

## L I R A Z

out at night to watch female singers. She'd sing at clubs, at weddings and parties, grabbing the microphone even though her father, my great-grandfather, was always trying to stop her."

Liraz's maternal aunt is Rita Yahan-Farouz, known mononymously as Rita, one of Israel's best-known singers and actresses, who from 2011 became popular in Iran after releasing a series of Farsi-language albums. The Iranian government subsequently accused her of plotting against the state ("Where there is music, the devil cannot enter," declared Rita in a 2017 TEDxTelAviv talk. "It unlocks peoples' hearts, and I have seen this time after time for the last three decades").

"My mum has four sisters, all musical," continues Liraz, who was raised in the beachfront neighbourhood of Herzliya, speaking Farsi at home but Hebrew outside in public. She grew up dancing and singing along to the music of divas celebrated in Tehran in the 60s and 70s, the golden age of Persian pop: the classically-trained Ramesh and superstar singer Googoosh, whose miniskirts and short haircut (the 'googooshy') were widely copied, but who from 1979 until 2000 was forbidden from singing.



The Tehran-born Rita brought the young Liraz along with her to recording studios in Tel Aviv and had her babysit her children: "I was nine years old when Rita became really famous. The older I got the more I wanted to do what she did." So, while her three brothers would all go on to work at their father's textile business, Liraz took lessons in acting, singing and piano. From the ages of 11 to 14 she acted at the Habima National Theatre, then attended the respected Beit Zvi School for the Performing Arts. After a mandatory stint in the Israel Defence Forces – she was a member of the Education Corp's military band – Liraz scored a part on Israeli television, and a film role that garnered an award nomination.

But it was the three years she spent commuting between Tel Aviv and Los Angeles, California – picking up roles alongside Sean Penn in 2010's *Fair Game* and Philip Seymour Hoffman in 2012's *A Late Quartet* – that saw Liraz fully embrace her inner Persian. "Tehrangeles." A smile. "Little Tehran. There are a million Iranians there, many Jewish. I found my second cousins. I dug into every Iranian neighbourhood, eating the food, buying traditional records with instruments like the tar, *qanun* and *baglama* and *ney* (flute). I felt like I was in Iran, where I've never been and don't even know, which as a girl always made me cry."

As she dived deeper into her heritage, Liraz began skipping auditions ("Too many times I was inside a room with beautiful ladies in heels, hair and make-up, maybe more talented than me, all of us competing for the same role"). At a professional crossroads, she turned to her heritage, her roots, for guidance, and on returning to Israel announced that she would henceforth only sing in Farsi. "I'd found myself," she says. "I finally understood that I am not of the mainstream, not in my personality or in my creative process. I decided to write songs that would reference Iranian music of the 1970s, which fused ethnic Iranian instruments with Western sounds, including rock and pop, along with Russian melodies from musicians who had studied in Europe."

"I wanted to integrate all of this with modern electronic music, layering the sound, and sing with the sort of raw courage and freedom you hear in the voices of 1970s Iranian singers. They were never polite or apologetic, and when the revolution happened many of them took their careers to other countries." Liraz waited two years for the right producer. In 2015, on a plane to WOMEX in Budapest, she met the man who would become her new manager. Back in Israel, he suggested Rejoicer, whose Battering Trio – a Berlin-based outfit blending loop-based beats with live instruments to create leftfield atmospherics – Liraz knew and loved: "I told him forget what you know about me. I am rebuilding my identity to tell my story. He understood."

Her career turnaround was finely managed, both by the artist and her advisors. Shows were booked months in advance. A band on guitars, drums and violin was cherry-picked. Liraz transformed her image (complete with a septum ring), dropped her surname and released a Farsi-language version of the Ellie Goulding song 'Love Me Like You Do', whose controversial video saw her singing and dancing inside a mosque and the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, her face covered by a sheer burka, her eyes defiant.

"At the end, when I lifted the burka, people shouted at me and kicked me out of there. I was in tears later; I felt I had done



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