

Can one musician weave together the disparate cultures of Israel? **Daniel Harris** meets the visionary Idan Raichel

Hearing voices

When somebody claims “to reflect the social character of Israel through music”, it’s hard not to respond with a sad shake of the head. But with 70 members, countless ethnicities, and ages ranging from 16 to 83, Idan Raichel’s assertion that his musical Project exemplifies the many faces and facets of Israeli life is nowhere near as outrageous as it first seems. Now, after a world tour that has taken in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas, there’s a fervour for an Israeli cultural experience that for once transcends the political.

Five years ago, Raichel was working as a counsellor at a boarding school for new immigrants, immersing himself in what he repeatedly refers to as “Israel’s beautiful melting pot”. The pupils were mainly Russians who had arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Ethiopians transported by the various airlifts that brought more than 10,000 people to Israel via the refugee camps of Sudan. Raichel’s motivation was helping teenagers on the cusp of self-determination to make sense of it all: “For the very first time they were forced to challenge themselves, to ask themselves, ‘What am I?’”

Unlike most of the Russians in Raichel’s charge, the Ethiopian youngsters tended to eschew their homeland’s rich tapestry of influences in favour of the hip-hop and reggae subcultures that they found in the clubs of Tel Aviv. Eager that they take pride in their heritage and keen to learn about it for himself, Raichel pushed them to explore and celebrate their own traditions — “to make sure they understood their roots before they became Israelis and took on board everything that that entails”.

What it means to be an Israeli is illustrated perfectly by Raichel’s own musical journey. As a child he learnt the accordion, playing the Gypsy-inspired klezmer that was a legacy of his parents’ Eastern Europe upbringing,

before entangling himself in the numerous musical strands entwining in Israel from around the world. After some time as a session musician, he set up a home studio, inviting as many people as he could find to join him. After assembling all the contributions into a demo tape he was offered a recording contract and formed the Idan Raichel Project. Blending Israeli pop with Ethiopian folk music and infusing it with Arabic poetry, Yemenite chants, biblical psalms and Caribbean rhythms, Raichel managed to co-ordinate the disparate traditions of Israel’s multi-ethnic community into a single and coherent whole.

The result is a melodic chorus of catchy tunes and lively beats, fused into an original and exotic sound, although Raichel refuses to reduce discussion of his work to an analysis of its constituent parts: “You can talk about lyrics, melodies and singers as

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different elements, but that detracts from the overall power of the songs — it’s about the complete entity”.

Constantly refreshed by regular waves of immigration, Israeli society’s absorption of new arrivals is swift. “We live in a super-small island, where we can’t cross the borders around us, so we live together, all the communities. We celebrate the Mimouna, the seventh day of Passover, with the Moroccan community, we go to Henna ceremonies before Yemenite weddings. We visit Arab villages, we visit the Beduin in the south, we serve in the army with the Druze. We embrace it all because we’re all immigrants, each of us bringing our own roots.”

These claims of integration might seem incompatible with Raichel’s three years of national service, but he disagrees. “We need the army to protect us — sadly, that’s just a fact. But

it doesn’t mean we don’t love the many different people in our country. Our project, for example, is an Israeli project, not a Jewish project — we have Arab singers and Christian singers, and we make them into role models. In doing that, we introduce people to their neighbours and show them that they’re kind of similar.”

Raichel’s new song, *Milei Koleh Mibehi* — *Refrain Thy Voice From Weeping* — captures this sentiment absolutely. Based on a passage from the Old Testament, it’s a message of hope for those who have lost loved ones in war and conflict, regardless of where, who or how.

This, though, is about as political as he’ll get, preferring to leave debate to the professionals and his music to speak on his behalf. “We don’t shout politics in your face — on a basic level, our songs are just simple love songs. You can make social state-

ments indirectly, you don’t have to yell.” This subtlety is reflected in the Project’s new album. If its first two records were snapshots of a youthful and outward-looking national consciousness, showing to the world what the news misses out, the upcoming release is more gnomic and personal. “Touring for the past few years, I discovered that what I love most is just to stay in Tel Aviv, and to travel inside not outside — you can make your own party, your own rave, on your own in your bedroom. So the record talks about personal thoughts, like going to a shrink — it’s about the life of a person who exists within his own four walls, alone with his thoughts and dreams.”

Such is Raichel’s popularity that those thoughts and dreams will not stay inside his four walls for long. ■ *Milei Koleh Mibehi can be downloaded from iTunes now*



SOUNDS

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Idan Raichel’s influences range from Ethiopian folk to Yemenite chants