

Zehava Ben Sings Um Kulthum: Dueling Nationalities and Appropriate Appropriations

Amy Horowitz



THE ENCOUNTER of Jews from European, Middle Eastern, and North African homelands in Israel provided new genres of music that combined the styles of very different cultures. In Israel, Jews from Islamic lands found an already present European-dominated national music “industry” that considered their musical traditions too Arabic. Against a backdrop of exclusion, they developed their own music and grassroots networks.

With dozens of Middle Eastern and North African ethnic communities in close proximity, a new pan-ethnic Mizrahi (Eastern) musical expression emerged. One such hybrid — Mediterranean Israeli Music (*Musika Yam Tikhonit Yisraelit*) — issued a visceral aesthetic challenge to the European Israeli sense of what a home/land should sound like.

Zehava Ben, a young Moroccan Israeli performer from a poor Be’er Sheva neighborhood, typifies this music style. She performs, among other things, the repertoire of Um Kulthum (1904-1975), a Muslim, Egyptian woman renowned throughout the Arab world. Zehava Ben successfully challenges political boundaries by claiming Um Kulthum’s repertoire as her inheritance. As a North African woman, Zehava’s appropriations of Um Kulthum songs are considered appropriate, and because she defies categorization, Zehava claims multiple indigenities.

Israeli Jewish musicians like Zehava, with roots in Islamic countries, are both insiders and outsiders to the regional soundscape. As insiders, their Jewish ancestors participated fully for hundreds of years as performers and composers throughout the Middle East and North Africa. With their immigration to the newly formed state of Israel, beginning in the late 1940s, they found themselves on the other side of the enemy line, outsiders to both the European-Israeli music industry as well as the music networks of their old Islamic communities.

Although Zehava Ben sees herself as a legitimate heir to Um Kulthum, it is a complicated inheritance. The relationship between identity and music in disputed territory — that is, the co-mingling of social and political identity with music — speaks to the shared nature of

cultural identity in the region.

The success of Zehava Ben’s claim to the legacy of Um Kulthum depends upon whether her diverse audiences accept the fundamental contradiction of an Israeli Jew performing the music of an Egyptian Muslim. In performing Um Kulthum, Zehava Ben calls attention to aspects of their shared experience: Um Kulthum, like Zehava, was a woman from a poor, religious, rural, Arabic-speaking family. These connections compete with but never completely overshadow the political, national, and religious schisms between them.

Zehava Ben’s performances allow her audiences to invest in these otherwise contradictory elements, that is, momentarily to realign nonaligned political positions (most notably, Muslim and Jew, Israeli and Egyptian, European and Middle Eastern Israeli, disenfranchised and mainstream). She allows her audiences to temporarily cross seemingly impenetrable borders.

This juxtaposition of Zehava’s nationality (Israeli) and aesthetic styles (Arab, Turkish, and Western rock, among others) requires a model of politics and a web-like model of airwaves or soundscapes that are not bound by geographic or national borders. The performers and audiences manage this dueling of nationalities as a field of integrations and contradictions — the business of everyday life.

While Um Kulthum produced a soundscape for the pan-Arab nationalism of the Nasser period, Zehava hopes that her music will bring the dueling peoples together. She says, “I will always sing in Arabic. I pray that my music, my singing, can bring real peace. I wish it were so. I wish my music would create some sort of connection. That is the most important thing right now.” (Zehava Ben, taped phone interview, 2001)

It is not just that Zehava Ben represents a possibility of hope for a time when the shared cultural styles of the Middle East might override the hostilities, though that is surely one factor of her success. Rather, appropriating from an “enemy” with a spirit of reverence and reclaimed lineage puts the hostilities of all of the players on the front lines.

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May 2005
Iyar 5765

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