

The Road Report

Middle Eastern and Jewish folk sung in Hebrew – intertwined with dub, pop, psychedelic and electronica – invigorates Jaffa Road's debut *Sun Place*. Li Robbins gets in the groove.

Jaffa Road is what Aaron Lightstone describes as “the oldest modern high-way in Israel.” It’s an apt metaphor for Jaffa Road the band, based in Toronto and founded by Lightstone, emerging out of a previous project called Shakshuka. To travel the musical Jaffa Road is to journey through a cultural landscape where past traditions and present day technology and musical styles constantly shift and overlay.

Sun Place, Jaffa Road’s debut recording (co-produced by Lightstone, also the group’s guitarist and oud player), blends jazz, Indian and Arabic music, electronica and dub. But above all (or perhaps, more accurately, underpinning all) there’s Jewish music. Still, Jaffa Road seeks “to challenge accepted notions of Jewish music,” as Lightstone explains.

“I think for most people Jewish music gets pigeonholed as klezmer or Israeli folk music or maybe Jewish liturgical music—but particularly klezmer. I like klezmer, but that’s not what we’re doing.”

That sense of ‘we’ is crucial to how the music of Jaffa Road has evolved. Although

Lightstone initiates many of the compositions (presenting them to his band mates via computer-generated aural “sketches”) he’s quick to say that the final product doesn’t sound much like those originals. “Our musical brains are like a big filter,” he says, “and we all listen to so much.”

The musical brains in question are ethereal-voiced lead singer Aviva Chernick, bassist (and co-producer of *Sun Place*) Chris Gartner, virtuosic saxophonist Sundar Viswanathan, and percussionist Jeff Wilson. Each brings his or her own broad musical experience (Gartner’s includes performances with The Look People, Mary Margaret O’Hara and members of Barenaked Ladies) and culture background; most of the band members and guest musicians on *Sun Place* are not Jewish.

But both Lightstone and Chernick have profound roots in Jewish music traditions. Along with Wilson they also perform with a more traditional ensemble, The Huppah Project. That group’s first CD, *Under The Canopy*, is inspired by Jewish wedding music. Lightstone’s great-grandfather was a well-known cantor, and Chernick is a cantorial soloist. All of which brings to light inevitable questions about tradition and religion. Chernick has an interesting perspective:

“I work in what, until recently, I have considered to be two separate contexts: a sacred context and a performance context,” she says. “I have wondered, for some time, if the place where I use my voice to

lead prayer is called sacred, then what is the place where we create this wonderful music, record and perform it with a broader audience? Profane?”

Clearly not, if audience reaction to Jaffa Road performances is any indication. Their CD release performance at Toronto’s Lula Lounge was in front of an ethnically mixed audience with ages ranging from 20s to 80s. Still, it’s not surprising that, to date, at least one listener has queried the band’s politics, wanting to know their stance on the Middle East and matters like Zionism.

But Jaffa Road is ultimately what Lightstone calls “an aesthetic statement, not a political one.” Furthermore it’s an aesthetic that is also part of a broader cultural movement, a re-invigoration of diaspora Hebrew art and culture. That many of Jaffa Road’s songs are sung in Hebrew is perhaps the single most unifying factor in the music.

Lightstone cites Israeli band The Natural Gathering as one of the early visionaries of this movement. It was after hearing them in a small club in Tel Aviv that he was inspired to follow their musical path—not the specific musical components as much as the attitude. They mixed styles of music including Jewish music in a way that was “tasteful and respectful.”

“With some groups it becomes schlocky,” says Lightstone. “Here’s the klezmer, here’s the hip-hop element ... but it doesn’t come together.”

It wasn’t until attending Toronto’s Ashkenaz Festival in the late 1990s that Light-



Jaffa Road



stone truly grasped the vigour and imagination of the scene as it was developing in North America. "I was blown away by how people were taking this thing I perceived as old and stodgy and making it hip."

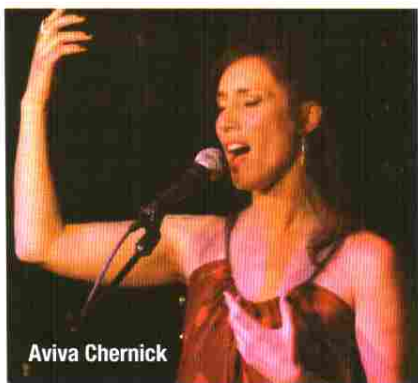
This inspiration coupled with his own longstanding eclectic musical tastes led organically to the sound of Jaffa Road. "I was 15 or 16 when I first heard the sitar. I always had a deep interest in Indian music, North African, Middle Eastern, and it was exciting to me to hear this whole other world of Jewish music where the sounds of Arabia were such a big part."

When asked who else he would consider part of the ongoing resurgence, Lightstone rattles off names like Idan Raichel, who plays Hebrew pop with Ethiopian points of reference; Matisyau, an Orthodox Jew who does Jamaican dancehall; and Canadian performers like Montreal Jewish hip-hopper SoCalled and the Greek/Middle East mélange of Maza Meze.

