

RONI BEN-HUR

Fortuna (Motema)



Guitarist Roni Ben-Hur's seventh album, traversing originals, standards, Spanish and Brazilian tunes, reflects his straight-ahead approach—in the spirit of mentor and longtime collaborator, pianist Barry Harris—while revealing his own musical roots and passions. Of Tunisian descent, Ben-Hur absorbed the influences of traditional Sephardic songs and prayers, integrating them into North-African and Latin rhythms. Case in point is the album's emphatic title track, its 6/8 African groove spiked with a Latin twist as it swings out.

Looking to Spain—the origin of Sephardic Jews who dispersed to North Africa and throughout the world during the Spanish Inquisition—Ben-Hur offers an imaginative rendition of Isaac Albéniz's "Granada." Two Jobim gems, "Soinha De Ser Com Voce" and "Modinha," add Brazilian flavor, the latter played with a chamberish quality, sans piano. Tenderness abounds on Irving Berlin's "I Got Lost in His Arms" and the Frishberg/Mandel ballad "You Are There," while master pianist Ronnie Mathews sears on Harold Arlen's "A Sleepin' Bee" (sadly, this was one of Mathews' last recordings). Ben-Hur's original "Guess Who" has the feel of vintage bebop.

A keen storyteller, Ben-Hur's dexterous, melodic and emotive playing is supported by a tight-knit cast of stellar musicians with a history of playing together, affording the session a sense of familiarity. Mathews, drummer Lewis Nash and percussionist Steve Kroon appeared on Ben-Hur's previous recording, *Keepin' It Open*, and Rufus Reid, featured on the leader's 2005 album *Signature*, rejoins on bass. But it's Ben-Hur who holds it all together, his skill and warm tone underscoring the band's chemistry on this well-conceived musical journey.

SHARONNE COHEN