

**INTERVIEW**

**ASAF SIRKIS**

words: Brent Keefe images: Eckie

# Second Choice, First



**Although drums were not Asaf Sirkis's first choice of instrument, he is now a first call player on the UK scene. *Drummer* listened as he discussed the importance of melody and his many projects**

**A**saf Sirkis may not be a household name but a quick glance at his schedule indicates that he is in serious demand. Born in Israel in 1969 into a music-loving family ("my father was a devoted music listener"), Asaf turned professional in 1990, after three years compulsory national service, playing any gigs he was offered. In 1998 he left Israel for Holland, before settling in London in 1999. Since that time, Asaf has found himself increasingly in demand with players such as Gilad Atzmon, John Law, Larry Coryell and Tim Garland while simultaneously running two trios of his own.

*Drummer* caught up with Asaf recently but before we could pose a question, Asaf enthusiastically began explaining his love of Konnakol, the South Indian rhythmic language that you may have heard Trilok Gurtu or John McLaughlin use.

"Konnakol is an amazing thing and you can practise it when travelling. I spend 90% of my life travelling, so I can actually practise now! It really works your brain; obviously you also need to practise physically but if you can do both then it really comes together. It has changed my playing quite a lot; I feel like I'm moving on to the next step. I'm not playing South Indian music but I have been listening to it for many years."

## **DON'T FORCE IT**

When it comes to practising, Asaf absorbs new things but is careful not to force them into his playing.

"The way I work is that I just work on things and let them bleed naturally into what I do. I don't want to force things. If there are elements fused within a musician, I think that they will eventually come out naturally and organically. If you try to merge things intellectually, it never works for me. The music must come first and then the concept comes later. I work on things and it's like something is slowly cooking there; I let it cook and it might take a few years. I've only been into Konnakol for about six months but already I feel that I think more rhythmically than I used to. I was never happy with the way I phrased and I wanted more clarity, of both idea and execution, and definition in my phrases when I played a fill or played a solo. Konnakol gives you that clarity because it's a very clear method. For instance, if you are doing a rhythmic exercise in Konnakol and lose one little bit then you lose the whole thing; you have to be focused on it all of the time and some of the exercises are very long. It stretches your mind in terms of playing over bar lines. It's like yoga; you have to stretch your mind to the extreme of its rhythmic capacity."



# Call

## SECOND CHOICE

Asaf began studying drums aged 12 but, surprisingly, it wasn't his first choice of instrument.

"Originally, I wanted to learn bass guitar but I couldn't find a teacher so drums were my second choice. I took drum lessons with a local teacher and then after a couple of years I took lessons with David Rich for about seven years; he was the first serious teacher I had. When I was 18 I had to join the army for national service. I convinced them I wasn't really fit for a combat unit so they put me in an administrative job. I was often not very busy so I was able to practise a lot on my practice pad. In my three years of army service I got my double stroke rolls together but I'm still working on my single stroke rolls!"

## LIGHTHOUSE TRIO

When Asaf moved to London in 1999, the diversity of music he played in Israel prior to that really helped him handle his current gigs.

"I got into playing jazz in London really as there's not much of a jazz scene in Israel. In Israel it's not a big scene and nothing is compartmentalised so I was playing a lot of Balkan music, avant-garde jazz and other interesting blends of music. Everybody plays everything because you have to in order to make a living. You can't just be a rock drummer; you have to play Jewish weddings also! The good thing about that is it develops your versatility and flexibility and makes you open to new ideas and styles. That kind of background has really helped me playing with Tim Garland's Lighthouse Trio. Tim called me four or five years ago and said, 'I have these instruments I want you to play' and he gave me a Hang and an Udu. The Hang is a relatively new Swiss instrument based on the same principle as Steel Pans but it has a much mellower sound and it looks like two wok pans stuck together. They are tuned and available in different keys. I hadn't played those instruments before so we worked together and developed this hybrid kit, where almost none of the components are conventional but I still play it like a drum kit. For example, I have two Bendirs, which are Middle Eastern frame drums, instead of a snare drum and floor tom and I have a Riqq drum which is a small Egyptian frame drum, instead of a rack tom. Instead of a bass drum I was using a Cajon but then I changed it to a marching snare and now I am using a Djembe. Also, I play the kit mostly with Hot Rods and brushes rather than sticks. I am still a drummer but I am playing different instruments and play more with the attitude of a drummer than a percussionist. ▶▶

