

The Star-Ledger

Jewish pop pourri

Ladino rock

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When Spain expelled its Jews half a millennium ago, some took with them a Castilian dialect called Ladino. As those Jews found more welcoming homes along the Mediterranean rim, Ladino became a refugee tongue that clung to its exiled homeland while absorbing bits of Greek, Turkish, Arabic, French, Portuguese and Hebrew, among others. Five hundred years later, Ladino is spoken only in small pockets of the world, mainly Israel, and rarely as a first language.

Except for New York's Sarah Aroeste, who sings Ladino rock 'n' roll.

The raven-haired, belly-baring Aroeste, 29, galvanizes the medieval language with her passionate, exotic vocals and an eclectic mix of modern and traditional instrumentation, from the hand drum called the darbuka to the riqq, a tambourine with a double row of cymbals. During her high-energy performances, Aroeste takes time to explain the meanings of the songs and teach the audiences a little about her Sephardic Jewish background.

"It matters to me that people understand where this music is coming from," says Aroeste, who performs with the four-piece Sarah Aroeste Band on Saturday at Bnai Keshet in Montclair. "At the same time we don't want them to think this is just a language and music that is stuck 500 years ago."

The performance is part of the New Jersey Jewish Music Festival, which runs through Sept. 25 at various venues in Morris and Essex counties.

Aroeste's family landed in Princeton by way of the Greek city of Salonika (now called Thessaloniki), Rochester, N.Y., and Trenton. She grew up in a small, close-knit community of mainly German and Eastern European Jews, and because her Sephardic grandparents wanted to assimilate, she had unanswered questions about her heritage. When she worked at a New York Jewish arts foundation that focused heavily on the emerging renaissance of Eastern European klezmer music, she began to feel the need to preserve the music of her own heritage.

Aroeste (pronounced arro-ESTY), who studied classical singing at Yale University, started playing guitar with a fellow Sephardic Jew a few years ago, eventually teaming up with the musicians who helped her put out her debut release, "A La Una" (titled "In the Beginning" in English).

She recently spent two months in Jerusalem researching Ladino, meeting with linguistic specialists, and introducing her style to the Israeli market, as well as fine-tuning the Sarah Aroeste Band's upcoming album, "Puertas."

"A La Una" invigorates Spanish folk songs about love and loss, some dating to the 15th century, with rock, jazz, blues and funk, among other influences.

"Arvoles (Missing You)" has a languid Caribbean feel. "Yo M'enamori (Moon Trick)" thrums with surf guitar. During "Hija Mia (The One I Want)," the Orient surfaces, the electric guitar fusing with its Middle Eastern cousin, the oud, a short-necked, pear-shaped stringed instrument. Along with the hand drums, the jangling riqq, and the qanun, a zither-like instrument with 81 strings stretched in groups of three, it is electrifying in its own way.

"I wanted to be able to sing this music and to convey it in a way that could really bridge my identity," Aroeste says. "It's simply the way I feel the music, because my context is also an American one, and I don't necessarily feel the music in the traditional style. I feel it with that electric beat, the more oomph. It's how my body and my soul understands and feels the music."

The New Jersey Jewish Music Festival continues through Sept. 25 with performances and special events for children, families and seniors at venues across Essex and Morris counties.

For more information on the festival or to order tickets, contact the JCC MetroWest Box Office at (973) 530-3444 or visit www.jccmetrowest.org/musicalfestival. You can order tickets at www.ticketweb.com (search "JCC Metrowest").