Death Of A Diva

Ofra Haza 1957-2000

June 1, 2000 By Barry Walters

In an era of willfully bland pop stars flaunting their manufactured roots, the unlikely career of Ofra Haza—who died of AIDS on February 23 in her home city of Tel Aviv at age 42—reads as a beautifully fluky Cinderella story befitting an extraordinarily singular talent. Known internationally since the mid-'80s for a pioneering mix of Yemenite folk songs and techno dance pop, Haza is both Israel's most famous musical export and an icon on the level of Madonna in her native country. Her musical hybrid is like her life, at once irreverently urbane and rooted in custom. And the controversy surrounding her mysterious and sudden death—it wasn't until five days later that an Israeli newspaper printed that she had concealed her HIV status even from her doctors—plays out the tensions of that duality so symbolically that it seems scripted.

The youngest of nine, Haza was born in 1957 in the Hatikvah ghetto of Tel Aviv to Jewish parents who had fled Yemen's 1920s Muslim regime on foot. At 12, she joined the Hatikvah Workshop Theater—run by her future manager, Bazelel Aloni—before serving her compulsory two years in the Israeli army. Upon her 1979 discharge, she mounted a successful solo career, and in 1983 came in second place in the Eurovision Song Contest, the competition that put ABBA on the map.

Haza remained a typical Israeli pop star singing unremarkable love ballads until 1985, when she recorded Fifty Gates of Wisdom. Two songs off the album were remixed for dance clubs and Haza's musical story turned delightfully strange (see "Israel's Madonna").

But all her success as a recording artist is almost dwarfed by Haza's saintlike status back home—her death has provoked a furor in Israel reminiscent of America's response to Rock Hudson. Haza and her family kept her illness and cause of death secret not only from the public—who flocked by the thousands to her memorial—but also from hospital workers, who are demanding to know why they weren't told that their patient, no matter how famous, had HIV.

The official cause of Haza's death following two weeks of hospitalization was massive organ failure, even though at one point doctors said pneumonia might have been a factor. When Ha'aretz, a popular newspaper, reported rumors that her death was, in fact, AIDS-related, hospital officials refused to confirm it. But at press time, no one, including her family and husband of two years, has stepped forward to deny it.

Israeli public opinion was polarized by the newspaper's decision to disclose her status. While some were outraged with Ha'aretz for not respecting the wishes of Haza's family, the paper's editors stood by the decision. "The more the days passed, and the more this conspiracy of secrecy grew to reach monstrous dimensions, the more we thought we ought to publish," Yoel Esteron, the managing editor of Ha'aretz, explained. "Isn't it time the citizens of Israel relate to AIDS as they do to cancer or dysentery?" According to a 1998 survey by the Jerusalem AIDS Project, 40 percent of that religious city's junior and senior high school students had never heard any mention of AIDS in the classroom. Haza's death may be the wake-up call needed for a country where last year the health minister removed all pictures of condoms from its World AIDS Day campaign.

Although local advocates worry that secrecy around Haza's illness sends a message of shame and raises concerns that other PWAs might be avoiding lifesaving care, it has also inspired action. Tel Aviv HIV testing has reportedly doubled since her death, and the presence of AIDS in this tradition-bound country—with an estimated 10,000 HIVers—is at last being openly addressed.

Haza's musical legacy is unambiguously inspirational. In the 15 years since her breakout, the mingling of indigenous folk and global electronics has revolutionized popular music via such acts as Enigma, Moby and Deep Forest. And whereas Haza's English-language records flaunted an unmistakable Madonna bent, the American singer's recent work bears an implicit Haza influence.

The mind reels at the possibilities cut short for Haza both as an artist and a potential AIDS activist: As someone who fearlessly bridged avant-pop Western and ancient Eastern styles, she could have inspired others living with the societal burden of Old World prejudice to find peace with this most contemporary of afflictions. Nevertheless, Haza's time-traveling, border-crossing legacy lives on through her voice's technical excellence and exuberance. Few singers capture the connectedness of all humanity with more gusto than this unlikely soul emissary.

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