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Israeli-born tenor saxophonist has seen it all

By OWEN McNALLY
SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

Benny Sharoni, an Israeli-born, Boston-based tenor saxophonist, can energize even the largest, most lackluster venue with his big-toned sound and ebullient phrasing packed with intense emotion and spirituality, a vibrant hybrid of the hip and the holy.

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Perhaps that spirituality is explained in part by the harrowing experiences the kibbutz-raised musician endured in combat as a young soldier in the Israeli Army in Beirut in the summer of 1982 during the height of the Lebanese Civil War.

Sharoni saw best friends and comrades die right in front of him. And he felt the existential fears that all soldiers — except for armchair warriors who romanticize about the glories of war — experience under fire.

Acknowledging that those shattering wartime experiences helped shape his belief in the bond between art and the spiritual, Sharoni prefers to focus not on his past, but rather on his upcoming gig March 30 from 6 to 9 p.m. at West Hartford's Szechuan Tokyo.

The saxophonist/composer will serve a robust mix of modern, hard bop, ballads, Brazilian and Latin jazz at the restaurant with his working quartet featuring pianist **Kyle Aho**, bassist **Todd Baker** and drummer **Steve Langone**.

"I believe that music is the strongest form of spirituality and is absolutely an outlet for the heart, an outlet you can't find in just about anything else," Sharoni says by phone from his home that he built by himself in a Boston suburb.

"Even when playing alone in my house, I feel sometimes that I play for the universe. I play so that the universe can have a sweeter life or colors. A musician plays not just for himself or for fame, but because he has to, because that's his calling. And my calling is to bring color into the universe," he says.

His belief in the mix of the musical and the mystical, he says, has been influenced not just by the horrors he saw in Beirut, as indelible as those traumatic images are. But his embrace of jazz as both a



BENNY SHARONI

transcendent and an existential force has also been inspired by his entire life experience, which includes growing up in a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip in a home that was graced with an abundance of culture provided by his loving parents.

Besides mandatory training on the kibbutz for a trade (he became a skilled welder), young Sharoni studied classical flute. As a teenager, he toured Europe in 1978 with an Israeli music and dance troupe.

In his mid-teens Sharoni discovered the power and the glory of Sonny Rollins and the liberating energies of jazz when his mother, before returning home from a visit to New York City, brought her son a couple of Rollins albums.

Young Sharoni pored over the vinyl grooves with the intensity and devotion of a Biblical scholar studying sacred text. His mother's gifts from Manhattan — a magical American utopia in his teenage mind — were revelations.

And, of course, there was the later life-turning milestone as a young adult, when, in 1986, with his imagination on fire with visions of such icons as Rollins, Zoot Sims, John Coltrane and Dexter Gordon, Sharoni immigrated to America to study jazz performance at Boston's Berklee College.

Now recognized as one of the best and the brightest on Boston's jazz scene, Sharoni has performed with many luminaries, including Joshua Redman, Danilo Pérez, Kenny Garrett and Larry Coryell.

Having to work full time to support himself when he first arrived in Boston, Sharoni had to leave Berklee College of Music after one

semester. But the hard-pressed jazz scholar studied and played with such Boston heavyweights as saxophonists Jerry Bergonzi and George Garzone.

Focusing today on working with his regular Boston-based quartet and quintet, Sharoni underwrites his pure jazz pursuits by playing commercial gigs, including weddings and bar mitzvahs.

As a jazz troubadour, he's played in Boston, New York, Florida, Europe and Jerusalem.

On trips back home to Israel, he visits his elderly parents, Irene and Chaim. Irene, who grew up in Chile, and Chaim, who lived in Yemen, immigrated to Israel where they met not long after Israel had officially become a nation in 1948.

Music has always been a key element in his family, Benny notes, since Chaim (a name meaning life) courted Irene, his kibbutz sweetheart, with his romantic harmonica playing.

The Sharoni household, Benny recalls, was always alive with music from classical to klezmer: It was a living microcosm of world music, he adds, including the Latin sounds his Chilean mother loved and the African-based music and rhythms his father had loved in Yemen.

Whether digging deep into a ballad or grooving high on a hard bop anthem, Sharoni infuses his spiritual, swinging music with a spontaneous celebration of life. Admission: \$15 cover charge at the door; \$5 discount students and seniors. Information and reservations: 860-561-0180. Szechuan is at 1245 New Britain Ave.

Blues Rock RAW

With her soulful, sultry voice, gutsy knack for swing and royal jazz lineage, jazz and blues vocalist **Catherine Russell** is sure to bring a musically intoxicating kick tonight at 7:30 to Real Art Ways' "Creative Cocktail Hour."

