

“I know **JEW-RICAN** seems like an odd mix, but basically it means I'm really conflicted at a pig roast”

hq

Rock in the Red Zone: A Filmmaker's Journey



The following was written by documentary filmmaker Laura Bialis (the subject of Heeb's article "[Gimme Shelter: War Rages and Sderot and So Does the Music](#)") who moved to Sderot, Israel, in December 2007 to make a film about how music sustains the city's war-weary inhabitants. Sderot, according to the UK's Daily Mail, is the most bombed place on earth. For more info on Bialis's film, go to www.sderotmovie.com.

"You can't record music in Sderot. There can be a rocket attack any minute. What if you are in the middle of a good take? Who is going to want to record that way?" said Avi Vaknin, a singer/songwriter from Sderot, as sweat rolled down his tan, stubby face. It was a summer night in July 2007, and Vaknin had finally allowed me to interview him for the first time in his studio in Netivot, a town 10 minutes down the road from his hometown. He was skeptical of news reporters, and it took me a while to convince him that I was different.

Who could have guessed that this articulate, direct man with a tendency to keep his guard up would someday become my husband?

As a documentary filmmaker from Los Angeles, my work has taken me all over the world: from labor camps in the Russian steppes to war-torn Kosovo, and now to the Negev desert just a mile away from Gaza. I had come here to tell a story that the mainstream news was missing. The story of a small Israeli town that, despite being hit by daily rocket attacks for seven years, still manages to produce some of the world's most prolific musicians. In fact, it's known as the Liverpool of Israel.

Sderot was established in the 1950s as a transit camp for immigrants from all over the Arab world: Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan. They were told to forget their old cultures and become "new Israelis." But two things were too strong to suppress: their pride and their music. They played darbukas and ouds on neighborhood porches and sang traditional melodies prayers from the synagogue with a distinctly north African beat and Arabic music from weddings and henna ceremonies. But most Israelis considered the music of the old world shameful, and for years mainstream Israeli music lacked even a hint of

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Middle Eastern flavor. Then, in the 80s and 90s, came an explosion of ethnically infused Israeli rock from Sderot. Legend goes that it started with Sfatayim (Lips), a local wedding band that wrote a rock song with a Moroccan beat and sent it to the radio. Israeli music would never be the same. Teapacks and Knesiat Hasechel (Church of Reason) followed, and are now are two of the most popular rock bands in Israel.

Sderot has certainly changed over the years, but I had no trouble finding an active music scene and kids who are confident they can make it, including a world-famous teen choir called Tzerei Sderot, led by former hard rocker Noam Shlomo, and Hagit Yaso, a gorgeous Ethiopian singer who has just been accepted into the prestigious IDF army band. Her voice rocks your soul. When I first met Avi Vaknin, he was the manager of SDEROCK, a bomb-shelter turned rock club for teenagers. Working with several hip-hop bands, SDEROCK produced an album, *The Hope Project*. Vaknin asked the kids to submit their lyrics. "I got twenty songs, and they were all about being afraid to die," he says. The group performed all over Israel to create awareness about what it s like to live under constant attack.

"That s for the kids," Avi explained. "I have my own music."

When Avi finally let his guard down, he invited me to one of his rehearsals. As he sang rock music full of soul and protest, I turned to see my producer with tears streaming down her face. These lyrics could have only come out of Sderot after seven years of bombings. The words echo with feelings of abandonment, the tone hanging somewhere between Bob Dylan and Coldplay. I had found my movie. And I fell in love. A little over a year later, Avi and I got married.

And now I am living in Sderot, finishing my film. I now know all the politics, gossip and inner workings of the music scene. A couple of weeks ago, in the middle of the war with Gaza, Avi and I were at the local Supersol market. We chatted with Haim Ulliel (of the band Sfatayim) in the detergent aisle, and ran into Ran Elmaliach, the guitarist for Knesiat Hasechel, by the cheese counter. Just then, the building shook as F-16s roared overhead. I turned to Avi and said, "Where else in the world can you go to the supermarket, hear fighter jets, and run into a rock star?" Only in Sderot.

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AngelaE8654 says,
04.08.09 at 1:04 am

You can't record music in Sderot. There can be a rocket attack any minute. What if you are in the middle of a good take? Who is going to want to record that way? said Avi Vaknin

Wow. What a sad way to have to look at life. And yet, you chose to embrace life here with this multifaceted young man. You ve got quite a story, Laura.

Angela

Backlinks

brainyfox says,
04.08.09 at 12:04 pm

Great piece. I love seeing Jewish related, thoughtful pieces on here. It is so refreshing!

KostasP says,
04.19.09 at 4:04 am

I agree with Angela; you have a quite an adventure in you to go through this.

Kostas from crete □ kreta

04.16.09 at 9:04 pm

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