

Rock 'n' Roll College Is Preparing Israelis For Semi-Stardom

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Its 'Heavy Metal' Department
Offers Course of Instruction
That Is Truly Underground

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RAMAT HASHARON, Israel — The dance floor of the club Roxanne is packed, the strobe lights are flashing, and the crowd begins to roar as Dana Berger strides on stage in a skintight gold lame dress and begins to sing.

Ms. Berger, 21, is being called Israel's answer to Madonna: a sexy blonde with provocative songs, wild clothes and a beat that makes people want to dance. She performs most evenings, promoting her band's first album and her current hit song, "Career Men."

By day, however, the Israeli Madonna hits the books: She is one of 200 students at the Rimón School of Jazz and Contemporary Music, Israel's first — and only — university of rock 'n' roll. Successful as she is, Ms. Berger still feels she needs to learn "the basics" and to develop her musical skills lest she burn out professionally.

The Rimón Compound

The Rimón school here in this suburb of Tel Aviv looks more like a run-down army base than a university campus, with several prefab buildings surrounding a sandy courtyard. The main rehearsal room — which the students jokingly refer to as the heavy-metal department — doubles as Rimón's underground steel-and-concrete bomb shelter.

Started in 1984 by four Israeli jazz and rock stars, the school sends its graduates off to dominate the Israeli pop charts. Rimón students are the children and grandchildren of Israel's founders, the generation of pioneers who drained swamps, built cities, and envisioned a country that would be just like any other, populated by everyday people with everyday problems. The pioneers probably weren't ready for rock 'n' roll, but Rimón's founders say they share a common impulse with their forebears. "We're rock 'n' roll Zionists," says Yehuda Eder, one of Rimón's founders, who has played lead gui-

tar in some of Israel's most successful bands. "We wanted to build something new: rock 'n' roll with an Israeli sound."

That is a radical notion in a nation whose main musical heritage consisted of patriotic folk songs about building the land of Israel and schmaltzy ballads heavy on the accordion. Israeli rock didn't emerge until the 1970s, and it remained largely a fringe activity, with bands made up of "local kids who sang in comically bad English with funny little accents," says Israeli journalist Ze'ev Chafets. Any attempts at singing rock 'n' roll in Hebrew were banned from the radio for bad grammar.

Only in the past few years have hundreds of rock clubs sprung up all over Israel, showcasing bands with a distinctive Israeli sound that is best described as a fusion of minor-key melodies, Arabic beats and Western rhythm lines. The Israeli rock 'n' roll revolution started with singers poking fun at the Bible. Biblical themes heroically treated in the music of the pioneer generation gave way to songs like the one by singer Ariel Zilber with the lyric: "Samson of Eshteol, he was such a buck; and here I am in Ashkelon working on a garbage truck."

Nowadays, even that sort of departure from tradition is passe. At Rimón, "our students want to write about sex," says Mr. Eder, the founder-guitarist. "And from time to time, self-destruction."

Despite the changes, in a place where people are trained from youth to be serious, rock 'n' roll has taken awhile to catch on. "There's a feeling in Israel that people aren't supposed to be having fun," says Danny Sanderson, an Israeli rock star who is on the Rimón board. "I used to introduce one of my songs, 'This is a happy song. Sorry, Dad.' Israeli rock 'n' rollers are always up against the Holocaust, the security problems, and plain old Jewish guilt."

It isn't easy living the rock 'n' roll life in a country in which everybody seems to know everybody. "In the U.S., a rock star can go wild and just disappear," says Mr. Eder, who, like all the teachers at Rimón, also still performs. "But I can't do that because every time I play a concert, I know half the people sitting in the front row."

No Way to Get Rich

Moreover, rock 'n' roll is not a ticket to the kind of mind-boggling wealth it can be in the U.S. For one thing, the market is just too small. A record goes gold here if it sells 20,000 copies (in the U.S. gold is reached at 500,000 copies). Israel's best-known stars

sometimes sell as many as 120,000 records, and that isn't bad in a country of about five million people. But it is one of the reasons Rimón students are required to study a range of musical skills during the school's three-year program, including composition, harmony and arranging. "A lot of these kids aren't going to be rock stars. In fact, they might end up having to play Hasidic weddings in order to make a living," says instructor Amikam Kimelman. "That's why we want them to learn how to do everything."

Classes are informal, with students criticizing one another's work. And because Israeli rock 'n' roll is such a new phenomenon, most material they study is contemporary American music. The culture gap can hinder teaching.

Latter-Day Flower Child

Down in the bomb shelter, a band is giving a lackluster performance of the old rock hit "Mama Told Me Not to Go." It's clear that the band doesn't really understand the lyrics. Mr. Eder, looking frustrated, stops the music and explains that it's a song about a Jewish mother who is always nagging her son. "Can't you relate to that?" he says. Clearly, they can. They start over with gusto.

But the students say that their biggest challenge isn't trying to fathom American culture but creating their own songs in Hebrew. Hebrew words usually have more than one syllable, which slows down any melody "and makes it really hard to groove," says instructor Gil Ladin, a drummer. But the main problem is that Hebrew is a language spoken primarily from the throat. "That means when you try to sing 'Come on baby, let's dance,'" says the songwriter Mr. Sanderson, "it sounds like you're choking on broccoli."

Shirley Yuval, a 24-year-old Rimón student, grew up listening to Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan. With her long blond hair and serene manner, she has the air of a 1960s flower child. She has included a number of songs she wrote for class in the album she just cut but, unlike her musical heroes, she avoids writing about issues. "If I say something political, I'll lose half my crowd because they'll disagree," says Ms. Yuval, who served in an army entertainment troupe before starting school. "And there's so little crowd to begin with, you can't afford to lose anyone."

For aspiring rock stars, the Rimón students are a decidedly well-scrubbed bunch. A young woman in black lipstick and a velour dress stands out because everyone else is wearing blue jeans and T-shirts. Many of the men are wearing