

Yalla Balagan: Trends in Israeli Hip-Hop

By Sharon Benamou and Daniel Scheide

Hip-hop is a distinctly American art form and more specifically, a distinctly African-American art form. In the early days of rap, it was striking to see white rappers, let alone non-American ones, yet hip-hop has spread to nearly every corner of the globe. Rap pioneer Chuck D. once described rap as “CNN for black people”, that is, a voice for those who don’t have a voice in the mainstream media. Today, rap music serves that function in communities across the world. Today, we’ll be looking at how this influence has spread to Israel.

Hip-hop culture was developed by Jamaican immigrants in the South Bronx, New York in the late 1970s. Hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa outlined four essential elements of hip-hop culture: b-boying (break dancing), graffiti, dj-ing and mc'ing (rapping). Today, we’ll be limiting our discussion to the musical elements of this culture.

Rapping has roots in Africa as stories were told over drum beats. In mid-20th century Caribbean musical culture popularized this form when DJs toasted or rapped out tales of heroism and braggadocio over dubbed Jamaican beats. 1960s Jamaican social culture was dominated by competing DJs with large, outdoor sound systems intended to draw a larger party crowd. Clive Campbell, later known as DJ Kool Herc, grew up in Jamaica of this period until his family immigrated to the Bronx in New York in 1967. In the early 1970s Kool Herc broke into DJ-ing parties and figured out how to construct even larger and more powerful sound system for parties held in the recreation rooms in the high rise buildings. In order to give the dancers opportunities to show off their moves he isolated the instrumental breaks in the songs and looped them together with two turntables. He punctuated the breaks by calling out slang phrases, which eventually developed into rap. Kool Herc is credited as the founding father of hip hop. Eventually others obtained sound systems, moved the parties to the streets and continued the development of hip-hop.

The Bronx in the 1950s had changed from a predominantly middle-class to lower class area with high rates of crime and poverty. In 1959 Parks Commissioner Robert Moses began building and expressway through the middle of the Bronx. As a result the white populations of Italians, Germans, Irish and Jews moved to the suburbs, leaving only the African American, Puerto Rican and Dominican populations. In the 1970s the South Bronx became the focus of American’s urban inner city crisis with its high unemployment and poverty. The area was known for burned out tenements and gangs. Hip hop was a cultural alternative to gangs.

The origins of hip-hop in Israel are often credited to Yehoshua Sofer. He was born as Nigel Winston in 1958 in Jamaica to Yemenite and Ukranian Jewish parents. He spent time in the U.S. and claims to have hung out with Chuck Norris. After making aliyah, in 1993, under the name Nigel ha-Admor, he released his only album, Humus metamtem or Humus makes you stupid which is considered a breakthrough in Israeli rap music. After leaving the music scene,

he started teaching Korean martial arts in Israel, and became a Breslover Hassid. Since then he has developed (or re-discovered) Abir, a martial art that he claims dates back to biblical times. But we digress. This album had a tremendous impact on the Israeli music scene. There are elements in this first hip-hop single that persist in later Israeli music.

The true force behind the dissemination of hip hop in Israel was DJ Liron Te'eni, who in the 1990s hosted a show on the army radio station called Esek Shahor, or Black Business. The name of the show was taken from a song on Nigel ha-Admor's album. At this point rapping was an American export, Liron required anyone who came in to show off their rapping skills to translate their raps into Hebrew.

The biggest rap hit in Israeli history is the song Shirat ha-sticker from ha-Dag nachash. The band's name is a spoonerism on the words for new driver. Like many manifestations of Israeli rap, ha-Dag Nahash presents a hybrid musical style, combining funk and rock elements. They combine turntables with a live band. One of the most popular Israeli bands both locally and abroad, they have been criticized for their jaded political viewpoints. They have attracted controversy with their song Gabi ve-Debi which parodies popular conceptions of Zionism and depicts Theodor Herzl on drugs. The words of Shirat ha-Sticker were written by novelist David Grossman and it is comprised of bumper stickers seen in Israel or parodies of the common slogans. In this video of the song depicts Arabs, ultra-orthodox, settlers from West Bank or Gaza, soldiers or partiers. In order to emphasize the sarcasm of the words, each line is expressed by the person with the opposite viewpoint to create an angry and ironic portrait of political and religious life in Israel. The song artfully demonstrates the stratification of Israeli society.

