

IDAN RAICHEL



Letting Israel's Many Voices Be Heard

STORY PHIL FREEMAN | PHOTO BARZI GOLDBLAT

When people outside Israel think about the country, their image is generally that of a simplistic dichotomy: Jews vs. Palestinians, end of story. But the country isn't just some cratered patch of desert on the edge of the Mediterranean; it's a cosmopolitan nation with cities as well as kibitzes. Living in those cities are people from all walks of life, with all sorts of ethnic backgrounds, from the region and beyond.

Songwriter/producer/multi-instrumentalist Idan Raichel was struck by the idea of showcasing some of the many voices his homeland was harboring. "I was working on demos in a studio I set up in my parent's basement and was inviting many different singers and

musicians to work with me. I was hoping to create demos that would lead to more work as a producer or songwriter, but it developed into the recordings that are the basis of the album."

The Idan Raichel Project didn't stay studio-bound for long, of course. "After the songs started getting airplay and there was a demand for a live show," Raichel recalls, "I decided to invite seven musicians of various backgrounds, each an exceptional artists on their own, to participate in creating a stage show. We sit in a semi-circle on stage, I am off to the side, and each artist gets a chance to shine. I thought this embodied the collaborative spirit of the project."

Raichel's U.S. CD, on upstart label Cumbancha, is actually a compilation culled from two Israeli albums—2002's self-titled debut,

and last year's *Mi'Ma'amakim* (Out Of The Depths). One of the tracks, the hauntingly beautiful "Bo'ee" (Come With Me), also appears on the Putumayo compilation *One World, Many Cultures*, a showcase for genre-blending collaborations that features Cheb Mami paired with Ziggy Marley, Taj Mahal accompanying Toumani Diabate, Alan Stivell alongside Youssou N'Dour, and many other surprising and rewarding encounters. Raichel has dreams of collaborating with performers from everywhere in the world. "I would love to work with singers from the Arab world such as Khaled, Cheb Mami, Souad Massi and Faudel," he says. "I'd also love to work with West African artists such as Salif Keita, Youssou N'Dour, Oumou Sangare, and especially Tinariwen, who I met when we both played at WOMAD in Singapore. I think they are great."

The power of Raichel's music lies in its combination of ancient and modern, reminiscent of Moby's looping of crackly blues and gospel 78s on his album *Play*. Traditional instruments are heard alongside guitars and electronics, and some of the voices, singing in ancient languages, are live, but others are sampled. Raichel manipulates the sounds, adding echo and reverb and synthetic rhythms occasionally reminiscent of hip-hop, but with the desolation of a desert post-sandstorm.

"Bo'ee" is entirely electronic, with vocals by Yair Ziv and Shiran Cohen floating amid the artificial sounds, perfectly demonstrating Raichel's self-effacing production style. "I always start a song with the vocals," he says, "and I let the melody and the rendition of the song guide how the rest of the song develops. Then I just add what the singer needs to support him or her. If he needs only an acoustic guitar then we give him that. If he needs something more electronic to contrast with what he is doing then we add that." The vocals on "Brong Faya" are particularly startling, fed through static and hiss to create a feel not unlike late-'90s productions by dubby UK dance artists Leftfield.

Raichel's been making music almost his entire life. "I started playing the accordion as a child," he recalls, "and I was exposed to all kinds of different music, everything from Gypsy music to Argentinean tango, French waltzes, Israeli folk, whatever. It taught me to keep my ears open to different sounds. I listened to a lot of different music growing up, from Miles Davis to Oum Kalthoum. I studied jazz in high school. I became interested in

Ethiopian music when I was counseling some Ethiopian kids and started listening to Mahmoud Ahmed, Aster Aweke, Gigi and others."

This newfound interest in Ethiopian music was the initial impetus behind the project, and tracks like "Mi'Ma'amakim," which contains samples from the traditional Ethiopian song "Nanu Nanu Ney," are the result. Wagderass Avi Vese, who sings on the track, immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia at 14. But perhaps unsurprisingly, given the open-ended and collaborative nature of the music, Raichel's expectations and early ambitions were quickly exceeded. "When I first started working on these songs, I was focusing more specifically on the Ethiopian sound, but I eventually began adding more Middle Eastern and Arabic flavors, Yemenite sounds and even influences from the Caribbean and South Africa," he says.

I use the vocals as the foundation of the song, and try to add the elements that I feel will enhance that particular singer's performance.

Indeed, there are over a dozen vocalists featured on the disc, part of a total musical cast of nearly 70 musicians of wildly diverse backgrounds. "The songs 'On Sabbath' and 'Brong Faya' feature Sergio Braams, who grew up in Suriname and Curaçao and now lives in Tel Aviv," Raichel says. "Most of the hip-hop flavored stuff on the album is performed by Braams, who is actually singing in a Dutch Caribbean patois. Mira Anwar Awad, who sings on 'Comfort Me,' is a Palestinian Arab who lives in Haifa and is a well-known actress in Israel. A man from the traditional Yemenite community named Yihia Tsubara, who is in his 70s, and his son Shalom Tsuberi, came to me to document their performances of the Diwan, an ancient collection of songs that they know by heart."

Different traditions, different countries, different generations—all come together in Idan Raichel's studio. *The Idan Raichel Project* may be a CD, but the larger Idan Raichel project is one of cultural and musical unification: a noble goal indeed, particularly in a part of the world many associate with sectarian conflict and religious intolerance. •

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