

ANAT COHEN

Bring On The Clarinet!

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Clarinet legend Paquito D’Rivera once introduced multi-reedist Anat Cohen as “one of the greatest (clarinet players) ever,” an observation far from hyperbole. Cohen has become a standard bearer who has been named the top clarinetist in both the Readers’ and Critics’ polls in *DownBeat* and elsewhere, and for almost two decades has had a hegemonic grasp on the title “Clarinetist of the Year” bestowed by the Jazz Journalists Association. And as influential and highly-regarded as she is on the clarinet, Cohen is also an accomplished soprano and tenor saxophonist, composer, bandleader, arranger and producer, and has played in and led all varieties of groups, given that she is fluent in many musical languages, including straight-ahead jazz, Dixieland, big band, Brazilian jazz, classical and world music. She is also a sister in the prominent Cohen jazz family: her younger brother, Avishai, is a renowned trumpeter, and her older brother, Yuval, plays soprano saxophone. And whenever their schedules allow, they record and gig together as, simply, the 3 Cohens.

Born in 1975 in Tel Aviv, Israel, the musical household also included her music teacher mother and a father who was a sometime musician and imparted his profound love of music to his children. Cohen began her musical journey on keyboards but moved to clarinet thanks to her father and to classical composer Sergei Prokofiev. “My father had a record collection, and in that collection he had *Peter and the Wolf*, and I loved the sound of the clarinet, which was the cat,” she recalls. “There was something about that sound. I was familiar with the sound, and for some reason we had a clarinet at home—I don’t know why. My father was not a musician, but a wannabe musician. He could pick up instruments and play them; he could put the clarinet together and show me the sound, and I was like ‘Wow, this is really cool!’” She adds that her mother taught music in kindergarten but that it was her father who knew, lived and breathed music all of his life, thereby having a big part of music being in the family, with a huge measure of support. For their children, the Cohens not only said, “Yes, it’s okay. Not only is it okay—it’s a blessed thing; it’s wonderful and it’s special, and it’s worth the time, it’s worth the effort.” They were, according to her, never ones to say, “How are you going to make a living?” The sounds in the Cohen household, with the three offspring practicing and playing all the time, was cacophonous, euphonious and inspiring. “You know, if I [was] sitting in the living room watching TV,” she remembers, “and my brother is going to practice, as much as I wanted to keep on watching TV, I [got] drawn to it. So, I had to say ‘Okay, let me go and pay my dues. I’ll watch TV later.’” And in retrospect she declares of that decision: “It was the best!”

Unsurprisingly, Cohen received a thorough formal musical education, beginning her clarinet studies at twelve and playing jazz clarinet for the first time in the Jaffa Conservatory’s Dixieland band. At sixteen she joined the conservatory’s big band and learned to play the tenor; it was this same year that she entered the prestigious Thelma Yellin High School for the Arts, where she majored in jazz studies. But there was an unexpected detour in her musical development. “When I got into a

jazz major in high school, the teacher was like ‘Just bring the saxophone, don’t bring the clarinet.’ So the clarinet became a secondary instrument for me.” Although Cohen’s clarinet studies were secondary to her saxophone playing at that time, clarinet influences significantly prevailed. “There were two clarinet players [I listened to] when I got into jazz,” she says, “Benny Goodman and Sidney Bechet, the only two I knew of at the time. And I did start on the clarinet playing the music of New Orleans, so I loved the tradition, the swing tradition.”

After graduation from high school, Cohen served her mandatory two years of service in the Israeli military, playing tenor in the Israeli Air Force band. She then enrolled at Boston’s Berklee College of Music, and after graduating in 1998, moved to New York and in 1999 played clarinet and saxophones with various groups, including pianist Jason Lindner’s Big Band, and groups such as the Choro Ensemble and Duduka da Fonseca’s Samba Jazz Quintet, during which time she expanded her knowledge of Brazilian and world music, gradually building the foundation for her stellar career. Her recording debut as leader was in 2005 with *Place & Time*, released on Anzic, the label she co-founded with Oded Lev-Ari, who is also a producer, arranger, musical director, close friend and indispensable confidant. Other acclaimed albums on the label followed, including *Clarinetwork: Live at the Village Vanguard*, *Luminosa* and tentet dates *Happy Song* and *Triple Helix*. For a decade (starting in 1998), Cohen was a member of the all-female DIVA Jazz Orchestra. “She was clearly an extraordinary soloist, one of the most creative, spontaneous, engaged players with the band and rhythm section,” recalls Sherrie Maricle, the band’s longtime leader, musical director and drummer. “She [has a] hardcore understanding of how to swing in the greatest tradition of jazz. I don’t know if you could have a specific definition of calling Anat a jazz musician because she’s a phenomenal performer, soloist, improviser, creator [and] entertainer. She’s expanded the boundaries of jazz artists for sure.”

