in Waltham, completing the project about a year ago. "I've always had this dream of building a house for myself," he says. "I built this house

just like I play jazz. I had no plan. I came in, I gutted everything, and I started building."

This new CD of Sharoni's is his first as a leader, but he's packed a lot of life into his 45 years. All the more reason to reprise Adderley's special "Fiddler on the Roof" tune on it.

"It's my roots," Sharoni says. "And 'To Life' is such a strong word. 'L'chaim.' It's amazing. All the light that you can bring from the universe to you is in that word."



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