

Raichel sings the blues
By Dalia Karpel
Ha'aretz January 18, 2005

At the age of 25, Idan Raichel says he's tired. What's bugging this young man, who recorded a blockbuster album that fuses Ethiopian and Israeli music in the basement of his home?

Until half a year ago, Idan Raichel was an unknown keyboard musician. Today, after selling nearly 60,000 copies of his CD "Idan Raichel's Project" (Helicon), he is almost a household name in Israel. Without any prior warning, the debut album of a musician from nowhere that fuses Israeli pop with Ethiopian music, mixes Hebrew with Amharic, and was recorded with the participation of guest musicians and singers in Raichel's home studio with no outside financing, became a the equivalent of a tribal bonfire.

At weddings and memorial ceremonies, the album's hit songs - "Bo'i" ("Come"), "Im Telekh" ("If You Go") and "Medabrim B'Sheket" ("Speaking Silently") - are anthems, almost part of the canon.

"Raichel is the most refreshing thing that happened to Israeli music this year," says Dubi Lentz, a music programmer for Army Radio and a member of the European Forum for World Music Festivals. "Raichel's music touches on everything that is happening today in current music and is connected with the tremendous interest in Ethiopian music, and it does the touching so delicately that it's just pure fun. I played the CD for people abroad and they were all enthusiastic."

The group's appearance at Bar-Ilan University on students' day was "amazing and moving," says Cabra Kasai, 21, the Ethiopian singer in the group who performs the music on stage. Born in Sudan, she was an infant when her parents were brought to Israel during "Operation Moses" in 1982. She grew up and went to school in the northern Negev town of Kiryat Malakhi and served in the Education Corps' singing troupe in the army. It was there that Kasai met Raichel, who did reserve duty as the troupe's musical arranger. During the recent performance she sang and recited a text in Amharic, which she had to learn by rote, because at home her parents spoke Tigrinya. (Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, is the most widespread of the dozens of languages and dialects in the country.)

"Raichel knew my voice and my vocal range, so he asked me to be in the show," she says. She is still on a high from the performance at Bar-Ilan, which took place the night before we spoke.

"Hundreds of people sang along with us - they all knew the words by heart - and screamed and asked for autographs. The girls tore their hair out and shouted, 'Idan, Idan, I love you!' How is he going to cope with that? Well, he chose this profession, so he'll have to deal with it."

`It's my CD'

At Moshav Ganei Yam, in the Sharon area, Raichel conducts a rehearsal with tranquillity that projects self-confidence. Taking part are the singers Wogdaras ("Avi") Wassa, a young Ethiopian singer who grew up in a trailer camp at Naveh Carmel in Haifa, singers Din Din Aviv and Cabra Kasai, and four other singers. They are preparing for the official premiere performance of "Idan Raichel's Project" at the annual World Music Festival, a top-quality event, to be held June 5-7 at the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center (the Project will appear on June 7). The sarcastic comments that Raichel hurls in the studio play a part in maintaining tension and concentration.

He grimaces when asked if the name of his album (which evokes the "Alan Parsons Project") isn't a bit megalomaniac.

"If I had called the album just 'Idan Raichel,' not only would it have been more megalomaniac - people would



Idan Raichel. "There was a period from the age of 20 to 23 when I wasn't functioning. You couldn't see it outwardly. Most of the time I saw my psychologist." (Reli Avrahami)

have thought that Raichel performs all 12 songs. I wrote the 12 songs and I arranged and produced them, but I perform them together with other vocalists. On the other hand, we are not a group. It's something in between, a kind of project, you know. I don't regret the name and I think it will accompany me for a long time."

