



Ryo Kawasaki

Ryo Kawasaki – one of the greatest Jazz-fusion guitarists – comes to Beirut in April, but first talks to **Natalie Shooter** about a lifetime in music.

What records first inspired you to get into jazz?

Harold Land/Wes Montgomery, 'West Coast Blues'. Kenny Burrell, 'Midnight Blue'. Paul Desmond/Jim Hall, 'Take Ten'.

When did you first pick up the guitar and why?

I studied violin when I was very little, then I started the ukulele at the age of eight or so and I kind of mastered the instrument around the age of 10. My mother gave me my first nylon string guitar on my 14th birthday when my hands had grown big enough to play guitar, so I switched. Since I already knew the mechanism of chords on a ukulele, it took me only a few months to adapt it to guitar.

You played with a number of Japanese jazz bands back in the 60s, what was the jazz

scene like there?

Jazz was really big in Japan during the 50s, 60s and 70s. Somehow the sound and mood of jazz fitted nicely with Japanese social consciousness, and still does. Japan is also historically the second largest jazz market next to the US and it has its own jazz history from almost the same time jazz was invented.

How did you come to join the Gil Evans orchestra?

To this day, I don't know how he knew about me. In 1973, I arrived in New York and a friend offered me an immediate gig with Joe Lee Wilson as part of the Newport Jazz Festival. Soon I was jamming regularly as part of the jazz community's 'loft scene'. A few months later, I walked up to my apartment and found a stranger waiting at my door. It was Gil Evans and he invited me to join

his orchestra, which was then working on a jazz recording of Jimi Hendrix compositions, but Jimi died a week before the project started in 1970. I also played on another Gil Evans album on RCA, 'There Comes a Time', with Tony Williams on drums.

Were you disenchanted with jazz music when you stepped out to write your own music software?

My nature is in sound engineering and electronics; I became a musician and guitarist as byproducts of that nature. I program exactly the same as I improvise, write articles or compose – there's no difference whatsoever – I just get the idea and urge to write software and start typing scripts.

You played in Beirut two years ago, how was the experience?

I loved both the people and the

city. It was a very friendly and memorable experience. Now the EU zone where I live is too over-civilised which I don't enjoy so much, particularly aspects such as that I can't smoke inside – I need to smoke inside.



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What are you working on at the moment in Estonia?

I have been developing online software for the UK immigration law firm to automate their entire works online. It is a huge job because it requires the highest security, reliability and privacy. I'm developing everything alone. I have a few regular groups in Estonia that perform quite regularly. I also work for a new Japanese label to mix and master their new releases, and I work for the Estonian Jazz Festival 'Nõmme Jazz' helping their productions.

What have you got planned for your concerts in Beirut?

My recent direction of music is to generate spontaneous improvisational music among musicians, not over-rehearsed or packaged, but based on memorable themes, exciting rhythms and sophisticated harmonies – so it will be along those lines. I believe that we musicians must fully enjoy first, in order for an audience to enjoy our music. So no matter what, I will be enjoying doing these concerts in Beirut!

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Thur 14-Sat 16, 10pm
EM Chill (01 565313)
Entrance pre-sale LL25,000 (inc. one drink), door LL30,000 (inc. one drink)
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For the full interview visit timeoutbeirut.com/music