

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of a man, Roni Ben-Hur, looking slightly downwards and to the left. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting his facial features. He is holding a metallic, reflective object, possibly a helmet or a piece of armor, which is visible in the lower right corner of the frame.

**RONI  
BEN-HUR**



*fortuna*







PHOTO: JOHN ABBOTT



- 1 Fortuna 5:47
- 2 I Got Lost In His Arms 4:55
- 3 Guess Who 5:25
- 4 Modinha 6:08
- 5 The Intimacy of the Blues 6:12
- 6 Were Thine That Special Face 7:50
- 7 A Sleepin Bee 4:29
- 8 Granada 4:55
- 9 You Are There 6:37
- 10 So Tinha De Ser Com Voce 8:46

RONI BEN-HUR guitar  
RONNIE MATHEWS piano  
RUFUS REID bass  
LEWIS NASH drums  
STEVE KROON percussion



# fortuna

FILE UNDER JAZZ



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# RONI BEN-HUR



Jelly Roll Morton famously said, "If you can't manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes, you will never be able to get the right 'seasoning.' I call it, for jazz." Roni Ben-Hur's music has an abundance of the Spanish tinge, but the seasoning is different indeed: His family's Sephardic Jewish origins trace back to Tunisia. "We came there from Spain at some point," he says, "and those Moorish roots still linger with us." His resourceful take on Isaac Albeniz's "Granada," originally for solo classical guitar, can be heard as a follow-up to his treatments of Tárrega and Villa-Lobos on previous outings. "It's very close to the music I grew up with, the Sephardic traditional songs, from the prayers. Early

Israeli popular music was influenced by that Spanish sound."

That sensibility courses through much of the music on *Fortuna*, particularly the Afro-Cuban feel that begins the title track (a trio version of which appeared on *Sofia's Butterfly* of 1998), or the rumba influence of "Were Thine That Special Face," a Cole Porter obscurity. "I mix all the Latin rhythms together," Roni declares. "For me it's very similar to North African music, so I try to bring that rhythm I grew up with, and it gets mixed with the Latin."

Roni, the youngest of seven siblings, is a guitarist who knows how to thrive as a valued member of a group. He's part of a wave of talented Israelis making a mark in the world of American jazz. An in-demand educator, he runs a popular adult jazz program at the Kaufman Center in New York, has established several successful youth jazz programs, runs music camps in the U.S. and Europe and has released two books and a DVD

series elucidating his "Talk Jazz Guitar" technique.

Roni brings all this experience to bear on the swinging, imaginative music of *Fortuna*, the sequel to his 2007 Motéma debut *Keepin' It Open* as well as *Jazz Therapy: Smile*, his fine duo outing of 2008 with Gene Bertoncini (a fundraiser for the Dizzy Gillespie Memorial Fund of Englewood Hospital, which provides care to the jazz community).

"Fortuna is my mother's name," Roni says, wistfully. "I was visiting her years ago back in Israel and the tune came to me. It was a reflection of watching her and seeing all the struggles she and my father came through, always coming up on their feet. Fortuna is also the goddess of good fortune, which has a strong resonance with my life and the attitude of my music."

Yet there's a certain sadness to *Fortuna*, one of the last recordings to feature the great pianist Ronnie Mathews, who succumbed to pancreatic can-

cer roughly six months after the date. Mathews was a vital presence on *Keepin' It Open* as well, and long before then, Roni and Ronnie had developed a bond: "The first time we played together and got to hang out was through my great friend [the late bassist] Walter Booker," Ben-Hur explains. With his authoritative time feel and harmonic mastery, Mathews is assured a place of honor in jazz piano history. And *Fortuna* is now a piece of that history too. "Ronnie was right on the money," Ben-Hur marvels. "From the get-go, he got the material and added a lot to it. Very generous, very creative, great to work with."

Heeding the "if it's not broken, don't fix it" rule, Roni kept drummer Lewis Nash and percussionist Steve Kroon on board from the previous album as well. "They've been playing together with Ron Carter for many years and they're each other's favorite," says Roni. "So it was a great gel between the two of them. Both Lewis and Steve have such a special sound and feel, and their imagination and cre-



ativity are endless. Every piece gets transformed. I love them."

