

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

mag

Heeb Issue #20 : Milk & Honey

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Gimme Shelter

War Rages in Sderot and So Does the Music



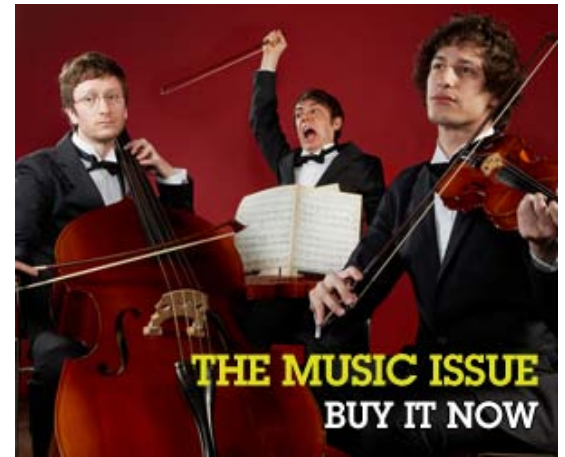
Photo by Bryan Derballa
Text by Brenna Ehrlich

Nearly every morning, California filmmaker Laura Bialis and the rest of Sderot’s residents wake to a female voice chanting, *Tzeva adom*. The words echo through the streets as the inhabitants of the small Israeli town hustle to bomb shelters and crouch in darkness until the last reverberations of the inevitable explosions dissipate. Recently, soldiers passed out home beeper systems, which alert residents to impending air raids. Insistent beeping, chanted warnings and bomb blasts all mingle to create a song that’s on constant rotation in Sderot, a town just one mile from Gaza.

Bialis moved to Sderot in December 2007 to make her documentary, *Sderot: Rock in the Red Zone*, which depicts how music helps sustain the spirits of the city’s inhabitants. Sderot, the most bombed place on earth (according to the UK’s *Daily Mail*), is home to a thriving music scene that Bialis compares to 1960s Liverpool.

Established in the early 50s as a camp for immigrants from places such as Iran and Kurdistan, Sderot didn’t officially become a city until 1996, and, over the years, has been home to foreigners from countries like Morocco, Romania and Russia to name a few. It’s always been a difficult place to live (even before the daily bombings from Gaza) and, according to Yham Hameiri, a journalist for Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, the city also has a reputation for poverty and ignorance. In advertising, they say, This woman from Sderot should understand your slogan. It means the most simple woman that lives in Sderot should

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understand what you mean, Hameiri says. But, she amends, A lot of very talented musicians and poets and authors came from Sderot.

In fact, according to Itay Valdman, editor in chief of *Time Out Tel Aviv*, Sderot was and is representative of a whole other realm of Israeli culture. These weren't the people that came from Europe after World War II, the Ashkenazim, Valdman says, but another culture completely, and another style of living with lots of specific problems. While mainstream Israeli music was largely free of Middle Eastern influences in the early days, this diverse assemblage of immigrants held tight to the music of their homelands, even if they only played it during jam sessions on their neighborhood porches. Still, it wasn't long before the melodies of their ancestry migrated from the front porch to the concert hall.

According to Avi Meshulam, radio DJ and chief editor of *Walla!*, a popular Israeli news portal, music really evolved in the early 90s, with Sderot contributing its share of musicians. Meshulam cites Lips, a Moroccan wedding band that penned a popular rock song infused with Middle Eastern flavor. Although the DJ dismisses them as a one-hit wonder, many claim that Lips revolutionized Israeli music. Teapacks, a Gogol Bordello-esque assemblage that took off around 1992, helped to cement Middle Eastern music's place in the Israeli music scene. Says Valdman, [Their lyrics] were political and social and talked about the hard life of the people that came from eastern states to the North of Israel: their shitty jobs, the discrimination and so on, he says. Bands such as these paved the way for modern acts.

Ever since the turn of the 21st century, Sderot has suffered rocket attacks from Gaza as fighting in Southern Israel continues its ebb and flow. Still, melodies compete with a chorus of mortar blasts as the city's reigning soundtrack. Old-school musicians such as rocker Noam Shlomo have lent their expertise to teaching the next generation of Sderot musicians. Shlomo heads up Tzeirei Sderot, an ethnically diverse, globetrotting teen choir. Singer/songwriter Avi Vaknin, with whom Bialis fell in love and married while in Israel, pens mellow, message-laden rock. He did his part in the past by managing SDEROCK, a club for young local musicians. SDEROCK's latest collaboration, *The Hope Project*, speaks to a more current music trend: hip hop. The album consists of music written by three bands composed of local kids with songs mostly dealing with war and fear. On a recent tour of Israel, the kids—many of whom are now serving in the Israel Defense Forces—performed in Tel Aviv, singing into the darkness as the orange glow of the stage lights illuminated their faces from below. We are the real reason to keep walking here, they sing, the voices of the kids mingling with Vaknin's smooth, melodic baritone. We won't lose our desire to live. Music and resistance: Aside from air raids and explosions, that's Sderot's eternal refrain.

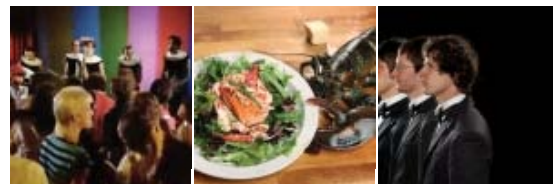
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