

Village Ambassador

Anat Cohen offers a fresh, multicultural clarinet sound to the jazz world

By Dan Ouellette Photos by Michael Weintrob

Within the span of a little less than a month this summer, Anat Cohen performed in front of two diverse audiences, captivating both.

On July 13 at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Rotterdam, Holland, the clarinetist/saxophonist and her quartet delivered an exuberant set in front of a large jazz-minded crowd. Most of the people there were curious to catch the reeds player who has captured the Rising Star Clarinet prize two years in a row in the DownBeat Critics Poll. Cohen not only proved to be a woodwind revelation of dark tones and delicious lyricism, but also a dynamic band-leader who danced and shouted out encouragement to her group—whooping it up when pianist Jason Lindner followed her clarinet trills on a Latin-flavored number by chopping up the clave and flying into a dissonant space. With her dark, curly, shoulder-length hair swaying to the beat of the music as she danced, she was a picture of joy.

On a hot late afternoon on Aug. 7, Cohen and her band took their song to the streets, this time on an outdoor stage in New York's Union Square in front of people bustling by on their way home from work, lazily hanging out while snacking on barbecue from street vendors or sleepily lounging on the small grass lawns. It was a totally different audience—not necessarily jazz aficionados, but music buffs who gravitated to the stage because of Cohen's groove and bubbly, woody tone on the clarinet. The group offered no balladry as they

breezed through an amalgam of styles, sometimes Brazilian with a Middle Eastern vibe, Afro-Cuban with an Israeli folk sensibility, classical with an Ivo Papasov-like wedding party gaiety or straight-up jazz where Cohen snake-danced on clarinet with guitarist Gilad Hekselman.

Different crowds, similar response. The audiences stayed put instead of wandering off—at North Sea to any one of the 15 other stages presenting music; at Union Square to any number of shops lining 14th Street at rush hour.

"It doesn't matter where we are, whether it's North Sea or here," Cohen said after the Union Square show ended with rousing applause. "We're having fun, which is what the audience is picking up on, and yes, we're busy." She added, "Almost doing too much," before skipping off to do a duet with guitarist Howard Alden at the chamber music venue Bargemusic at the Fulton Ferry Landing in Brooklyn. A few days later she jaunted off to the Newport Jazz Festival, where she was enlisted by festival impresario/pianist George Wein to be a member of his Newport All-Stars group that also featured Alden, bassist Esperanza Spalding and drummer Jimmy Cobb.

Has Cohen's rise to prominence been meteoric? Not if you've been following Cohen's longstanding but on-the-fringes Stateside career, first in Boston and then in New York with a variety of bands, from Brazilian choro groups to her own Waverly Seven band that pays tribute to Bobby Darin.