



A Musical Bridge Between Cultures

George Robinson

Special To The Jewish Week

The Minimalist composer Steve Reich has said that the only authentically Jewish music is Torah cantillation. Curt Sachs, a renowned ethnomusicologist, defined Jewish music as “that music which is made by Jews, for Jews, as Jews.”

Surely it can't be that simple.

Ask Basya Schechter and you get a different, richer answer, one that reflects her own complex experience as a working musician, singer-songwriter, band leader and chazan. Schechter is probably best known as the founder and leader of Pharaoh's Daughter and as the cantor for the Upper West Side worship community Romemu. Most recently she has been working on a side project, joining with rapper ePRHYME (Eden Pearlstein) as **Darshan**. Their first CD together is now available at darshanproject.com, and the duo will be performing March 21, 7 p.m., at DROM (85 Ave. A).

Schechter recognized her role when a rabbi at B'nai Jeshurun pointed it out to her many years earlier. “He said I was a bridge,” she recalls with a mixture of pride and amusement.

Ask her about Jewish identity and the words pour out of Schechter in the same thoughtful, honey-toned abundance that characterizes her music.

“My upbringing was a kind of bridging,” she explains. She was born into a fervently Orthodox family in Borough Park, but when her parents divorced when she was still a child, her mother left the community, while her father remarried to a woman who was “even more Orthodox.” So she became a sort of unannounced link between the frum and non-frum branches of her family. At first she wanted to be still more observant, a halacha-obsessed 7-year-old. Un-

surprisingly, a backlash later set in and “I lost my relationship with halacha as a way of identifying myself Jewishly.”

From this atypical start, she gradually began to experience a more conventional Orthodox Jewish kind of adolescent rebellion.

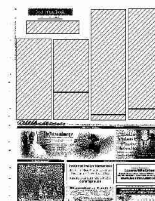
“I went to yeshiva, but I also wanted to become an artist,” she says. “I wanted to go to dance school, act in soaps, everything else. In high school I was head choreographer and our dance programs brought in so much revenue for the school that they gave me days off to study music. Then when I went to Israel for an ultra-Orthodox seminary, I discovered art, I started hitchhiking with friends and I wanted to be more exposed to the outside world. There was this yearning to see what was so off-limits.”

She got kicked out of the seminary, traveled throughout over Africa and the Middle East and had a singularly unlikely life-changing musical experience.

“I discovered Arabic music sitting in a KFC in Cairo,” she says. Despite the rather unusual setting, she immediately recognized a profound affinity with what she was hearing.

“I thought, ‘Oh, my God, this is my music,’” Schechter says. “The musical core of who I am, my foundation, is the music I grew up with, chasidic music. That’s where my melodic structure comes from. But the new influences and elements I was being exposed to started to become a part of me as well, like old memories I had almost forgotten.”

The result is not just a musical admixture, although that is pretty much the first thing you hear on any of Schechter’s recordings or live performances. As she has traveled and moved from one educational experience to another, including Barnard College and the cantorial program at ALEPH, the Jewish Renewal movement’s school, Schechter has em-



braced even more of the world.

But in doing so she could hardly be said to have disengaged from her Jewish identity.

“My genetics and experience and infrastructure are so Jewish,” she says, laughing. “I have no desire to shake off the ‘indoctrination’; I see myself through that lens. My creative world is certainly [accessed] through that portal. But I’ve brought together so many other things that make me who I am, someone who is connected to all other cultures — African and Sufi [among others]. I don’t feel it’s a contradiction.”

Intriguingly, Schechter’s musical career choices have been pretty resolutely Jewish.

It’s not that she hasn’t been courted by the pop music world but, as she says, high-powered musical machers would tell her she couldn’t do an album like her “Queen’s Dominion” project or a set of Yiddish poetry by Abraham Heschel or an album of Middle Eastern-inflected instrumentals.

“They would have stifled me, would have made me fixate on a certain kind of success,” she says. “It’s a very competitive world, the secular music world.”

So she has continued exploring her own brand of Jewish musicality.

“It’s a way to anchor myself,” she concludes. “This is the way I live my life, how I fit myself into our Jewish narrative of thousands of years.” ■



George Robinson covers music and film for the paper. His column appears monthly.