

Israeli band a model for peaceful co-existence

FESTIVAL PREVIEW

Idan Raichel Project

When: Today at 4 p.m. on Stage 6, and 6 p.m. on the mainstage
Where: Folk Fest, Gallagher Park

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For many people, the term "Middle East" is virtually synonymous with "trouble spot." But one musical visionary in Tel Aviv could help change that perception.

You might even call the Idan Raichel Project something of a model for showing how people of disparate backgrounds can get along.

"We are like one stone in a huge bridge," offers Raichel, on the phone from his home, where it's nearly midnight. "But I'm hoping this project shows people in some small way that peace is possible here."

As his ensemble has found unexpected success, Raichel has been under media pressure in Israel to declare his own politics. But he has

avoided doing so.

"I'm 31 and I have very strong political views about the situation. But I feel I'm the leader of a project and the magic is that you can find people who are right-wing and left-leaning, Jews and Christians and Arabs singing side by side, and so it doesn't matter what I think. The magic is that all these people agree not to agree, and that they are together onstage."

Amid their dense, entrancing, eclectic mix of percussion, strings, keyboards and electronics, the Project's several albums have featured songs in six languages, including Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi and English. But any perceived language barrier hasn't been a problem. In fact, the biggest surprise was how this organic musical experiment wound up becoming a hit, nudging out Beyoncé on the pop charts as their first two albums hit triple-platinum status at home in Israel. Ironically, the bandleader had an initial struggle just to find a label interested in putting out their music.

"The marketing people were worried about what they were selling, who was going to give interviews, or



Idan Raichel

SUPPLIED

how we would play live with all these people. Eventually someone thought it might work in a world music niche, but suddenly we started getting singles on the charts, and now, 17 songs have hit the charts here."

The project has now played sold-out shows and festivals worldwide. For their debut in New York, they invited representatives from Putamayo Records and that led to the first two international releases *Idan Raichel Project* (2006) and *Within My Walls*

(2008) coming out on Putamayo's sister label Cumbancha, both to great acclaim. He has channelled that success back into the music.

Raichel comes from a Jewish family with roots in eastern Europe. He began to play "the least glamorous instrument in the world" — the accordion — at age nine, and pursued his creative curiosity from there, checking out tango and Gypsy music, and studying jazz piano. Taking his compulsory stint in the Israeli army turned out to be a great musical apprenticeship after he joined the military's rock band. Before long, he was the band's musical director.

Following his military service, Raichel took a job as a school counselor and he was exposed to a group of Ethiopian Jews who turned him on to the various pop and folk sounds of their country. That was the spark that ignited the Project. By 2002, he had pulled in musicians from several different ethnic backgrounds to complete the band's self-titled debut. He underlines that the project is now closer to a collective.

"It's almost hard for me to keep track because the band keeps changing all the time. Up to now around 85

musicians have participated in this project. The youngest is 16 years old and the eldest are about 83 and 89 years old."

Ultimately, his Project reflects the continuing Jewish diaspora, which has brought so many different cultures to his part of the world.

"Israel is all about immigration, so it's one of the most interesting melting pots in the world. If you can imagine listening to the streets of Tel Aviv, it's about the sounds out there that move me the most."

As the band tours more and more, Raichel has made new musical friends around the world, often incorporating them into his low-tech recording set-ups in synagogue basements and hotel rooms. He has used musicians from Arabic, African and Latin origins and he's only one of several singers who share lead vocals.

On tour it's different again. "We are 10 onstage, but most of us do several things when it comes to different musical skills. Some of them already have solo careers and recordings and they come from all over the world. But for me the biggest compliment is when someone defines us as Israeli music."