

Yaron Herman - "A Rabbit out of a hat"

With the CD "Follow The White Rabbit" the Israely pianist Yaron Herman has now published his debut on the German label ACT Music. Fitting the title, he creates a world "behind the mirror" —and yes, the allusion to Lewis Carroll is deliberate.



Yaron Herman

The trenches and borders between the genres don't mean anything to *Herman*, as well as he doesn't follow the usual pianistic approaches in his music. His extraordinary musical orientation he owes to an equally extraordinary teacher, *Opher Brayer*...

Carina Prange talked to Yaron Herman for Jazzdimensions

Carina: Yaron, you were the first jazz pianist to perform in the "Forbidden City" in Beijing. What were the most insistent impressions you took with you?

Yaron: I wasn't aware I was the first until I was told! It was an incredible experience. Just sensing all the history and the visual attributes of the place is enough to make you think you're in a dream.

Carina: A look back. When you were 16, your first career as a professional Basketball player abruptly ended due to a knee injury. You started to learn the piano after that and now you are a professional pianist. When you switched your profession, was there a period of doubt or even fear?

Yaron: It always seems to be the case. You have to be aware that the door is closing, that another door is opening and that you might need help in finding the keys by someone who already opened that door, or is in the room to give you instructions. Only if you realize you're in jail you wish to escape. Its a question of awareness of one's own position. There wasn't any fear associated, I was to young—and foolish to use the jazzy reference—to be afraid. Things seemed to just flow and happen naturally.



Yaron Herman

Carina: Did *Opher Brayer* indeed give you lessons on the piano? Or did he by his means and methods "just" open an individual access to the instrument for you?

Yaron: Opher was my only piano teacher, but our focus wasn't on the instrument but rather on developing creativity in the approach to music and improvisation. For that he had developed a special method based on mathematics and psychology. I had to study everything that was technical and instrument related like sound, touch, technique, use of pedals, classical music etc, by myself through lot of observation of other pianists and lots of reading. There is a great deal of classical music literature about the piano that is quite fascinating and useful.



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Carina: Is it true to say that *Brayer* created a complete and universal philosophical and psychological system of his own to "open up" a person's talents?

Yaron: Yes, he has helped many people and not only jazz musicians. We can all do great things but we don't have the tools to do it. But one can learn how to discover them and develop them to achieve personal growth.

Carina: In what way did this change your attitude towards music and maybe your view on life and your perception of "facts and reality"?

Yaron: I can only say that it changed everything. If you have read the myth of the cave by Plato you might get an idea of the transformation possible or the efforts it has required. Before meeting *Opher* I had a quite superficial interest in music, I didn't listen to jazz or classical music at all and was just listening to popular music on the radio.

So when I met *Opher*, it opened up a door to this endless and beautiful world of jazz and improvisation. And then I realized I might have found my way to express what I was feeling and couldn't understand or express in any other way.

Carina: You left Berklee College Of Music after attending it for just two month because you were "repelled by the atmosphere of competition" of the schooling...

Yaron: It's not quite it, I have no problem with competition. It's a part of life and is everywhere. Don't forget I come from a sport mentality, so that wasn't the problem! It was more the fact that I didn't feel free enough to do my thing. I might have taken a different decision if I'd been older.

But at 18 I was just after my own thing. After having studied with a teacher who was constantly adapting to my rhythm and was challenging me all the time I felt I was losing that in a school environment. It was more and emotional decision than a rational one, but I'm glad I took it.

Carina: Is it better for a musician to stay outside of such a system? What is the best way to learn when you are, in some way, on your own?

Yaron: I guess each musician has to find the optimal way to become the best he can be. It's very individual.



Yaron Herman Trio

Carina: Meanwhile Paris has become a second home for you. Do you find the Paris jazz scene especially inspiring?

Yaron: Well, I don't necessarily find inspiration in one geographic place, since the world is becoming smaller so to say with YouTube, internet and other media. One can live anywhere in the world and still be hip! Paris is a wonderful city with some great musicians as is Berlin or Barcelona. But one has to always be open to what's going around in NYC or in other cities, always listening and advancing.

