

Gulaza

A new quartet fronted by singer Igal Mizrahi is showcasing rarely heard songs from Yemenite women. **Barry Davis** reports

Singer Igal Mizrahi's personal musical odyssey is something of a familiar one. In Israel there are several examples of musicians, by and large from Sephardic backgrounds, who eschewed their familial ethnic roots in favour of Western commercial music, only to return home to roost a few years down the line. Mizrahi is a case in point.

Today the 40-year-old singer and actor fronts the Gulaza quartet, having been exposed to the elemental sounds and spirit of Jewish Yemenite liturgical music when he accompanied his father to the local synagogue. While that may have fired the infant's imagination it also, eventually, pushed him out of the fold for a while. "There were all these synagogues in our neighbourhood," he recalls. "Each community had their own take on what was the pure form of *piyutim* (liturgical song) from Yemen. I couldn't take all that squabbling, so I left it all behind me."

Acting became his first serious artistic pursuit, a craft he engages in to this day, alongside his work with Gulaza. "I was a bit of a superstar at the acting school," he says, although adding that it was also a frustrating experience. "I didn't feel I could express myself fully as an actor."

Mizrahi's epiphany came at some expense – physically for a colleague, and emotionally for him. "I witnessed a serious injury during a rehearsal on stage," he says, refusing to go into detail. "I took time off after that. I went home to think about stuff. I eventually returned to music, Yemenite music and singing. I felt I had to express myself completely."

You get that when you see and hear Mizrahi strutting his stuff on stage. His voice, emphatic diction and presence grab you by the heartstrings and don't let go. He has an emotive delivery worthy of someone who grew up in Yemen, surrounded by the music,



Rida Kopeck-Paulikowska

rather than a second-generation Israeli. The band's name comes from the surname of Mizrahi's paternal grandfather, who relocated from northern Yemen to pre-state Palestine in the early 20th century.

"I researched Yemenite music. For me it all starts with voice and percussion. They are the basic ways of making music." They are also, historically, considered to be 'kosher' means of music making, as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, in 70 AD; since then using other instruments has been frowned upon in certain religious circles.

Mizrahi was drawn to songs written and performed by Yemenite Jewish women, in the privacy of all-female gatherings. Traditionally, Yemenite women are not allowed to sing in front of men. The lyrics and rhythmic substrata feed off a broad swathe of activities and events, from quotidian domestic tasks to portraying milestone occasions. Mizrahi is keen to get Yemenite women's song out there, for all to enjoy, and also to present it as

faithfully, and naturally, as possible. "I have to feel the music with my body, with the hand movements, and the drama of the song."

Gulaza is not a 'pure' Yemenite outfit. The instrumental line-up includes a cello, guitar and a *ngoni*, the West African instrument considered by some as the forefather of the banjo.

Mizrahi is at ease with cultural synergy. "I discovered that in the eighth century many Yemenites crossed over the sea to Africa, to get away from the Muslims. It's a natural mix." That certainly comes across in the band's eponymous debut EP release, while Mizrahi says he has stretched the stylistic span for the forthcoming sophomore, full nine-track album, *Ya Mehija*, due out in October. "The first record was dark and rich, like the earth – women are earth. The next album will have more colours. It will be brighter." ♦

- + **ALBUM** *Gulaza's album, Ya Mehija, will be released on October 10*
- + **MORE** *Gulaza will perform at WOMEX, see www.womex.com*