

RONI BEN-HUR

guitarist / recording artist / educator

Jazz guitarist Roni Ben-Hur has earned a sterling reputation as a musician and educator, renowned for his golden tone, improvisational brilliance, compositional lyricism and ability to charm peers, students and listeners alike. Eminent jazz critic Gary Giddins wrote in the *Village Voice*: “A limber and inventive guitarist, Ben-Hur keeps the flame alive and pure, burning in every note... He’s a guitarist who knows the changes and his own mind.” Roni — born in Israel in 1962 but a longtime American citizen, based in the New York City area — has recorded a dozen-plus albums as leader or co-leader, with *The New York Times* praising his “crisp, fluid style” and *Time Out New York* calling him “a formidable and consummately lyrical guitarist.” He has developed a rare facility in both straight-ahead jazz and samba/bossa-nova styles, underscored by his work with masters in each field, from bebop piano sage Barry Harris and winds ace Frank Wess to beloved Brazilian vocalist Leny Andrade and composer Marcus Valle.

Roni’s newest album as a leader, *Stories* — released by Dot Time Records in March 2021 — features a poetic mix of songs and instrumentals, one that sees the guitarist tracing a line from childhood musical memories in Israel to his life today as a globally minded artist. *JazzTimes*, in its glowing review of *Stories*, noted the guitarist’s inspired interplay with such generationally diverse talents as pianist George Cables and trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, as well as vocalists from Israel and Mexico; the review went on to laud Roni and company’s brand of storytelling as “distinctive” and “uniformly engaging.” Always an educator as well as a performer, Roni has directed the jazz program at New York’s Kaufman Music Center for more than 25 years. Along with creating acclaimed educational products — such as the method book *Talk Jazz: Guitar* — Roni has also directed international music camps for two decades, currently leading his Roni Ben-Hur Jazz Camp in Vermont and France. Jazz guitar star Russell Malone got it right when he said: “Everything Roni does is beautiful. He has the magic touch.”

Originally from Tunisia, Roni’s family relocated to Dimona, Israel, where he was born into a large, working-class family — and grew up not only with good ensemble values but also a sense for the necessity of improvisation. Going on intuition above all, the guitarist began performing in wedding bands and in Tel Aviv clubs as a teenager enraptured by the recordings of Wes Montgomery, Grant Green, Joe Pass, Jim Hall and Kenny Burrell. The young musician also came to love the classical Spanish repertoire via the iconic guitarist Segovia, hearing a Moorish sound that resonated with his family’s North African roots. Later, after moving to New York City in 1985, he would fall for Brazilian music, particularly through the work of guitarist-composer Baden Powell.

“My dual affinity for jazz and Brazilian music has a lot to do with where I come from,” Roni explains. “With my family coming from Tunisia, I felt at home with each style since the Brazilian and jazz rhythms both ultimately come from Africa. And when you consider the jazz-standard repertoire, the melodic content of songs by composers like Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin is very much rooted in Jewish music. And while North Africa has that link to Moorish sounds, those sounds are also at the root of Brazilian music. So, I’ve just always gravitated

toward those beautiful minor-key songs and romantic melodies of the standards songbook, as well as the deep rhythms in both bebop and Brazilian music. It all feels totally natural to me.”

When Roni came onto the New York jazz scene, he was fortunate to be taken under the wing of Barry Harris, a disciple of Thelonious Monk and Grammy Award winner who led the influential Jazz Cultural Theater during the mid-’80s in Manhattan. As an up-and-coming guitarist, Roni played in Harris’s band, absorbing musical and life lessons from the now late NEA Jazz Master. “I was so lucky to -learn at the elbow of Barry Harris,” he insists. “The young players at that time and all the listeners, too, we just loved his *feel*. When we performed for that knowing audience of his, you could actually see when the beat was right by how everyone in the crowd moved their heads and bodies. It was the same thing on stage. You would get a shot of energy coming through you from that authentic, uplifting swing that Barry always had in his fingers.”

