

Muzika Mizrakhit and Muzika Etnit: Discourses of the Israeli Middle Eastern Musical Aesthetic

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As the last members of the audience obtain their programs and find their assigned seats, the theater lights dim. The musicians enter the stage, elegantly dressed in loose-fitting pants and colorful blouses with intricate Middle Eastern designs and patterns. After picking up their assorted instruments—cello, nay, kamanche, saz, darbuka, and acoustic bass guitar—they begin to play. Such a scene may seem typical or familiar to a concertgoer of world music here in the US. However, the performance venue is in Tel-Aviv, Israel, where Middle Eastern musical styles are encumbered by years of political conflict.

This paper serves as an investigation and comparison of *muzika mizrakhit* (Mizrakhi music) and *muzika etnit* (ethnic music), the two primary Middle Eastern musical forms that emerged in Israel in the mid-1970s and the late 1980s respectively.¹ My analysis draws from Israeli newspaper articles, relevant scholarly work, and ethnographic data and interviews² from my own research on *muzika mizrakhit* and *muzika etnit*. Though most scholars characterize Israel's primary class divisions along ethnic lines—generally referring to class distinctions between the dominant Ashkenazim (European Jews) and the more marginalized Mizrahim (Middle Eastern and North African Jews)—we can observe a further fracturing of such essentialized social categories in Israel through music. While it is true that in Israel today the proportion of Ashkenazim in the

highest income bracket is still four times that of Mizrahim, scholars have recently noted the emergence of a new social category: a Mizrahi middle/upper class (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991:50; Melman 1992:105). As yet, no current scholarship examines the tensions and complexities triggered by the appearance of these new social developments among Israeli Mizrahim. This paper seeks to begin to address this topic through the analysis of the musical practices associated with *muzika mizrahit* and *muzika etnit*, thereby highlighting the complexities that come to light when upwardly mobile Mizrahim struggle to break away from a marginalized cultural status in Israeli society.

Throughout Israel's short history of just over half a century, shifts in musical styles have reflected struggles of power and identity between the dominant Ashkenazim (European Jews) and the Mizrahim (Middle Eastern and North African Jews). For the first two decades of the nation's existence, Middle Eastern cultural practices were rejected as "uncultivated," "too Arabic," and therefore "un-Israeli" by the state-controlled media. However, two Middle Eastern musical forms, *muzika mizrahit* (Mizrahi music) and *muzika etnit* (ethnic music), emerged in Israel in the mid-1970s and the late 1980s respectively. *Muzika mizrahit*, which grew out of the low-income Mizrahi working class, represented the counter-hegemonic Mizrahi cassette-culture (cf. Manuel 1993). This pop music marked a cultural hybrid innovation on the part of second generation Mizrahi Israelis. *Muzika etnit*, a Middle Eastern Israeli phenomenon not yet explored in current scholarship, represents a more recent crop of Middle Eastern-style bands, many of which call upon specific classical Eastern musical traditions (i.e., Persian, Arab, North African). Musical traditions only previously heard in each respective community on special occasions have emerged for the general Israeli public in live venues. Some practitioners of this musical genre mix these Eastern styles with Western classical music and jazz, and align themselves with the global "world music" scene. Accord-

ing to a 1997 article in Ma'ariv, a premiere Israeli newspaper, “*muzika etnit* is to *muzika mizrachit* what jazz is to western pop” (Geffen 1997:24).

Like “world music” movements from other parts of the globe, *muzika etnit* practitioners position themselves against cultural Eurocentrism, a stance which is highly charged in Israel. It would perhaps seem logical, then, if *muzika mizrachit* and *muzika etnit* were to align themselves with one another, given their shared interest in establishing the prominence of Middle Eastern culture in Israel. Yet this is not the case. As I attended concerts of both *muzika mizrachit* and *muzika etnit* and discussed these styles with Israeli musicians and audience members, what struck me was how distinct the audience members who patronized these genres were. *Muzika mizrachit* continues to be supported predominantly by working-class Mizrahi audiences, while upper- and middle-class Mizrahim and Ashkenazim alike characterized audiences of *muzika etnit*. After reading a good number of newspaper articles in Israel and speaking with several Israelis on the topic, I noted the concern among practitioners of *muzika etnit* to distinguish their musical style from *muzika mizrachit*—denying it as a legitimate expression of Israeli Mizrahi identity.

How do musical styles relate and contribute to the formation of social and class identities? In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates the way in which “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (1984:7). According to Bourdieu, musical production is a unique and powerful identifier of class orientation: “Nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music” (ibid:18).

In *Rationalizing Culture*, Georgina Born utilizes elements of Bourdieu’s theoretical understanding of aesthetic distinctions in order to examine the modernist musical avant-garde in France. Her study demonstrates the way in which professional avant-garde musicians discursively disavow and denigrate

popular music in order to legitimize their own more “high cultured” musical pursuits. I apply Born’s notion of “splitting” to the performance practices and discourses utilized by practitioners of *muzika etnit* in terms of how they distinguish themselves from and position themselves against *muzika mizrakhit*. According to Born:

Splitting involves a distortion whereby the “object” (of perception) is experienced as split into a “good” and a “bad” object, which are both absolutely separate yet antagonistically bound. The good is idealized, granted supreme and unquestionable legitimacy, and felt to be a refuge from persecution, while the bad object is denigrated as worthless, but also as a destructive and terrifying persecutor. Extreme splitting is linked with two other mechanisms: denial and omnipotence. Denial involves the omnipotent obliteration of a perception—such as the existence of the bad object—“without reference to actual reality” (Hinshelwood 1987:266). Thus splitting, omnipotence, and denial are mutually implicated processes (Born 1995:37).

I argue that composers/musicians of *muzika etnit* exhibit evidence of splitting through their delegitimation and “denial” of *muzika mizrakhit*, the “bad object,” while granting “unquestionable legitimacy” to their own musical genre. Although both musical styles are self-conscious hybrid innovations utilizing both Middle Eastern and Western musical codes and instrumentation, *muzika etnit* works “under the guise of pure, formal autonomy, of its absolute difference from the popular culture [i.e., *muzika mizrakhit*] with which it coexists” (Born:45). Many musicians of *muzika etnit* seem to perceive themselves as subjects with the critical “role of (aesthetic) salvation” of Middle Eastern art music, “under the threat of its annihilation” (Born:38) by *muzika mizrakhit*.

As my analysis will demonstrate, practitioners of *muzika etnit* are generally dedicated to the cause of granting Middle Eastern music more “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984) in Israel. The central interest of this study, however, is to interro-

gate contradictions inherent in the strategies utilized by these musicians to position their musical genre as high culture. These strategies derive “from the need to gain aesthetic legitimation as composers within the world of serious contemporary music,” which means “retaining a distance” from *muzika mizrachit* (Born:297). This splitting or fragmentation is often “necessary for subjects successfully to inhabit the wider discourses” (Born:279).

In spite of the fact that bandleaders for *muzika etnit* are generally Mizрахim themselves, *muzika etnit* has not achieved wider success among the majority of Mizрахim in Israel, who are predominantly represented in the working class. Born notes that “one result of aesthetic subjectification may be to fragment the subject and produce incommensurable aesthetic-dispositions: an internal sense of irreconcilable desires, legitimate and illegitimate, explicit and covert” (Born:35). This seems applicable to our Israeli case where the splitting reflects the fragmentation of the Mizrakhi subject, confronted with the desire to both “resist” and “enter” the aesthetics of the Israeli dominant culture. Splitting is referred to as “one of the most primitive defenses against anxiety” (Born:37). In the Israeli case, I argue that this anxiety stems from the simultaneous desire for recognition as Mizrakhi citizens, and the desire for high social status and mobility in Israel. In order to take their places as members of the Israeli middle and upper classes, the splitting enacted by these Mizрахim involves the “repudiation or denial of another (past) cultural self” (Born:304)—a lower-class Mizrakhi subjectivity that must be transcended.

Raymond Williams provides us with an understanding of the way in which social changes and the emergence of aesthetic products are related. He argues that the upward movement of a social class necessarily requires new kinds of aesthetic products associated with that changed social order (Williams 1981:202). *Muzika etnit*, then, in its alignment with jazz³ and Western classical music is a logical move toward the redefinition of a middle/upper class aesthetic, as these musical forms are viewed

as high culture in Israel. In this sense, the sign, *muzika etnit*, “becomes the arena of the class struggle” (Volosinov 1973).

In order to understand the way in which *muzika etnit* situates itself both discursively and musically against *muzika mizrakhit*, one must first understand *muzika mizrakhit* itself, and its history. The musical genre emerged as part of the counter-hegemonic struggle of Israeli Mizrahim when it became clear that the Israeli cultural melting pot had failed to include over fifty percent of the population. Although immigrant absorption policies sought to promote integration and equality, in reality Mizrahim experienced inferior housing placement, unequal educational opportunities, and over-representation at the lowest levels of the army and labor force. A disproportionate number of Mizrahim were sent to the squalid *ma'abarot*, the immigrant development towns on the frontier regions of the country (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991).

As stated above, the Ashkenazim had already defined an Israeli national identity, and once Israel became a state, this invented national identity became part of government policy, referred to as *mizug qaluyot*, the “mixing” of the exiles. Mizrahim were “encouraged” to assimilate into the Israeli “melting pot.” As a prerequisite for full social integration, all subsequent immigrants were to abandon their previous cultural traditions in order to embrace the official national Israeli culture.

The exclusion of Middle Eastern cultures was pervasive because the Israeli state-controlled media assisted in the formation of the nation-state. Through these means the state could more successfully imbue an entire nation with a specific musical genre. The early Zionist music, known as *Shirei Eretz Yisrael*, was mostly adapted from the styles of Yiddish, Polish, and Russian folk songs with Hebrew words inserted (Horowitz 1994:7). “By controlling access to the airwaves, ethnic variation could be minimized, while new national songs helped shape a common national identity” (Horowitz 1994:87). Middle Eastern music was minimally featured on the radio

when the state-run folklore ensembles performed, but always during specifically unpopular time slots.

In the 1970s, however, the second generation of Jewish Middle Eastern Israelis grew weary of such second-class treatment. Although many of the Ashkenazi immigrants had initially been placed in *ma'abarot* as well, most had been relocated to better housing situations in urban centers. The Mizrahi *ma'abarot* had grown into poor and overcrowded neighborhoods and cities, and Middle Eastern Jews began seeing themselves as trapped in their low economic and social status. One militant grassroots group, the Black Panthers (the name inspired by the African-American movement in the United States), mobilized young Mizrahim to protest what they viewed as the state's deliberate discrimination against Mizrahim and to increase solidarity among Mizrahim (Yishai 1998:4).

The Emergence of *Muzika Mizrachit*

Amidst this climate of ethnic identity and assertion, *muzika mizrachit* emerged in the 1970s. Mizrahim were interested in a revival of the cultural heritage of which they felt they had been robbed. In order to understand the complex nature of what both *muzika mizrachit* (and *muzika etnit*) came to be, one must recall that because these political developments only took shape with second generation Mizrahim, "the Eastern groups had already been Israelized and alienated from their own ethnic roots" (Halper, Seroussi, and Squires-Kidron, 1989: 133). The pre-immigration folk music of each Mizrahi group, therefore, could not remain intact under the impact of the new Israeli environment that had marginalized Middle Eastern music since the state's inception. This factor must be kept in mind when one observes that the emergence of both *muzika mizrachit* (and *muzika etnit*) did not represent cultural revivals, but actual acts of hybrid cultural "invention."

It must also be emphasized that "ethnic identity and expression never threatened the essential Jewishness of Middle

Eastern and North African Israeli Jews, or the priority they gave to complete integration and assimilation” (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron, 1989: 133). In spite of the largely counter-cultural nature of the musical movement, its practitioners sought to be accepted by the general Israeli population as well. *Muzika mizrakhit* has always presented a sound that is close enough to the Western tradition to be tolerated by the mainstream Israeli population. Though in many ways *muzika mizrakhit* was clearly a form of social protest against the Israeli establishment, it was just as obviously in many other ways an effort to be accepted by mainstream Israeli society. All of the practitioners of *muzika mizrakhit* I interviewed stressed that *muzika mizrakhit* was the true form of Israeli music—for only it represents the true synthesis of “the ingathering of the exiles.”

What defines *muzika mizrakhit*, then, is a combination of elements, both musical and non-musical, which mark the musical style as “authentically” Mizrahi. These elements all relate to its image as the music of “the people” or *amkha*, the popular Israeli term for the Middle Eastern and North African working classes (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1989:134). The image was conveyed in a variety of ways.

Most strikingly, it was evidenced by the way in which the music was originally distributed. *Muzika mizrakhit* is often referred to derogatorily as “*muzikat tahanat merkazit*,” central bus station music because, unlike the more mainstream Israeli pop music sold in record stores, it made its selling debut in the marketplace at the central bus station close to the Mizrahi working-class area in southern Tel Aviv. Because performers of *muzika mizrakhit* were denied access to record companies and radio stations until the 1990s, their music was almost exclusively recorded on cassette tapes, which were inexpensive and easy to produce. The packaging of these cassettes involved non-professional, simple wrappers, which were often merely photocopied and contained the phone number of the performer’s agent. The industry of *muzika mizrakhit* subverted the rules generated by Israeli record companies that dictated

expensive marketing of their records and state-of-the-art sound quality. All of this attests to the industry's attitude toward the mainstream Israeli public who would "not purchase the cassettes at any rate" (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1992:136-137,669).

An analysis of the performance of *muzika mizrachit* further reflects the ideals of the working class. Performances generally occurred, and to a large extent still occur, in restaurants, public halls, or clubs located in industrial zones and in other "places frequented by the amkha" (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1989:137). Because performers of *muzika mizrachit* had little access to the state-controlled mass media, they made most of their income from live performances, and their interaction with the audience was crucial.

Avihu Medina, is a second generation Israeli whose parents emigrated from North Africa in the 1950s. He is *muzika mizrachit*'s outspoken composer, lyricist, performer, and advocate. According to Medina, "There is never a performance without the participation of the audience—they sing with me, they answer me" (Medina 2000). Artist and the audience generally speak back and forth to one another, and singing, dancing, and eating are generally part of the performance as well. The greatest nightmare for the performer of *muzika mizrachit* is "a silent, passive audience" (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1989:135). This corresponds to many contexts for Arabic secular music, where one "is led to envision an active and perhaps noisy audience, audibly enjoying food and drink as well as the music" (Racy 1986:418). In addition, "creativity which involves both the artist and his listeners...relies on direct and instantaneous input from the audience" (Racy 1991:11). The "deep-rooted demand for participation" (Bourdieu 1982:32) is not only characteristic, but oftentimes necessary in working class musical settings.

The most important goal of the performer of *muzika mizrachit* is to please the audience. Though it is true that this goal extends to all musicians at some level, Mizrakhi musicians

have a unique way of accomplishing this. One of the methods used is slightly varying the styles of their songs, depending on their audience. This is crucial as most singers earn the largest portion of their income from performances at Mizrahi weddings, which tend to be ethnically specific. *Muzika mizrahit* possesses many ethnic substyles, such as Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Indian, Georgian, Moroccan, and Arabic. Musicians must have a few songs from each style in their repertoires, so that they can relate to whatever specific ethnic group the situation dictates (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1989:136). These reciprocal performance elements give the crowd a feeling that *muzika mizrahit* is truly their own.

Another key element that marks *muzika mizrahit* as “authentic” to its listeners is the identification of the audience with the singer and his/her voice. Just as in Arab culture, where the vocalist has always occupied the central place in musical life (Danielson 1988:141), the success of *muzika mizrahit* is completely dependent upon the appeal of the band’s singer. Zohar Argov, the most famous and loved singer of *muzika mizrahit*, personified Mizrahi working class culture in Israel; “he grew up attending synagogue . . . revered his mother, and ate *jahnun*.⁴ He also dressed in bold suits and sported a thick gold chain” (Horowitz 1994:191). Singers of *muzika mizrahit* were and are still today almost exclusively Mizrahim, who are portrayed as sharing similar life experiences to those of their audience members. In interviews with the media, well-known singers speak freely about their Jewish religious values such as observing the Sabbath or keeping a kosher home, about familial relationships, or about the trials and tribulations they endured growing up in low-income environments. Vocalist practitioners of *muzika mizrahit* generally have no formal musical training, and the audience’s evaluation of a performer is visceral. The singer’s voice must move audience members, for it is his or her voice that ultimately must resonate “with their struggle” (Horowitz:190).

In addition, a number of musical codes are utilized to

identify *muzika mizrachit*. Some of these include the use of an open improvisational section in free rhythm (*mawwal*), the use of the melismatic style and nasal voice quality, and inclusion of distinctive Middle Eastern instruments such as the oud and qanun. Yet in conjunction with the Middle Eastern musical codes, we find that *muzika mizrachit* always possesses Western ones as well. These include elements of basic Western harmony as well as standard rock instrumentation such as the drum kit, bass guitar, synthesizer and electric guitar. Western style rock music in conjunction with *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* had already established itself as authentically “Israeli” by the early eighties (Regev 1992), and therefore the inclusion of rock elements in *muzika mizrachit* was a natural and logical development.

Is this Arab music?

For the practitioners of the music, *muzika mizrachit* is distinct from Arabic music, as the Mizрахim wanted to clearly demarcate themselves from the more highly stigmatized Palestinians and other Arabs with whom they shared many musical traditions (Halper, Seroussi, Squires-Kidron 1989:134). The Mizрахim with whom I spoke were quick to acknowledge the Greek and Turkish influences inherent in *muzika mizrachit*, as it is widely known that several of the earliest songs of the genre were Greek and Turkish songs translated into Hebrew.

Yet my informants neglected to mention the influence of modern Arab pop music, mostly produced in Egypt and Lebanon, or its similarity to *muzika mizrachit*. My Mizрахi informants instead explained the intrinsic Middle Eastern elements in *muzika mizrachit* as a natural evolution of their personal or familial historical roots as Jews living in the Middle East.⁵ This may partially explain why some performers prefer the term *muzika yam tikhonit yisraelit* (Israeli Mediterranean music) to *muzika mizrachit* (Eastern music). The former label emphasizes the more neutral “Mediterranean” rather than the purely “East-

ern” influence, more marked as Arab. The desire to have their music and culture legitimized as truly “Israeli” and seen as separate from Arab cultural forms, is of crucial import to working class Mizrahi Israelis, many of whom still feel marginalized in Israeli society.

A good example of the discourse utilized by Israeli Mizrahim to distinguish themselves from Arabs was observed during my interview with a prominent performer of *muzika mizrahit*⁶ when we discussed her parents’ immigration from Yemen. When I referred to her parents as “Arab Jews” she corrected me stating, “There is a big difference between the Jewish Yemenites and the Muslim Yemenites. They [Jewish Yemenites] always considered themselves to be living in Yemen for a temporary period, and when the time came to make *aliyah*,⁷ everyone came to Israel” (2000). Jews living in Arab lands were never “Arabs” then, according to my consultant, as their residence in these countries (in many cases, for over one thousand years) was only “temporary.”

***Muzika Mizrahit* in the New Millennium**

In the past few years, *muzika mizrahit* has gradually succeeded in penetrating the music industry, and has finally achieved commercial success in Israel. Although a large number of sales still take place in Israel’s outdoor marketplaces, hundreds of albums of *muzika mizrahit* are now available on CD in Israeli record stores where mainstream Israeli pop is sold. Many of these albums utilize the music industry’s most savvy marketing techniques, such as the inclusion of glossy photo-posters of the star-singer, as well as flashy multi-paged accompanying booklets featuring song lyrics and photos of the singer in elaborate costumes and sexy poses. You can hear Sarit Chadad, Eyal Golan, and Zehava Ben—the most commercially and financially successful singers of *muzika mizrahit*—on many popular Israeli radio stations, including *GalGalatz*, *Galei Tzahal*, and *Reshet Gimmel*. In addition, in the past three years

a highly popular weekly Israeli television show called “Taverna” has emerged which primarily features interviews with famous singers of *muzika mizrachit* and the performance of their music. Furthermore, hipster Ashkenazi and Mizrakhi Israelis can dance to the grooves of *muzika mizrachit*’s hits at even the trendiest clubs in Tel Aviv. In spite of *muzika mizrachit*’s success in these realms, only a few performers of *muzika mizrachit* such as those mentioned above have been highly successful, while most are still relegated to the many Mizrakhi pirate radio stations. In addition, out of the three secular Israeli daily papers distributed nationally, only *Yediot Akhronot* publicizes performances of *muzika mizrachit*. Even in *Yediot*, the ads for the Mizrakhi performers oddly appear only in the back section of the newspaper, rather than in the “Arts” section where all the other performances and concerts are listed, and *muzika mizrachit* continues to be associated with working- and lower-class culture in Israel. I will address this seeming contradiction later in this paper.

Muzika Etnit

Muzika etnit first emerged in Israel in the late 1980s—less than fifteen years after *muzika mizrachit* entered the scene—but by that time, cultural and national discourse had shifted to valorize notions of cultural integration (Dominguez 1989:120). Although there are some conflicting discussions concerning what exactly the genre is, the term “ethnic” in Israel connotes Eastern or Mizrakhi as explained above, in spite of the fact that Israel is situated in the Middle East, and approximately half of its citizens are of “Eastern” descent. Israeli ethnic music, or *muzika etnit*, represents the recent proliferation of Middle Eastern-style bands in Israel many of which—though not all—play ethnically-specific music such as the Isfahan Ensemble or Yair Dalal, performing classical Iranian and Iraqi music respectively. Though what distinguishes this category is its classical Eastern element and the

inclusion of classical eastern instruments⁸ such as the oud, santur, qanun, or setar, some practitioners of *muzika etnit* such as the East-West Ensemble and Bustan Avraham fuse these Eastern styles with Western classical music and jazz.

It is important to note that the term *muzika etnit* was not one chosen by its practitioners, but rather seems to have originated from the media. Most musicians expressed irritation that such diverse musical practices were lumped together as “ethnic.” “Everything that’s not Western is ethnic in Israel. How about jazz and bluegrass? Why aren’t those ethnic?” (Hershstein 1999). Another musician stated, “The modern West has decided . . . that ‘whatever we are not,’ that’s ethnic music . . . It’s crazy, because even these new genres like house, dub, punk, techno have their own genres, but there isn’t Egyptian, Persian, Bukharran—after one thousand years of a tradition, it’s all called ethnic” (Borochoy 1999). Yet in spite of performers’ discontent with its inherited name, the genre has become known in Israel as *muzika etnit*, and musicians, therefore, refer to it as such in their dealings with the mass media.

Discursive Strategies

For many years now, the press has been criticized for either insulting or completely ignoring *muzika mizrakhit* in its coverage. Unlike the way in which the Israeli press vilifies *muzika mizrakhit*, however, *muzika etnit* is constantly praised. I intend to point out complicities and complacencies in the so-called “liberal discourse” which raises up *muzika etnit* and denigrates *muzika mizrakhit*, reifying notions of Mizrahi “cultural poverty.”

Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range’ (Hall, 1977) so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological’: which appears instead to be permanent and ‘natural’, to lie outside history, to

be beyond particular interests. (Hebdige 1979:16)

By valorizing *muzika etnit* and claiming it to be the “authentic” Middle Eastern music, critics of *muzika mizrachit*—such as members of the Israeli mass media, practitioners of *muzika etnit*, or others long-situated in the Israeli establishment—can justify their scorn through their “framing” of it as inauthentic. In this sense, the Israeli cultural hegemony can be maintained as *muzika etnit* becomes “naturalized” as the only true form of Middle Eastern music.⁹

Yair Dalal is a second generation Israeli in his early forties whose parents emigrated from Iraq in the 1950s. Dalal is a key performer of and spokesperson for *muzika etnit* and defines this musical genre in a newspaper interview:

[*Muzika etnit*] includes elements that belong to Jewish-Arabic or Eastern culture; as opposed to Mizrachit pop [*muzika mizrachit*] that mixes European elements, like synthesizers or electric guitars, *muzika etnit* is art music, equal in status to classical chamber music and maybe also connected, on the Eastern side, to Jazz. The pieces are longer, the instruments are usually acoustic, the music for the most part is instrumental. (Geffen 1997:24)

Dalal’s description of *muzika etnit* does not correspond completely with the way other bands might define the genre. Some bands do use an electric bass, or a synthesizer and some bands do not employ European elements. Nevertheless, this definition captures many of the important elements in terms of how the genre chooses to position itself. What distinguishes it first and foremost is its “Eastern” element. A close second to that component, however, is that it is *not muzika mizrachit*.

Newspaper articles from the Israeli press underscored the desire to distinguish between the more “authentic” Middle Eastern elements inherent in *muzika etnit* and the commodified Middle Eastern pop sounds of *muzika mizrachit*. As I will demonstrate, however, the concepts of authenticity and legitimacy get played out very differently in the context of *muzika etnit*. An article from the summer of 2000 described the merits

of the Center for Classical Oriental Music and Dance that opened in Jerusalem in 1995. The article paraphrased the words of the Director of the Center, Avi Shoshani, as stating,

“Shoshani says that Classical Middle Eastern music, in contrast to the commercial Middle Eastern music that is heard in the media and the cassette bazaars, is worthy of attention and nurturing and that it can boast of works that provide profound, complex and interesting aesthetic experiences” (Hitron 2000).

Yet in an attempt to qualify or temper such statements, one performer of *muzika etnit* states in a newspaper article, “It is important for me to emphasize that I’m not attacking the Israeli [*muzika mizrakhit*] artists. I actually praise them for the fact that they succeeded in breaking the taboo and making it to all of the audience in Israel. But their identification as Mizrakhi artists hurts me as a *true* Mizrakhi artist” (Bahir 2000:37, emphasis added). Here the “splitting” described by Born is apparent. Even when this musician attempts to restrain his criticism of *muzika mizrakhit* or perhaps even offer a compliment, the effect of his words still amounts to an unequivocal insult. According to this line of thinking, practitioners of *muzika mizrakhit* are not true Middle Eastern musicians, and the fact that they refer to themselves as such “hurts” performers of *muzika etnit*. Whether this performer used “hurts” to express emotional or rather financial suffering as a result of being stigmatized with *muzika mizrakhit* is unclear. Either way, the statement provides us with a clear understanding of the dialectic between *muzika mizrakhit* and *muzika etnit*.

It is feasible that those mentioned above were misquoted or that the newspaper reporters themselves chose to phrase their statements in the fashion that they did. Yet such statements are very much in line with the discourse utilized by informants in my ethnographic interviews. In one interview, for example, another prominent performer of *muzika etnit* stated,

“Mizrakhim are proud [of *muzika mizrakhit*] in spite of the fact that it’s not Middle Eastern music. They

say, ‘This is our music!’ It’s not their music. It’s shit. But they perceive it as their music. It’s the same with Blacks [in the United States] and the way they perceive rap” (2000).¹⁰

Practitioners of *muzika etnit* use several “anti-discursive” mechanisms to legitimate their genre as high art, while simultaneously “denying” the legitimacy of *muzika mizrakhit*. This is accomplished first and foremost through an avoidance of the musical and performative components associated with *muzika mizrakhit*. In another newspaper article, a musician criticizes *muzika mizrakhit* stating:

Take, for example, Shimi Tavori.¹¹ He doesn’t get on stage with an oud, but rather with an electric guitar and synthesizer, and it’s the same with other singers of that style. It’s like playing Bach with an oud and not with a cello. It’s impossible to perform Eastern music¹² without Eastern instruments. In the Arab nations you wouldn’t find a singer, even in the pop genre, that would get up on stage without the accompaniment of authentic instruments (Bahir 2000:37).

In fact, this statement is erroneous. Most Arab pop bands do not include “authentically” Middle Eastern instruments though like *muzika mizrakhit*, they often sample the sounds of these instruments on a synthesizer. The electric guitar, bass, and keyboard are standard instruments in contemporary Arab pop. Yet discourses of authenticity are not necessarily based in truths. In contrast to its rival, *muzika etnit* utilizes classical Middle Eastern instruments such as the oud, santur, doumbek, and qanun, as well as classical Western instruments such as the flute, guitar, bass and piano. The importance of *muzika etnit*’s association with Western classical music is evidenced when Shoshani states, “My dream is that in the future there will be performing musicians who can sing both Western bel canto and Eastern music” (Hitron 2000:8). By aligning their musical style with jazz and western classical “art” music, practitioners of *muzika etnit* seek to benevolently elevate Middle Eastern music in Israel from the low-class status of *muzika mizrakhit*.

Muzika etnit also distinguishes itself from *muzika mizrakhit* by limiting the genre to predominantly instrumental music. All of the performers of *muzika etnit* whom I interviewed expressed little interest in working with singers. According to a performer from a well-known *etnit* band, “Most audiences are happy if you give them a good beat and a singer. It’s difficult to keep an audience interested without a singer” (1999). In spite of this observation, this musician stated that his group will never employ a permanent singer, and these sentiments were shared by several other musicians with whom I spoke. Adopting Western classical musical practices that emphasize instrumental music carries prestige in Israel, as it is immediately associated with high culture and the largely Ashkenazi upper class. However, considering the prominence of the vocalist in Arabic music, and the desire of practitioners of *muzika etnit* to include “authentic” Middle Eastern musical elements, this unequivocal rejection of the singer seems significant. I would argue that the aversion to the vocalist in *muzika etnit* stems from a desire on the part of practitioners to clearly demarcate their music from *muzika mizrakhit*, where the vocalist is central; this aversion overrides the desire to conform to more traditional musical practices. Such contradictions highlight the complexities of negotiating musical authenticity in Israel.

Furthermore, the performer’s above comment concerning what pleases most audiences provides us insights on the public to whom *muzika etnit* appeals. Although “most audiences” are satisfied with a good beat and a singer, this type of audience is of no concern to the musician. He rejects what he perceives to be the “vulgar” and “unrefined” aesthetics of the popular. What makes *muzika etnit* “authentic,” then, differs significantly from that of *muzika mizrakhit*. Broad-based popularity is not the highest goal for musicians of the *muzika etnit* genre.¹³ When asked whether the Israeli public initially accepted the music of the East West Ensemble, Yisrael Borochoy responded, “Such things aren’t relevant to me. If I’m playing the music I like,

that's enough" (Borochoy 1999). As stated earlier, much of Middle Eastern and Arabic music emphasizes a symbiotic relationship between audience and performer, yet practitioners of *muzika etnit* seem to have adopted an alternate value judgment concerning this interplay. Such responses seem logical when one considers that *muzika mizrakhit* possesses by far more economic capital in Israel than *muzika etnit*. While without "a public the superstar musician is naked" (Waterman 1994:99), the performer of high art music does not rely on broad-based support. Instead, *muzika etnit* gains its legitimization through cultural capital, which is not predicated on economic success.

Correspondingly, when Shlomo Yisraeli, a radio host at *Kol Hamuzika* described what distinguished *HaBreira Teeveet*—Israel's first band of the *muzika etnit* genre—from *muzika mizrakhit*, he stated, "It was much more authentic. They didn't adjust their style in order to sell entertainment. It was like they were saying, 'If you like it, buy it, if not, oh well'" (Yisraeli 1999). Clearly, practitioners of *muzika etnit* wish to present themselves as having no interest in serving the "common people." The language utilized by my informants seemed to imply that it was almost preferable that Israelis with uncultivated musical tastes did not appreciate their music, for in order maintain a viable high art aesthetic, any ties with mass culture must be severed.

Performance Codes

By observing a concert of *muzika etnit*, one witnesses the operation of other codes, which mark the event as "high culture." In contrast to audiences at concerts of *muzika mizrakhit*, the middle- and upper-class crowd at concerts of *muzika etnit* generally sits quietly and politely in their seats throughout the performance, and demonstrates its approval of the music by applauding in between pieces. Concert venues are usually at well-reputed concert halls such as the Suzanne Dalal Center in

Tel Aviv or the Pargod in Jerusalem. Musicians perform on a stage, often with backdrops decorated with classic signifiers of what one would associate with Middle Eastern visual art. At one performance I attended, every audience member was handed a concert program with a small pleasantly fragrant tree branch inserted inside, to inaugurate the ensemble's new album, "Perfume Road." At another performance, the reading of modern Israeli poetry complemented musical selections. In addition, so as to provide the already musically disciplined audience with further musical insights to be observed during the pieces, the leader of the ensemble generally introduces musical selections before they are performed, identifying musical modes or a song's historical roots. The music itself is complicated, often improvisational, experimental, and unmetered, and pieces may last up to fifteen minutes. These textual/visual and musical cues are "strategies for constructing 'the public,' an internally diversified social formation unified by patterns of musical taste and consumption" (Waterman 1994:99).

Political Alliances

Finally, according to the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv*, what clearly differentiates *muzika etnit* from *muzika mizrakhit* is that "grossly generalized, *muzika etnit* is music of the left wing" (Geffen 1997:26). Unlike working-class Mizrahim who predominantly vote for the Likud party or Shas, the powerful Sephardic/Mizrakhi religious party, both audience members and performers of *muzika etnit* alike tend to vote for the Labor party. Yair Dalal states, "I perform a lot with Palestinian musicians and I believe that when a person plays and knows the culture of his neighbor, the dams between them burst and walls break down" (Geffen 1997:25). Similarly, Yisrael Borochof of the East-West Ensemble states, "In a place where armies and politicians fail, music creates a bridge between cultures" (Borochof in Shiffman 1991). Through its musical class alliance, *muzika etnit* is often able to bridge deep ethnic, cultural,

and religious chasms between Palestinians and Israelis. Unlike its counterpart, *muzika etnit* caters to liberal, educated, middle- and upper-class Israelis, like most audiences of world music in Europe and the United States. Unsurprisingly, the majority of this audience is Ashkenazi, though it of course includes many Mizrahkim and some Palestinians as well. Correspondingly, the bands themselves generally include a mix of Ashkenazim and Mizrahkim and a few do have Palestinian members, though the band-leaders are predominantly Mizrahkim. Although *muzika mizrachit* unites its audience through common working-class political struggles, *muzika etnit* unifies its audience through a common middle-class political agenda: peace and coexistence. “Leftist” views in Israel have always been resolutely linked with Israel’s middle and upper class and the Ashkenazi-dominated Labor party.

It is noteworthy that *muzika etnit* aligns itself with Palestinian musicians and the Palestinian struggle, in contrast to *muzika mizrachit*, which intentionally emphasizes its distinctness from Arab music. The specific categories of “othering” or “splitting” we witness here through music, perhaps provide us with further insights on class distinctions in Israel. Generally, it is only those Mizrahkim more secure in their higher social status who feel comfortable enough to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause. However, the working-class Mizrahki can not afford to exhibit that solidarity as freely, for he still risks being mistaken for the “other-other,” the more highly marginalized Palestinian. Such distinctions provide us with a further understanding of “splitting,” which we see occurs only when the subject sees herself as threatened.

Whose music?

Like *muzika mizrachit*, *muzika etnit* has achieved more Israeli radio time in the last few years. However, unlike *muzika mizrachit*, its airtime is restricted to eclectic “world music” programs on *Kol Hamuzika* (the radio station for classical

music) or on *Galei Tzahal*, the Army's radio station. *Muzika etnit* has succeeded in elevating Middle Eastern musical styles to what is viewed by many as a higher art form in Israel, and some forms of *muzika etnit* compete in the global music market as "Israeli music," but working-class Mizrakhim are still not "sold" on the genre. It was difficult for me to carry out ethnographic research on the way in which working-class Mizrakhim respond discursively to *muzika etnit*, as they generally do not attend performances of this genre. In addition, unlike much of *muzika mizrakhit*, which is now aired on popular Israeli radio stations and is therefore familiar to all Israelis, *muzika etnit*, aligned with art music, has not entered the consciousness of most working-class Mizrakhim. Yet my limited conversations with Israelis on *muzika etnit* were telling. According to Arik Cohen, a bouzouki player for the *muzika mizrakhit* genre, "*Muzika etnit* doesn't speak to the people because usually there are no words. It [*muzika etnit*] is usually instrumental music which is hard for them to connect with" (Cohen 2000). As Bourdieu reminds us, "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (1984:2). Without the necessary "cultural competence," Mizrakhim who have not been imbued with a specific musical discipline do not appreciate *muzika etnit*. While the Israeli media and members of the Israeli middle/upper class deem *muzika etnit* as the "authentic" Israeli Middle Eastern musical form, the music listened to and purchased by the majority of Mizrakhim is *muzika mizrakhit*.

Why has *muzika mizrakhit* remained low-brow?

While visiting Jerusalem last summer, I stopped by Tower Records to check out the music selection there. When I didn't find any *muzika mizrakhit* in the "Israeli music" section, I looked around the store until I finally located a section entitled "Israeli Mizrachi music." While I stood there browsing the album covers, two young Israelis who appeared to be around

seventeen approached the section where I had situated myself. “Here it is.” said the boy, “*Muzika mizrachit*. Now everyone knows you’re a *freykha*.¹⁴” Clearly the boy was poking fun at his female friend for her taste in music. The girl chose Sarit Chadad’s new album from the shelf—a logical choice as Sarit Chadad had recently won the title “Singer of the Year” in Israel. But as I have suggested above, even such broad-based success of *muzika mizrachit* has not erased its stigma. Tower Records still relegates Israel’s “Singer of the Year” to a section separated from “Israeli music.”

We are left pondering why this continues to be the case. Resistance is a perplexing subject of analysis, for if “the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (Abu-Lughod 1990:53). Similarly, Paul Willis demonstrates that in spite of the “subversive” and “threatening” nature of resistance, the very act of resistance sometimes “traps” the subaltern group in additional ways (1977:174-175). In its refusal to adopt the standards of the dominant music industry, such as placing little care in the sound quality of its recordings or in the aesthetics of their packaging, practitioners of *muzika mizrachit* assisted in perpetuating the low-class status of their music, which continues to this day.

Furthermore Pierre Bourdieu provides us with a framework for understanding the production, transmission, and reception of cultural capital, the symbolic value an aesthetic object has in its specific cultural economy. As Bourdieu reminds us, oftentimes “the structure of the distribution of economic capital is symmetrical and opposite to that of cultural capital” (1984:120). According to this logic, then, the fact that *muzika mizrachit* has attained economic capital does not make it likely that the genre will achieve cultural capital in the near future. Despite a recent increase of Mizрахim in the highest occupational stratum, the general economic gap between Mizрахim and Ashkenazim in Israel has grown within the second (and now third) generation (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991:33). Perhaps this gap can help elucidate the question as

to the continued low-status of *muzika mizrakhit*. Though the audience for *muzika mizrakhit* has widened to include Ashkenazim, the music is still a signifier of working class Mizrahi culture and identity. As I alluded to earlier, many twenty-something middle-class Israelis with whom I spoke, both Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, attested to dancing to *muzika mizrakhit* at hip Israeli clubs. Yet these same Israelis acknowledged that they would never purchase a CD of the *muzika mizrakhit* genre or play the music in the privacy of their own homes. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 1984:6). For the middle class, an evening of “slumming” with *muzika mizrakhit* is completely acceptable as long as one’s class alliances are clear in other respects.

As my analysis demonstrates, musical authenticity in Israel is understood and constituted through a series of devices and techniques enmeshed in power struggles with clear historical roots. The exposed contradictions inherent in these techniques, once deconstructed, demonstrate “the central role of discourse in strategies of legitimation and power in artistic production” (Born:33). While at first glance, the efforts of performers of *muzika etnit* seem to combat the Israeli Western cultural hegemony, their discursive denial of *muzika mizrakhit* through splitting causes us to take a second look. Ironically, this “anti-discursive denial may . . . be more characteristic of hegemonic than subordinate cultural systems” (Born:39). The perils of combating cultural hegemony in the form of “ethnic” or “world” music are manifold; as Steve Feld reminds us, projects “embarked upon with self-consciously progressive political and aesthetic agendas are neither innocent of nor discursively free from postcolonial critiques” (1994:289). In support of this point, Eagleton argues that “a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which political hegemony is currently maintained is a necessary prerequisite of effective political action” (1990:12). Inquiries into aesthetics can help us develop a more sophisticated understanding of how this hegemony is maintained. Entangled in an intricate conflict of interests, the emer-

gent Israeli Mizrakhi middle class disavows its relationship to the Mizrakhi working class and its vibrant aesthetics.

Indubitably, the hegemonic elements of *muzika etnit* are evident through its class distinctions and I will avoid making claims for resistive elements inherent in its aesthetic form. Yet there is something quite inspiring about the public acceptance of the performance of distinct Middle Eastern musical forms in the Israeli nation. We must remember that even fifteen years ago, most Mizrakhim were ashamed to perform musical genres that defied the notion of the Israeli melting pot, let alone Arab genres. *Muzika etnit* represents Israel's recent "decline in commitment to collective values, the shifting of the focus to the needs and aspirations of the individual . . . and spontaneous styles which do not reflect clear and well-defined ideological commitments" (Don Yehiya 1999:188). Such shifts as evidenced through musical practices have large ramifications for Israeli national identity. *Muzika etnit* is relevant to an understanding of Israel's conception of itself and the nation-state's relationship to Arabs inside and outside its borders.

It is often only by attuning our ears to music that we can comprehend some of the more nuanced cultural shifts in society. Because music is often experienced in very public forums, its power as an identity marker for the people it represents as well as for those it does not represent is undeniable. "Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code" (Attali 1985:11). How does the fracturing and broadening of cultural and national identity we are witnessing in Israeli music reflect and enact new conceptions of peoplehood? Is the increased valorization of Middle Eastern musical forms in *muzika etnit* influencing the social milieu for previously marginalized Israeli Mizrakhim and Palestinians? *Muzika etnit* signals a lost nationalist dream with its fractured, post-modern notions of Israeli identity, while simultaneously offering us glimpses of possibilities for "hope and fantasy" (Appadurai 1990:17) in the Israeli

nation.¹⁵

NOTES

1. A more in-depth comparison of the two genres served as the topic for my master's thesis entitled *Muzika Mizrahit and Muzika Etnit: Performing Middle Eastern Identities in the Israeli Nation State*, completed May 2001. This paper, therefore, has benefited from the comments of Deborah Kapchan, Richard Flores, Abraham Marcus, Katie Stewart, and Suzanne Seriff.

2. I conducted all ethnographic interviews in Hebrew and transcribed them into English.

3. Jazz, of course, was not considered high culture in its inception, but was also appropriated as a sign that went through a similar officialization.

4. *Jahnun* is a typical Yemenite dish.

5. See Regev (1995).

6. I have chosen here and elsewhere in certain portions of this paper not to reveal the identities of my consultants.

7. The term *aliyah* means literally "ascension." The term "to make *aliyah*" is used to describe the act of immigrating to Israel.

8. There are a few Israeli pop bands such as "Gaya" and "Sheva" that are sometimes referred to as "*muzika etnit*" (to the chagrin of most of the practitioners of *muzika etnit* I interviewed) because of their incorporation of the oud and darbukka in many of their songs. These bands target a very specific audience in Israelyoung hippy types. At this point, these bands have not been included in my analysis or research, as their music is very much ingrained in mainstream Israeli pop rock.

9. Those who deny claims of the media's biases in this realm should note that in 1981 *Ma'ariv*, one of Israel's most popular national daily's, bought *Hed-Artzi*, one of Israel's most successful record companies (Horowitz 1994: 185).

10. Born utilizes the term "anti-discourse" to describe "a discourse . . . that is produced in the process of simultaneously denying another, coexistent and rival discourse" (38). It is particularly interesting how this musician himself draws parallels between rap and *muzika mizrahit*, criticizing *muzika mizrahit* in much the same way that Cornel West critiques rap (See DeGenova 1997).

11. Shimi Tavori is a well-known singer of the *muzika mizrahit* genre.

12. Dalal actually uses the words "*muzika mizrahit*" but I have chosen to translate this to mean "eastern music" in order to distinguish his different intent here.

13. The Frankfurt School, and in particular Adorno's critique of popular/mass culture, has much relevance to this discussion, but such analysis is beyond the scope of this particular paper.

14. The word *freykha* is an extremely pejorative word in Hebrew for a low-class Mizrahki woman.

15. The research for this thesis was conducted during the summers of 1999 and 2000, prior to the most recent escalation of violence in Israel. It is unclear how the current situation will affect the acceptance of Arab and Middle Eastern cultural forms in the future.

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