About 30 singers and musicians are involved in the CD, and Raichel objects to the remark that they remain anonymous for the most part. "All the participants are credited and I always talk about them and will keep doing so," he says. "I know how important it is that Yair Ziv sings 'Come' on the CD, because I can't sing like that, and I know how important it is that Mulugeta Tedesa and Ortal Ofek performed 'Speaking Silently,' because otherwise it wouldn't have the sound it has. It's my CD, yes, but I know how important its colors and details are. Let's say I didn't force anyone into it, and if any of them had said they don't want to be part of it, I would have found replacements for them. But if they came and brought their colors, they are part of the reason that the album sounds the way it does, for good or for bad."

Wassa and Kasai, who are taking part in the live show, are grateful for the opportunity Raichel has given them. "I left my job as a security guard for the train and joined him," says Wassa, 22, who did her army service in the Paratroop Brigade and has so far sung only in Amharic at clubs and weddings. "We are really cool about one another, we're like a family," she enthuses.

Raichel feels the same way, though he notes that in this particular family, he is the daddy. "None of the young people on the CD, with the exception of Din Din Aviv, who sang with the Gaia group, was known - apart from Ivri Lider, of course, who produced 'Come,' and Avi Singolda, the guitarist. It would be an exaggeration to say that I used people; by the same token, you could say that they used me. Everyone takes it and does what he wants with it. 'Idan Raichel's Project' wasn't a group or a band. It was my album, on which I hosted people."

All grist for the mill

Raichel, 25, is quiet and modest, and his cautious choice of words reflects a tormented soul. He "agonized tremendously" before deciding to go on stage with the Project. "But when the offer from the festival came, I said, that's it, we're jumping into the deep end." The songs will be performed by a small vocal group, and Raichel, who once said that he sings "like an omelet," will sing anyway at the snazzy Performing Arts Center.

The idea of an encounter between cultural extremities is not new in music, of course, as in the other arts, and Raichel is not the first in this country to interweave Ethiopian elements with local pop, which is Western in spirit. Still, his experience of the melting pot made it come out natural and simple, on the one hand, yet also deep and penetrating. The precision is surprising in light of the fact that Raichel's music does not have a family foundation. He is an Israeli-born Ashkenazi.

"My music has two aspects: There are the words and the melodies I write, and there are the fusions that I create between ethnic groups, between currents and between people, and in the encounter between them everything is open," he explains.

"I approach music without definitions. I record everything that attracts me or that seems interesting to me, and I accumulate materials, including sketches with performers and with musicians. I invite some of the people to the studio to record things for me. If the material can stand on its own, I make a track. For example, at the festival there will be one song by a singer who will not be on the stage. His name is Bongai Xulu and he is a singer from the Zulu tribe in South Africa. His voice will be heard from a computer, with the group accompanying him on the stage. It won't be easy, because you don't have his movements or his dynamic."

The lyrics of his big hit were also born this way, in a spontaneous encounter with voices that interest him: "A young Ethiopian woman I met in Kfar Sava wrote a text for me, a love letter saying that she can't fall asleep at night, so she goes downstairs, sits on the bench next to the house and thinks about how happy she will be when she sees her beloved. I never heard anyone talk like that in my life, certainly not a native-born Israeli woman. It's an experience from a previous life. That text went into 'Come.'"

What is your connection with Ethiopian music in the first place?

Raichel: "I don't have any special empathy for the Ethiopian community, though the Ethiopians in Israel are a community that reflects powerful authenticity. I record with Ethiopians for the same reason that I record with others - with Sergio Brahms, a singer and musician from the Caribbean, for example. I recorded a prayer of Kasahu Zimro, the kes [spiritual leader] of Kfar Sava, with a Hebrew prayer by Yosef Cohen, for the same reason that I go to the Yemenite synagogue in our neighborhood in Kfar Sava and record there. I record all the time. I don't limit it to Ethiopian music only. The album originally had a piece with Arabic music, which was dropped in the final editing, because it didn't fit the overall concept."

Could it be that you are looking for a musical identity?

