

moment

GUIDE TO CULTURAL ARTS

THE BEST OF JEWISH MUSIC, ENTERTAINMENT AND CREATIVITY



WHO IS A-WA?

The Yemenite Israeli sister act takes Israel and the Arabic-speaking world by storm

by Anna Isaacs

The music video opens against a vast, craggy desert. Three women with jet-black hair do the bidding of their watchful, whip-wielding, gray-scruffed patriarch—scrubbing dishes, draping linens, brushing a froth of shaving cream across his jaw. A cutaway shot shows three male counterparts in blue tracksuits and red fez-inspired baseball caps, dancing for a stately hookah-smoking woman.

Then, a shift in tone: The women take off across the landscape in a white Jeep, bil-

lowing sand in their wake, having ditched their muted chore clothes for glittering fuchsia abayas. When they reach their destination, they rush up the steps of a palatial home to join the three tracksuited men in their traditional, joyful Yemenite step.

The song is “Habib Galbi”—Arabic for “love of my heart”—and the singers are the sister act A-Wa, Arabic slang for “yes.” The video is right at home on the Facebook page for “Mipsterz”—an online community for self-described “Muslim

hipsters,” where the video appeared just after its March 2015 release—and some of the group’s most enthusiastic fans hail from Lebanon, Yemen and Libya.

One could be forgiven for mistaking A-Wa for anyone but who they are: Tair, Liron and Tagel Haim, three Jewish sisters from Israel’s Arava Valley, dominating the Israeli music charts with the first Arabic-language song ever to hit number one. The trio revels in the ambiguity:

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TAL GIVONY



AMI AND TAMI

"The best day of my life" Maya Reuven, 8 years old, *Oshman Family JCC*
"Musically brilliant!" Yehudi Wyner; Pulitzer Prize winner

Ami and Tami, Matti Kovler's buoyant, tuneful musical fable (*Boston Globe*) is a modern Israeli twist on Hansel and Gretel. With performances from coast to coast, the production features two all-star casts in both English and Hebrew, and is headlined by the Emmy-winning TV host Sonya Hamlin as the Storyteller and the composer Matti Kovler performing the role of Composer on stage.

The show is now traveling in three different formats, from the smallest, suited to the most intimate venues, to a large stage with orchestra. Join Ami and Tami as they find their path in the forest, and discover how the power of imagination can bring a family together! An orchestral recording of the musical fable in both languages is forthcoming in 2016. (What better way for kids to learn Hebrew than through infectious music with fun lyrics and catchy rhymes?) Stay tuned!

For more information about *Ami and Tami* and other Floating Tower productions please visit floatingtower.com, email info@mattikovler.com or call +1 (617) 642-7316

BARRY LOUIS POLISAR

Long known for his songs and books for children (such as "Don't Put Your Finger Up Your Nose" and "My Brother Thinks He's a Banana"), Barry Louis Polisar is a Jewish writer and performing artist who writes and sings his songs in films and TV shows. You may know his song "All I Want is You" from the movie *Juno*.

Barry also writes adult books, including *Telling the Story: A Passover Haggadah Explained* and a midrash on thirteen stories from Genesis. For over four decades, he's traveled throughout the U.S. and Europe presenting author visits and concerts in schools and synagogues, and has performed at Jewish book fairs and JCCs. Visit barrylou.com or email barrylou@barrylou.com



JEWISH MUSEUM VIENNA

The Jewish Museum Vienna presents a new temporary exhibition titled "Stars of David: The Sound of the 20th Century" from April 13 to October 2, 2016. Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed, and Matisyahu are just some of the Jewish artists who have written musical history. "God Bless America," the unofficial anthem of the USA, and "White Christmas" were written by Irving Berlin, son of a Jewish immigrant from Belarus. Jewish musicians have stamped their influence on all aspects of the music business in the 20th and 21st centuries and have made a significant contribution to entertainment culture. "Stars of David" looks at the various genres, from musicals and film music to jazz, rock and pop and its exponents. The Jewish Museum Vienna at Palais Eskeles in Dorotheergasse and in Museum Judenplatz offers exhibitions on Austrian Jewish history, religion and tradition.

