

## Interview

# Lena Bloch

Interview by Joe Patitucci

Photo by Chris Drukker

**Jl:** Could you discuss your new recording and how it developed from a germ of an idea into the finished artwork?

**LB:** I think the recording became possible when I found the right people to do it with—and the idea of what it should sound like, came from this particular combination of personalities. It wasn't conceived beforehand. I met Dave Miller, a very gifted and intuitive musician, at the jam session and we had several gigs before we did this recording. Billy Mintz, an unbelievable orchestrator on the drum set, has been my drummer of choice for a couple of years. Once I heard Billy with Cameron Brown, whose playing I have always admired, I realized that was a perfect rhythm section for me. So when everyone agreed to do the record, we picked a studio time. Without arrangements, without discussion, we just played the material the way we heard it happening—each musician contributed an original. Plus we had a Warne Marsh's "Marshmallow" and Ted Brown's "Featherbed", rarely played, but well familiar to all four of us. I believe, this recording couldn't been done like that with different people. It would be different music.

**Jl:** What kinds of opportunities and challenges did you experience with respect to your musical pursuits, and interest in jazz, as you were growing up in Moscow, Russia?

**LB:** My parents love jazz and are both pianists, so the music of Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Duke., Count Basie, Billy Holiday, Ella ... was always in the air. But I wasn't at once attracted to it. I started as a classical pianist, then I played guitar and wrote art songs on Russian poetry, studied opera singing, and then switched to jazz vocal, which was very challenging. In Russia, people can really give you a hard time when you start doing something. I got no encouragement, but a lot of "no talent," "you will never make it" stuff. Which, thanks to my character, only made me practice longer and



more persistently. Suddenly I thought of a saxophone, a voice much stronger than mine, though so close to my breathing and my body. For about a year, I practiced for up to 13 hours a day—fighting neighbors and my parents, who, although supported my interest in music, did not support me doing something which did not sound good. I spent a lot of time in the great Lenin library, reading music books about Dolphy, Booker Little, Coltrane, George Russell, Yusef Lateef ... and copying them by hand. There were no copy-machines.

**Jl:** What were the motivators that led to your immigration to Israel in 1990, to attend Rubin Academy of Music and Dance?

**LB:** When the opportunity presented itself, I decided to emigrate, hoping to find a real school to study at, some real people to play with, students like me—and I really hoped to get more information - books, recordings, maybe even live concerts.

**Jl:** What was your experience like in Israel - as an artist and as a resident experiencing the culture?

**LB:** As a new immigrant, I was sponsored by the government, so I did not have to worry about work or place to stay for about a year. The Academy presented me with my first professional instrument, I was so happy. My teacher, Boris

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Visit Lena Bloch online at [www.lenabloch.com](http://www.lenabloch.com)

Hear Lena

Wednesday April 9, 2014, 8.30 PM

Seeds, 617 Vanderbilt Ave, Brooklyn

Lena Bloch – tenor saxophone; Russ Lossing – piano;

Dave Miller – guitar; Billy Mintz – drums

Saturday April 26, 2014, 8.30 PM

iBeam, 168 7th Street, Brooklyn, NY

CD Release Celebration

Lena Bloch – tenor saxophone; Dave Miller – guitar;

Cameron Brown – bass; Billy Mintz – drums

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Gammer, became a very close friend. He absolutely supported my playing and asked me to assist him in combo rehearsals and private lessons. It was all playing, listening and studying. Fantastic. In the summer of 1990 I went to the Red Sea Jazz Festival to play with a student group, and heard Wayne Shorter, George Coleman, Freddie Hubbard, Elvin Jones live so close... Harold Mabern, Billy Higgins, Benny Green... I will never forget this.

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**JJ:** Could you discuss your associations and experiences with Yusef Lateef and Billy Taylor, which were the product of your attending the Jazz In July program at the University of Massachusetts in the 1990s?

