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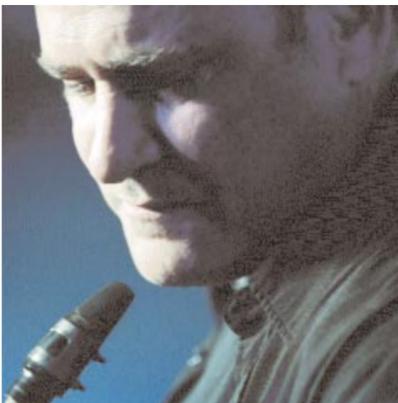
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NEN DEC 09

Back at Playhouse

One of modern jazz's most controversial, wacky, and downright loud players, Gilad Atzmon renews his links with Norwich with a concert next week. **ROB GARRATT** spoke to him.



Known as one of jazz's loudest players, Gilad Atzmon turned more than a few heads when he announced his latest release, a delicate album of ballads recorded with a string section.

What few people realise is that the Israeli-born saxophonist decided to record the album right here in Norwich, on stage at the Playhouse.

Appearing with a string quartet for the first time as part of a coup for the 2008 Norfolk and Norwich Festival, it was during the flights of exuberance associated with a premiere that saw him decide to devote the next 18 months to the project.

"I did it for the first time in Norwich for the festival and I really, really loved it," says Atzmon. "It was there and then that I decided to make this album and do this tour."

The project culminated in the release of *In Loving Memory of America* earlier this year, a self-conscious tribute to legendary bebop pioneer Charlie Parker, and his delicate *Bird with Strings* album.

"Whenever I heard *Bird* it always shocked me how great he was," explains Atzmon. "It's always kind of refreshing, devastatingly brilliant. It always remains and it's why I decided to be a musician in the first place."

It sees the prolific composer play moving takes on Parker standards *Everything Happens to Me*, *April in Paris*, *I Didn't Know What Time It Was*, and *If I Should Lose You*, all from the 1949 LP *Bird with Strings*, an album that recast the notorious bebop pioneer in an unfamiliar setting.

Hearing it for the first time as a teenager, it was a remarkable zeitgeist that helped craft both Atzmon's musical and political personality.

Born in Israel in 1963, at 19 Atzmon served in the Israeli Defence Forces during Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an experience that inspired him to turn against his people. He is now a fervently outspoken anti-Zionist, and is said to be as well known in some parts of the world for his fiery philosophical essays as his playing.

"I was a teenager, I wasn't into jazz but I loved music," recalls Atzmon. "I heard *Bird* on the radio and I thought 'oh my god, what's that?'"

"I went to the shop and I couldn't believe he was black. I was living in a Jewish state, in Israel, where everything beautiful was Jewish. I thought he must be a black Jew. I listened to all his friends and were all black."

"Through that that I started to believe how wrong Israel is. It's through that I saw it was a completely different place to I was. Its through that that I ended up in total support of Palestine and totally against my people."

In *Loving Memory of America* is the most recent chapter in Atzmon's career, an uncharacteristic homage to a lost time and place, it is at odds with his unsentimental style.

Moving to London in 1994, a decade ago he formed the *Orient House Ensemble*, a band who mix Atzmon's fiery bop phrasing with ethnic scales, epic arrangements and electronic effects.

Their breakthrough album *Exile* won the BBC Jazz Album of the Year in 2003, and established him at the forefront of the genre, a position that was solidified in the title of a recent book written by Chris Searle - *Forward Groove: Jazz and the Real World* from Louis Armstrong to Gilad Atzmon.

As well as recording five acclaimed albums with *Orient House*, his most bizarre move to date is an album and tour under the alter-ego *Artie Fishel*, a fictional deluded Jew convinced jazz was born in Israel. The album was a

peculiar mix of mock-interviews and ironic musical parodies.

As well as jazz, Atzmon, 46, has also written two comical philosophical novels, which have been translated into 27 different languages, and further explore his anti-Zionist tendencies.

But you would be wrong to call him an intellectual, and is featured gigging member of rock band *The Blockheads* - formally fronted by Ian Dury.

This year Atzmon added the role of producer to his CV, recording and playing singer-songwriter Sarah Gillespie's debut LP, *Stalking Juliet*, and is currently producing an album by Robert Wyatt.

