

# Longing Rises Within Me

Al Wahsh Fadh Alia - A Journey in the Footsteps of Judeo-Moroccan Music

By Amit Hai Cohen

## Abstract

A musical journey that transcends boundaries in the Jewish-Moroccan world, where the music is a mirror onto a historic period, evoking nostalgia between Muslims and Jews, and offering a glimpse of the interaction between East and West. The film locates celebrated Moroccan musical stars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and gives a final voice to a generation that is fast disappearing.

## Synopsis

**Petit Robert** inserts a dusty cassette tape into an old tape deck and plays an old recording from when he was a celebrated artist in Morocco. He gazes up at the ceiling of his apartment in a Kiryat Hayim housing project, where he has lived since immigrating to Israel, and sings “Mahani Zin” (Your Beauty Saddened Me). “Those were the days...,” he reminisces. “I was such a famous singer ... so famous.” His home is full of memories of his stardom. In the midst of singing, he takes photo albums out of drawers. He sits on the sofa and sighs, and drawing his gravelly voice into a *mwal* (vocal improvisation) as he sings “Fiin Al Ayam Li Kanu” (Where Have Those Days Gone). In one of the photographs he is young, with curly hair. “I once sang on the greatest stages in Morocco,” he reveals. Petit Robert, like many Moroccan singers who immigrated to Israel, found himself marginalized in his new country. Most of these artists passed away in complete anonymity. Their music is testament to a historical period and to Jewish-Muslim relations in Morocco. It is also a window into the Moroccan Jewish community worldwide and a connection between its people. Above all, it is simply great music, sweeping and poignant, that encompasses just about every style.

The film journeys between Israel, France and Morocco, among the people and the places where Moroccan Jewish music is still paramount. The film introduces many characters, each with his or

her own story and music. Jews and Muslims, young and old, groups and individuals - a collage that transforms the music to something timeless and relevant. This is not a historical film; this is a film whose narrative is music, and within the music the personal stories of the performing musicians are discovered.

In a world parallel to that of Petit Robert, the Botbol brothers divide their lives between their luxury apartment in the heart of Paris and an impressive apartment in Tangier facing the sea. Claude, Marcel and Hayim are among the pioneers of popular Moroccan music, the first to introduce Western instruments, like the electric guitar and the saxophone, to traditional music. Hayim, 90, the eldest brother, is still a popular singer in Morocco and performs at important concerts and stars in various festivals. He can be frequently seen on television, performing new arrangements to old songs. Marcel is a violinist, and owns the Marcello restaurant in Tangier, a magnet for musicians who come every day to perform until late at night. Claude, the youngest brother, is a percussionist and a walking historian of Moroccan music. Over the years, he has become a businessman. The brothers want to age with dignity, but the Moroccan audiences refuse to let them rest and demand more and more performances. This year, the brothers are opening a series of concerts in honor of their late father, Jacob Botbol, who himself was the musician who proclaimed Morocco's independence. From Tangier, the trio gaze out at the sea and the horizon is like a distant memory. "We, the Botbol brothers, were raised on music, our whole lives were in music." They recall the glory days of their youth and sing the song their father wrote for King Mohammed V, "Raniyu Ma'aya, Raniyu" (Sing with Me, Sing).

Near the Botbol brothers' Paris apartment is the Salle Gaveau theater, where Maxim Karouchi prepares to perform with a group of Moroccan musicians in a tribute to Jewish music. They are rehearsing the song "Omri Ma Nensak, Ya Mama" (I Will Never Forget You, Mama), composed by Samy El Maghribi in the 1950s. "We grew up on the music of the Jews, in fact we were born into it," explains Abdelsalm, the group's saxophonist. Maxim is the youngest musician in the Karouchi family, lives in Casablanca, and is a celebrated Moroccan musician. His brother Mike (Masoud) Karouchi is one of the most successful singers in Israel for the *hina* ceremony (a ceremony and event preceding the wedding that is part of the Sephardic Jewish tradition), known for his *shaabi* (Moroccan folk music) style and considered one of the best bendir drummers on the Jewish Moroccan music scene. Five years ago, Mike Karouchi was awarded an

honorary degree by the Moroccan government. The Karouchi brothers have a glorious musical ancestry: Massoud, their father, had a well-known orchestra that performed at all the Jewish events. Moise Karouchi, Mike and Maxim's uncle, lives in Lod and ekes out a living by performing at the occasional party. He regrets having settled in Israel because he wasn't able to carve out a musical career for himself in Israel. He smokes and says in despair, "I feel they deceived me."

These individuals, and many others, constitute the musical mosaic of the film. Every individual has his or her own story of success and failure. The film weaves between them and shows many small moments and insights that accentuate the musicians' awareness that their era has passed: most of their friends have passed away, there are fewer concerts to give, and regardless, their energy and ability to perform in front of an audience is flagging. They want to be remembered, but mostly, they do not want the music to be forgotten. "There is no one who can speak the language anymore," they lament. "We failed to create students, there is no one to carry on our work." In the final scene, against the backdrop of the Kiryat Hayim housing project, young musicians join the veteran musicians to perform one of the great classic songs from the 1950s.

