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Home is where the muse is

By BARRY DAVIS
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With New York experience, saxophonist Elad Gellert returns to his roots in Jerusalem.

Elad Gellert is back home. After close to four years in the Big Apple, the epicenter of the jazz universe, the 28-year-old saxophonist returned to his hometown of Jerusalem a year ago to do his creative thing.

“This is my space – where I hold rehearsals and jam sessions, and I write and create and teach here. I have all the instruments I need here, and I play all of them,” he says.

The “space” in question is an intimately proportioned soundproof room cozily ensconced in the recesses of a garage in the capital’s Talpiot industrial area. The location is not as incongruous as it might seem, though; in addition to refitting exhaust pipes and replacing clutches, the garage owner – a personable chap by the name of Eddie – also sculpts, and has his own jamming room a floor above the saxophonist’s musicmaking domain.

The four saxophones Gellert plays – from the soprano down to the curvaceous baritone version – are all lined up and awaiting his attentions, like brass sentinels expecting the appearance of a muse. And there are keyboards and a drum set on hand, too.

“I might write something and I’ll try it out on the piano,” explains Gellert. “And then I’ll move on to one of the saxophones, to see what sort of sound I’m looking for, and then I’ll go to the drum set to see what kind of a groove I want.”

Gellert will be conveying his groove to local audiences next month, when he hits the stage at Jerusalem’s Yellow Submarine with his band on December 11. That will follow an earlier appearance in the capital, a gig in the Jazz Globus Festival this Saturday evening with the Shalosh trio – pianist Gadi Stern, double-bass player Daniel Ben-Horin and drummer Matan Assayag.

Listening to Gellert talk about his life, it is apparent that he has been through a lot in his 28 years, and it has influenced his music. His father died when he was just three years old – the song “Amikam” on Gellert’s debut album, *Expectations*, is dedicated to him – and a few years back, a close friend committed suicide.

The latter tragedy is depicted in the album’s opening sequence, “Slow Moshe,” named after the Jerusalem bar.

“I was actually there when I got a call from another friend who told me what had happened,” he recalls.

“I was in the bar with some friends, and then I caught a call, and I stepped outside because it was noisy inside, and that’s when I heard the terrible news. So you hear that, too, on the CD. It’s part of my life.”

Before moving Stateside, he spent two years studying at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, not all of which was to his liking. It was an earlier acquaintance who inspired him to seek new avenues of education. During his formative years, Gellert came intermittently under the wing of veteran New York jazzman Arnie Lawrence, who made aliya in the late ’90s after mixing with some of the greats of the jazz fraternity, such as legendary trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong.

“Arnie taught me a lot,” says Gellert. “I really benefited from his experience.”

In addition to his performance track record, Lawrence was instrumental in establishing the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York, and it was there that Gellert continued his musical education. It proved to be a good move.

“There is an Israeli approach whereby, first of all, you have to be told what is not right,” he says. “It’s like that with everything, not just in education – on the news, on the street, you name it. A lot of teachers start by telling you what is wrong, but I don’t believe in that approach. I believe in preserving what is good, and improving on it.”

And that’s exactly what he found at the New School: “I came across a wonderful teacher called Dave Glazer. Dave always focused on the positive things, but I didn’t get that to begin with. I thought he wasn’t a good teacher, as if he wasn’t addressing my problems and showing me how to overcome them. He’d say something like, ‘That was good. Now see if you can do it better.’ I like that.”

Gellert says he learned several important lessons from Glazer, including what not to play.

“He asked me to play a solo by [legendary saxophonist] Charlie Parker, and he told me that I shouldn’t play the notes that Parker doesn’t play. He said, ‘Bird [Parker] never stops,’ and he showed me that Parker’s fingers went to keys on the saxophone – without playing them – on his way to notes he did play. That changes your groove. I tried it the way Dave showed me, and it worked out just right with the timing, and the groove. That was an amazing thing to learn.”

Another teacher, Dave Johnson, helped Gellert along his path to personal development. Gellert suffers from dyslexia and thought he might be able to do something about that by attending Johnson’s poetry class at the New School. It was indeed a positive experience for Gellert, although not quite in the way he’d expected. On one occasion, he painstakingly wrote a poem for the class and, not wanting to make a fool of himself in front of Johnson and his classmates, he ran the text through the computer’s autocorrect function, unaware of the changes the computer had made in addition to sorting out the spelling errors.

“I wrote something and read it out to the class, and there was this sort of stunned silence after I finished, and the teacher said, ‘That’s really tight,’ and then the other students started asking me about all sorts of words I’d used. But they weren’t the words I’d originally put in there,” he remembers. “It came out well in the end, even though it was a surprise to me. It was great to have a positive experience with writing, because I’d been ashamed of my dyslexia. That helped me connect with myself. Dyslexia is a part of me, a part of the way I speak, of my humor and of the way I play music.”

The opening two tracks of *Expectations*, “Slow Moshe” and “Don’t Be,” stemmed from poems Gellert wrote.

Few people would call New York a calm place, but the young musician says he found tranquility there.

“Because there is so much going on there, and there is so much information flying around, I found myself looking inward, into myself. I had more time to myself on the subway, and more time to look at people and to look at the dynamics between myself and other people. I got a lot of inspiration from New York. I always say that the amount of great musicians there – playing all over the place – is like the masses of rats scurrying around under the subway.”

After three-and-a-half years surrounded by the sounds and beats of musicians from all over the world, feeding off their cultures and creative talents, he now finds himself back in his own smaller but beloved pond. While Jerusalem may appear to have less to offer than the Big Apple does, Gellert says he is constantly amazed by the dynamic local artistic scene.

“There are always things going on here,” he states.

“There are people in Tel Aviv who think of Jerusalem as something of a cultural wasteland, but they just don’t get the vibe here. There are things happening, for example, in bars all over the place. Just go to the shuk and see what’s going down there. It’s fantastic.”

Although he misses the energy of New York and some of his pals over there, he says there is plenty to feed off here, too.

Jerusalem has its own special atmosphere, and that's its charm," he says. "Jerusalem has its own character, which is very different from New York. Jerusalem is the place for me to create in. This is my place."

For tickets and more information about the Jazz Globus Festival: 052-263-4444 or www.jazzglobus.com. For more information about the Yellow Submarine: (02) 679-4040 or www.yellowsubmarine.org.il.



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