"Many people in Israel have strong roots. Groups such as Lips, or Sahara, have powerful Moroccan roots. Some people take those roots and transpose them to the center or to the extremities. Ofra Haza took her Yemenite music and brought it into the mainstream, Kobi Oz took Tea-Packs and brought it forward. I have no roots and I don't have a place where I could come from. I am a native-born Israeli. My parents were also born here. One grandfather is from Russia and the other is from Poland, and there is a grandmother who came from Germany. So I have no musical roots from the tribal or ethnic point of view, and when you have no roots, you have perspective. You can float and look at things from above, identify all kinds of other roots and make things out of them."

Your lyrics are very simple, very basic, wouldn't you say?

"In 'Shoshanim Atzuvot' ('Sad Roses'), for example, which in terms of the melody is like community singing, the words - 'O God, make him come, I'm waiting by day and by night,' and so on - were very influenced by African texts that I read on CDs. 'I got up in the morning, I went to the river, I love you' - very simple. The lyrics of 'Come' are also unsophisticated. But there are all kinds of simple. I don't understand why such a typical line as 'Oh baby I love you,' which you can hear all the time on MTV, is legitimate, but in Israel, when Sarid Hadad sings 'Yallah, go home, Motti,' it's considered low. It's singing at eye-level. There are people who eat in fancy restaurants and others who eat in fast-food joints. It's part of the Israeli way of life, you know. You can listen to a complex work by Mozart and you can connect with a song like 'You're a Cannon,' and think that's terrific because that's how people talk on the street. Why try to say 'You are my knight on a white steed' when you can say straight out, 'You're a cannon, there's no one like you'? I'm in favor of writing simply and concisely. By the way, Ethiopian singing is far from simple and is rich in imagery."

Stuck with Music

Idan's mother, Rachel, is a secretary, and his father is the manager of an earthmoving company. His older brother, who is 29, is in computers, his 21-year-old sister is doing make-up high-school matriculation exams, and his younger brother, 17, is in high school. When he was growing up, the family lived in a small home in Kfar Sava; today they have a spacious home in the city, where "everyone has his own space and territory. For my parents, the home was always more important than anything else, certainly more than a career."

All the children played musical instruments at some stage. Raichel's mother also played, and his grandfather played the mandolin and the accordion. "Dad has terrific hearing," says Idan, the only one of the children who stuck with music. In third grade he played the organ, moving on to the accordion, and in high school, where he took the music and jazz track, he took up the piano and subsequently devoted time and energy to jazz in its diverse forms.

"Keith Jarrett influenced me a lot," he says of the American jazz pianist and composer. "I love the supposedly undefined things he can do."

Raichel was drafted in 1995 and played keyboard instruments for army troupes. Ten days before his discharge, he got an offer to become an instructor at a summer camp in Hadasim, a boarding school north of Tel Aviv, and

when he showed an excellent rapport with the Ethiopian children there, he was invited to stay on. Some of the Ethiopian kids at Hadasim liked hip-hop; others preferred original Ethiopian music. Raichel asked them where he could find cassettes with that music and he started to listen, record and collect.

He made a living from playing the piano for pop-rock shows of top singers such as Iggy Waxman, Eran Tzur and Ivri Lider. In the meantime, working in an improvised studio in the basement of his home in Kfar Sava, he put together the Project, piece by piece, with the help of 30 musicians ranging in age from 16 to 80.

Now that nearly 60,000 copies of the album have been sold, how would you describe your frame of mind?

"Once there was a guy who went to the doctor because he had a bone stuck in his throat. While he groaned and choked, the doctor succeeded in removing the bone. 'Wow, you saved me, how can I thank you,' the guy asked the doctor. He replied, 'Give me half of what you were ready to pay me when the bone was stuck in your throat.' Before the Project was realized, and I very much hoped that it would be, the people who took part in it dreamed, like me, that one day we would make our voice heard. What I wanted, I got. But you have to be very careful not to get greedy, and you have to beware of success. I read traditional texts and books like Job and Ecclesiastes, and you have to remember very well the statement, 'Know where you came from and where you are going' [which is recited at funerals]. You don't have to know everything, you can flow with things, but you must never forget where you came from and where you were half a year ago, and where you were two years ago, because there are things you can't quantify into money. The fact that you are making people feel good is one of those things."

