

Benny Sharoni Brings Quest for Lyrical Expression to Old Lyme Jazz Haven

By OWEN MCNALLY (/PEOPLE/OWEN-MCNALLY) • MAY 27, 2015



"Our mission was to make the most beautiful music we could."

Benny Sharoni

It's been five years since the big-toned, Israeli-born tenor saxophonist Benny Sharoni made his recording debut with an acclaimed album called *Eternal Elixir*.

All the promise resonating through that warmly expressive debut disc -- a spiritually inspired work that touted music as the eternal elixir for the world's woes -- has been more than fulfilled

in the Boston-based saxophonist/composer's new release, *Slant Signature* (Papaya Records).

An excellent showcase for his writing and playing, the CD rings with increased authority, additional creative breadth and depth and a re-affirmation of Sharoni's basic credo to make beautiful music.

His heartfelt aesthetic on beauty and truth is rooted in and originally inspired by the lyrical expressiveness of Sonny Rollins that he first encountered at home years ago as a musically gifted kid who was born and raised in a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip. His life-changing Rollins epiphany came to him wrapped up in a batch of vinyl LPs that his music-loving mother had brought home to him after a trip to New York City.

Music of all kinds reigned supreme in the Sharoni household presided over by his émigré parents. His mother, who grew up in Chile, and his father, who had lived in Yemen, both emigrated from their original homelands to Israel where they later met at a kibbutz not long after Israel became a nation in 1948.

The Sharoni home was alive with the sound world music, including Latin styles from Chile and African-based melodies and rhythms from Yemen. Plus, of course, the fortuitous cache of Rollins recordings, which Benny totally immersed himself in as a young man who suddenly had a calling to become a jazz musician. It was a calling that led him all the way to America, the Promised Land for many aspiring jazz musicians from foreign nations.

Hearing Rollins not only forever changed his life, but also lit the way to discovering a litany of tenor saxophone greats, including Zoot Sims, John Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, Benny Golson and many other American icons. His love for jazz led him to Boston's Berklee College of Music for just one semester, his collegiate career cut short by his need to work full-time to get by on his own in a land not quite so full of milk and honey for a young, idealistic jazz student.

Despite that bump on his road to success and jazz mastery, Sharoni managed to study with such Boston-based jazz Brahmins as the saxophonists Jerry Bergonzi and George Garzone. Eventually, he established himself on the Boston scene where he has led his own bands and appeared with such renowned players as Joshua Redman, Danilo Perez, Kenny Garrett and Larry Coryell. Today he tours and performs with his own bands throughout the East Coast, Canada, Europe and Asia.

On the studio recording of *Slant Signature*, Sharoni beefs-up his working quartet, which features Barbato, Baker and Langone, with two special guests -- the fiery trumpeter Jim Rotondi and guitarist Mike Mele. Although Rotondi had never played with Sharoni's quartet before, his interaction with the tenor saxophonist sets sparks flying right from the opener, a Sharoni original called "Minor City."



Throughout the session, the pieces are graced with refreshing vigor, verve and a continuous sense of celebration, whether the band is grooving on an original samba, or on such jazz pieces as Freddie Hubbard's "Down Under," Lee Morgan's Ceora (done as a romantic bossa nova with Sharoni in a reflective mood), or Ray Bryant's buoyant, funky "Tonk," the soulful, sterling grand finale sparkling with a Horace Silver lining.

Sharoni listened widely over the historic range of tenor styles as he honed his own voice.

Obviously, Sharoni, who is a diligent scholar of the tenor saxophone, listened widely over the historic range of tenor styles as he honed his own voice and found his independent sense of artistic direction leading to fresh approaches to the music.

Nonetheless, you still sometimes hear hints or catch glints of luminous Sonny elements beaming through, whether it shines in emotion-filled gruff tones or in smart thematic playing. It lights up in flashes of wit and a bright sense of play, for example, when Sharoni makes his grand entrance on the Freddie Hubbard tune.

What he's all about is life-affirming energy and the perpetual celebration of beauty. "This record is 99 percent heart," Sharoni has said of his artistic goal. "The band is so full of heart and joy and intensity."

As he confides in the CD's liner notes to jazz critic Ed Hazell: "Our mission was to make the most beautiful music we could." With total honesty and no hyperbolic exaggeration, Sharoni can stand proudly in front of any banner proclaiming: mission accomplished.