



## World Music before World Music: Rereading Israel's Habrera Hativeet ("Natural Gathering") After Forty Years

Edwin Seroussi

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

All Israeli music emerged as a convergence, and at times a clash, of traditions anchored in diverse musical cultures shared by Jews in the Diaspora with their co-territorial non-Jewish societies and brought by Jewish immigrants to Palestine/Israel. Decades before the concept of 'world music' appeared on the scene, Israeli Jewish musicians experimented with a variety of hybrid forms and styles in 'art' and 'popular' music. Such experimentation, that started prior to statehood and continued after 1948, was motivated by variants of the cultural agenda of Zionism that advocated some sort of musical blending between an imagined "West" and "East." Most of these hybrids were in fact manipulations by Eastern and Central European Jewish composers to color their work with some "Oriental touch." The latter could be an Arab tune borrowed from Palestinian villagers, a quotation of Biblical cantillation from a non-European Jewish community (mostly mediated by musicological transcriptions) or the performance of the work by a Jewish artist of non-European upbringing.

With the advent of the rock aesthetics in Israel as the primary mode of conceiving popular music (around the year 1970), the ethos of mixing "East" and "West" took various new expressions. These new forms included *musiqā mizrahit* (lit. "Oriental music") and various expressions of "ethnic" pop-rock, such as the Greek-tinged music by Yehuda Poliker, and later on the work of rock bands such as Ethnix and Tea-Packs. In spite of the multiple semantic content of their music, these artists were never categorized in or outside Israel under the 'world music' label but were rather seen as local variants of pop-rock.

Among the Israeli artists operating within the 'world music' context, Shlomo Bar was a pioneer and major representative whose work preceded the inception of that label on the international market as well as Israel's major contributions to it, such as the ensemble Bustan Abraham (from 1990 on). This paper discusses the first and formative period of Shlomo Bar and his band *Habrera hativeet* (Heb. *Ha-brera ha-tiv'it*, Eng. *The Natural Gathering* or *The Obvious Choice*) by analyzing their first two albums. The first one "Origins/Elai Shorashim" (literally "Back to the Roots") of 1979, included Indian violin, sitar and tampura, Spanish guitar, "progressive jazz" bass, while Bar accompanied himself on congas. The second album, "Waiting for Samson" (1980), was based on a 1979 live recording at the elitist Tzavta Theater Club in Tel Aviv and remains to this day one of the most lasting productions of *Habrera Hativeet*. It combined Israeli songs of diverse provenances, Hassidic *niggunim* and original songs.

Bar and his band did not operate within the rock aesthetics properly nor within the field of 'art' music. It rather aspired to fuse a wide variety of ethnic styles (including jazz, perceived as ethnic Afro-American music) into a multifaceted sound set to 'serious' text by poets (rather than song writers), such as the Moroccan-born poet Erez Biton or the playwright Joshua Sobol (whose 1976 play "Kriza" triggered the establishment of *Habrera hativeet*). This sound was immediately perceived by music critics as an 'avant-garde' operating within a popular medium. Bar and *Habrera hativeet* also reread, in a subversive and sometimes provocative manner, mainstream Israeli and traditional Jewish songs (Sephardic and Ashkenazi). Despite the *mizrahi* origin of some of these artists (Bar is originally from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco), their musical materials and texts, *Habrera hativeet* always distanced itself from *musiqqa mizrahit* and its audiences or from ethnic-tinged Israeli rock. It rather targeted the urban elites (mostly Ashkenazi) who were sensitive to ethnic discrimination among Jews in Israel.

Until now, no detailed analytical examination of the music by Bar and *Habrera hativeet* was attempted and thus the scholarly treatment of this ensemble remained vague. Statements such as that Bar and *Habrera hativeet* aimed "to achieve recognition for the distinct Oriental style of this music as equivalent to Western fine art music" (Cohen and Shiloah 1985:209) are characteristic of the opaque treatment of one of Israel's most interesting contributions to 'world music' with continuous operation for three decades (but with constantly changing personnel).

In this presentation, I will argue that the perceptions of "uniqueness," "originality," "crossover," and "authenticity," that marked the reception of the first two albums of *Habrera hativeet* resulted from a convergence of four musical parameters: use of mixed strophic/open forms, orchestration, intonation and voice production, and innovative rhythmic patterning. To these four musical parameters, one can add to the process of reception the selection of texts and the contexts of performance by *Habrera hativeet*, which will be treated tangentially in this paper.

## Bibliography

<http://www.shlomobar.com>

- Brinner, Ben. 2009. *Playing Across the Divide: Musical Encounters in a Contested Land*. Oxford University Press.
- Horowitz, Amy. *Musika Yam Tikhonit Yisraelit (Israeli Mediterranean Music): Cultural Boundaries and Disputed Territories*. Ph. D. diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1994).
- 1997. "Performance in Disputed Territory: Israeli Mediterranean Music," *Musical Performance* 1/3, pp. 43-53.
- Kuttner, Yoav. "Habrera Hativ'it," *Ariel* 66 (1986), pp. 37-44.
- Regev. Motti and Edwin Seroussi. *Popular Music and Israeli National Culture*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
- Shiloah, Amnon and Eric Cohen. "The Dynamics of Change in Jewish Oriental Ethnic Music in Israel," *Ethnomusicology*, 27/2 (1983), pp. 227-251.