

MUSIC

Giant Steps



MAINSTREAMING

BENNY SHARONI'S HARD BOP, PHIL WILSON'S MILES AND GIL, BEN POWELL'S FIDDLE MAGIC

BY JON GARELICK

When I first put on Benny Sharoni's new *Eternal Elixir* (Papaya), there was, as a composer friend of mine likes to say, "nothing wrong with it." That is, it seemed no better or worse than a zillion other straight-ahead tenor-saxophone discs.

But within two tracks, I'd changed my mind. This was like some great lost hard-bop album from 1962. Indeed, that second tune was the easy-swinging blues "French Spice," from Donald Byrd's 1961 *Free Form*. Another Byrd tune, "Pentecostal Feelin'" (also from *Free Form*), and Blue Mitchell's 1964 "The Thing To Do" were classic boogaloes. Each of the other tunes likewise had a specific groove and pop-song verse-chorus hookiness — boogaloes, bossa novas, Latin-jazz/swing mixes.

Sharoni also has a taste for what Don Byron once called "one of the great acts of jazz — the weird cover." That's another hallmark of '60s hard bop, when movie themes from the likes of *Exodus* and *Spartacus* were popping up everywhere. Sharoni takes his lead from Cannonball Adderley's 1964 *Fiddler on the Roof*, following that album's arrangement of "To Life" as he begins with a muted trumpet solo (Barry Ries) over a Latin rhythm before heading into straight swing. A bossa arrangement by pianist Joe Barbato of Bobby Hebb's 1966 "Sunny" is another highlight.

None of which would matter a whit if not for Sharoni's playing. Think of his crushed-felt tone and ruminative bop phrasing as coming out of, oh, Dexter Gordon by way of Jerry Bergonzi. He also has the Coltrane-requisite speed and muscle, but his solos — no matter how fast — always take their time. On "French Spice," he slows down the flow with quarter-note melodic arcs and plenty of rests before accelerating into 16th-note double time. These pieces are never merely abstract chord exercises — Sharoni is always creating tunes that parallel the theme. On the bossa-nova classic "Estate," his beautiful, relaxed little reveries of melody have the dreamy grace of Stan Getz.

"If music doesn't have space, it doesn't work," he tells me over tea at Trident Booksellers & Café on Newbury Street. "Negative space," he says, and looks over his shoulder at the faux Van Gogh image on the wall, "that's what makes a painting great."

Born and raised on a kibbutz in Israel by a mother from Chile and a father from Yemen, Sharoni has led a peripatetic life. He served his mandatory stint in the Israeli army from 1979 to 1982, participating in the disastrous '82 invasion of Lebanon. His unit was within earshot of the notorious Sabra and Shatila massacre. "There was nothing we could do," he tells me. "Sharoni was an animal."

Sharoni, who plays Chianti in Beverly next Friday, credits music with saving his sanity — the tapes of Sonny Rollins and Steely Dan he listened to on his headphones. In 1986, he came to Berklee for a semester that was cut short by a teachers' strike. He studied with Jerry Bergonzi, George Garzone, Charlie Banacos. He practiced, played, and worked all manner of

odd jobs. For six or so years, he ran an R&B wedding band, but he tossed it when the business tanked with the economy — "I was tired of fighting for it." He tells me that it was now or never as far as making an album. "The more you know in jazz, the more depressed you can get. I mean, try listening to Coltrane — how humbling is that?" He pauses. "You know what? I can live with it."

GRACE
Sharoni's solos always take their time — even when he's playing fast.

