

His world

Israeli artist Idan Raichel brings people together with global sound

By Joan Anderman, Globe Staff | January 26, 2007

The sound of Israeli pop music is, by and large, the sound of pop: Artists such as prog-rocker Aviv Geffen, singer-songwriter Ivri Lider, and vivacious vocalist Sarit Hadad routinely top the charts. So when a young keyboardist, producer, and composer released his namesake debut album, "The Idan Raichel Project," nobody would have predicted that Raichel would become an Israeli superstar -- least of all the musician himself.

"I was very surprised," says Raichel, on the phone from his studio in the Tel Aviv suburb of Kfar Saba. "First of all it was a very lo-fi sound, done in my parents' basement, as demos. The second thing is that in Israel the idea of world music on the main charts is very unusual. It's not on the radio."

If "world" is a loose definition for ethnic musical hybrids, Raichel takes the concept to a new level. More than 70 musicians from a vast swath of indigenous backgrounds contributed to his two Israeli releases. Tracks from both of those albums have been compiled for his first US release, "The Idan Raichel Project," which came out in November on the Cumbancha label.

"It's not a band. It's not one man. It's all these people coming together," says the 29-year-old musician. Drawing on the wealth of musical talent in Israel's burgeoning immigrant populations, Raichel brought together Yemenites and Arabs, Moroccans and South Americans, Eastern Europeans and Ethiopians, as well as third-generation Israelis. The youngest musician on the album is 16; the oldest is 84. "I have to admit," Raichel says, "that the idea was to record with my friends. So it's not that I'm recording with an Ethiopian singer. I'm recording with my neighbor who is by chance Ethiopian."

While Raichel's original intention may not have been to send a message of tolerance and solidarity, the Project's multicultural profile is as appealing to many as its global sound -- a heady blend of modern ambience and ancient traditions.

"There are a lot of controversial political issues going on concerning Israel, and we really wanted someone who could bring people together with a message of hope and unity," says Anna Berezina, a member of the Brandeis Zionist Alliance, which arranged for Raichel's on-campus concert on Wednesday. He'll perform with an eight-

member ensemble composed of musicians from Iran, Turkey, Uruguay, Israel, and Sudan. "The timing is amazing, considering who was just here," she adds, referring to Jimmy Carter's recent visit to the college.

Raichel's personal musical history is itself expansive. As a child he played accordion, an instrument with a repertoire that led Raichel to discover Argentine tango, French waltzes, and Gypsy music from Eastern Europe. When he began studying jazz piano as a teen, Raichel immersed himself in the work of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Keith Jarrett. During his time serving in the Israeli Army, Raichel played covers of rock and pop hits. Later, while working as a counselor at a boarding school for immigrants and troubled youth, he became familiar with Ethiopian village music -- one of the most prominent elements on the album.

"The Eastern African community in Israel is one of the most interesting," Raichel says, "because they've kept their roots and traditions alive for thousands of years, and it's never been heard in the mainstream."

David Schommer, a New York record producer and creator of Bole2Harlem, an Ethiopian-American music collaborative, says that "there's never been an industry that supported Ethiopian musicians, as there has been for musicians from Mali or Senegal. It's been underground, and there haven't been modern artists that translate to a world-music ear. But I think we're living in a really provocative time for music, finally, with an openness for blending cultures. I think you could take a kid from Idaho and play him something like this and he might listen."

Raichel writes love songs, he says, "pure and simple." There are no political statements; he has no social agenda. But there's no denying what Raichel calls the "side effect" of his musical project.

"At the end of the day you see this great, how do you say it in English, rainbow of people, from Jamaica to Yemen to the Sudan camps. We don't deal with politics," Raichel reiterates, "but peace isn't about signing contracts. It's about creating a factory at the border of Israel and Lebanon that people can work in. I'm not sure a Hasidic teenager from Brooklyn knows much about his African-American neighbor in the same city. You can talk from here to tomorrow, but in the end you just have to do it."

Joan Anderman can be reached at anderman@globe.com. For more on music, visit boston.com/ae/music/blog. ■

© Copyright 2007 Globe Newspaper Company.