**LB:** Billy Taylor was the artistic director, and I did not have a lot of personal contact with him. He heard me play and invited me to stay in the US and attend the UMass Jazz Department program. Unfortunately, I had to go back to Europe due to the illness in the family, but in 1999 this invitation was still valid, and I came for my graduate studies. With Yusef, however, we had master classes twice a week every week. So he was my actual teacher. Yusef was very kind and encouraging. I was so happy I could finally talk to him in person after years of studying his *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. I haven't had a chance to speak to him again ever since. Just a few words of gratitude ... Can't express it in words ...

**JJ:** What kinds of advice, suggestions, guidance or words of wisdom or encouragement did you receive or pickup from Billy Taylor? Yusef Lateef?

**LB:** Yusef Lateef introduced us to a concept of atonal or free improvising over a standard harmony. He believed that each person possesses some kind of internal “melody”, something that keeps recurring in his/her playing. He told us to

think deeply and choose 9 different pitches, and then to compose a row out of them. Then improvise using this row over a standard tune. He did not like “hip” language and thought it demeaning, as well as the word “jazz”.

**JJ:** How did your experiences at the Cologne Conservatory, Germany, in 1999 help in your artistic pursuits in music, and as a jazz improviser in particular?

**LB:** I attended Cologne Conservatory in 1992 and graduated in 1999... Long study... In Germany, higher education is free, but I had to compete with other 22 candidates, to be accepted... So the study itself was very easy, more about

playing, rehearsing, participating in special ensembles and big band projects. I was very fortunate to study with John Taylor (UK), John Marshall (former Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Big Band), Keith Copeland. The big band was conducted by Bill Dobbins, Bill Holman, Bob Brookmeyer. In 1997, I started my own quartet and was writing music for it, as well as transcribing arrangements from records. Our pianist was writing a lot, too - so we were close to developing some special sound, although very much in the straight ahead tradition. In 1999, our pianist and I went to the Banff Jazz Workshop and met our future drummer and bassist there, who we were to work with for the next 3 years.

**JJ:** What were some of the essential understandings you gleaned from your experience at the Jazz Workshop in Banff, Canada, where you studied with Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner and Dave Holland.

**LB:** Kenny Werner was an artistic director in 1999, and he brought his *Effortless Mastery* classes there. That was very interesting, although I couldn't relate it to myself. I never had any fear of self-exposure or any stage-fright. Once I was very lucky to get to play with Kenny a couple of tunes in a duo. That felt amazing. Joe Lovano was doing master classes on solo and duo playing. I remember that he played a solo piece, staring at the audience all the time, and everyone was mesmerized. It felt so organically connected to the music, his look. The workshop with Dave

Holland was the most important to me, since Dave talked about symmetry in music, a subject that has always been fascinating to me. His lectures were based on the book *Symmetries of Music* by Erno Lendvai, a Bartok and Wagner scholar. The system that results from dividing the circle of fifths into equal parts, is called “Axis System”, and it gives a composer and an improviser incredible possibilities. It can be applied to melody as well as to harmony. It was fascinating to build all these beautiful ornaments, connecting various points of the circle—and they all had a concrete sound equivalent! Dave demonstrated in practice that intellect and feeling enrich each other, not exclude, as it often thought of superficially.

**JJ:** How did your introduction to the music of Lennie Tristano by Lee Konitz, with whom you studied, expand your perspectives as a jazz improviser?