# INTERVIEW ASAF SIRKIS

*Libra* is the latest Lighthouse Trio CD and it features the trio and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Before that we recorded an album called *The Mystery* which was all orchestral with drum set and percussion. That was a great project that also featured Chick Corea. Tim is amazing at getting a lot of very different things together in a very tasteful way."

## LEARNING BY MELODY

Although Asaf often plays some complex music, he prefers to not use charts.

"I try not to use drum charts; I try to learn everything by heart. I've always learned Tim's music by heart and kind of written my own part within it with his direction. He normally sends me a basic midi file so I can get an impression of the tune and its melody and I then listen to that and maybe transcribe it and learn it. The melody is very important for me and I always tend to learn music by melody and either



**"I try not to use drum charts; I try to learn everything by heart"**



play the drums with the melody or try to complement it. Even if it is just chords you may find a melody within the chords."

## SIDEMAN TO BANDLEADER

In addition to his work as a sideman, Asaf runs two groups of his own; Asaf Sirkis Trio is a fusion group whose latest CD *The Monk* was released in 2008. Asaf was happy to admit that the trio's music has a strong Alan Holdsworth influence

"Absolutely. I've been listening to Alan Holdsworth for many years. At one point I transcribed all of the drum parts from seven of his albums and that's actually how I met Gary Husband. He came to Israel in

1998 and played at the Red Sea jazz festival with Alan Holdsworth. I was also playing there and I just grabbed him and gave him my book of transcriptions and said, 'This book is about you!' Since then we have kept in touch and have played together a little. I didn't learn to play all of the transcriptions; I just wanted to know what was going on but it developed my ears a lot."

The Inner Noise, Asaf's other trio, is an organ trio with a difference, fusing classical organ and jazz.

"My father listened to a lot of classical and organ music such as Bach and French organ composers such as Maurice Durufle and Cesar Frank and I've been massively,

excessively even, into organ music for a very long time; particularly the organ music of Oliver Messiaen. There was a year or two when I didn't listen to anything but organ music. I had the organ music in my head and also Alan Holdsworth's music and, of course, I play drums so I combined the three. I had a very full sound that I heard in my head; sonically very loud and expressive.

The Inner Noise is an amazing band but it's hard to book gigs for. I'm known more in the jazz circuit and jazz promoters didn't really know how to take the Inner Noise but it looks like we are going to be working quite a lot with my other trio."

## FULL DIARY

Before disappearing off to his next project, Asaf mentioned some of his current and upcoming activities. It seems he won't be taking a holiday any time soon!

"I have gigs coming up with my trio, Tim Garland and John Law's trio which is a very melodic European sounding group. I also recently recorded a new trio album with the Swiss guitarist Nicholas Meier and will be recording another album with saxophonist Dan Stern. I am also writing some music for a new album but I think it will take a while for me to get it together and I don't know what form it will finally take." **D**

## GEAR BOX

### DRUMS:

12" Djembe as bass drum (on a DW cradle stand)  
14" Remo Bendir as 'snare'  
10" Riqq drum (traditional Egyptian frame drum)  
15" Bendir as floor tom  
8.5" Masterwork Metal Darbuka  
PanArt Hang Drum  
Emin Percussion Bass Udu Drum

### CYMBALS: ISTANBUL

20" Agop Turk Jazz Ride  
18" Agop Traditional Flat Ride  
Two 10" Agop Raw Bells as Hi-Hats  
10" Agop Trash  
8" Agop Traditional Splash  
8" Agop Alchemy Bell  
6" Agop Alchemy Bell

**STICKS: VIC FIRTH**  
**HEADS: REMO**  
Ambassador Coated  
**CASES: PROTECTION RACKET**