His own *In Loving Memory of America* is more than just a tribute to Parker, but also sees the sees Atzmon looking back over his own storied career for the first time, reworking his own *Orient House* material alongside familiar standards.

"The strings thing is a major thing for me, something I really wanted to do for many, many years," explains Atzmon.

"There are a lot of things about *Bird* that are shocking. But I had to put some of me in it, it couldn't be any other way."

The album is also a romanticised, nostalgic look at the time and place that gave birth to Atzmon's heroes - Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane among them - an America of the forties and fifties has occupied a cherished vision in his idealistic mind.

But the academic, philosopher and author is less than dreamy about modern America, or indeed modern life - and argues we are at a pivotal time in musical history, at the birth of a recession-inspired "revolution".

He is full of rousing rhetoric, equally convinced of the truth of his words as the beauty of his music, repeating his adjective-laden speeches with the assuredness of someone rehearsing familiar arguments.

"I live here and I love it here," says Atzmon. "I was very happy not to live in America these last eight or nine years. Something pretty horrible to America."

"Something pretty horrible happened to British music too, we were under a serious iron fist of the music industry that flattened creativity and talent. It was devastating to watch."

"However the music industry officially died. It's a revolution. Those economics who took over the will have to die now. We are going to play again. I am far busier now in the context of a credit crunch than I've ever been."

■ Gilad with Strings, Norwich Playhouse, November 28, 01603 598598, www.norwichplayhouse.org.uk

■ Further listening: www.myspace.com/jihadaxeman

Primetime TV shows and sell-out tours have helped Lee Mack into the comedy big time, but the sitcom writer and stand-up tells **DAVID MARK** he still loves playing smaller venues like Norwich Playhouse.

Critically acclaimed BAFTA-winning comedian Lee Mack is returning to the live stage by kicking off his hotly anticipated new show with three performances in Norwich next week.

Now a near household name thanks to his starring roles in the multi award-winning BBC sitcom *Not Going Out* and as team captain on *Would I Lie To You?*, the tour will be packing venues many times the size of Norwich Playhouse, so we're lucky the Lancastrian comic loves playing smaller venues, and has a soft spot for Norwich.

The show - inevitably entitled *Going Out* - will no doubt feature his trademark brand of high energy banter, well crafted gags and sharp one-liners.

You're preparing for a major tour next year. You're currently playing smaller venues - though Norwich Playhouse is one of the bigger ones - in preparation. How's it going? I'm loving it. I just turn up at the little clubs and give things a try. It feels like I haven't done that circuit for a long time. There are new clubs I've never even played at. I'm getting all nostalgic, remembering when I started out. Sometimes it will be just 20 or 30 people in the crowd, and that's got a very different feeling to it than when you're playing for hundreds.

Do many big-name comedians still perform at the smaller venues?

Most do. It keeps a freshness to your act and it helps you to find out whether your jokes are going to make just you laugh, or anybody else. There's one place I love that maybe has a capacity of 80 people. Tim Vine, Omid Djalili and Andy Parsons have all tried stuff there. One night, the line-up was Omid Djalili, followed by Al Murray, and then the manager came out and said that he reckoned the crowd were all busy telling each other there was no way he could top that with a headliner. So he brought out Robin Williams, who did 15 minutes and brought the house down.

You're now very much a household name. Has your career panned out the way you always hoped or expected?

I truly never thought about the big time. My ambitions were very low. If I could make a living, I was more than happy with that. Things have just worked out rather nicely. Funny enough though, when I do go back on the circuit I almost miss the anonymity of being just one of the guys on the bill and trying to prove to an audience that I'm worth listening to. It was harder when I got well-known. People come to see you because they've heard of you and they like you, and that makes it easier in one sense as you know they like your delivery and your sense of humour and they'll hopefully laugh, but there is more pressure not to disappoint.

As well as your stand-up show, you have had big successes with *The Sketch Show* and *Not Going Out*. Tell us about your writing process. It's that old saying about digging for gold. In the old days I would just wander about and if something struck me as funny, I'd talk about it that night on stage. I've got to be a bit more structured now. Sometimes the writing process is tortuous. You just sit there at the computer and try to think of a gag that will bring the house down while you're sitting in a depressing empty room. But I'd say only 10pc of what I write ever sees the light of day.