**LB:** I met Lee in 2001, by a coincidence, and he invited me to come by. By the time I met him, I was facing a bad crisis. I really hated my playing, the compulsive, contrived, unnatural way it came out. I absolutely had no idea what to do to turn myself inside out. First thing Lee did, was to name exactly what I was suffering from. I felt washed out from within. He also gave me a cassette with Warne Marsh. I have never heard anyone play like that before. I started listening to everything I could find by Warne. Lee only talked about Warne in his lessons—if about anyone in particular. We never talked about Tristano, probably because I never asked. It was a couple of years later that I started to study materials, related to how Tristano taught—John Klopotoski's book about Warne, *The Unsung Cat*. Eunmi Shim's book about Lennie. Lee's lessons with me are mostly playing and discussing afterwards. I am sure he teaches other people differently. What is really crucial, I think, is Lee's precision, his exactitude in approaching melody, time, rhythm—together with guiding intuition, spontaneity and freshness. As he says “As soon as I hear me playing something familiar, I take the horn out of my mouth”. Again, the seeming opposites working together in reality... In life, I notice that a lot of times self-consciousness, ego, greed for attention, fear of failure—very non-musical things like that—stand in the way of continuous playing and attentive collaboration on stage. They block intuition, make me play because I “ought” to, make me play something which “has to be done”. So lessons with Lee addressed these issues constantly. The thing is, one can never get rid of such “oops”, but one can learn to effectively recognize the “worms” when they creep in. Then there is a technique of slow improvising, like playing in a very slow tempo without “double-time”, it constructs a situation where you develop continuity and time-phrasing feel, not being able to consciously “control” what you are playing.

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# Samba Meets Jazz Workshops — Open House, April 8

**Samba Meets Jazz Workshops**, directed by Brazilian bassist/composer **Nilson Matta**, will host an **Open House Faculty Concert and Jam Session** on April 8 at Jazz at Kitano, Park Ave. and E. 38th St., from 7:30-11 p.m. All are welcome.

The Open House is the kick-off for two 5-day summer workshops to be held in Bar Harbor, ME, July 20-26 and July 27-August 2. This year, award-winning guitarist **Dave Stryker** and Brazil's legendary singer-songwriter **Célia Vaz** will join SmJ's roster of all-star faculty artists.

Stryker, a perennial favorite in *DownBeat Magazine's* Critics and Readers Polls, will add a new dimension to the Instrumental Week, with his unique combination of soul-

jazz and blues styles. Vaz, who will teach during the Vocal & Instrumental Week, has earned wide recognition not only as a vocalist, but as an arranger, guitarist and educator. She is famed for her work with Brazilian superstars like Joyce and the Quarteto em Cy, as well as Billy Eckstine and other leading international artists.

Stryker and Vaz will join returning faculty pianist/bandleader **Arturo O'Farrill**, pianist **Matt King**, trumpeter **Claudio Roditi**, saxophonist **Harry Allen**, percussionists **Café**, **Fernando Saci**, and **Zach O'Farrill**, and Mr. Matta.

Matta, now in his sixth year with Samba Meets Jazz workshops, notes that the program is open to adult students of all levels and

backgrounds. "Our commitment is to personalize the program — to challenge each student at her/his own level. Our goal is not just for students to grow musically, but to have fun. With this faculty and our spectacular location on Frenchman's Bay, steps from Acadia National Park, that's not hard! We invite everyone to join us at Kitano, and see!"

For more information, contact Executive Director Alice Schiller at [Allice@SambaMeetsJazz.com](mailto:Allice@SambaMeetsJazz.com) or call 888-435-4003, or visit [www.SambaMeetsJazz.com](http://www.SambaMeetsJazz.com). RSVPs for the Open House are appreciated.

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**JJ:** Could you provide a glimpse into how the many influences that you have had—European Classical tradition, Middle Eastern, Turkish music and others - have helped to shape your style?

**LB:** European Classical music came first - ballet, then piano, guitar, voice... Then, of course, as a teenager, I listened to a lot of serious rock music - Deep Purple, Peter Dinklage, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd... In Germany, I was fortunate to play with a German cult band - Embryo, and they introduced me to Turkish and Arabic sacred music, North-African art music (Morocco, Algiers, Egypt) - which is extremely important to me today. In 1997, I met my Persian teacher, the great sitarist (not sitar, it's setar) and singer Kaveh Dalir-Azar, he taught me about Persian classical music and its tonal material. I feel very attracted by the sound and expressive techniques of the instruments like oud, nay, setar and tar, gimbri, archlute and viola da gamba.

