

Ellen Lefrak

passionate spirit

by Marco Maimeri

Born in the USA, once teenager, she moved to Israel, where she developed and refined her artistic studies, also working as an archaeologist. She divides her time between Jerusalem and Westport, Ireland, portraying Irish-folk and jazz musicians, with whom she shares the expressive flow and freedom. She has met so many jazz musicians and portrayed several: her main quality is to be able to capture their essence, just as jazz soloists do with melodies.

You were born in Yonkers, New York, but at 19 you emigrated to Jerusalem, Israel: what pushed you to leave your own country and settle down in this magical but troubled new nation?

I was in a Zionist youth movement, Habonim, from the age of 13, and felt that, as a Jew, my place was in Israel. In 1962 I went there for a year: I immediately loved it and still do.

Where did you develop your formative path mostly, in the USA or in Israel? And what could you say about this dual artistic education?

My art education in America was 3 years in secondary school and one year in Tyler School of Fine Art, Temple University of Philadelphia. Altogether they gave me a strong basis of the fundamentals: painting, drawing, design, etc. In Israel, during my first year, I took drawing and sculpture, while studying at the Hebrew University. After that there was quite a break while I got sidetracked to studying archaeology and working for 5 years as an archaeologist. During the last couple of years, I took some art courses and decided that it was what I wanted to do. In 1972 I applied to and was accepted in the Bezalel Academy of Art, where I received my BFA in 1976. This I see as the real basis to my artistic endeavors and formative path.

How was the Israeli art educational system in the 60s and in which way did it transform from then, if so?

Israeli higher art education was quite good then and still is now: I received quite a good artistic background. The lower educational levels didn't – and probably still don't – have enough focus on the arts. But today there are also various separate schools specializing in the arts.

Even now you work and teach in Israel, but since the early 80s you divide your time between Jerusalem and Westport, Ireland: what unites these two apparently different realities of your artistic life?

Actually I see a lot of similarities between these two apparently separate realities and I feel completely at home in both of them. Some examples: the separation or not of church/synagogue and state war and peace, 2 peoples struggling for life and control, nostalgia for the past, British control in both countries, divided cities (Jerusalem and Belfast), various problems of small and new countries. They seem to share many similar experiences.

You have specialized in Jazz portraits: how did this choice originate and what can you say about the book “Jazz Gallery”?

I lived in Eilat for a few years in the 80's and went to the jazz festivals since music has always been very important to me and I have loved jazz especially from a young age. At the festival I started photographing musicians and then working from those photos to make oils, pastels, silk-screens and collages. I never intended it to become a lifelong commitment, but once I started it was hard to stop doing jazz. The same subject gave me the opportunity to do my own improvising and reach out to various techniques and not have to worry about finding a new subject. The painting *Big Jazz Squares* was meant to be a summary of my jazz themes and from there I planned to do something new. However I found that I could not stop so I decided not to fight the impulse.

"Jazz Gallery" was my first book showing the bulk of my jazz works, especially the earlier ones. Some of the *editing* work and much support were given by Lynda Ludy. The book was published through Viovio.com.

What instead is the reason for your choice of Irish-folk musicians and what can you say about the volume "The Irish Connection"?

I have a great love for Irish musicians, so painting them was a natural extension of the jazz, as they both are musical forms that encourage the participation. Anyone who wants can simply join in. The principle for me is the same: capturing people creating music before my eyes. The people are so very different and this is an interesting challenge, and I have enjoyed every minute. Also, in a town like Westport it is easy to get to know the musicians, and it all becomes more personal. It is especially gratifying to see the musicians' reactions to my work. "The Irish Connection" is my second book and contains most of my Irish works: landscapes and musicians. I am hoping to update this in the future.

Are there analogies between the music you listen to – especially Jazz music – and your way of painting? And who are your favorite Jazz musicians?

This is a difficult question: I don't think that this was something I was completely aware of. The music and the musicians certainly influenced my choice of color, which grew much stronger and brighter. I have always tried to make my work freer and flowing like the music. Most of my favorite musicians are from the bebop era: Dizzy, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, etc. For me, this is real jazz. When rhythm and improvisation were shining through. I can enjoy some New Orleans traditional jazz and certainly like Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, but they do not affect or inspire me in the same way. Other favorites of mine are Art Pepper, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Charlie Mingus, along with many others.

Among these musicians there is also drummer Max Roach, author of the foreword of your book "Jazz Gallery": when did you meet him and what did this encounter mean for you?

I had the good fortune to meet Max during his first visit to Israel in 1991. He appeared during the Israel festival at a temporary version of the Blue Note. I saw his first performance, took photos and brought them to his next performance where I met his saxophonist, John Tussaint: I showed him the photos and I was brought in the *backstage* to meet Max. Max then asked me to make some copies for him and to come back to his next performance the following day. I was extremely excited. From then on we became friends. I had the pleasure of his company during my following two trips to New York City as well as his last trip to Israel. I greatly miss his friendship: it was an honor and a delight to have been his friend.

You describe your artistic activity as lonely and individualistic: is painting jazz for you a way of feeling part of "a collective creative process"? And why have you thinned out your visits to jazz clubs and festivals, maybe due to the transforming of jazz music?

Most definitely I want to feel a part of it all. This is my way of participating to the music. The more I like the music and the more I photograph, then I continue from there. For me, one of the greatest joys of music, especially jazz, is to be able to sit with complete strangers and create. Any changes in my going to performances depend more, unfortunately, on economic reasons rather than on the transformation of jazz.

There has been a strong debate on the Winter Red Sea Jazz Fest in Eilat and the Israeli cultural policies: how do you relate to this issue, could Jazz be a solution?

I am afraid that I did not hear much about this but I can say that no matter what ones political opinions are, this should have nothing to do with art, academics or music. Playing music should be a positive way to get to know people and overcome difficulties. Jazz could definitely be a solution, and a good one too.

Illustrations

In the first page, at the top: the artist;
at the bottom: "Freddie Hubbard [and Eric Dolphy]" (1995), enamel paint and oil bar on paper.

In the previous page: “Red Max Roach” (1995), enamel paint and oil bar on paper.

In this page, at the top: “Betty Carter #1” (1993), hard pastel on colored paper;
at the side: “Big Jazz Squares” (1996), oil on canvas.

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