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Film proves Israel rocks

Documentary takes a look at diverse music scene

By Daniel M. Kimmel

What do you know of modern Israeli music? "Jerusalem of Gold" by Naomi Shemer? It was written in 1967 and its writer died in 2004.

Movie Maven

In fact, Israel has a very lively musical scene today and it offers an interesting perspective on the issues that are currently roiling Israeli society. "Israel Rocks!" gives us a taste of how those debates play out on the musical scene, from Hasidic rockers hearkening the imminent arrival of the messiah to a secular band who sings that no such event is ever likely to occur. Some sing of peace coexistence, others sing of the importance of retaining the Golan Heights, and still another group insists that even Jerusalem is not sacred. These are songs unlikely to pop up at even the hippest Friday night service.

If this 2000 documentary has a flaw it's that it might better be called "Israeli Pop," because some of the music here – chorale

arrangements from disabled IDF veterans for example – may be entertaining but are in no way "rock." Other examples on display are unquestionably rock, including one band wailing about how their generation is "[screwed] up." Adults might want to send the kids from the room, or vice versa.

What's fascinating is how the lively and vibrant Israeli culture comes through the songs and performances shown here. As we watch the musical debates – not

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only among Israeli Jews but a Palestinian singer and a mixed group that includes Jews and Arabs, secular and non-secular – we are impressed at the passion they bring to their music. There may be songs about the usual teenage heartthrobs and breakups on the Israeli hit parade, but that's not what's being showcased here.

The film ends on an unexpected note when Shimon Peres pops up. It turns out he has written the lyrics for a song ("She Was Born Out of a Dream") and musician Sholomo Gronich has come up with the

music. We watch a performance of the song Gronich leads with Sheba, a chorus made up of Ethiopian teenagers who have immigrated to Israel. Peres says that music is a language that has a curious lack – it cannot speak of hate. Haters may use music, but music itself does not communicate that.

It may be too much to ask that music solve our problems here, in Israel or anywhere else, but when people are singing or playing music, they're not physically attacking each other. Perhaps we should

take a lesson from Peres and require our leaders to wage their debates through song.

It couldn't hurt.

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"Israel Rocks!" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.