Your friendship with co-star Tim Vine - who will also be appearing at the Playhouse early next year - is well documented. Do you find it easier writing for him on *Not Going Out* now that you are so well-versed in his comic delivery?

Tim's a joy to write for. Whatever he says is funny, so it makes life so much easier. I just rang him a moment ago, actually. I'd written a joke



Lee's got a soft spot for Norwich

The Sketch Show is fondly remembered by comedy fans. Why do you think it has never been listed alongside the truly great comedy series of recent years? We came along a little early, I think. At the moment, sketch shows are very popular. They're joyous and silly and there are a lot of them on TV. When we were making *The Sketch Show*, things like *The Office* were just appearing that had that natural, cynical edge, and that was what people were looking for at the time. We were just mucking about in silly costumes and there was a laugh track. It was old-fashioned. But people did laugh.

that wasn't really my sort of thing and said he could have it, and he returned the favour. He'd written a joke that he described as 'absolute filth' and that sort of thing doesn't really fit in his act, so he thought he'd give it to me. It's good to know I'm a repository for the unacceptable.

What does the future hold? Well, there's a new series of *Would I Lie To You* on the BBC which I think people will find funny, and *Not Going Out* is somewhat in limbo at the moment and not so easy to talk about. The next few months are all about the stand-up for me. It begins properly with these three shows in Norwich and then in earnest from February through May. I'll be doing a bit of work in America after that, and then who knows?

■ Lee Mack will be at Norwich Playhouse from December 3-5, then again on January 9. All four shows are sold out, but there may be returns if you're lucky. 01603 598598, www.norwichplayhouse.org.uk

www.leemacklive.com

Comedy previews

Back of the Net

Carrow Road, December 3, £10, 0844 8261902

The popular Red Card Comedy Club has been bringing stand-up to Carrow Road for a couple of years now, so it was perhaps inevitable that comedy and football would merge at some point.

This month they launch this great sounding new spin-off. A sports-based quiz show

inspired in no small part by Five Live's hugely popular *Fighting Talk*, *Back of the Net* is billed as "the sporting equivalent of a stand-up show, with audience participation". Expect a mix of comedy, quiz and Q&As - all with a Norwich City twist.

Premier League panellists for this opener include *Fighting Talk* regulars Bob Mills and Martin Kelner, Germany's 'ambassador of comedy' Henning Wehn (no possible sporting rivalries to talk about there, then), and NCF favourite Darren Eadie. The fun will be presided over by Norfolk-based sports writer Will Buckley and Tony Coward. **www.redcardcomedyclub.com**



Rob Grant

Norwich Playhouse, December 11, £15, 01603 598598, www.norwichplayhouse.org.uk

The multi award-winning co-creator of *Red Dwarf* and best selling sci-fi author takes a surprise leap into the unknown as he turns his hand to stand-up. But it sort of makes sense - large chunks of his books, including *Fat and Incompetence*, could be categorised as observational comedy, and his personality seems rather suited to a stand up arena, even if his mannerisms and physicality don't quite match up.

His show *Standing Up*, promises to apply the relentless laser scalpel of his comedy to Government incompetence, 21st Century technology and fun sized chocolate bars. Audience members who are not 100pc confident in their bladder control are advised to wear rubber underpants. **www.robgrant.co.uk**



Comedy Store Christmas Party

The Forum, December 14, £12 (£10 cons), 01603 630000, www.theforumnorwich.co.uk

Those nice Comedy Store folk have got four Christmas crackers lined up for this special seasonal edition of the ever popular monthly comedy gathering. There'll be the cheeky banter and comic buffoonery of Rob Rouse (pictured). A vibrant, twisted, snappy, raw, sweaty and flatulent comedian, he was the star of the cult E4 TV program, *The Pilot Show*, and has a top role in the BBC comedy, *The Bunk Bed Boys*. Expect him to go stellar sometime soon.

Joining him will be audience favourite Pierre Hollins, whose only other 'proper jobs' have included washing dishes in the House of Commons, labouring on a gas pipe line in the Middle East and teaching drama to the mentally ill. Meanwhile there will be the likeable laconic style and biting social commentary of Wayne Deakin. We are also being promised a very special guest. Santa? **www.thecomedystore.co.uk**