



TOMER COHEN

From Israel to NYC

Twenty-five-year-old Tomer Cohen plays jazz with the earthy feel heard in improvisations by Bill Frisell, Julian Lage, and early Pat Metheny. He studied and gigged in New York City, which informs his beautiful, intricate new album, *Not the Same River*. Here,

Brad Meldau, and sax of John Coltrane and Charlie Parker. I was looking for new ideas.

You play arpeggios more than block chords, like on "Sunrise."

I like to harmonize with two or three notes and observe the space it creates – it gives the

Cohen unpacks the long journey from his home country to the city where he's blossoming as a fresh jazz voice.

You started as a rock player in Israel. What happened in your early years as you evolved toward jazz?

I began playing in the kibbutz in seventh grade. Back in those days, friends taught me how to play Metallica and Led Zeppelin; I was really intrigued by it. I loved to see the music coming out of my fingers – it's still magical to me. Shortly after I finished high school, I started to learn jazz deeply for two years at the Israel Music Conservatory in Tel Aviv, which later helped me to get into the New School in New York City.

Who are your primary influences?

The first jazz guitarist I studied was Charlie Christian, quickly followed by the likes of Wes Montgomery, Pat Martino, and Jimmy Raney. Then I turned to more-modern players like Bill Frisell and Kurt Rosenwinkel. At the same time I tried to learn from other instruments, such as the piano of Bud Powell and

music a bit more room to breathe and the other instruments greater space to talk. On guitar, when I focus on two- and three-note chords, I also have an extra finger to create a voice-leading motion for a melody.

You do a lot of hybrid picking.

Yes, I'm using a pick with the thumb and the first finger, and then fingerpicking with the other three. I've developed this technique because I wanted to play the chord notes at the same time, like a piano player, and find polyrhythms. Most of all, I try to learn the things that get me excited.

What is your main guitar and other gear?

I often use a Gibson ES-335 and Quilter Labs Tone Block 202 head. For pedals, there's a Keeley Compressor, Boss DD-7 delay and a Strymon Bluesky reverb.

On some songs, like "Empty?," you're having a lot of musical conversation with drummer Obed Calvaire and bassist Matt Penman. How much of the arrangements were charted out, versus straight improv?

I always try to find a balance between free parts and written parts. That way, the composition flows, allowing us to converse, musically. Most of the solos had no chords indicated – some were rhythmic concepts and others, like "Empty?," are fully open. There, the band enters with a rhythmic concept of 4 over 6, so it had room for musical conversations. That brings an interesting angle to the music. I like it to step into the unknown – it's way more exciting for everybody, and new, beautiful things can emerge.

There's flamenco and Middle Eastern music in your improvisations.

Definitely. Growing up in Israel exposed me to Middle Eastern music, which I was listening to a lot and played on occasion. It had an influence on my style, which can be seen in some of the harmonic and melodic choices I make. I never studied flamenco, but the way I'm playing – with a pick and fingers at the same time – can sometimes sound like it.

Does living in New York City contribute to your style and sound?

It would be hard to think how I would sound without living in New York. Being here has exposed me to a variety of players and music, plus the ability to listen, play, and hang with the highest quality of musician has really opened my mind to new ideas. For players, a New York flavor emerges if you stay in the city for a while. It can offer a special energy from the buildings that touch the sky and subways that shake the ground. New York is a really unique experience that affects both the players and their jazz. – **Pete Prown**

Tomer Cohen: Liri Agami