

Yotam Silberstein: Guitarist Deserving More Recognition

This series of jazz notes was begun with the idea of providing relief from the stress of the pandemic through the pleasures and transformational power of music. Now we can add to that burden our nation's reaping the harvest of seemingly unstoppable police brutality, institutional racism and civil animosity. There is no point to invoking "politically correct" even-handedness when right and wrong are so clearly defining themselves — one side is saying "let's end racial injustice" and the other side is saying "let's perpetuate white privilege." Yes, that's simplistic, but that's how I see it.

Whether you agree with me or not, perhaps you will believe as I do that great music can take us to new places and offer a mental respite -- the opportunity to glimpse something new, creative, and refreshing, something inherently worthwhile. Music, like meditation, offers a single point of focus that we can enter and — as the music unfolds — be uplifted, transported over the brick wall we run into daily as we try to come up with a practical response to what is beyond our control. Now more than ever, whatever our political opinions and inclinations might be, we need a vacation, however brief, from stress.

In this episode of One Track Mind, I want to introduce you to a musician I discovered a couple of weeks ago through following up some Youtube links to a live-streamed concert. Though he was not the featured musician, Yotam Silberstein, an Israeli guitarist, still young, caught my attention and held it for the next hour-and-a-half. For the gourmets among us, it might be like discovering a restaurant that has been around for a long time but one you had never heard of, one with a wide-ranging menu and every dish, though dissimilar from many others, is executed authentically and presented beautifully. Like every great jazz player, Yotam Silberstein can make every type of music his own through his interpretation of the original melody and the improvisation he builds upon it.

Silberstein grew up in Tel Aviv and began playing guitar at 10. He attended the Alon High School for the Arts, which was a platform for his winning many music competitions. Still in high school, he went to New York City for a summer and studied with the master pianist, Barry Harris. Not surprisingly, he served as a musician in the Israeli Defense Forces, which he joined after high school like most other Israeli teens.

As a result of winning another competition after serving in the Army, Silberstein's band performed at the prestigious Umbria Jazz festival in Italy. He soon won an opportunity to study at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York. Within a few years, he was hired as a sideman to first-class jazz players, enjoying especially long stints with James Moody and later on with pianist Monty Alexander. In New York, Silberstein learned to play a variety of music and felt drawn to Brazilian and Argentinian genres. In an interview you'll find in Link 5 below, Silberstein talks about the multicultural education he acquired in New York City.

What is most remarkable is the authenticity and apparent ease with which he adapts to diverse musical languages without losing his own identity as primarily a jazz musician. On guitar, he demonstrates a warm, singing sound, even at top speed. The fluidity of melodic lines and clear musical ideas make even his most adventurous improvising accessible to an open-minded listener. While Yotam Silberstein is not yet a household name (or whatever the jazz equivalent is), he should be.

Follow the links below for an introduction to Yotam Silberstein's music.

Link 1. "Tea for Two" (trio). Composed in 1925 for the musical "No, No, Nanette" by Vincent Youmans.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCrFoWOYxr0>

As an introduction to his music, listen to how Silberstein transforms a traditional American popular song, "Tea for Two," into a personal musical statement. The recording is from a live gig in New York in 2015, accompanied by pianist Aaron Goldberg, and bassist Yasushi Nakamura. The instrumentation recalls three famous combos of the 1940- 1950s: The Nat King Cole Trio (when the famous vocalist was a jazz pianist), the Art Tatum Trio, and the Oscar Peterson Trio — all featuring piano, bass, and guitar. The group plays "Tea for Two" the way it might have been rendered a half-century earlier, and progressively modernizes their improvisations over several improvised choruses. In Silberstein's last improvised chorus, you can see how far he stretches the song's harmony and melody. To help keep track of the improvisation, it may help to know the song is of the form A / B, each theme being 16 measures. The B theme begins the same as the A theme, but its last 8 bars (measures) are different. If you can hear that structure behind the improvisation, you will be better able to keep track of the melodic invention..

Link 2. "Nocturne" by Yotam Silberstein). 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRP-reE5rEQ&list=RDrCrFoWOYxr0&index=2>

As the title implies, the guitarist is evoking a nighttime mood, one of sophistication and graceful lyricism. It's a 9-minute recording, but if you want to get an insight into his lyricism, listen to his stunningly melodic approach to the tune's melody beginning at about 1:09 into the track.

Link 3. "Impedimento" by Aaron Goldberg. Live in Tokyo, 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxc8q3MaKgU&feature=emb_rel_end

A great illustration of Yotam Silberstein's fluidity and clarity of ideas. However creative, abstract and "outside" his improvising grows, the lines always make sense

and are executed with full tone and flawless execution. As he plays, imagine yourself singing the lines. Although I (and perhaps you as well) could never sing those lines, you will start to hear their speech-like quality and understand them as musical statements. Goldberg's piano solo is wonderful in its variety of rhythmic variations and often humorous melodies.

Link 4. Entitled "Blues," this sounds improvised on the spot). during a live recording at The Bar Next Door in New York City (2013). With Avishai Cohen on trumpet.β The song does not adhere to typical blues "changes" .(harmonic progression)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waiy2orQNmE&list=RDrcrFoWOYxr0&index=5>

An impossibly uptempo bit of "hard bop" playing reminiscent of the 1950s - 1960s, a style also called "straight-ahead" jazz at the present time. The group is fronted by Avishai Cohen on trumpet, who starts off the rather abstract soloing. At about 4:00 into the tune, Silberstein begins his solo and completely changes the mood, though he later gravitates back to the hard bop soloing when it began. This track is not identifiably as melodic (in the traditional sense, i.e., the ability to sing the solo) but it is my cup of highly-stimulating, intense tea, so I have included it.

Link 5. "Brazil" by Yotam Silberstein. Live at the Israeli Jazz festival in New York City. 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3fxMOTOKi4>

The show is introduced by Brian Pace who interviews the guitarist in between tunes. Though poorly recorded (drums too loud, uncontrolled reverb), the live performance shows the authenticity of Silberstein's musical travels into Latin America. The song is from his album entitled *Brazil*. (On this album, he has included in his band jazz luminaries associated with Latin music, including John Patitucci, Victor Feldman, and Claudio Roditi, and Paquito D'Rivera.) He is playing in a very different "mode" than in the other selections in these links. It's easy to hear the genre and stylistic differences even though you may not be able to describe them. His other recent album is called *Village*. You will find a great deal of Silverstein's music on Youtube and via his web site www.yotammusic.com.