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Music



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Israel's first marching band

Is there too much electronic music in Israel's popular scene? Does Mother Russia have too much influence on local culture? Then meet "March Dondurama", Israel's first marching band

Yuli Seker

Despite the many influences of Mother Russia on its cultural world, Israel has never had a suitable equivalent to the Red Army Band that roamed the streets of the city, attracting excited crowds.

Once upon a time, Independence Day celebrations were accompanied by glorious military parades that were shown on primetime television.

But today, apart from the police band that, on occasion, interrupts the tiring routine of our national team's soccer games, there is no one to lift us off our "lazy boy" and make us want to go out dancing at a spontaneous street party.

Until now, that is. "March Dondurama" – four sax players, four drummers, four trumpets, two trombones and a tuba– make up Jerusalem's new marching band. They play in clubs, parties and festivals across the country, but mostly they just wander city streets or public squares, trying to make local pedestrians happy.

Marching through the market

Band members of "March Dondurama" will never forget their first march about a year ago. Armed with drums, saxophones, trumpets, trombones and one tuba, they left in colorful suits and ties, on a mission to conquer Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda outdoor market.

"It was an ordinary day at the market, people walked about and bought vegetables, and suddenly they ran into this strange orchestra playing in the street," recalls Dotan Yogev, the 25-year-old founder of the band.

"The response was wonderful. People were so happy that some of them actually started dancing with us. The highlight was when one of the vendors started throwing candies at us. A week later, when our tuba player felt something was off with the sound of his instrument, he reached in and found a piece of candy," he added.

Inspired by Hassidim

It all began when Yogev finished his military service and visited New York City. He worked as an au pair for a local family, and would go to nightclubs after work.

"One evening," he says, "at the end of a show, 20-or-so people in strange outfits and instruments entered the club, to everyone's complete surprise. They performed for us and I was completely enchanted. At the end of the show I went up to one of them and asked to join the band. I told him that if there is no available instrument, I was even willing to tag along and just clap my hands."

Yogev joined the band, someone even set him up with a drum to beat on, and over the next few months the skinny Israeli kid became an indispensable part of the New York group "Hungry March Band".

"It wasn't a nerdy high school band," he says with a smile. "We found ourselves in all kinds of crazy situations. We played at a dog parade in Brooklyn, at the inauguration of public gardens, at a park along the river, and even during the great East Coast power outage in 2003."

"We simply went out to the streets and started marching in the dark. I was very excited by our direct relationship with the audience, and I knew immediately that was something I wanted to do," he added.

Yogev returned to Israel, and after a year of odd jobs he began promoting the first Zionist

marching band project.

"In Jerusalem," he says, "you often see Breslav Hassidim driving around in a van, turning up their amplifiers, playing music and trying to make everyone happy. I was always envious of them, how everyone shows up and dances around them. As someone who lives in Jerusalem, I am all for these joyful things, but it shouldn't come only from the religious angle."

He made a few calls and managed to organize a qualified group of musicians that shortly thereafter became "March Dondurama" ("Dondurama" is a sort of Turkish ice cream). Some band members are actually professional musicians, but the group also includes a career army officer, a film student, a biology teacher and a design student.

"At first it was very hard to schedule rehearsals," Yogev admits. "You go on and try to set a date that would work for fifteen people. The location was also a problem, but Danny, our sax player, managed to get us a rehearsal room at the school where he teaches."

Marching with angels

Since the shaping experience at Mahane Yehuda, Dondurama has played all over the country. The band participated in the Jerusalem Pride Parade, the Akko Festival, and have played the democratic high school in Tel Aviv and Kibbutz Sde Boker (with Eviatar Banai), just to name a few.

Recently, the band released a new CD, which includes self-produced, original material. Their music is up-beat, joyful and combines Gypsy, Balkan, Andalusian, Middle Eastern and Latin elements.

"We have a habit before every performance," Yogev says. "We drive in several cars, stop at a random street, get out, play one song, and then move on to the next street. When we did this in Tel Aviv, we were surprised to discover the kinds of crowds that eventually gathered round. There were young people from Tel Aviv who came to dance, but also many seniors, immigrants from Russia. The music probably touched a familiar chord for them, something from back home."

"A street audience feels as if they have received a gift," explains Udi Raz, the band's tuba player. "They were in the middle of the day, going about their business, and suddenly this strange thing lands on top of them. They immediately return the love, excitement and happiness. People that show up for a performance and pay for the ticket, arrive with a much more critical attitude – 'let's see who these guys are, and if they are worth the 40 shekels we paid'."

Music, dance unite

Recently, as the group was marching down the streets of Tel Aviv, spectators were treated to a particularly surreal sight: in the middle of a show in Dizengoff Square: Suddenly a group of older men dressed like angels joined in. Turns out they were mentally handicapped patients from the Dimona branch of AKIM (Israel's National Association for the Habilitation of the Mentally Handicapped), who came to Tel Aviv to put on their own street show.

Within seconds, the event turned into a bizarre dance parade, involving the band players in suits, AKIM angels in white robes, street corner beggars and a group of punk kids that gathers each evening by the square.

Despite the inevitable connection to historic marching bands, Yogev and the rest of the players choose not to play Soviet-style, classical orchestral music. "It doesn't appeal to me as much," he admits.

"It's not music you can dance to. Our connection to the music is immediate, from the first note. After a moment of wonder and puzzlement at sight of the people with the strange outfits, marching and playing on the streets, everybody joins in," he says.

"As far as I am concerned, Dondurama is first of all a community, and collection of people who enjoy doing things together, and only later end up playing music," tuba player Raz adds.

"There is no tradition of acoustic music in Israel, and when people here of a band with wind instruments, they immediately think of the Hadera youth orchestra.

"Today's youngsters create electronic music, and a set-up like ours is very unnatural in the local landscape. The band was established without any commercial goal, purely out of love. When it did pick up, that was the real surprise," he said.

This story was taken from Israel's leading newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth

[Back](#)