

Idit Shner
Nine Short Stories

There are any number of complex and overlapping stories that alto and soprano saxophonist Idit Shner can tell. These *Nine Short Stories*, however, are carefully chosen, documenting time well spent in the company of pianist Josh Hanlon, bassist James Driscoll and drummer Stockton Helbing. All except Driscoll were students together at the University of North Texas and spent four or five years playing together in small groups and big bands.

Although Shner moved to Eugene, Oregon in 2006 to take up her current position as assistant professor of saxophone at the University of Oregon, she had no intention of leaving her colleagues and classmates for good. “We’re all parents now in various stages of family growth, with too-full lives and careers,” she says, “but like any really good friends, I always knew we could come back and pick up where we left off.”

The fact that Hanlon, Helbing and Driscoll work together often as a trio in Dallas-Fort Worth also made them the ideal choice for *Nine Short Stories*. “Josh is a consummate pianist with amazing knowledge of harmony,” Shner says. “In addition to being a wonderful soloist he has the uncanny ability to read my mind while I’m soloing. Stockton has tons of chops and good taste, which is rare; he’s both reliable and collaborative and incredibly helpful in the studio. Though this was my first time playing with James, I was immediately impressed with his warm tone and solid time feel. He’s such an accomplished player, melodic and soulful.”

As for Shner, through her technical command, refined musical instincts and hard-earned professionalism she’s established herself as an impressive voice on the horn and a strong composer as well. She is a fiery and dedicated jazz improviser and composer, but also an accomplished classical virtuoso, deeply versed in the voluminous but little-known repertoire for classical saxophone. While she’s not out to argue any points about the intertwined histories of jazz and classical music (“I try my best to keep them stylistically as separate as possible — it’s important for me to be a native speaker in both languages”), her depth of knowledge in both is clearly a unique asset and a sign of her omnivorous aesthetic.

Her 2008 debut, *Tuesday’s Blues*, offered vibrant modern jazz arrangements of Jewish liturgical music in a quartet setting with the brilliant pianist Stefan Karlsson. Her 2010 release, *Fissures: 20th-Century Music for Saxophone and Harp* (with harpist Yumiko Endo Schlaffer), found her playing bass saxophone on Rokus de Groot’s “Cadenza” and Philippe Di Betta’s “Fissures” and concluding with Yusef Lateef’s gorgeous three-movement chamber work “Romance.” On her 2013 outing *Le Merle Noir* (with pianist Svetlana Kotova) she dealt with intensely demanding music by Messiaen, Philip Glass, Eugène Bozza and others. “When I play classical saxophone there is absolutely no jazz articulation,” Shner says. “When playing jazz, there is no classical vibrato, ever. In classical, the math problem has one correct solution; in jazz it has many different solutions, all equally correct, and at least two of them are blues.”

Which brings us to *Nine Short Stories*, and for Shner the cross-reference to literature is entirely conscious. “Think Kafka or Salinger or Etgar Keret,” she advises. “They create a complete universe and immerse you in it, you jump in wholeheartedly and then it’s gone in a flash. Same here: each tune has its own internal grammar, its own comping that matches the melody and solos. In the studio I told the guys how much I detest generic comping and how each tune follows its own logic. They really listened and I hope that’s apparent.”

The intriguingly asymmetric feels of “Revision” and “Hymn and Variations” came about through Shner’s exposure to non-Western musical cultures: “My next-door neighbor is a traditional musician from Zimbabwe. Sometimes he and his friends sit on the back porch and play and sing tunes from the old country. I love the interlocking rhythms and directness of folk melodies that withstood the test of time. ‘Revision’ was influenced by the African sensibility. ‘Hymn and Variations’ is influenced by classical Arabic music, where you have this gigantic orchestra and everyone plays these huge extended forms in thick unison, both together and not exactly together.”

In tackling Billy Strayhorn’s “Passion Flower,” an Ellington band staple and one of Duke’s many feature numbers for Johnny Hodges, Shner declares her debt to one of jazz’s definitive alto stylists. “His playing is so vocal and moving. It is very athletic — you need a lot of throat control and you really have to know what you’re doing. And even though it’s so beautiful I don’t know *anybody* nowadays who does that. I find that strange and an even better reason to do it. I played an all-Hodges concert a few months before the session and ‘Passion Flower’ was a favorite.”

Both “Departure” and “Arrival” were written on a plane, respectively at the start and finish of a trip to New York. The former is anticipatory, conveying a sense of the unknown laying just ahead; the latter tinged with the excitement of returning home to share positive news. In “Arrival” one hears hard-bop echoes in the band’s tight syncopated hits and spring-loaded unisons. “Departure” has a modern Latin-tinged feel, somewhat McCoy Tyner-esque perhaps; Hanlon’s sensitive chords under Driscoll’s fine leadoff bass solo serve as a perfect example of the “non-generic” comping that Shner insists upon.

Shner switches to soprano for the bright and engaging “First Waltz” and the sparsely lyrical “Like Satie.” The pitch range of these tunes was better served by the soprano, and the shift in tone color benefits the album as well. “In jazz,” Shner remarks, “with tenor and alto you really have set expectations: ‘Oh, they sound like Coltrane/Rollins/Chris Potter/Joe Henderson, etc.’ But the soprano is less codified and more open to taking on different roles.” Her beautiful sound and facility on the straight horn — on her classical recordings as well — is disarming and memorable.

The sound of Hanlon switching to Hammond B3 organ on “Angst as Usual” shifts the album’s tonal palette once more. There was no predetermined plan to do so, but the grit and, well, angst of the tune seemed to call for a raw timbre; in performance Shner has in fact used

distorted electric guitar to get the desired effect. But the studio had a quality organ on hand during the session, “and we just had to go for it,” Shner recalls.

Jazz listeners and those in the know regarding the Great American Songbook will recognize “Just Friends” as the source of the harmonic progression of “Not Friends,” the concluding track. Shner’s tune, however, is in the darker key of A-flat, in contrast to the original key of F. Interestingly, Helbing ad libs alone on the last eight bars of the head; he does it again when the head returns, after solos from Shner and Hanlon. The end of the form comes and Helbing is still at it, finally bringing *Nine Short Stories* to a close with an almost haphazard cymbal catch. “The band ditches the drummer mid-tune,” as Shner describes it, a kind of punch line built into the form.

“Not Friends,” in other words, turns the idea of band camaraderie and rapport on its head, but all in good fun. What it really reveals is a band comfortable in its own skin, making music on the highest level without losing sight of the most important ingredient of all: joy in human connection.

David R. Adler
Athens, Georgia
July 2017