Harris also had an incredible store of knowledge in his head, “but when he talked about complex concepts that would normally take years to digest, the way he articulated them made sense right away,” Roni adds. “In that way, his teaching was like his playing — it had an immediacy. Everything was related to the beauty in the music, never rote exercises. If Barry saw me jotting down notes during a lesson or recording with a Walkman, he would say, ‘No, don’t take notes... don’t tape it.’ For him, the lessons were part of an oral tradition, one you had to experience in the moment, to truly absorb. That meant when you were on stage, you had those lessons in deep inside and you could really be in the moment with the music.”

As it was for Harris, teaching has long been important to Roni, and the guitarist has developed an international reach as an educator over the years. As founding director of the jazz program at the Lucy Moses School of the Kaufman Center in Manhattan starting in 1994, he has educated a multitude of jazz enthusiasts in ensemble playing, improvisation and jazz guitar. Over the years, Roni has also led jazz camps from Maine and New York to such far-flung locales as Brazil, Puerto Rico and Turkey, teaching workshops in straight-ahead jazz, Latin jazz and Brazilian jazz. These days, the guitarist holds his Roni Ben-Hur Jazz Camp in Vermont each summer and in France every spring and fall — for music lovers for whom playing jazz, Roni says, “is a passion, not a vocation.” The camps held near the village of Uzès in the South of France double as culinary and travel experiences, including cooking classes and excursions to nearby sights.

Reflecting on his teaching philosophy, Roni says: “I learned so much about teaching with Barry Harris as a mentor. It’s always about love of the music and respect for the student — and keeping the bigger picture in mind, not just mastering tunes. The people who come to my jazz camps are serious amateurs. I give them the opportunity to learn a lot — repertoire, rhythms, techniques — but I also give them the space to enjoy themselves in a relaxed, vacation-friendly environment, with a lot of hanging out and jam sessions. The goal is to have fun learning, so that the experience is rewarding and refreshing. Most of the students are accomplished professionals beyond music – they’re doctors, lawyers, business people. I’m a believer in practice, of course, but I aim to teach students at their own pace. And I want the jazz-camp participants to learn music through a love of the experience, not only through theory. As Barry

did, I emphasize aural learning so that students can absorb music through their ears and fingers. Assimilating it that way means the lessons really stick with you.”

Stories, Samba and Introspection...

With the songs and instrumentals of his recent album *Stories*, Roni traced influences and emotions across his journey as both a musician and a man. “The tunes on *Stories* are all connected to my life in one way or another,” the guitarist explains. “As a child in Israel, I would hear ‘Ha’omnam,’ a moving song about never giving up hope sung by the popular folk singer Chava Alberstein. The lyrics, written during the dark days of the Holocaust, are by the Hebrew poet Leah Goldberg, and those words never go out of date, sadly. They’re sung with such a lovely, bell-like tone on the record by Tamuz Nissim, who’s originally from Israel. We also play ‘After the Morning’ by the great jazz pianist John Hicks, who was another important figure for me when I first came to New York. I wrote the instrumental ‘Ma’of’ — which means ‘taking flight’ — for my daughters as they were going off on their own. There’s also the song ‘A Redoblar,’ which means ‘let’s roll’ and reflects the fight against oppression in 1970s Latin America. Latin music and culture have come to mean a lot to me in my musical journey. Magos Herrera, who grew up in Mexico, sings that one with such depth of feeling, as she also does with a Ladino folk song, ‘La Serena.’ The album also includes my original instrumental ballad ‘But I Had to Say Goodbye,’ about lost love.”

For *Stories*, Roni fronted a quintet featuring frequent bass partner Harvie S. and drumming great Victor Lewis, as well as esteemed veteran George Cables on piano and, in a first studio meeting for Roni, the award-winning Canadian trumpeter Ingrid Jensen. Along with the aforementioned pieces, the album includes the Cables instrumental “Melodious Funk” and a vintage piece by unsung bebop pianist Elmo Hope, “Something for Kenny.” *Jazziz* magazine pointed out how *Stories* showcases “some of the world’s finest contemporary jazz musicians,” while *All About Jazz* marveled over Roni’s interpretive and storytelling skills on an album that’s “glowing with wisdom.” As for working with the vocalists on *Stories*, Roni says: “I love working with singers. It was artists like Billie Holiday who attracted me to jazz in the first place. As an instrumentalist, working with a singer requires a special, subtle discipline. You always have to leave space in the arrangement, to really listen, concentrate on the melody and help convey the message of a song.”