**JJ:** Could you talk about some of the jazz artists with whom you have worked or studied - such as Mal Waldron, Johnny Griffin, Horace Parlan, et al - who have made a significant impact on either your artistry and your understanding of human nature?

**LB:** I first met Mal Waldron as he was rehearsing with Steve Lacy at the Cologne Conservatory, and then went to talk to him the next day at the concert hall before his performance. He asked what music I wish to perform, and I said "Be-Bop!" He replied that the circumstances have had changed since, and it is not possible to play this music today as it was possible back then. It has no meaning anymore. "You have to listen to modern music" - he said. "What music, for example?" - I asked. "Miles Davis". - "But I

don't like Miles Davis!" (true, I did not really dig him) - "Then... Eric Dolphy". Mal Waldron projected unbelievably strong energy, warm, kind, extremely focused. Playing with him felt like his aura elevated you above the ground. Johnny Griffin once invited me to sit in with his quartet without ever hearing me play. He later said: "I could tell from the way you answered me". He was a spiritual person, interested in the religions of the world, particularly Islam. He believed that all faith is one. Keith Copeland, a great jazz drummer originally from Memphis, who played with Griffin a lot, was my ensemble teacher at the Cologne Conservatory. He is responsible for "transporting" his good students to New York, helping them to get closer to the music scene here. He helped so many young musicians, it's amazing. Keith is a giant, with a huge heart. People like that to me are like facets of a human "crystal" - kindness, purity, beauty, strength - all in one, different sounds and different "modes" of being...

**JJ:** How has your activity as an educator benefited or challenged your work and development as a musician?

**LB:** When working for private schools, I am not able to choose the students, and I certainly believe that not everyone can or should study music and playing an instrument. So it takes a lot of mental energy, to deal with a student who needs to be motivated and pushed a-new each time. This challenge isn't related to music, it is more of a therapist' or psychologist' work. The situation like this makes all my preparation for the lesson in vain, and it can be very frustrating. On the other hand, my own private students are like my partners in our mutual development, we discuss things together, play duets, practice scales and arpeggios, invent little motives, transcribe solos and sing along. Teaching like this is like teaching myself, very useful and clarifying.

**JJ:** With the challenges that it takes to maintain and increase proficiency on one's instrument,

what do you do to balance staying on the path of mastery for the various woodwind instruments you play?

**LB:** Tenor saxophone is my main instrument, next comes alto, then flute - and clarinet is the last and not my favorite... I found out that saxophone, flute and nay (Middle Eastern side flute) all use the same approach in sound production - best described by Joe Allard. So that helps me to play my less practiced instruments when I need to. I also try to use the same type of mouthpiece and same name and number reeds on both saxes. Tenor saxophone has big range - 3.5 octaves, and I can imagine I play alto or flute when I practice tenor. Although I can play clarinet and flute, I am basically a single-instrumentalist, I think. My flute and my clarinet need a lot more attention, but I always chose to practice saxophones instead...

**JJ:** What kinds of activities help you relax when you're not performing or teaching?

**LB:** Practicing is very relaxing for me - like meditation. I'd just play various combinations of intervals - very slowly. Other than practicing, I try to listen to music as much as I can, sometimes even more listen than practice. Especially if my free time is deep at night...

**JJ:** Is there anything you'd like to promote or discuss that I haven't prompted you about?

**LB:** I'd like to give a shout-out that I've been working on a new transcription of Bach Two-part Inventions, for tenor and alto saxophones, trying to preserve the original shape of the melody and experimenting with a close position for both voices, rather than open positions, which I saw in other transcriptions. I also try to utilize a more modern range, especially for tenor, up to C4. If anyone is interested to try, please contact me.

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