Yet Lightstone doesn't see this musical direction, at least in terms of Jaffa Road, as being radical. "What we are doing is breathing new life into traditional music. Anyone who really studies traditional music knows they have to evolve to survive."

As far as the sound of *Sun Place* goes, he credits co-producer Gartner for much of the vision, calling him "the glue that makes it all stick together." Gartner responds by saying, "ultimately I was excited to find a meeting ground for Middle Eastern, dub, pop, psychedelic and electronic music."

Of course at the end of the day, after all the explaining and parsing of the music is put to rest, it's the actual experience of hearing it that counts. Or, as Chernick puts it, recalling the crowd up and dancing at the CD release party: "Who can deny themselves a good groove?"



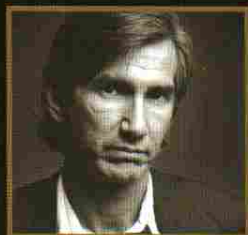
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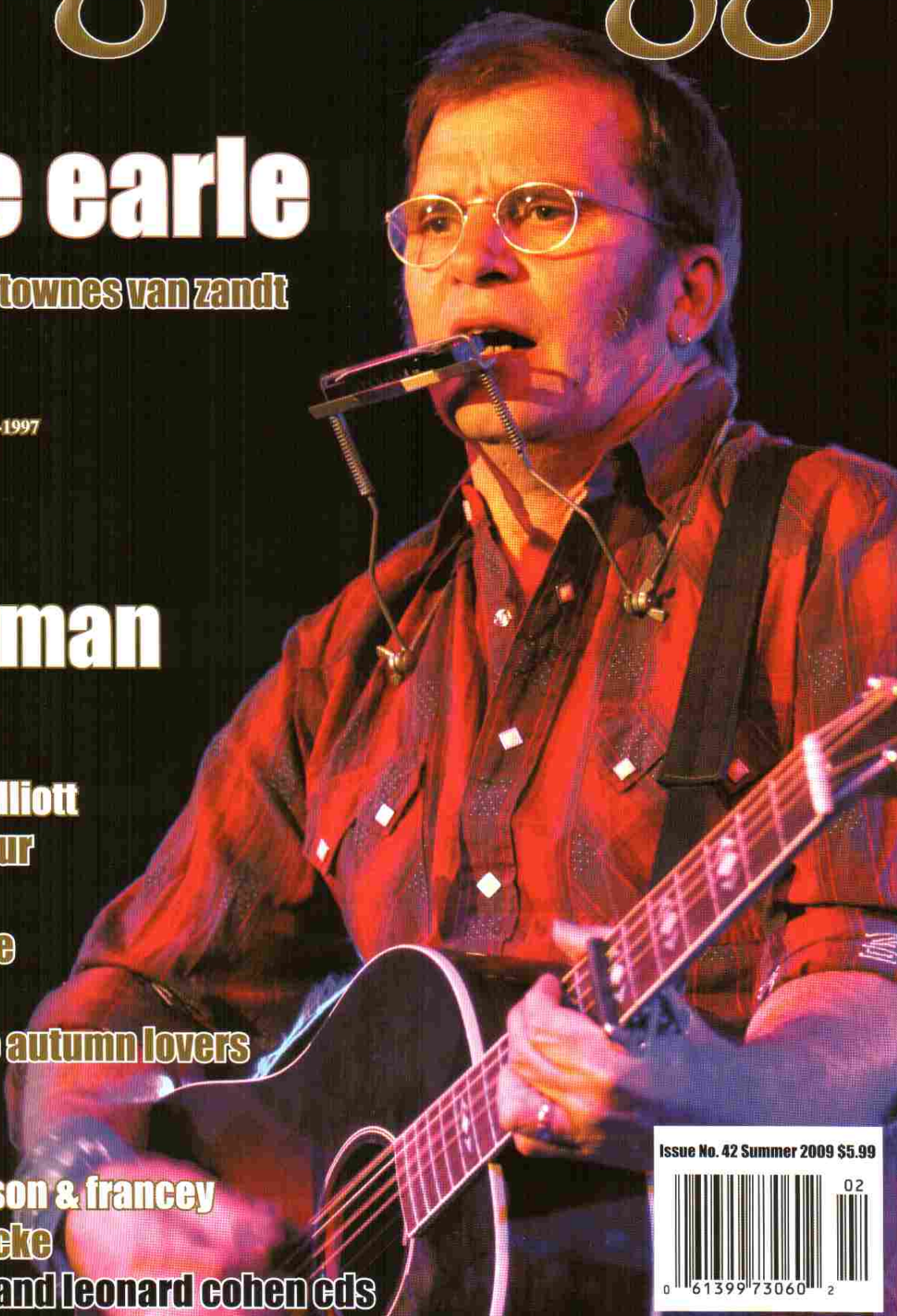
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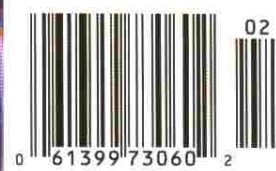
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