Prior to *Stories*, Roni released the autumn 2020 album *Samba do Arraial* (Tratore Records) as a co-leader with Brazilian drummer-producer Percio Sapia. Along with bassist Marinho Andreotti and percussionist Vinicius Barros, the disc features veteran vocalist Leny Andrade on four tracks. She was dubbed “the Ella Fitzgerald of Brazil” by none other than Tony Bennett, who has always been a fan of her samba-meets-jazz stylings. Roni has worked with Andrade for years now, touring the world as a duo with the singer and releasing a lauded album with her, *Alegria de Viver*, in 2014. *Samba do Arraial* is another showcase for Roni’s love for the music of Brazil and his natural facility in samba and bossa-nova styles — as well as the kindred-spirit relationship he has so often enjoyed with the country’s musicians over the decades. Recorded

in a collegial, workshop atmosphere, *Samba do Arraial* draws from the classic songbooks of Baden Powell, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Vinicius de Moraes and Hermeto Pascoal, among others.

In that relaxed workshop environment near São Paulo, the band explored the intricacies of Brazil's various regional rhythms, with Sapia, Andreotti and Barros providing deep grooves underneath Roni's six-string lyricism. Along with praise from various outlets for the album's authenticity ("not the Hollywood version of samba... totally hot"), *New York City Jazz Record* extolled Roni's "virtuosic and creatively limber fretwork" on *Samba do Arraial*. Ever modest when it comes to his own skills, the guitarist says: "Percio and Vinicius are masters of all those distinct rhythms, a truly mysterious art. So it was a fascinating privilege for me to work so closely with them for hours and hours, developing a real interplay together and coming up with fresh treatments of vintage Brazilian songs." When it came to Andrade, she invested her performances with the rich artistry and emotional wisdom that fans of Brazilian music have heard in her voice across seven decades. "To work with Leny again was such a pleasure and an inspiration — she's special, whether singing a ballad or a bossa nova," Roni says. "It doesn't matter if you can't understand a word of Portuguese in the lyrics. You can feel in your heart what she's expressing."

In spring 2018, Roni released *Introspection*, an exceptional trio album, via the Jazzheads imprint. He co-produced the record in close collaboration with bassist Harvie S. The two players, in league with drummer Tim Horner, explored classics by jazz composers from Billy Strayhorn, Thelonious Monk and Tadd Dameron to Kenny Dorham, George Shearing and Joe Henderson. The album also includes Brazilian numbers by Baden Powell and Ary Barroso, plus a Jerome Kern standard. *Introspection* brims with subtly insistent swing and insinuating melodies, the rapport between the players intimate and conversational. "The tunes on *Introspection* are ones that I had always wanted to play, feeling drawn to them whether for the melody, the harmonic possibilities, the rhythmic feel, or all of the above," Roni explains. "Many of the pieces are rarely heard — and almost all had never been recorded before in the setting of a guitar trio. That allowed us to put a fresh, personal spin on them. Harvie and I created the arrangements organically, over about a year of working together. The way we perform this repertoire features both the guitar and bass as equal parts of the ensemble, with the melodies played by both of us. The interaction is constant."

Introspection is a record to play on repeat, with its warm, glowing allure like candlelight in a room. Yet there are highpoints to underscore: the beautifully atmospheric trio intro to Henderson's "Serenity," Roni's liquid phrasing in Barroso's "Pra Machucar Meu Coração" and the way he brings Neal Hefti's 'Repetition' to life with glinting melodicism. Harvie S colors Strayhorn's "Blood Count" with aptly vulnerable arco, while his solos buoy Kern's "Nobody Else But Me." Then there is the bassist's hip, thrumming intro to Dorham's "Asiatic Raes" — and the whole cooking, album-capping trio performance that follows, with Roni soloing up a storm and Horner getting his licks in, too, the drum-and-cymbal interplay of his solo richly musical. The players reach into themselves as per the album title of *Introspection*, but there's also the sense of communion that the best records often have — in this case reaching from the long-gone composers through the vitally alive interpreters and on to all us lucky listeners.

