The Ethnofolk Letters

Jerusalem
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Dear CSMT/SCTM People,

My four weeks in Jerusalem are almost over. As a guest lecturer-in-residence for the Halbert Centre for Canadian Studies here at Hebrew University, I’ve been more "Canadian" than I usually am when in Israel, especially as (OK, OK, I confess, I like saying it!) President of the CSMT/SCMT.

So—I’ve performed for the Israeli Musicology Society (who are becoming exchange members), carried out more fieldwork among Sephardim, unexpectedly been responsible for Bob Rae’s "Same Boat Now" song’s becoming known in Israel; given lectures and radio talks and recitals; performed with my friend Betty at the "Roman Restaurant," clad in togas and fresh leaf garlands. Taken endless walks around my favourite haunts in the labyrinths of the Old City, up and down the steep terraces of Haifa, through the cheerfully shabby flea market in Jaffa.

I could write at length about all these, but for this letter’s main preoccupation, let me introduce you to the problem of Tel Aviv’s New Central Bus Station. Opened last summer, it is reputedly the biggest in the Middle East. No, wait—Jerusalem’s new "canyon" (shopping mall) is the biggest in the Middle East—I think the new bus station is the biggest anywhere.

So, why is it a problem? Not because it’s so huge it takes half an hour to find an exit. Not because over ¾ of the 1400 shops and cafés are empty. Not even because it costs 50¢ to use the (admittedly spotless) washrooms, while the cleaning staff vigilantly watch for would-be criminals who try to sneak into a vacated stall without putting a coin in the slot. No—the problem is the disappearance, with the Old Central Bus Station, of Bus Station Music.

There are other names for it—Musica Cassettot (Cassette Music), Musica Mizrakhi (Oriental Music). (In Turkey, a parallel music, Arabesk, is also associated with transportation and called "dolmush"—"collective taxi"—music.) Basically, this is Hebrew-language Middle Eastern popular music. Until recently, it was not played on the radio or distributed on "official" cassette labels. Now, a few Israeli and other musicologists have produced papers and articles on it, the radio has become more open to it (well, less closed), and a few of its singers have recorded on "real" labels, to the disgust of some of their colleagues, who see them as traitors. Still, most "intellectual" Israelis I know look down on this music, to put it mildly. When I remark, truthfully, that my 7-year-old daughter loves it, they commiserate. "But actually I kind of like it, too—some of it, anyway," meets with an incredulous stare and/or an eloquent shrug.

Where is the bus station in all this? Well, you have to imagine the Old Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. Sprawled over several shabby streets not far from the bustling shuk (market), it comprised a few central bus lanes and a small, vaguely unsavoury building where one could buy tickets and, with patience and application, acquire information, and, with considerable bravery and a personal stock of toilet paper, use a washroom. Buses and taxis turned into its sharp corners at breakneck speed, with wild honking, shouting, shoving aside. So far, not much to mourn. But the rest of the myriad bus lines to everywhere in Israel were scattered over dozens of surrounding streets. With experience, it was possible to locate the bus to one’s destination; often, it seemed easier to change the destination.

Meanwhile, I was often tempted not to go anywhere at all. The streets were crammed with open stalls and street vendors hawking cheap clothing, costume jewellery, plastic children’s toys, dubious watches. There were the delicious smells of falafel and shwarma; piles of fresh sticky cinnamon rolls; huge round pretzel-bagels; carts overflowing with soft drinks and chewing gum; bargain-rate cassettes and batteries—and, above all, Bus Station Music. Cassettes blared from every stall—not subtle music, not brilliant—but infectious. And you could bargain for them, too, especially if you bought more than one.

So, when the New Bus Station opened, there was some noise about "re-creating a colourful street market atmosphere." So far, what I’ve seen are a few forlorn clothing stall among rows of empty counters, a lot of cafés and ice cream counters—and the pervasive presence of—muzak. OK, it’s efficient, and it’s clean. After all, who really wants to slosh through muddy lanes (it does rain sometimes), brave the bathrooms, wander up and down the streets endlessly trying to find the bus to a particular suburb? Ah, but the atmosphere....

I met Amy Horowitz one day, in Israel writing her dissertation on—you guessed it, Bus Station Music. She was the only person I talked to who actually, like me, mourned the passing of the Old Bus Station—and for her, it wasn’t only nostalgia, it was a real snag in ethnographic methodology. So I asked her who were the latest big names and where was the best place to buy cassettes now that the classic one had been sacrificed to urban progress. And the next day found me in the jostling crowds of the market, at a tiny but loud cassette stand sandwiched in between stacks of red peppers and tangerines and enamel saucepans, laboriously translating from Hebrew, "Come on, buy four cassettes, I’ll give you a good price. Listen to this guy, you’ll love him...." All was not lost after all—What’s in a name?

Judith Cohen