Carina: You are from Tel Aviv. To be born in Israel and work as an internationally successful artist, does that call for a special sense of political, cultural or social responsibility?

Yaron: Well, the only responsibility I feel is making the best music I can, and not miss any flights! (*laughs*) I don't think of myself as a representative of anything. I'm who I am and proud of it, but I don't see any reason my music should represent anything else but love and a message of hope and openness. Which is as far as one can go from politics. I don't believe in musical frontiers or human one's for that matter, a love supreme!

Carina: The Israeli bass player *Avishai Cohen* is famous for his extraordinary stage presence and his charisma. You are known for the same qualities. Is that just a coincidence?

Yaron: We know each other a little. We crossed paths in different festivals and have common musician friends. I guess we both really love to make music and do it with all our heart. I can only speak for myself, and music *is* my life. When I go on stage I give everything I got.

Yaron Herman Trio
Follow the white Rabbit



Yaron Herman - "Follow The White Rabbit"

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Carina: Did the title "Follow the white Rabbit" of your new album happen by accident or is there a connection to *Lewis Carroll's* book "Alice in Wonderland"?

Yaron: There *is* a connection. I was looking for a title to the album for a while until a friend of mine suggested this idea after playing some of the tunes with me the night before on a gig. I thought it fitted perfectly—because when you listen to the album, in the way it opens and then evolves and unfolds you can really get the sense of falling into a new world and going through some surprising twists in the plot. It's like a journey I would hope.

Carina: You also recorded a song by the band *Radiohead*. What fascinated you about the music of this band? Are there some "jazzy" vibes hidden inside of it?

Yaron: I think what attracted me to it as that it didn't have *any* jazzy vibes about it! *Radiohead* is probably one of the most inspiring bands today. Lots of jazz musicians love their music and are inspired by it. I just think that "No Surprises" is a fantastic song with a great emotional power. Which is very important to me when I choose to play a song.

Carina: *Brad Mehldau* also from time to time interprets songs by *Radiohead*. Is there something in their music that appeals especially to pianists?

Yaron: There is a great harmonic richness which is very appealing to pianists since the piano gives you so many reharmonization possibilities. But I think you can take anything and make it work. I even used *Britney Spears* one of my previous albums. (*laughs*)

In jazz the only limits are the limits of one's own imagination!

You can't really say the music is as rich or compelling, but one has always to remember that in jazz the only limits are the limits of one's own imagination. We can take any material and take it out of its context, and through improvisation somehow sublime it.

Carina: To be a musician, is that a way of life, a profession or a mission?

Yaron: I guess it has all the advantages of a mission and all the disadvantages of a profession.

Carina: If you compare it to a professional career in sport, are there parallels? If so, what are they?

Yaron: The idea of performance. When you go on stage you have to be concentrated and give a hundred percent. You are not trying to defeat anyone, but trying to win over yourself, which is totally interior. There are also notions of the discipline it requires, such as preparation, practicing, training.

When you play in a group, remember to pass the ball. Don't try and score all the points yourself. It's a team effort. Also having a healthy life hygiene—if you take 100 planes per year, you have to really take care of yourself. There are many others, I guess



Yaron Herman

Carina: You have developed a "theory of musical improvisation" you call "Real Time Composition". Does that differ from the concept of "instant composing" other jazz musicians propagate?

Yaron: Well, essentially improvisation is like composing, except we do it in real time. No time to edit, to change our mind, and to try something else. Everything has to happen in the moment and follow the logic of a written piece. One thing I've noticed when analyzing the solos of the masters from *Tatum* to *Coltrane* to *Jarrett* is that they are using systems and patterns which permit them to create structures and logic even in real time.

I was always intrigued by the idea of developing my own method instead of copying the patterns of others. I thought you could either learn a language or learn "how to learn languages". I wanted to be able to create my own.

Together with my teacher we started elaborating a system that would permit endless creativity without being linked to a specific style. We use basic mathematical models and graphs to achieve this. It would be a long story for this interview.

Carina: Okay, last question—do you have a philosophy for life?

Yaron: I don't really have one that I could tell you about in words. But I hope you can hear it.

Carina Prange

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