From Mojave to Manhattan Style and more...

Roni formed the starry collaborative trio *Our Thing* with Panamanian-born bassist Santi Debriano and Brazilian drummer Duduka Da Fonseca, the band releasing its eponymous first album through Motéma in 2012. The superlative *Our Thing* ranged from deeply swinging interpretations of Thelonious Monk's "Green Chimneys" and Irving Berlin's "Let's Face the Music and Dance" to a pair of poetic tunes by Antônio Carlos Jobim and several lovely originals that channel the players' Middle Eastern, Latin and Brazilian heritages through a post-bop prism. One of Roni's contributions was a fresh rendition of a longtime favorite in his songbook: "Anna's Dance," written for one of his two daughters. *DownBeat* called *Our Thing* "mesmerizing" and *The New York Times* praised it as "engaging," while the *New York City Jazz Record* captured the disc's virtues colorfully: "Ben-Hur, Debriano and Da Fonseca sway with the grace of palm trees, exuding a laidback introspection." *The Buffalo News* declared the record as "delectable jazz internationalism of near-Olympic variety. Ben-Hur [is a player] of first-rate fluency and taste."

Roni reunited with Debriano and Da Fonseca to release the album *Manhattan Style* in 2016 via Jazzheads. Marked by the group's characteristically soulful grooves, telepathic interplay and richly organic ensemble sound, *Manhattan Style* presented originals by all three members alongside interpretations of off-the-beaten-track tunes by Duke Ellington ("African Flower"), Ornette Coleman ("The Blessing") and Tom Jobim ("Polo Pony"). *New York City Jazz Record* noted the album's "amazing cohesiveness," along with singling out how the Roni's "fluidity shines whether playing chords or single-note lines in double time." While his solos and ensemble playing enliven every track — *Hot House* magazine remarked on the guitarist's "warm, rich tone" — Roni's compositional contributions to the album included the grooving, Middle East-evoking opener "Home," the lyrical "Amy" and, in its initial appearance, the playful, highly rhythmic "Ma'hof."

About the *Our Thing* trio, Roni says: "We're each of us leaders in our own right, with our own ideas and approaches. Our backgrounds are from different parts of the world, with deep ethnic roots — which is itself a very New York thing. We produced *Manhattan Style* on our own, collaborating to create arrangements on the spot. It was a labor of love by musicians who are passionate about playing well together and learning from each other — about different tunes, grooves, harmonies. There's a lot of chemistry and camaraderie whenever we're together."

Between *Manhattan Style* and *Our Thing* came Roni's *Alegria de Viver* disc of 2014 with Leny Andrade. The two artists delved deep into the bossa-nova catalog for rare gems, recording the album in Rio de Janeiro. "Leny's voice is this incredible instrument, and she has a vast knowledge of tunes," Roni said at the time. "She really communicates the depth of Brazilian music. Making the album in Rio with her was an honor, recording together on the studio floor, organically. And then we performed the music together in New York, Brazil, Australia — some extraordinary nights. Working with her was like having a window into the wide world of Brazilian music, as she knew all the greatest original composers of bossa nova from Jobim on down."

She's full of stories about these historic figures. Leny is plugged into the source, like Ella was with Cole Porter."

JazzTimes offered a glowing report on *Alegria de Viver*: "Eschewing her long-favored trio format, Leny Andrade has found an ideal duet partner in Israeli-American guitarist Roni Ben-Hur, whom she met in 2012 when she guest-lectured at his Brazilian music camp in Maine... End-to-end, this is a flawlessly beautiful alliance." *New York City Jazz Record* called Roni an "inspired partner" for the singer, noting his "supple rhythm and glowing sound." *Jazz Weekly* joined in the praise, describing the album as "charming, intimate... It's casual yet passionate, like a cozy late night after all the guests have left."