e-mail: info@jmw.at / www.jmw.at

Jewish Museum Vienna
A-1010 Vienna, Dorotheergasse 11
Sun-Fri 10am-6pm
Museum Judenplatz

A-1010 Vienna, Judenplatz 8
Sun-Thu 10am-6pm
Fri 10am-2pm
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CANTOR SHIRA LISSEK

Cantor Shira Lissek of Park Avenue Synagogue brings to her cantorate a wide knowledge of Jewish music, an inspiring voice, a vibrant spirit and lifelong synagogue experience. Lissek conducts weekly Shabbat, festival and holiday services, and officiates at life-cycle events and special occasions such as Yom Hashoah observances with dignified reverence. She is also a concert artist, operatic soloist and educator. Lissek is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music and Indiana University and a proud member of the Cantors Assembly and of Actors' Equity. She has performed leading roles with prestigious opera companies and orchestras, and has performed off-Broadway. Lissek participates in numerous cantorial concerts and recitals throughout the country and abroad. For more information, visit shiralissek.com or pasyn.org/resources/music-at-pas/ptach-libi

KLEZKANADA

Every year, over 400 people gather in the beautiful Laurentian Mountains for KlezKanada, the internationally acclaimed festival of Jewish arts and culture. For over 20 years KlezKanada has focused on tradition, innovation and continuity, connecting Jews of all ages with culture, history and community. The faculty and speakers are international leaders of Ashkenazic Jewish music, culture, language and beyond. The extensive program includes workshops in klezmer music and Yiddish song, traditional Yiddish dance, Yiddish language and theater. KlezKanada also features North America's only Jewish Poetry Retreat, an extensive series of talks and discussions, and a rich program for children. Inter-generational, interdenominational and interdisciplinary, KlezKanada has grown into North America's largest retreat for the study of Jewish arts and culture. For more information and registration, visit klezkanada.com



MUSIC OF REMEMBRANCE

Two stories. Two survivors haunted by the ghosts of their past. *Out of Darkness*, a bold new two-act opera by Jake Heggie, offers compelling musical witness to survival in the face of unimaginable adversity. Discover the amazing true story of Krystyna Zywulska, whose daring poems became anthems of defiance among her fellow prisoners in Auschwitz. Explore the fate of homosexuals during the Holocaust through the experience of Gad Beck and Manfred Lewin, two idealistic young lovers in 1930s Berlin whose lives and love were torn apart under Nazi rule.

Music of Remembrance (MOR) is a non-profit organization founded in 1998 by Artistic Director Mina Miller to remember the Holocaust through music with concert performances, educational programs, recordings and commissions of new works. MOR tells stories that need to be heard and challenges audiences to question their own thinking.

For more information and tickets, call 206-365-7770 or visit www.musicofremembrance.org



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STARS OF DAVID
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Dorotheergasse

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“We wanted people to be very curious—who are these girls?” says Tair, 32, the eldest. “We wanted people to just listen to the music and confuse them, in a good way.”

The Haim sisters—no relation to the L.A.-native Jewish three-sister band Haim—take their musical cues from family history. Their paternal grandparents were among the nearly 50,000 Yemeni Jews secretly brought to Israel in Operation Magic Carpet in 1949. Growing up in the remote southern desert village of Shaharut—an idyllic but isolated childhood that Tair likens to “Little House on the Prairie”—the girls would often visit their grandparents in Gadera, where they listened to their grandmother sing traditional lullabies and mimicked their grandfather’s Yemeni Arabic pronunciation of Jewish prayers. “For little girls with musical ears like ourselves,” says Tair, “we just fell in love with the music and the groove.”

For many Yemenite Jews, religious music was a male domain, while women—many

of whom were illiterate—created their own spiritual world in secular folksong. Their songs were passed down from generation to generation, picking up new flourishes over time. “In a way,” Tair says, “we are continuing the tradition by taking these songs and giving them our own twist.”

