

CULTURE

Rockets may fall, but Sderot continues to rock

By Abigail Klein-Leichman January 15, 2009

The percussion of pounding Qassam rockets has been the steady backdrop for eight years now in Sderot, situated one mile from the Gaza Strip border. But Los Angeles documentary filmmaker Laura Bialis heard a different beat coming from this racially mixed, working-class town - drums, guitars, and the voices of musicians who have turned Sderot into the Liverpool of Israel.

In July 2007, Bialis moved to Sderot "to find out what it means to live in a never-ending war, and to document the lives and music of musicians under fire."

Bialis, 34, created the Foundation for Documentary Projects as a way to fuse her love of history with her passion for filmmaking. Her award-winning work has included movies about human rights, poverty, and wartime memories. Her most recent film, *Refusenik*, explored the 30-year international human rights campaign to free Soviet Jewry.

Bialis said the subjects in "Refusenik" inspired her to action when she received e-mails from friends in Israel about the humanitarian crisis in Sderot and the media's seeming indifference to their plight.

"I couldn't just sit there and not do something," she tells ISRAEL21c. "I looked at myself in the mirror and said, 'You have a camera and you know how to tell a story and make movies, so go there and do it.'"

A mini revolution that transformed Israeli pop music

In seeking a focus for what will become the movie *Sderot: Rock in the Red Zone*, Bialis learned that two decades ago, Sderot - then a town of some 10,000 mostly Moroccan Jewish families -- had bred Israel's first successful ethnic musicians. Haim Uliel and other such performers merged traditional melodies with contemporary rock. They began what Bialis calls a "mini revolution" that transformed Israeli pop music.

After a mid-1990s influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia that doubled its population, Sderot continued incubating serious musicians and successful bands including Teapacks, K'nesiyat HaSekhel (Church of Reason), and Sfatayim (Lips). "People are writing, rehearsing, and performing here daily," Bialis says. "People say it's *ir hamusica*, the city of music."

It is also, apparently, a city of love. In September, Bialis married one of the subjects of her film, recording artist and producer Avi Vaknin, a second-generation Sderot resident of Moroccan descent. His new release, *Million*, is receiving airplay across the country as Sderot continues to absorb rockets from Gaza.

For 10 years, Vaknin managed Sderock, a music club and rehearsal space in a bomb shelter. He brought major Israeli artists to work with the young musicians at the club. "The original idea was to suck the poison out of them; to let them scream... to let it all out," he relates in the film. Vaknin produced two Sderock albums: *The Record Project* (2001) and *The Hope Project* (2007).

Lyrics by teens about life under fire

Using lyrics written by teens about life under fire, a trio of local hip-hop bands performed the songs on *The Hope Project*. "It's insanely powerful," says Bialis.

She also turned her camera on Tzerei Sderot, a teenage choir that performs internationally. The group includes a mix of secular and religious natives, as well as newcomers from places such as Moldova and Azerbaijan. Last year, director Noam Shlomo taught the choir songs from the bands that came out of Sderot, and invited those bands to sing with them at a concert, Bialis says.

Her film also chronicles musicians including former choir member Hagit Yaso, 18, now in the Israel Defense Forces band, and Micha Biton, an ethnic rock artist with three successful albums to his credit.

"I think there is a pride of place in Sderot," Bialis says. "This has never been an easy place to live, and certainly now, many residents are traumatized. But the kids I've met in the music scene are doing pretty well psychologically and I feel it's because they have a focus on creating."

Sderot: Rock in the Red Zone, is now in editing phase, a process Bialis expects to take six months. She has created a website to promote the film and to encourage donations toward its completion.

Most of my films are a mission for positive change," she says. "I don't make propaganda. It's just a window into real lives."