Prior to his collaboration with Andrade, Roni paired with São Paulo-born bassist Nilson Matta to make the beautiful album *Mojave*, released by Motéma in 2011. *Mojave* saw the two musicians meld their worlds with "ease and naturalness," according to *JazzTimes*, the pair working with New York jazz drummer Victor Lewis and Brazilian percussionist Café. The foursome ranged from pieces by such Brazilian icons as Jobim, Baden Powell and *choro* pioneer Pixinguinha to Burt Bacharach's "The Look of Love" and deftly rhythmic originals by all four players. One of Roni's compositions on the album is a signature number of his interpreted afresh: moody beauty "Eretz" (Hebrew for "land"). *All Music Guide* called the blend of Roni's guitar and Matta's double-bass "magic," while *Rochester City Newspaper* offered a similar judgment: "*Mojave* is magical from start to finish... The combination of Matta's samba and Ben-Hur's swing is a marriage made in heaven."

Mojave was the second in Motéma's Jazz Therapy series. The series was co-founded by Roni and the label to raise money and awareness for the Dizzy Gillespie Memorial Fund of New Jersey's Englewood Hospital and Medical Center Foundation, which has provided care for uninsured jazz musicians. The first album in the series was *Smile*, Roni's 2008 duo set with veteran guitarist Gene Bertoncini. Admiration for this duo record was widespread, with *The New York Times* lauding its "sophisticated and lyrical" musicianship. *DownBeat* simply called the album "stunning." The players stretched from the Charlie Chaplin title track and the Arlen-Mercer standard "Out of This World" to an enterprising take on Roberta Flack's hit "Killing Me Softly" and two personal standards from Roni's pen: "Anna's Dance," written for one daughter, and "Sofia's Butterfly," penned for the other. Jazz sage Nat Hentoff praised the "lyrically meditative dialogue" between Roni and Bertoncini in the *Wall Street Journal*, while the *Washington Post* was enamored by "the dazzling dexterity and tasteful elegance of these duets."

Early Strides, Sharing Music...

Two other key albums in Roni's discography are *Fortuna* (Motéma, 2009) and *Keepin' It Open* (Motéma, 2007), both with piano vet Ronnie Matthews and ultra-swinging drummer Lewis Nash, plus percussionist Steve Kroon. *Keepin' It Open*, which also included bassist Santi Debriano and trumpeter Jeremy Pelt in the group, has a wide purview, from Monk's rollicking "Think of One" to Roni's arrangement of a dark-hued old Sephardic melody, "Eshkolit." Tapping into his

family's Sephardic Jewish roots and his love of the Spanish classical guitar repertoire, Roni recasts Granados' "Andaluza" as an ensemble piece. And the guitarist's originals include the finger-snapping "My Man, Harris," a tribute to Barry Harris. *JazzTimes* called the album "a delight from start to finish," while the *All Music Guide* avowed that Roni "can swing as hard as anyone."

Fortuna, which featured Rufus Reid on double-bass, saw Roni recast another totemic Spanish classical piece, Albéniz's "Granada," with an ear for how Moorish sounds influenced early Israeli popular music. Along with two Jobim numbers, the disc also includes the Irving Berlin ballad "I Got Lost in his Arms" and Roni's funky original "Guess Who." Jazz scholar Dan Morgenstern listed *Fortuna* as one of his top 10 discs of 2009, and *JazzTimes* described the album this way: "A keen story teller, Ben-Hur's dexterous, melodic and emotive playing is supported by a tight-knit cast of stellar musicians... his skill and warm tone underscoring the band's chemistry." The judgment from *All About Jazz* was, vividly: "*Fortuna* is a sparkling ode to the brightness of life."