Completing the lineup is Rufus Reid, a bassist of great renown, who, in addition to being Roni's Motéma label mate, happens to be a neighbor in Teaneck, New Jersey. "Rufus is a close friend, and one who's been a great positive force in my life," says the guitarist. Along with Kroon, Reid first appeared on Roni's 2005 Reservoir disc *Signature*, deepening the shared history of this band all the more.

In addition to Roni's originals, the Albeniz gem and the American standards, there are two songs on *Fortuna* by Antonio Carlos Jobim, "Soinha de ser Com Voce" and "Modinha," drawn from a Brazilian jazz repertoire that Roni has explored in depth with his friends and frequent duo partners, bassists Santi Debriano and Nilson Matta. (Roni also spent eight weeks traveling in Brazil in 1988.) "I read somewhere that Jobim's dream was to compose like Villa-Lobos," Roni recalls. "I think for 'Modinha' he was

thinking not bossa nova, but chamber music. So I took out the beat — there's no bossa nova feel at all." Another striking detail is the absence of piano. "I wanted the freedom to take it wherever I wanted," he adds, "and to leave more space so the percussion and bass textures could come out."

As a longtime disciple of pianist and master bebopper Barry Harris, Roni can always be counted on for a deep and direct approach to straight ahead swing, the marrow of the tradition. His own "Fortuna," Billy Strayhorn's "The Intimacy of the Blues," Harold Arlen's classic "A Sleepin' Bee" (with Ronnie Mathews aflame), "Guess Who" with its "old-fashioned, hip '60s backbeat": Roni anchors these tracks with a full, round guitar sound and an intuitive sense of band chemistry. He's also moving and harmonically savvy on the ballads, including Irving Berlin's "I Got Lost in His Arms," one of many songs he learned while running a summer camp and staging musicals for kids with Motéma artist Amy London, a frequent collaborator

who happens also to be Roni's wife, and the mother of his two children, Sophia and Anna.

Dave Frishberg and Johnny Mandel's "You Are There" is a timeless, yearning melody, a story of unthinkable loneliness. "I had in mind the parents who lost their kids in the Iraq war, this senseless war," Roni says. "The pain these people feel. It's always inside of you." Perhaps, too, it's a fitting farewell to Ronnie Mathews, who does not play on the track, and whose absence is now all the more resonant:

"I sometimes think there's just one thing to do  
Pretend the dream is true  
And tell myself that you are there"

— David R. Adler

David Adler regularly contributes to *Jazz Times*, *Downbeat*, *The Philadelphia Weekly* and he also serves as editor for *Jazz Notes*, the quarterly publication by The Jazz Journalists Association



PHOTO: JOHN ABBOTT



- 1 Fortuna** 5:47  
Roni Ben-Hur (Bohobza Music/BMI)
- 2 I Got Lost In His Arms** 4:55  
Irving Berlin (Irving Berlin Music Company/ASCAP)
- 3 Guess Who** 5:25  
Roni Ben-Hur (Bohobza Music/BMI)
- 4 Modinha** 6:08  
V. de Moraes & A. Jobim (Corcovado Music Corp & V M Enterprises Inc./ SGAE & BMI)
- 5 The Intimacy of the Blues** 6:12  
Billy Strayhorn (Tempo Music Inc./ASCAP)
- 6 Were Thine That Special Face** 7:50  
Cole Porter (Chappell & Co Inc./ASCAP)
- 7 A Sleepin Bee** 4:29  
Harold Arlen & Truman Capote (Harwin Music Corporation/ASCAP)
- 8 Granada** 4:55  
Isaac Albeniz
- 9 You Are There** 6:37  
Johnny Mandel & Dave Frishberg (Marissa Music/ASCAP)
- 10 Soinha De Ser Com Voce** 8:46  
A. Jobim & Aloysio de Oliveira (Ipanema Music Corp./ASCAP)

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Engineer: Dave Kowalski

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Producer: Roni Ben-Hur

Liner Notes: David Adler

Photography: John Abbott

Live Recording Photos: Andrew Lepley

Art Direction: Jana Herzen

Design: Kaitlin Doorley



Also from Roni Ben-Hur on Motéma,  
Keepin It Open & Jazz Therapy: Smile,  
with Gene Bertoncini. These titles and  
more at [ronibenhur.com](http://ronibenhur.com) & [motema.com](http://motema.com)