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THE ARTS

Music group brings Israeli multiculturalism to Bay Area

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Idan Raichel plays keyboards with his ensemble, whose members are of Ethiopian, Iraqi, Polish and Egyptian descent.

An Israeli musical ensemble, the Idan Raichel Project, is touring the United States to celebrate Black History Month. That an Israeli group would be honoring black history is a head-scratcher for many Americans, who often cast black-Jewish relations as adversarial. But there are many black Americans who are Jewish, and a sizable number of Ethiopians and Black Jews who are Israeli.

Today, indigenous African and Middle Eastern Jews make up just over half the Jewish population of Israel. Nonetheless, says Boaz Nol, campus regional liaison at the Israel Center of San Francisco, "to bring Israel in as part of Black History Month in America is unique and unexpected by the people here. It seems strange. But that is the real Israel."

The Idan Raichel Project, whose Bay Area swing was initiated by the Israel Center, includes members of Ethiopian, Iraqi, Polish and Egyptian descent. It already has performed in New York, Boston and Santa Cruz, and will appear at Stanford University on Tuesday.

The Project blends diverse musical styles, languages and lyrical texts. For example, the opening song on its first, self-titled album begins with holiday incantations recited by a kesh -- Ethiopian Jewish priest -- against the background of traditional Ethiopian instrumentation, electronica and percussion. The title song on the newly released second album, "From the Depths," is a modern love song revolving around text from ancient Jewish psalms.

"This kind of mix," says Gadi Gidor, head of A&R for Helicon Records in Israel and Idan Raichel's manager, "was never tried before in Israel, definitely not in the commercial way."

In Israel, world fusion music began in the 1950s, as Jewish refugees and immigrants streamed in -- mixing traditional sounds from countries such as Morocco, India, Turkey and Hungary. Mizrahi music, or "Oriental" music, excelled in this fusion and is the No. 1-selling music genre in Israel.

However, when the rescue airlifts Operation Moses and Operation Solomon brought the bulk of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1984 and 1991, respectively, Ethiopian music remained on the margins of Israeli society for complex political, economic and social reasons. Although Ethiopian clubs popped up across the country, the songs performed there never made it past the confines of club walls.

Enter Idan Raichel, 27, a third-generation Israeli of Eastern European heritage. From a young age, Raichel was drawn to global music. Following his three years of service as a keyboard player in the Israeli army band, Raichel worked as the music director of a boarding school in Netanya, where there was a strong Ethiopian presence.

"I was exposed to Amharic and Tigrean music," Raichel recalls. "I started to hear lots of cassettes from Addis Ababa -- village music, like Ethiopian pop and reggae, or the native village songs. Then I started to ask teenagers in my program

where I could hear live Ethiopian music in Israel. It's not very common; you can't hear it on the streets. I started to search for Ethiopian restaurants in South Tel Aviv, where you can hear live Ethiopian music. I went to these clubs and started to hear lots of wedding songs, as well as songs for other occasions."

After becoming a music producer four years later, Raichel recorded a demo tape in his home studio. He worked with Ethiopian musicians and producers, blending their lyrics, chants, melodies and instrumentation with songs he had written over the years. He sent the demo to Helicon Records, not expecting much. But Gidor identified Raichel as the next big thing.

"When I heard Idan's demo," he recalls, "the combination of Amharic and Ethiopian culture within contemporary Israeli culture was striking. All of a sudden there was a light put on this culture, this small, wonderful culture living among us, which not many people in Israel had come across. It had social and artistic significance."

With the backing of one of Israel's largest record labels, Raichel's album catapulted Ethiopian language and music motifs into Israeli pop culture. The first recording went triple-platinum, with four No. 1 singles and a top 10 listing in 2003. The second recording, which has been out almost a month, went gold two days after it was released.

"Israelis didn't listen to Amharic music before this," says Cabra Casay, 22, one of the Ethiopian Israeli singers touring with the Idan Raichel Project.

"Everyone knows Amharic now," says Vograss Vesa, another Ethiopian Israeli singer in the ensemble. "It's fun. People from the community give us a lot of praise."

Community leaders agree that the group's music has generated interest in Ethiopian Jewish heritage and that it has opened doors that were previously shut to Ethiopian Israelis. Some, however, question why it took Raichel for Ethiopian heritage to be valued by the greater Israeli society.

"People are listening to Idan Raichel because he is European Israeli, because he is white," says Alamu Baleta, youth project director at the Ashdod Community Center in southern Israel, where there is a large Ethiopian population. "The Ethiopians gave him all the ideas and words from our culture, but it's as if it's the voice of Idan Raichel. . . Israelis still don't recognize the many talented musicians from our community, don't relate to them as they do to other Israeli artists."

To value and encourage the expression of Ethiopian heritage, says Shlomo Akele, director of Bahalachin Cultural Center for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, Israeli society needs to get behind the Ethiopian community -- by bolstering community-run organizations with sufficient resources, for example. And yet, he reasons, progress comes in small steps and must be welcomed.

"As long as the community doesn't have the support, someone else who does have the support can present (aspects of the culture), and people will accept it," he says.

On Jan. 31, as the ensemble toured the East Coast, masses of Ethiopian Israelis gathered in front of government offices in Jerusalem, protesting the quota on immigration of Falash Mura -- Jews forcibly converted to Christianity in Ethiopia, and then left behind during the airlifts to Israel. Israel has never had a quota on any other Jewish group, according to Avraham Neguise, director of South Wing to Zion: The Association for the Ingathering and Absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and enforcement of this policy has caused thousands of Ethiopian families to suffer separation from their loved ones.

Still, ensemble members say they focus on their music and seem uninterested in the political backdrop of their work.

For Akele, however, there are many levels of social significance to the music -- especially its success: "One thing that's good is that people in Israel are hearing the Amharic language on the radio now," he says. "It raises their curiosity about the culture."

The ensemble's scheduled Bay Area appearances have raised local curiosity as well.

"It will open opportunities for dialogue, which is always a good thing," says Estifanos Baissa, assistant director of the student Programs and Activities Center at UC Davis -- one of several organizations co-sponsoring the ensemble's visit on the Davis campus. "I think it will open the eyes of the black students and community to the fact that we do have black Jews, and it adds to the wonderful diversity of the black community and African diaspora. "

Numerous African and African American groups are co-sponsoring the ensemble's visit at each campus. In addition, all proceeds from a UC Davis appearance will go to the Jewish World Service's relief efforts in the Sudan. The idea was the brainchild of Maayan Davis, 18, an activist with Aggies for Israel and Students Take Action Now for Darfur.

"My involvement with these organizations, and my participation in this project, is what made me think of donating the proceeds," she says.

Although the Ethiopian element of the Idan Raichel Project is the most compelling for many, it is just one aspect of the ensemble's world beat flavor.

"You see all these different shades and colors of Israel, through the people onstage and the music being played," Gidor says. "If you want a firsthand glimpse of the Israeli melting pot, then this is the show to see."

"It's a good opportunity to expose people to the multiculturalism of Israel," Wolf says, "that it's not just white, Eastern European Jews -- which is what people have contact with here on campus."