Roni's album *Signature* (Reservoir, 2005) put the guitarist in the company of Reid, piano heavyweight John Hicks and drummer Leroy Williams, plus Kroon. The tracks included the first appearance of Roni's gem "Eretz," plus two pieces by the peerless 20th-century Brazilian composer Villa-Lobos and tunes by Jobim and Cole Porter. *DownBeat* said: "*Signature* is a collection of consummately played music that matches the six-stringer's consistently creative melody reading, soloing and comping with the supportive work of superb sidemen. Ben-Hur's originals are similarly impressive, from opening burner 'Mama Bee,' which dazzles with a brilliantly constructed guitar solo, to 'Eretz,' a gorgeous ballad intended as a tribute to the guitarist's native Israel that feels like an instant standard."

For *Anna's Dance* (Reservoir, 2001), Roni convened a combo of elders: Barry Harris on piano, Charles Davis on saxophone, Walter Booker on double-bass, Leroy Williams on drums. The highlights include the debut of Roni's title composition, as well as the timeless Billy Strayhorn ballad "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing." In the *Village Voice*, Gary Giddins said: "As eloquent as a cool breeze, this understated exercise in bebop equilibrium goes down so easy that you might underestimate the magic. Ben-Hur and Charles Davis, who trades in his Sun Ra baritone for suave tenor, speak Harris's lingo like natives." And it was in the late '90s that Roni had kick-started his discography with two bebop showcases. First came *Backyard* (TCB, 1996), presenting him alongside the Barry Harris Trio. Then there was *Sofia's Butterfly* (TCB, 1998), which saw the guitarist offering much promise (with Leroy Williams and bassist Lisle Atkinson in tow); the album includes the ultra-fluid virtuosity of his take on Monk's "Four in One," not to mention the first appearances of his original title tune and "Fortuna."

In addition to leading his own bands, Roni has shared stage and studio not only with the heroes and peers mentioned above but with the likes of Cecil Payne, Etta Jones, Marcus Belgrave, Charles McPherson, Jimmy Heath, Clark Terry, Slide Hampton, Chris Anderson, Earl May, Teri Thornton and Bill Doggett. Of late, Roni has collaborated with pianist Roger Kellaway, with whom he played Mezzrow and the Kitano in New York, and with bossa-nova

composer-performer Marcus Valle, with whom he played a week at Birdland. *The Star-Ledger* of New Jersey summed up Roni's appeal for artists and listeners alike: "A deep musician, a storyteller, Ben-Hur works with a warm, glowing sound and has an alluring way of combining engaging notes with supple rhythm."

Roni regularly performs at top jazz venues and in major festivals across the country and around the world. As an educator, he has established jazz programs in New York City high schools, along with presenting workshops for students of all ages in the U.S. and Europe. His instructional releases include the DVD *Chordability* (Motéma, 2011), which offers 20 lessons on chord voicings and jazz harmony for intermediate and advanced guitarists. Roni also translated "the Barry Harris method" to guitar with the publication *Talk Jazz: Guitar* (Mel Bay, 2003), which has appeared in English and Japanese editions. Online, he offers tutorials via mymusicmasterclass.com.

Looking ahead, Roni is working on an album with the much-loved vocalist Sheila Jordan, alongside Harvie S as bassist and producer. To be released by HighNote in 2022, the album will serve as a 60th-anniversary nod to Jordan's Blue Note debut of 1962, with the trio including some reinterpretations of material from that LP, *Portrait of Sheila*, plus other songs. Roni and Harvie S. also have another trio recording in the can, with this one including drummer Sylvia Cuenca. Similar to Roni's *Introspection* album of 2018, this new disc will feature songs by classic jazz composers, such as Herbie Nichols and Bobby Hutcherson.

Along with the guitarist's upcoming album releases, the near future will entail more Roni Ben-Hur Jazz Camp experiences in Vermont and France, as well as further educational work at the Kaufman Center in New York. "When I was first imagining a life in music, my mother pointed out to me — perceptively — that music isn't a profession as much as it's an obsession," Roni says. "You keep learning and growing and sharing in music not because you want to climb the career ladder but because you *need* to learn and grow and share as an artist. You can't help it, you love it — that's what drives you. As many records as I've made so far, shows I've played, workshops I've taught, music always feels so fresh to me. I'm always wanting to share it with colleagues, students and listeners. After all, that's what music was really made for, to share with other people."

— *Bradley Bambarger*