

Operation Farsi

The Israeli-Iranian singer and actress Liraz talks to **Jane Cornwell** about rediscovering her Iranian roots, singing in Persian and the risks taken to fulfil her desire to record with fellow Iranian musicians

Hidden identities. Encrypted files. Midnight trysts between Tel Aviv and Tehran, no questions asked, no faces shown. “Sometimes all I could see on my screen was a bare wall, or a glass of water on an empty desk,” says Liraz, the Israeli-Iranian singer and actress whose new album *Zan* (Women) includes covert collaborations with Iran-based musicians and composers. “For me,” she continues, “these musicians are my brothers and sisters, but our countries are enemies. If they were caught, they would be jailed... There was so much excitement about the project at the start. But then some got scared and asked me never to contact them again. That was painful.”

Dark-eyed and angular, Liraz is imbued with the poise that comes with national stardom (in a neat art/life twist, she’s currently appearing as a Farsi-speaking Mossad operative in the Apple TV espionage series *Tehran*) and two NMC label albums in Hebrew (2005’s *LIRAZ* and 2012’s *Only You Allowed*). She is Zooming from the

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Tel Aviv home she shares with her film actor husband Tom Avni and their two young children. Behind her, propped just so, is her *tar* – the wasp-waisted wooden Iranian lute Liraz rediscovered when the pandemic hit and has been practising daily since. Next to it is the vinyl sleeve for 2018’s *Naz* (an adjective meaning the shrewd cuteness deployed by Iranian

women), a collection of mainly pre-revolutionary pop songs by female Iranian singers, and a work given electro-bounce by Israeli beat maker Rejoicer.

Sung in her mother tongue, Farsi, *Naz* lit up social media in Iran. Liraz (who uses her full name Liraz Charhi when she’s acting) was sent videos of women

dancing inside their homes to her hit single ‘Nozi Nozi’, *chadors* (Iranian burkas) cast off, faces joyous. Iranian musicians sent her clips, lyrics, melodies. Some wrote everyday. She wrote back, securely, in the first language she learned – which she calls Farsi (“It’s what I’m used to”), aware that others may deem the language ‘Persian’ – and so the songs for *Zan* took shape, slowly.

“Farsi is the language of Iran, my culture,” says Liraz, 43, whose parents, Sephardic Jews of Iranian-Jewish descent, left Iran for Israel with their families in 1964 and 1970 when the two countries had close ties, but when, even prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, being a Jew in Iran was never advertised. “I felt it was the only way I could connect to my heritage, to my grandparents. My grandmothers were engaged when they were 11 and 12 and married when they were 15; I grew up hearing so many stories about them,” she says.

Her mother’s mother had wanted a career as a singer, a profession long considered immoral for women: “She used to sneak ▶



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