As to the big band ethos, Cohen herself acknowledges that she was catching the end of an era, where people were touring with a big band, “really touring, like taking flights, going on a bus,” noting that today that proposition is “very hard.” She recalls that she would always ask DIVA founder and band manager, the late Stanley Kay, “‘So, what’d you think, Stanley?’ because he would [attend] every show. And he [would say], ‘Don’t ask me, listen to the audience!’ And he would always talk about the relationship between the performers and the audience.” Cohen noted the way Maricle would be very relaxed, talking to the audience and telling stories, and letting the audience into the story of the band. “Her approach was, in essence: I’m on the stage and you are sitting in front of me, but we are equal.” Maricle agrees, “I think it’s kind of insane to feel like you’re on stage and not to realize the reason that you’re there. Because people just paid a lot of money to see you perform, and I think it’s bizarre to not want to have that. But we’re not on the stage if no one’s in the seats, you know?”

In the way that Maricle formed a quintet called Five Play with members of DIVA, Cohen would cull members

from her tentet to form Quartetinho with Vitor Gonçalves (piano, accordion), Tal Mashiach (bass, guitar) and James Shipp (vibraphone, marimba, percussion). So far the group has two albums on Anzic: their eponymous 2022 debut recording and the more recently released *Bloom*, from last year. “They are fantastic multi-instrumentalists, which makes a quartet an octet,” she says proudly of her bandmates. “So part of the exploration is not just exploring harmonies or rhythms, (but) you’re exploring sonorities of different instrumentations.” Cohen notes how she loves that Quartetinho can go to a different era just by changing an instrument, an exploration that is just vast: “In building the show, it’s a lot about the sonority. My job when I play the clarinet is to take an existing melody and give it the best treatment I can, to bring it to life in the way that I find appropriate at the moment and give it my interpretation, my own take.” She also is aware that the way she articulates the humor, or the humanity, or even the darkness that she finds in a melody will come out whether playing Monk or Dvorák. “The way is to just find my own approach, that will make it all coherent,” she concludes. Omer Avital, a first-call bassist, is a longtime Cohen family friend who has played with all the siblings. “She’s a unique clarinet player,” he says of Cohen. “She’s a great musician (with) a very emotional, very animated way of playing.” Avital also observes that Cohen has also become a first-rate bandleader and that her love of Brazilian music has only broadened over the years. “She knows Brazilian *choro* upside down,” he says. “She speaks Portuguese, as she lived there. She went all the way!”

This month, Cohen celebrates her 50th birthday at the Appel Room with two nights of concerts where she will lead various small and large ensembles and she’ll be joined by, among others, brother Avishai as they explore various musical genres. A live album, *Interaction* (Anzic), with the 3 Cohens and WDR Big Band (arranged and conducted by Lev-Ari and recorded live at the Kölner Philharmonie in 2022) will be released this month. “I can do everything on a clarinet and find how to be myself and not apologize for mixing everything that I love,” Cohen says. “Today, when I meet young clarinetists, many times they say they play clarinet, but when playing jazz their teachers will ask them to play saxophone instead. And I [say], ‘Have them call me.’ Tell them the clarinet can play any music. Don’t let them tell you [that you] can’t play something on the clarinet, because you can!”

For more info visit anatcohen.com. Cohen’s 50th birthday concerts are at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Appel Room Mar. 14-15. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Anat Cohen & The Anzic Orchestra—*Noir* (Anzic, 2006)
- Anat Cohen—*Clarinetwork: Live at the Village Vanguard* (Anzic, 2009)
- Anat Cohen—*Claroscuro* (Anzic, 2011)
- 3 Cohens—*Tightrope* (Anzic, 2013)
- Anat Cohen & Marcelo Gonçalves—*Outra Coisa: The Music of Moacir Santos* (Anzic, 2016)
- 3 Cohens/WDR Big Band—*Interaction* (Anzic, 2022)