

## 1970

As recent stellar performances at the world's major venues have shown Israeli double-bassist-composer-vocalist Avishai Cohen is at the peak of his creative powers. Those who have followed Cohen's career in the past fifteen years or so will know that his musical references reach far and wide, moving seamlessly from classical to jazz and traditional songs. Cohen plays and sings magnificently, and often gives vent to his love of melody as well as the art of improvisation. Cohen's new album *1970* highlights the more accessible side of his talent without compromising his artistic integrity.

"It's not a jazz record," he explains. "I don't know what it is, but I've always had a connection to pop. I like pop as much as I like Bach and Charlie Parker. Singing has become very serious in my life over time. I've been asked by many people, when is the vocal album gonna come? Well, this is it, right here."

An entirely worthy successor to 2015's *From Darkness* *1970* is arguably Cohen's offering to date that has the greatest mainstream appeal, as it sees the bassist-vocalist unveil 12 pieces that range from heartfelt original songs in English such as *Emptiness* and *Blinded* to spirited reprises of Middle Eastern folk songs. Cohen and a superb band that includes regular percussionist Itamar Doari, oud player-guitarist Elyasaf Bishari, keyboardist Jonatan Daskal, drummer

Tal Kohavi, cellist Yael Shapira and vocalist Karen Malka, who featured on previous Cohen releases, have fine-tuned arrangements that are enviably concise and radio-friendly.

Unity, compassion and togetherness have been recurrent themes in Cohen's work to date, and he expresses those feelings vividly on pieces such as *Song Of Hope*. "I suppose the album is very much like a personal diary, with a lot of emotional stuff. I had to write *Song Of Hope* because of the state of the world and the times in which we are living."

Cohen sketches out a more confessional landscape on numbers such as *My Lady* and *Move On*, where he broaches the joy of love and the pain of heartbreak, drawing on the vocabulary of classic songwriters such as Stevie Wonder, the soul music genius who has had a great influence on several generations of jazz artists.

"Titles are always difficult," Cohen argues. "I wanted something specific but open and decided the music would be a throwback to and have a spiritual connection with the 70s. All my influences are almost African and definitely African-American, like Stevie, soul and funk which came before hip-hop, I like that too. I think that all of these influences are obvious, and I wanted a stamp that was clear. It had to be *1970*."

Cohen arranged the material for an electric rhythmic section in which the glowing sound of Rhodes piano

is prominent, and he uses this canvas to brilliant effect on the aforementioned tracks as well as on an imaginative reprise of one of the most timeless of gospel anthems, *Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child*. Nonetheless he plays acoustic bass with all his trademark virtuosity on several tracks, such as the Yemenite traditional *Se'i Yona*, with Elysaf Bishari's oud to the fore, which produces intense melancholy. As well as being the 'vocal album' **1970** marks a departure from previous Cohen releases in another way. The artist saw the need to draw on the talent of an experienced producer.

"I've produced all of my own albums up 'til now but for a record where I'm singing, playing and arranging I felt I really needed a producer, so I brought in Jay Newland. He is a great producer, engineer and mixer whose resume is incredible – Norah Jones, Charlie Haden - I mean he's worked with just about everybody. He was really focused as a listener and engineer, and he brought that real warmth to the sound.... that was exactly what the record needed."

Born in Kabri, Israel, Avishai Cohen grew up listening to the likes of the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and The Police as well as Ladino folk music and Sephardic traditional songs, so his affinity with the human voice is deeply rooted. Naturally, Cohen sang as well, but he revealed a great ability as an instrumentalist, taking up piano and bass guitar under the influence of jazz legend Jaco Pastorius.

When he graduated to double bass it became clear that there was a young master in the making and relocation to New York, to study at the prestigious New School Of Music, was the next inevitable step on his creative pathway. Life in the early '90s in one of the most iconic of jazz cities was not just about long hours in the rehearsal room. Cohen honed his craft both in clubs such as Smalls and also on the streets in a more guerrilla way, busking whenever he had the opportunity in order to broaden his experience of performance as much as he possibly could.

Although Cohen went on to work with emerging stars like Danilo Perez and the legendary Chick Corea, both as a member of his trio and sextet Origin, it became clear, from an early stage of his career that he would become an artist in his own right, eventually signing to EMI/Blue Note after issuing music on his own Razdaz Recordz label.

The critically acclaimed albums he recorded throughout the millennium, highlights of which include *Colors*, *Devotion*, *Lyla*, *Gently Disturbed* and *Seven Seas*, marked Cohen's potential as a composer as well as player. Also interesting was the way Cohen put his own spin on contemporary urban music and classic pop, covering pieces such as hip-hop legend Dr.Dre's *The Watcher* and the Beatles' *Come Together* as he continued to investigate his own Middle Eastern cultural heritage. It is no surprise to find a version of another Lennon & McCartney classic, *For No One*, on *1970* alongside the original

pieces in which Cohen tells stories with his voice and his sound. This new work reveals thus yet more layers of the artist's personality as he navigates familiar and unfamiliar territory both in terms of material and arrangements. 1970 was a significant year for many and *1970 is A* significant album in 2017.