

Omer Avital Qantar : New York Paradox

One of the most remarkable things about Omer Avital is the fact that he became a highly individual leader early in his career. If he is often called the “Israeli Mingus”, it is not only because of the energetic way he plays the bass, nor because his music often draws inspiration—like that of the great Charles Mingus himself—from the fundamentals of jazz, the blues in particular; nor even because he likes to yell and shout and to encourage his musicians on the stage. The main reason for this nickname is the “workshop” aspect of his various groups and their often atypical instrumentation, which combine personalities as well as tones, impelling the musicians to reveal the depths of their soul in a fraternal context that is at once empirical and spontaneous. Avital recognizes that *“the process of getting a band together and growing it (and growing with it) is one of the most exciting and important things for me as a creator of music, band leader and composer.”* He has proven this at the head of his sextet with four saxophones, which was one of the major groundbreaking jazz groups of the 1990s, and now with his current group Qantar. *“The coming together of personalities, souls, characters, sounds and voices is at the heart of what we aim at as jazz musicians”*, he adds. *“Once the band is comfortable and the sounds get together it is ready to create its own unique experience.”*

Qantar was launched four years ago, and this group has something special that distinguishes it from most contemporary jazz ensembles that are often nothing but a casual and short-lived meeting of talents. The group is made up of five Israeli musicians, all of whom had made the crucial decision to move to New York in order to measure their talents against the best that the megalopolis has to offer in terms of jazz. Even though the quintet became a cohesive unit thanks to concerts and tours, the initial and nurturing spark was the innovative Wilson Live venue that Omer Avital had opened in the Bushwick area of Brooklyn. Wilson Live is a meeting space, a place for jam sessions, a rehearsal studio, a music club and a stage for recordings. A cosy and friendly place to meet and hang out, a music laboratory. *“When we opened Smalls, the most important value was that we had a place”*, remembers Omer Avital, evoking the first years of the West Village club which was the crucial setting for a true jazz renaissance in the 1990s. The bassist played there the very first week of the club’s existence, in April 1994, first as a member of Peter Bernstein’s quartet, then as the bassist in the trio of a then-unknown pianist Brad Mehldau. Assessing

how beneficial Smalls had been for his entire generation, one that included musicians such as Kurt Rosenwinkel, Jason Lindner, Mark Turner and Guillermo Klein, and for which it had a haven for apprenticeship, sharing, creativity, a fruitful exchange between generations, a place for cohabitation between nationalities and styles, Omer Avital threw himself into launching Wilson Live, with the goal of “*a creative home for musicians in Brooklyn*”, in order to infuse twenty-five years later something of that special positive energy that Smalls had when it opened.

Qantar effortlessly found a place for itself in this new creative setting, its members soon turning the space into a second home, a place for sharing Turkish coffee, communal meals, all the joys and pains of five Israeli expatriates living in New York. “*Qantar is like a gang. I don’t have a band, I have Qantar*”, says Avital with unfeigned enthusiasm about the group whose musicians are all younger than he is, and “*were born when I was at Smalls and grew up listening to my records*”. In addition to attesting to the fertility of Israel’s contribution to contemporary jazz—with so many highly talented musicians now on the scene—Qantar is also an example of Omer Avital’s truly inspirational role. Along with his compatriot Avishai Cohen, he was one of the precursors of the impressive current wave of musicians including the Anat and Avishai Cohen, Eli Degibri, Shai Maestro, Yotam Silberstein, Or Bareket and Yonathan Avishai, among others...

Recorded live and unedited, *New York Paradox* is Qantar’s second album. The group includes the pianist Eden Ladin, drummer Ofri Nehemya and saxophonists Alexander Levin and Asaf Yuria. From the very first notes, what is striking is the way Qantar sounds like a band. The density of its tone illustrates a shared history, but this radiates much more profoundly in the music itself as it unfolds collectively. “*For this band, we don’t use charts but rather learn the music by heart and create the arrangements on the spot, organically. For me as composer-arranger, this is the best way to work since you get the best results when the musicians can tailor their parts to the music*”, explains the bassist, who seems to have combined in this group all of the influences that have given added strength to his music, hard bop in particular, whose warm expressiveness illuminates it. If Qantar sometimes sounds like a Mediterranean version of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, this is because it is connected to the cohesive spirit that characterized the key versions of the drummer’s legendary group. The same love of swing

and blues permeates Omer Avital's music, effortlessly integrated into everything that has evolved harmonically and rhythmically in jazz over the past thirty years, as well as the oriental influences that Omer Avital owes to his own Yemenite and Sephardic roots, adding colors to his fertile and enthusiastic imagination as a composer. The twofold saxophone attack of Alexander Levin and Asaf Yuria deploys its spectacular polyphonies, giving the melodies a full-bodied lyrical depth, and the bluesy melodic lines a soulful and unaffected weight. In their solos the two saxophonists reveal different personalities, giving us the impression that between them they can cover the tenor saxophone's entire spectrum—in the shadow of Coleman Hawkins, Eddie Lockjaw Davis, Hank Mobley, Joe Henderson, John Coltrane, Billy Harper... Their playing is a reminder of how much the beauty of jazz, so full of history, is an ageless music that is constantly reinvented by those who play it. Omer Avital can be proud of having transmitted this conviction to the musicians who play with him...

As for the leader's bass playing, it ceaselessly evokes his passion and his capacity for driving the music forward, a constant reminder that from strolling to walking jazz has always been an art of movement first, a drive connected to life itself, to the very way people walk, a stride that is hopeful and joyful, wistful and light-hearted. All these feelings and emotions, so readily apparent in Omer Avital's music, are irresistibly endearing and captivating.

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