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The idea for the film developed out of my own work as a musician. Over the past decade, I have been performing, composing and producing in the world of Moroccan music: its history and sounds run through my veins. I have shared the stage with many Moroccan musicians, both Jewish and Muslim, some of whom are the most famous Moroccan musicians alive today, and many of whom are 40 years old than I. In 2012, I was invited for the first time to perform in Morocco with a small ensemble of Israeli musicians, including Neta Elkayam, my life partner and creative collaborator. Since then, we are often invited to Morocco where we have performed at different festivals and I have screened some of my short films. My musical career propelled me to the Israel-France-Morocco connection, where I have met so many people from different, sometimes opposing extremes, who are all connected by their love of music.

Over the years, I have tried to bring the cinema to my musical life. Most of the time, I have preferred to put aside my camera and remain a musician. I now feel the time has come to

document and explore the world around me visually: to explore the characters who comprise it, to challenge them and their music, and to offer a cinematic interpretation of their sounds.

My vision is to create a film whose center is the music, with few formal and face-to-face interviews, and focus on documenting the lives of the musicians. There will be hardly any stage performances. Musical documentation will be found sitting around a table, in the kitchen, or on the beach. Any everyday location. My intention is not to make a documentary about the history of Moroccan music, but history, together with identity, nationalism and religion, is inseparable from the subjects that will arise. The film aspires to be a non-narrative or chronological collage, but one that moves between people and places with musical affiliations and the stories connecting them.

The impetus for the film was not only a personal aspiration to document my own experiences and the music that was so important to my family. I feel a historical obligation to draw attention to music that has been sidelined and continues to be marginalized even where it has successfully taken root. I need to provide a space for men and women who share oral history through sound and voice, and who create music which, aside from its nostalgia, delivers an authentic message to anyone with an open heart and mind.

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**Amit Hai Cohen** was born and raised in the southern Israeli town of Netivot, to a Moroccan-Tunisian family. He is a musician and filmmaker, living and working in Jerusalem. Many of his works revolve around the Jerusalem-Morocco connection, such as the musical documentary “Ya Lhmama” (Oh Dove) that was first screened at the Andalusian Festival in Essaouira, **Morocco** in 2015, and “Abiadi” a tribute to the **legendary singer of Moroccan Jewry**, Zohra Al Fassia, for which he served as artistic and musical director. In recent years, together with his life partner, Neta Elkayam, who is also his artistic collaborator, he has performed the Howa Jani musical project worldwide in partnership with the **foremost musicians** from the Jewish and Arab worlds.

Many of Amit's works address social issues, such as the soundtrack to the series “Nevi'im - Operation Amram”, which tells the story of the kidnapping of Yemenite and East Balkan children (in Israel) for adoption by Ashkenazi families, “Traf traf”, a music series and short film (18 min)

created during periods of war, as well as a series of films developed from social struggles he was involved in, including "Stop the Evacuation", about Ovadia Ben Avraham's struggle with Amidar, the **Israeli National Public Housing Corporation** (35 min). Amit's works also include music for dance and films like "Zit Aal MA" (Oil on Water), which he co-wrote, the theme song for the film "Anashim Ktumim" (Orange People) by the **highly-respected director Hanna Azoulay Hasfari**, and the choreographed work "Qadam". Amit frequently writes and lectures on topics related to his works.

[www.amithaicohen.com](http://www.amithaicohen.com)

Producer: **Levi Zini, documentary filmmaker**

For over 30 years, Levi Zini has been producing independent films and documentaries for television and cinema in a number of genres; arthouse, investigative, current events, and docu-activism. From 2009 to 2013, Zini served as the art director for Channel 8, HOT. Levi Zini has won numerous awards at local and international festivals. He has twice been awarded the Minister of Education and Culture Prize for documentary filmmakers (1999 and 2012).

Among his many works:

2019 – Six Years and Three Months: Begin at the Helm | Director and Producer | A three-part documentary miniseries on peace, war and social revolution | Channel 52 | KAN

2016 - Many Shades of Black | Director and Producer | The world of employed ultra-Orthodox (Haredim) in context of the Beit Shemesh municipal elections | 75 min | Channel 8

2013 - The Land Will not be Silent - Part 3 | Director | Episode in a series on the Yom Kippur War | 50 min | Channel 1, Channel 8

2008 - Mythes et Symboles qui ont fait l'Histoire (Myths and Symbols that made History) | Director | Documentary | 60 min | FRANCE 2

1996 – Anaphase – About the Batsheva Dance Company | Won the Documentary Film Prize at the Haifa Festival in 1999 and an honorable mention at the Amsterdam Festival | 60 min