The success of the CD and now the preparations for the festival have made Raichel edgy and tense again. Not that he's complaining, but he has to meet schedules and also cope with the critics.

"When we recorded the CD, we worked according to what's known as 'Ethiopia time,'" he says. "In other words, you make a date with someone to record at 10 A.M., and at 5 P.M. he calls you to say that he's just leaving for Kfar Sava from Kiryat Gat. In performances there is no such thing as that. There are dates and schedules and you can't just flow along like you're doing 'shanty.'"

The reviews bother him: "Someone wrote that the CD is a bad Ethiopian album. That's true - it's a bad Ethiopian album and it's also a bad Hungarian album. The definition thing doesn't get us anywhere."

Does a bad review affect your ability to love yourself?

"You can imagine that love songs like these don't come from a happy place. My music is not happy music. At bottom, everyone is preoccupied with himself. After all, until not long ago, I would go to work - meaning I would go to play music - and I would come back and my heart was in my home studio. Now I am working in my heart, I am taking my heart, which has become everyone's property, so you can do anything to it - you can do parodies of it, you can criticize it, you can say to me, 'Why do you have that look? What's with the dreadlocks, are they welded? Is it natural or fake?' It's not just that you become public property, your heart is also public property, and not only have you become public property, you work at being public property. You market your heart."

So what is with the dreadlocks?

"It's not meant as a statement. I haven't had a haircut since I left the army in August 1998, and then you roll it and it becomes fashionable. It's true that I am occupied with my hair, I touch it and collect it, because it's nice to do that and I like rolling my hair. Some people smoke because they are bored. A propos definitions, how would people react if I cut my hair? I don't have a contract that says I can't do that, but I think it would be a serious mistake to cut my hair now in a promo period, because that's what identifies you. It's not some nose ring."

Would you call yourself ambitious?

"I am in control of what's happening. There are a lot of talented people making music in Tel Aviv, but they don't push themselves the way you have to. They could have put out a CD long ago, but maybe that's not important to them. I didn't think about putting out a CD, either. I called Gidi Gidor [from Helicon Records] with the aim of advancing from my place as a musician to a musical arranger or producer. I just sent him a few cuts that we were working on, and he told me to come in so we could talk about it some more. Now I don't have any more specific ambitions - I'm tired."

How can you be so tired at the age of 25?

"There was a period from the age of 20 to 23 when I wasn't functioning. You couldn't see it outwardly. Most of the time I saw my psychologist. I was depressed. The depression was always there. Not only can't you sleep, you can't wake up, either. All kinds of things hit you. Things like 'Who moved my cheese' - it's not exactly things that hit you, it's things you put aside and suddenly there's a boom and you're down, and you never imagined that you would find yourself in a place like that."

Is that why you thank your psychologists in the booklet that accompanies the CD?

"Yes. I'm sure this CD is the result of getting out of that situation, in which I couldn't do anything except go to work and nothing seemed to have a point. Suddenly I started to find a point in recording at home and outside. Afterward I started to record on the piano and sing a little and I did experiments with all kinds of people, and I made contact."

Did getting out of the depressed state mean that you also started to communicate with people?

"My strong side is that I communicate well with people. There were a lot of years when I didn't communicate. I was very popular in school, but as when I got home I didn't have anyone to talk to and I didn't leave the house. From seventh grade I was socially cut off when it came to Friday evenings. The first time I went to a discotheque was in 12th grade. Starting in fifth grade, I saw a psychologist for two years. After a two-year break I went back into treatment for another two years, and that's the way it kept going. When everyone else went out, I would play and listen to music."