

# Assessing Atzmon

## Guest Column

In his keynote address at the recent National Critics Conference in Los Angeles, Norman Lear drew laughs with a reference to *On Bullshit*, the best-seller by Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt. But the message from Lear, the visionary sitcom writer, activist and co-owner of Concord Records, was serious. Artists and critics, he argued, are socially and politically vital because they “know how to cut through the ideological foghorns and B.S., illuminating piercing human truths.” It is refreshing when that’s the case, but artists and critics are as capable of doling out B.S. as they are of exposing it.

One of the subtopics floated during the conference was “how to review work that is socially/politically based.” During the Bush years we’ve seen no shortage of politically inspired jazz—Dave Douglas’ *Witness*, Maroon’s *Who the Sky Betrays* and Charlie Haden’s new *Not in Our Name* (with his resurrected Liberation Music Orchestra) are just a few examples, all part of a jazz-protest tradition that takes us back, arguably, to Louis Armstrong. Obviously, there is no one jazz standpoint on current events, nor is there one way to respond to political art. As journalists, reviewers, listeners and fans, we bring our own baggage to the work in question, and the best we can strive for in our reactions is openness, fairness and informed intelligence. With some political artists, however, dispassionate comment is all but impossible.

Take, for instance, the Israeli-born, London-based saxophonist Gilad Atzmon. A staunch anti-Zionist, Atzmon is the darling of Britain’s Socialist Workers Party—in fact, a return guest lecturer at the SWP’s annual Marxism conclave. But read Atzmon’s political writings (at [gilad.co.uk](http://gilad.co.uk)) and you’ll find a sensibility about as progressive as Idi Amin’s. There Atzmon writes: “[W]e must begin to take the accusation that the Jewish people are trying to control the world very seriously.... American Jewry makes any debate on whether the ‘Protocols of the elder of Zion’ [sic] are an authentic document or rather a forgery irrelevant.” He has also written: “To be a Jew is to be a victim and to enjoy your symptoms. To be a Jew is to believe in the holocaust [sic], to be a Jew is to believe in a historical narrative constructed around endless merciless sagas of persecution and harassment.... The victim strategy is the latest and most sophisticated form of Jewish supremacist segregation.” It’s little wonder that Atzmon has helped to distribute Paul Eisen’s *The Holocaust Wars*, a Holocaust-denial tract.

Oliver Kamm, a columnist for the *Times* of London, has been waging a campaign against Atzmon on his blog ([oliverkamm.typepad.com](http://oliverkamm.typepad.com)). Fierce critics of Israel are also weighing in. Sue Blackwell, an anti-Zionist activist in Britain, has removed all links to Atzmon from her Web site ([sue.be](http://sue.be)). Ali Abunimah and Hussein Ibish, no friends of the pro-Israel lobby, have denounced Atzmon’s fellow traveler Israel Shamir as an anti-Semite (Atzmon’s site features a prominent link to Shamir’s). Members of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty and Jews Against Zionism have condemned the SWP for giving Atzmon a platform.

Given this, jazz reviewers and fans face a conundrum. Atzmon’s

**How to discuss worthy music without accepting dubious politics?**

music—a passionate hybrid involving oud, various reeds and percussion, Middle Eastern vocals and traditional jazz instruments—is quite worthy. But how to discuss it without misconstruing or naïvely accepting Atzmon’s dubious politics? Not always are the stakes this high—after all, there’s no need to mull over Scientology every time we review Chick Corea. But Atzmon’s obloquy is another matter.

Jazz writers have fared rather badly in their assessments. Profiling Atzmon in the September 2003 issue of this magazine, Stuart Nicholson did what journalists generally should: He wrote in a level-headed, objective voice. The resulting portrait was restrained, respectful and woefully incomplete. Elliott Simon, reviewing Atzmon’s 2003 disc *Exile* for AllAboutJazz.com, was entirely hoodwinked, characterizing the saxophonist’s message as “a plea for understanding among Israelis and Palestinians....” Atzmon’s message is the opposite: “[W]e must help the Palestinians become as armed as their Israeli enemy,” he has written.

In a lengthy discussion board on AllAboutJazz.com, one participant rebuked Atzmon mildly for his “anger,” but also wrote: “Oh, I certainly find it refreshing to hear such views coming from someone with roots within the Jewish community of Israel.” Another offered this pearl: “There are many narratives in this world, and non [sic] has more justification more [sic], more validity or more right than any other.” A contributor in London replied, “I couldn’t agree more,” ending the exchange. Atzmon and others of his ilk are counting on this sort of gullibility and confusion.

The plight of the Palestinians is real, but Atzmon has crossed the line into anti-Jewish bigotry, and it’s disappointing to see how few in the jazz world have noticed. Stephen Graham, editor of Britain’s *Jazzwise* magazine, told me that Atzmon is “a popular draw on the live scene.” *Exile* was voted album of the year at the 2003 BBC Jazz Awards, and Atzmon’s latest, *musiK: Re-Arranging the 20th Century*, was in the running this year. The praise for his music isn’t unwarranted—though it has obscured the political issues raised by his work.

Writing recently in *Slate* about Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lee Siegel drew a useful distinction between political and “politicized” art. The former, he argued, tends to highlight the ambiguous and the unresolved, while the latter “invokes political categories [and] stays imprisoned within them....”

Atzmon’s work is nothing if not politicized, and that is his right. But critics also have a right to respond as they see fit. On that score, one would hope for a bit more tough-minded skepticism. **JT**