Let's back up and get more of a picture of Israel. The dominant force in Israel is secular Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, who originally settled Israel starting in the late 1800s. Other groups are religious Ashkenazi, including various sects of Hasidim; Mizrahim, who are Jews from Arab countries and other Sephardim such as Turkish and Greek. Mizrahim are neither secular nor ultra religious but somewhere in between and arrived en masse after statehood in 1948. Then there are the Russians, who are technically Ashkenazi but arrived in the late 1970s to mid-1980s, the Ethiopians, who arrived between 1985 and 1991 and then the other religious minorities including Muslims and Christians. Each of these groups has its own political and social ideology, each represented by their own political parties.

The Israeli music industry is controlled by the dominant culture, secular Ashkenazi. The styles favored by the music media are the following.

Where did that leave musicians outside of the mainstream? If their music did not conform to the official party line it was ignored by the music industry. This continues until today, as we will see.

When we started looking at who was creating hip hop in Israel, most of the hip hop artists come from outside the dominant socio-political group in Israel, the secular Ashkenazim. Let's look at

the largest producers of hip hop music. Mizrahim, Ethiopians, Hasidim and Arabs.

An Arab-Israeli group that has gotten a lot of attention is Dam. Their name not only means blood in Hebrew and Arabic but is also an acronym for Da Arabian MCs. Their lyrics explore the tension in their place in society. Within Israel they are seen as suspect, being Arabs, and in the larger Arab world they are seen as being too close to the Israelis. They not only lash out against the Jewish majority but also the complacency they see in Arab-Israeli society, noting that more Jewish Israelis protest on their behalf than their own people.

We don't always think of the religious as being outside of the mainstream, but there is clear evidence of discrimination in the workplace. An MC with a clear Jamaican influence is Adam Yosef Ben Lavi. He was born Adam Levinzon and as a child, he earned the nickname Fishi ha-gadol due to his height and his resemblance to the character Fishinon from the cult classic film Alex Holeh Ahavah. His lyrics originally dealt with sex, drugs and violence, but later he became preoccupied with religious themes. In fact, he became interested in Hasidut from his marital arts study with Yehoshua Sofer. Aka Nigel ha-Admor. He hosted an educational program MC School on Walla.il teaching the fundamentals of music. Like many Israeli rappers, he has had financial problems with his record company and now his recent releases have been available for free on the internet. His song Shomer Shabat combines rap and reggae and is about keeping the Sabbath. Today, his music is less religious and deals with the struggles of disadvantaged youth.

It's interesting that while in the U.S. religious rappers tend to be associated with Chabad, in Israel, they tend to be associated with Breslov. For one Breslover it is a little different because she is a woman. Rinat Gutman was originally a folk singer who performed for all-female audiences because of the prohibition of kol ishah. Rinat Gutman spoke with rabbis who determined that rapping was not singing and she would not violate modesty prohibitions by rapping. She explains that she likes rap because she can convey a very clear message through its words. Her target audience is not her fellow Breslovers or even the Orthodox community but the secular society. Her aim is to relay religious messages and to learn about a non-materialistic life.

It is clear that rap music as well as reggae resonate strongly with Israelis, both religious and secular. Remember that reggae and hip hop are not considered as distinct for Israelis. They are often lumped together as 'black music.' Reggae is linked with the Rastafari movement. While Rastafari is an offshoot of Christianity, much of the symbolism is more closely tied with Judaism. The enemy is Babylon, the Western world and they long for Zion which is Africa, and specifically Ethiopia. Fishi ha-gadol and Axum (who we'll get to) reuse these metaphors in both religious and secular contexts. It almost seems to come full circle when Ethiopians are in Israel performing hip hop and reggae, sometimes mixed together.

The Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in two waves in 1984 and 1991. Their absorption into Israeli society was not as ideal as they had hoped. Around 1997, many reggae nightclubs in Israel, and specifically Tel Aviv, began to see an influx of Ethiopians. According to Malka

Shabtay, an anthropologist who has studied the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, when the crowds became largely Ethiopian, other Israelis and African foreign workers deserted the clubs and they became more Ethiopian-oriented. Ethiopian youth are appropriating rap and reggae to develop a new subculture of Afro-Israeli identity. It is clear that members of this population, who felt separate from other Israelis, gravitated to historically black American musical styles. Their music speaks of disappointment, disillusionment and hostility to those they feel are responsible for their situation. Again, there is an attraction to the symbolism of reggae where Ethiopia is seen as the Promised Land.

The hip hop crew Kafeh Shachor Chazak is comprised mostly of Ethiopians. The name of the group 'strong black coffee' is a reference to the local café/community center where they crafted their skill. As in the U.S., hip-hop could be a cultural alternative to violence and poverty. One of their songs samples a well known Mizrahi song, Eyzon medinah. It is almost a gloss because the original song by Eli Luzon also critical of the Israeli government and speaks to his disillusionment. The video features Eli Luzon and as they walk through the streets of Netanya, a beautiful city on the Mediterranean rather than a development town, you see the foreign workers who live in legal limbo, drug addicts and everyday city scenes.