The popular event, which mixes socializing with art and music on the third Thursday of every month, runs from 6 to 10 p.m. at RAW, the multi-alternative arts, social and entertainment center at 56 Arbor St., Hartford.

Russell's two recent solo albums, "Cat" and "Sentimental Streak," have been widely, even wildly acclaimed, receiving much-coveted

accolades from such eminences as Will Friedwald, a premiere chronicler of popular music singers, and Nat Hentoff, dean of American jazz critics.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal, Hentoff has called Russell's jazz vocal stylings "the real thing" and praised her as a natural swinger "who hits a groove from note one."

Since the release of "Cat," Russell's debut album in 2006, the veteran singer, who has worked in many genres from rock to gospel, has performed at such jazz and blues events as the Tanglewood Jazz Festival, Montreal Jazz Festival and Chicago Blues Festival.

"Sentimental Streak," her new CD, taps into the traditions of classic African-American divas ranging from Bessie Smith to Lena Horne.

Her main mission, she explained to Hentoff, is "to find rhythms that make you feel good all over." And her passion for jazz and blues is a family tradition.

Her father was the late Luis Russell, an important jazz band leader, arranger and pianist and longtime musical director for Louis Armstrong.

Catherine's mother, Carline Ray, a terrific double bassist, was a star performer with the once famous International Sweethearts of Rhythm, a groundbreaking, all-female band that struck a rousing feminist blow against the raging sexist stereotypes of the period.

A Juilliard graduate, Carline has also performed with greats across the generations, ranging from the venerable pianist/composer Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981), a pioneering figure in breaking down sexist barriers in the male-dominated jazz world, to such a contemporary luminary as Wynton Marsalis.

Catherine Russell, who's known as "Cat" to friends and fellow musicians, will be accompanied by **Matt Munisteri**, guitar; **Mark Shane**, piano; and **Lee Hudson**, acoustic bass. Admission to "Creative Cocktail Hour": \$10, general; \$5, RAW members. Information: 860-232-1006 and www.realartways.org.

Ibarra Storms Firehouse

Fusing Filipino folk traditions, chamber music, jazz and other disparate ingredients, drummer/

percussionist/composer **Susie Ibarra** leads her trio Friday at 8:30 and 10 p.m. at New Haven's Firehouse 12.

Ibarra, violinist **Jennifer Choi** and pianist **Angelica Sanchez** perform new music as well as selections from the leader's CDs, "Songbird Suite" and "Folkloriko" (both on John Zorn's Tzadik label).

Ibarra leads or co-leads six groups, including Electric Kulintang, a duo with her husband, Cuban-American percussionist/composer Roberto J. Rodriguez, which performs an original blend she calls Filipino gong electronica. (She returns to Firehouse on May 5 and July 2.)

Tickets: \$15, opening set; \$10, second set. Information: 203-785-0468 and www.firehouse12.com. Firehouse 12 is at 45 Crown St.

Other Notes

Sponsored by the Hartford Jazz Society, trumpeter/historian **Fred Smith** gives a free lecture on jazz tonight at 6:30 at the Hartford Public Library, 500 Main St., Hartford. Guitarist/vocalist **Dave Palla** leads his quartet Saturday at 8 p.m. at The Buttonwood Tree, 605 Main St., Middletown. Joining Palla are **Ben Golder-Novick**, woodwinds; **Paul Fuller**, bass; and **Bill Carbone**, drums. Information: 860-347-4957.

Goose Lane, comprised of guitarist **Chris Cretella** and drummer **Dave Parmelee**, performs jazz, classical, metal, funk and open improvisation, Friday at 8 p.m. in the "Limelight Series" at the Green Street Arts Center (GSAC), 51 Green St., Middletown. There's a pre-concert reception at 7 p.m. Information: 860-685-7871 and www.greenstreetartscenter.org.

Carl Allen, a noted drummer, is the headliner at The Arts Center at Killingworth's "Jazz NightOut" in a café setting Saturday night at the Living Rock Church, Killingworth. Bassist **Phil Bowler** and blues vocalist **Debra Cilingin** open at 7:30 p.m. Information: 860-663-5593 and www.artscenterkillingworth.org.

Pianist **Doug Schlink** leads his combo tonight at 7:30 at Szechuan Tokyo Restaurant, 1245 New Britain Ave., West Hartford. Nu Directions performs there Friday at 8 p.m. Information: 860-561-0180.

Send jazz information to jazz@courant.com or 860-241-6354.