That twist includes inspiration from the kibbutzim surrounding Shaharut, where native English speakers from the United States and Canada listened to jazz and other American popular movies and music. The sisters count *Singin’ in the Rain*, Ella Fitzgerald, Fleetwood Mac, Bob Marley, the Jackson Five and hip-hop among their many influences. A-Wa adds in darbuka (goblet drum) beats, Western vocal harmonies and, of course, a full array of modern and distinctly non-Yemenite instruments.

“We grew up in the desert and we had no borders and everything was open to our imagination,” Tair says. “So we developed our creativity and the ability to dream big, because we had nothing to lose.” Dreams of singing at music festivals around the world took the trio into the mountains, where they sang to imagined crowds of

fans. It’s still hard for Tair to believe that today, they’re doing the real thing. “We have to punch [sic] ourselves sometimes,” she says in a thick Israeli accent.

Their ascent to fame began about five years ago, after Tair earned a music degree and returned home to Shaharut to write an album in the desert, and wound up asking her sisters Liron, now 30, and Tagel, now 26, to join her. Collaborating was “natural,” Tair says. After their day jobs, the sisters would record YouTube videos of themselves singing both original and traditional songs.

They sent a demo to Tomer Yosef, a fellow Israeli with Yemenite roots whose band Balkan Beat Box is ubiquitous in dance club remixes the world over. He liked what he heard, and the sisters soon joined him on tour and had him produce their debut album, released in Israel last year. A-Wa has toured through Europe and the U.S., most recently playing at the South by Southwest music festival in Austin.

The video for “Habib Galbi” has now racked up more than three million You-

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of Sholem Aleichem’s own epitaph, a medley of hit tunes by Mark Warshawsky, and even a Yiddish rendition of “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.” The JPPC is a vibrant, intergenerational ensemble—many members are under 35. *The Jewish Week* has praised the group’s “upbeat Broadway bounce” and its ability to convey “layers of emotion embedded even in the simplest of lyrics.”

For tickets, visit symphonyspace.org

To audition, email information@thejppc.org

NOAH ARONSON



Noah Aronson is touring with an incredible band of Israeli musicians he met while studying at Boston's Berklee College of Music. Each musician is a highly accomplished and proficient artist, infusing their own passions and stylings to the mix creating a fresh new approach to contemporary Jewish music. Combined with Noah's engaging performance style, audiences experience a highly interactive, spiritually uplifting and emotionally moving concert that will leave your community singing!

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—Dr. Alan Mason, President, Guild of Temple Musicians

For booking info, email rose@noaharonson.com

noaharonson.com



SHELDON LOW

Sheldon Low is one of the brightest young stars in Jewish rock today. He performs concerts, conducts "Light Up Shabbat" services, seminars, and leads Artist-in-Residency weekends across North America. Low is popular with teens, adults and young families alike, and is renowned for his rousing live performances and hit compositions. He is the only artist with opening tracks on two NFTY Ruach compilations and both of his children's albums (*It's All Challah To Me!*, *Look At Me!*) have been distributed by PJ Library to tens of thousands of households around the globe.

A highly regarded Jewish innovator, Low has been featured on the cover of *L'Chaim Magazine* and on Shalom TV and leads workshops, webinars and speaking engagements around the country, and has served on the faculty and staff of Songleader Boot Camp and Jewish Rock Radio. Low's fifth studio album is set for release in the fall of 2016.

For more information, contact Sheldon Low at info@SheldonLow.com

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Tube views, and the sisters have gained a diverse following that recalls the broad appeal of an artist who could be called their predecessor: the late Ofra Haza, perhaps Israel's most famous singer, whose haunting vocal trills the sisters closely echo. Haza, too, built a career on a love for traditional Yemenite music, and cultivated an Arab fan base as a rare Mizrahi artist in Israel.

In a time when the threat of boycott looms, A-Wa acknowledges the commercial risks of touring as Israeli musicians. But they also embrace their multifaceted identity—never hiding their Judaism and their home, but never “shouting” it, either, as Tair puts it.

“We are very proud of who we are, but I think that it's very important for us to make music that anyone can enjoy, anyone with an open ear, and someone that really wants to just listen to something new and fresh and, you know, to have fun,” she says. “Because this is art, you know? It doesn't matter where it comes from. If it's good, it's good.”

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