It seems that much has changed since Shabtay's study. While she found that Ethiopians were separating themselves from other Israelis and other Africans, today's hip-hop scene is much more diverse, both in the audiences as well as the performers. As much as the Ethiopians are creating a distinct black identity, there is often collaboration with Mizrahim. The group Axum is named after the Ethiopian city where many Ethiopian Jews and Christians believe the Ark of the Covenant to be hidden. In this video for Ma'im ha-kesef, we again see a side of Netanya not often presented outside of Israel.

The difficulty Ethiopians faced assimilating was not a new phenomenon. The Mizrahim were considered second class citizens and to some degree suspect because in look, customs and music, they too closely resembled Arabs. Their pronunciation of certain Hebrew letters sounds guttural than and reminds the listener that Hebrew and Arabic are sister languages. The 1960s and 70s were a turbulent time politically for Mizrahim. Second generation immigrants created their own Black Panther party to promote the needs and rights of Mizrahim. An examination of Facebook and MySpace profiles of rap artists and fans reveals an affinity for this short-lived movement. Upon arrival in Israel they were sent to live in poor settlement towns in the desert rather than in the cities of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem or Haifa, had inferior education and opportunities for advancing in society. Mizrahi music, very briefly, contains elements of Greek, Turkish and Arabic music, it has a florid vocal style that derives from the cantorial style of the synagogue, uses middle eastern instruments (oud, qanun, tarbuka) and uses Mizrahi pronunciation of certain letters. Mizrahi musicians distributed their music at weddings and in the central bus station in Tel Aviv. The themes of the songs are about love or are religious texts.

The biggest hip hop act, Subliminal, is Mizrahi but his music is so nationalistic, and samples nationalistic, Zionist songs that he is part of the musical mainstream. He has quarreled with left-wingers. He has built, and then burnt bridges with Arab-Israeli musicians. His musical and visual

style is the most derivative of contemporary American rap. He has been very successful in getting media sponsorships. It is also interesting to note that while Jerusalem is often seen as politically right-wing and Tel-Aviv, left-wing, the rappers from these cities tend to take the opposite viewpoint. Perhaps a reflection of the rebellious nature of the art form.

While there is not a lot of hip-hop coming from Russian immigrants, Vulkan, is a notable exception with his gravelly voice and impeccable delivery. At first, he rapped in Russian, but switching to Hebrew to reach a larger audience. His song ha-Aliyah details how many Russians feel out of place in Israeli society. In Russia, they were considered Jews. In Israel, they are considered Russians.

Today, hip hop in Israel is generally produced and distributed independently, typical for music outside of the dominant culture. This may be the result of artists getting ripped off by record companies or simply reflect larger trends in global music production and distribution. Many start off with record companies then distribute their music themselves, or go with non-Israeli record companies). This is no different from the distribution of Mizrahi music.

There is very little literature on the subject of Israeli hip-hop, but what is out there concentrates on Arab-Israeli issues, focusing on Subliminal, Dam and maybe some left-wingers as well like ha-Dag Nachash. Most other rappers don't deal with these issues. They are either making party music or dealing with social issues. Self-improvement for those living in poverty or other difficult circumstances. For many Israelis, these might be more important and immediate issues than the matsav (as important as it still is). Both Fishi ha-Gadol and Kafe Shahor Hazak explicitly talk about music as a way for kids to get off the streets, avoid violence and do something with their lives.

Perhaps it is a bit misleading to talk about hip-hop as a distinct genre. Just as the various ethnic, social and religious groups in Israel interact, so do musical styles. We'll end with a collaboration of religious Mizrahi singer with an Israeli rapper. Gad Elbaz sings in the Mizrahi style and aims to speak to both religious and non-religious members of Israeli society in order to unite them. The lyrics in the song ha-Layla zeh ha-zeman only speak of unity. The video however depicts a standoff between religious Jews and blinged out hilonim, or secular Israelis, dressed similarly to American rappers. The groups come together by taking turns break dancing (one of the only representation of breaking we've seen). As they walk through the streets a flash crowd forms, all performing the same line dance. The crowd eventually expands into some sort of street party that is completed when the Breslovers join in. This song and video, rather than using hip hop as a medium for describing the ills of Israeli government and society, uses hip hop to unite all - secular and religious, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi.