

Keeping the faith

Yasmin Levy sings of an all but forgotten culture, and with the father she never knew. By Clive Davis

The music has travelled a long way in the past 500 years, from Spain to Portugal, from north Africa to the Balkans and Israel. And now, thanks to Yasmin Levy, the words and melodies are casting their spell over audiences for whom Ladino culture — the legacy of the Jewish community expelled from Spain in 1492 — is no more than an exotic enigma. One of the world's endangered languages is enjoying a belated renaissance on the concert stage.

We are not talking about a museum piece. There are no clouds of scholarly dust at Levy's concerts. Judeo-Spanish ballads and prayers blend with full-blooded songs of love and loss; Moorish melodies suddenly detour into flamenco rhythms. To the dismay of some traditionalists in her own country, the 33-year-old Israeli singer has found a way of uniting past and present, East and West.

Her magical new album, *Sentir*, is her most mesmerising accomplishment so far, and will surely find a place on many a "record of the year" list in the coming months. While some world-music purists will no doubt chafe at the



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sophisticated, jazz-tinged backdrop woven by the ultra-hip Spanish producer Javier Limon, the results are breathtaking. Even the Spanish cover version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* — which might have seemed too obvious a shot at radio airplay — works surprisingly well, the song taking on the aura of an incantation in a synagogue.

Levy's voice has matured and

deepened. Her past attempts to fuse Ladino and flamenco influences led her to strain at the leash as she shifted the focus from a head tone to the chest. On *Sentir*, you encounter an artist who knows when to hold back.

As she says in soft-spoken English when we meet in her manager's offices in Soho: "When you are younger, you try to prove yourself too much. Then you get older and you realise that less is more. I used

Sentir comes when, by an act of studio sleight of hand, she performs a duet with her father on the wistful love song *Una Pastora* (A Shepherdess). His interpretation was recorded some 35 years earlier, yet the blending of the two is seamless.

"Even though I don't have memories of him, I grew up listening to his voice," Levy explains. "I know it better than my own hand. But I never thought I would be worthy to sing with him. I was too scared. My manager had to tell me, 'He's not going to be angry with you. Don't try to compete with him.' That song is the pearl of the album. If you listen, you can tell that I sing it differently from all the others. I was walking on eggshells."

While she was immersed in music in her childhood in Jerusalem, performing was not always her ultimate goal. Originally, she set her sights on becoming a vet. The idea of a career on the stage emerged only later. As she recalls, her first outings attracted a certain amount of disapproval from her community's elders. Some frowned on the idea of a woman performing in public; others disliked the idea of musical arrangements being added to lyrics traditionally performed a cappella.

As a result, Levy built much of her early following abroad, particularly in France and Spain. Increasingly drawn to flamenco, she found herself caught between the disapproval of flamenco traditionalists who regarded her as an interloper

'Love and loss': Levy performs Judaeo-Spanish Ladino ballads

and the righteous fervour of Israelis who feared she was diluting her father's hard-won legacy. It has taken a long time, but she finally seems at peace with herself.

When we spoke, Levy had been visiting London to put together a new band. Her current musicians have reached the age where raising

a family makes touring doubly exhausting. Besides, the moment has come, she senses, to take the music in a more "oriental" direction. Performing in Turkey — the country where her father was born — has been a revelation for her, and on her travels she has encountered variants of Ladino songs that went undocumented by her father. There are versions from Greece, Bulgaria, Morocco and other countries, too. Does this mean, then, that the Ladino language is destined to survive after all?

Surprisingly, perhaps, Levy counts herself among the pessimists: scholars will carry the torch into the future, she insists, but once a language fades from everyday use, it is doomed. A melancholy thought, but one that makes her even more determined to celebrate the music itself. Levy may not be conventionally religious, but she has a holy mission all the same. She can feel God, she says, in her throat. **G**

Sentir is released on World Village

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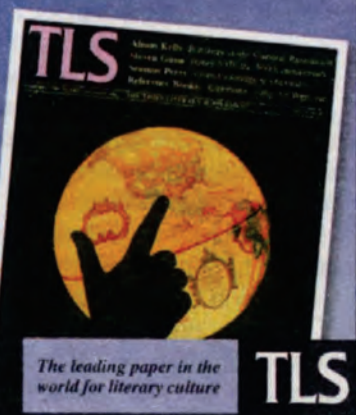
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to shout. Now I sing. I found there was great passion in flamenco, but Ladino music is my blood, my history. It's my father. So I said to myself, 'Okay, there are thousands of artists singing flamenco. I need to go home.'

Her father, Isaac (or Yitzhak) Levy, is a constant presence in her conversation, despite the fact that he died when she was just one year old. One of Israel's leading musicologists, he was a titanic figure in Ladino culture, collecting and annotating countless songs, sacred and secular, that might otherwise have been lost to posterity. (There are only about 150,000 Ladino-speakers in the world today, most of them elderly.)

In Israel, the younger generation, raised to speak Hebrew — as was Yasmin Levy — have lost the everyday connection with the ancestral tongue. Levy confesses that she does not speak Ladino on a daily basis — she has instead the basic vocabulary that the average child picks up from parents. One of the most compelling moments on

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