Israel’s Madonna

June 1, 2000 By Barry Walters

Although Ofra Haza had released many albums in Israel during the first half of the 1980s, her international success story begins with 1985’s Yemenite Songs, released in the United States as Fifty Gates of Wisdom (Shanachie). Forgoing the pop that had made her a star, Haza returned to her roots to record devotional folk tunes in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. The accompaniment straddles tradition (oil cans and serving trays used as percussion instruments, the historical response to the orthodox Muslim ban on musical instruments) and modernity (jazzy double bass, ’80s drum sounds suggesting synthesizers). It is her least Western album available domestically, and although it pioneered her hybrid style, its thin, flat sonics render the elegant material repetitive.

Created in the wake of Haza’s worldwide breakthrough with dance-club remixes of “Galbi” and “Im Nin’Alu” from Fifty Gates, 1988’s Shaday (Sire/Warner Bros.) features re-recordings of those signature anthems utilizing scattered lines in English plus seven new tracks. Even while maintaining Haza’s funky Yemen sound, its synth-pop evokes “Papa Don’t Preach”–era Madonna. Now dated, Shaday was meant to be of-the-moment, and its mix of old and new was precisely the point. Unfortunately, the crucial cuts were best experienced in their long-lost, extended vinyl versions, but Haza’s most striking sampled appearance (from “Im Nin’Alu”) is back in print via Eric B. & Rakim’s Paid in Full—The Platinum Edition.

Desert Wind (Sire/Warner Bros.), out in 1989, is where Haza’s transglobal approach truly gels. The presence of producers Arif Mardin and Thomas Dolby ups the quality dance-music quotient, and the lyrics (mostly in English) tackle issues close to Haza’s heart. Nowhere is this more apparent than in “Middle East,” which addresses terrorism over a giddy arrangement. Perky and pointedly subversive, this is Haza at her most pop.

The tactics of 1992’s Kirya (Shanachie) are far more dignified. Producer Don Was opts for slower tempos, subtle genre-bending and naturalistic sonics. Lacking Desert Wind’s sing-along hooks, Kirya instead weaves hypnotic melodies over sensual hip-hop rhythms. Little gets in the way of Haza’s performance, not even the presence of narrator Iggy Pop on “Daw Da Hiya.” Although it can serve as elegant aural wallpaper, Haza’s final U.S. album is worth main-course savoring.

The easiest, no-risk way to sample Haza is via DreamWorks’ 1998 animated biblical epic The Prince of Egypt. Haza sings the role of Moses’ mother, Yocheved, and it’s her pained plea to “Deliver Us”—a tune that haunts and inspires Moses—that sets the film’s passionate tone. Beginning with a piercing cry in Hebrew, Haza then croons an English lullaby that climaxes with a

parting operatic prayer demonstrating not only her virtuoso technique but her absorbing soulfulness. No one else could have done it.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Israel-8217-s-Madonna-10226-4036