

MODERN DRUMMER



Features

Ziv Ravitz

The Urgency of Now

Story by Jeff Potter

Photos by Bastien Burger

"It's hard to define what jazz is these days," Ziv Ravitz says. "In the end, it's the spirit of everything being possible." A drummer of fervent energy and inventive interplay, Ravitz freely blends elements of jazz, world music, avant-garde, and rock. His complex, fluid grooves and shifting textures conjure the sound of multi-percussionists wielding an endless sonic palette.

Growing up in Israel, Ravitz began playing professionally at age thirteen in his hometown of Be'er-Sheva and in Tel Aviv. "I saved up money since I was twelve to go to Berklee," he recalls. After graduating from the school in 2004 with a degree in jazz composition, Ravitz relocated to the epicenter of progressive jazz, Brooklyn. He soon toured the world and recorded with the Lee Konitz Quartet.

In addition to his ongoing six-year seat in pianist Shai Maestro's trio, Ravitz has performed with Kurt Rosenwinkel, Mark Turner, Yaron Herman, Omer Avital, Omer Klein, Joe Lovano, Joel Frahm, Mick Goodrick, Tomasz Stanko, Esperanza Spalding, Ben Monder, Ralph Alessi, trumpeter Avishai Cohen, TAQ, and Minsarah, among others. Here he talks about two current discs and reflects on the inner fire that fuels his passionate drumming.

MD: The Shai Maestro Trio is an ideal forum for your drumming style. You approach the kit organically, not necessarily structured by a hierarchy of layers—for instance, a “leading” ride cymbal or a “bottom” bass drum.

Ziv: While at Berklee, I met a drummer named Nat Mugavero, who was all about free playing. We had many talks and played duets together. He used to force me to go to a classroom with sticks to play the walls, the chairs. I realized how many sounds and elements you could generate from anything. The drums are a vast instrument. Vast!

A lot of drummers see it as only a function—keeping the time or marking the form. But the drums are an ocean of beautiful sounds. The only thing I want to do is to capture and utilize what is already there. There are lots of opportunities in using the drumset—even a slightly different texture will move the music differently. You could use the rim of the high tom as a ride cymbal for a whole song, and it could generate a specific feeling for the other musicians and for yourself and the groove.

MD: You use two snare drums, including one tuned very low. Is that for sonic reasons or to have access to legato notes?

Ziv: It's a combination. I want to create a different feeling for saying the same thing. It's more than just the tuning; the snare responds differently when it's tuned lower. It's a bit more sluggish, and the decay is different. So it offers me two snare options.

Sometimes I retune the floor tom to a different pitch in the middle of the show. Or I might not use the bass drum at all—just use the floor tom, snare, and hi-hat, separating the drums into different elements, reconstructing the drumset. For example, if I use the low snare drum and use the floor tom as a bass drum, it gives a very specific color. And I'll put a little towel on the floor tom to create a muted sound and use a mallet, and that creates such a different feeling of the beat.

MD: You often make mid-song kit alterations. What determines those?

Ziv: It depends on what the music needs. I might hear a need for a change of texture. For instance, during a soft song, if a bass player decides to play a busier bass line or creates a groove repetition, I might want to make the sound of the drums “trashier” by taking out a cymbal from my bag and putting it on top of another cymbal—but slowly morphing the texture, so it's not like, “Okay, now we're in a different part of the song.” Instead, you have to make everything come from within the music. The choices I make are not because I want to do them, but because it's what the music needs at that moment.

MD: You've released your fourth disc with Shai's trio, *The Stone Skipper*.

Ziv: The new album is by far the best one we've done, and I'm extremely proud of it. We did something we'd never done before, which is go into the studio four or five days, sleeping there and working from morning until 1 a.m.—trying to find the right thing. There are no edits; it is what it is.



(<https://www.moderndrummer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ziv-Ravitz-1.png>)

MD: While your previous disc with pianist Yaron Herman, *Everyday*, features surprising drum/keyboard duets, the new release, *Y*, takes a left turn.

Ziv: It's vastly different. This time it's a trio. The bass player, Bastien Burger, also plays guitar and keyboard. And we have guest singers coming from the pop world: Patrick Watson, Hugh Coltman, Dream Koala, and Matthieu Chedid, who's well known in France. We're trying to match the popular world and jazz world, but not in a way that's artificial.

We're taking it from the direction of the pop artists and having the jazz mentality on top of that—but producing the album in a rock way. It's a very produced album, but it will be the same live; the produced part will still be there, but the elements can be moved around and improvised upon.

MD: Did that concept alter how you approached your drumming?

Ziv: I incorporated a lot of electronics to increase my palette of sounds. The electronic setup that I use is a set of triggers on the drums going through a Nord Drum system, which then goes through my computer for further manipulation. I use either effects through Ableton Live or a completely different instrument triggered from the drums. There are moments when I play drums and triggered bass lines in order to free up the bass player.

MD: You toured with Omer Avital, who incorporates numerous international grooves, especially from the Middle East.

Ziv: That's a part of my sound. I come from Israel, and my grandmother is from Egypt. I heard a lot of music from that world growing up. Israel is extremely diverse musically. It's a young country, so people come from everywhere. The evidence of the immigrant sound is there—everyone is an “immigrant.”

Omer asked me to play things I hadn't played before, and it opened up a totally new page for me for understanding grooves in a different way. I had to play like the sound of four percussionists playing at the same time, but from a drumset. A lot of those sounds I developed, I use with Shai today.

I also toured for eight years and did four or five albums with [pianist] Omer Klein. We met playing with Omer Avital's trio. They both played a lot of Arabic music, North African and West African music, music from Iraq and Yemen. This changed my vocabulary. And I embraced my roots.

MD: There has been an increasing influx of outstanding jazz musicians from Israel, including you and Shai.

Ziv: I didn't go to music school in Israel. I grew up in the desert—nothing! I was not coming from the same world as some of the other jazz musicians. But what stands out with musicians from Israel is not the schooling—it's the mentality. It's a mentality of urgency. Before I left, my father gave me some advice that encapsulates what the energy of jazz musicians in Israel is. He said, "You go to a venue, put up your cymbals, you play the gig, take the cymbals off and put them on your back. You go back out on the street to go home and a truck comes by and kills you." I said, "Okay...?"

He said, "Now go back. You're just about to put the cymbals up on the stand. Put them on and imagine that this is the last gig of your life. Make every note count." That advice has stayed with me and is the mantra for every gig I play. A lot of jazz musicians come over from Israel with that urgency—that this gig, this moment, this note is the most important I will ever play.

MD: Is that fostered from growing up in a landscape of conflict?

Ziv: When I was in the sixth grade, I didn't go to school for half a year because of the Gulf War; we were in the shelter for six months. If you walked on the street, you went with a gas mask.

The urgency of life, the realization that life is fragile—you need to take the moment, because the most important time is now. When I look at what's going on today—we need to be real in the moment, not selling bullshit. As humans, we can see if something is real or not; we can tell whether the feeling is real. As musicians, this is our job. This is my mission. When we play music, we are supposed to share this moment on stage together with an audience—this piece of time suspended from anything else—and get from one place to another place. And the vehicle is the music.



(<https://www.moderndrummer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ziv-Ravitz-3.png>)

Tools of the Trade

"I think about the music the drums create beyond just the rhythms and the groove," Ziv Ravitz says. "There's a big place for harmonies and melodies—hearing the big picture of the music created by the drums. [So] I tune my drums to specific notes. I like having the variety of notes and using it as a harmonic instrument as well so you can really make it sing. The high tom is D, the floor tom is A, the snare is F, and the bass drum—depending on size or skin—is usually a D or E. My cymbals are G and F#."

Ravitz most often uses Canopus, Gretsch, or Yamaha Maple Custom drums, and his setups generally include two 14" snares that can vary in depth and material, an 8×12 tom, 14×14 and 16×16 floor toms, and a 14×18 or 14×20 bass drum, depending on the brand and the gig. His cymbals include 22" Bosphorus Masters and 22" Zildjian Constantinople Light rides, 14" Istanbul Agop 30th Anniversary hi-hats, 16" Jesse Simpson hi-hats, and a 20" Zildjian Dark ride modified by Jesse Simpson. His stick of choice is the Vater Sugar Maple Super Jazz 7A model, and his heads are Remo Coated Ambassadors.