

Singer marries Yiddish, Middle Eastern influences

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Special to The CJN

Singer Lenka Lichtenberg has immersed herself in the thick, Old Country glottals and umlauts of Yiddish song for the past three decades.

Last year, she released her fourth studio album, *Fray (Free)*, a collection of haunting, original Yiddish compositions that marry Yiddish and Middle Eastern influences, and she's gearing up for a performance at Lula Lounge in Toronto. It's a strange departure from the Czech-born artist's early beginnings as a child star with little connection to her Jewish roots.

"I was no genius, but I could hold a note," she recalls, sipping orange tea in her Toronto home. "So when I was eight years old, my mother responded to a request on the radio to apply for an audition [at Prague's famous Semafor Theatre] with Jiri Suchy, who's a household name back home. I got the part, and together with him I recorded a bunch of hits."

The eight-year-old became a full-fledged sensation, and Lichtenberg grew up performing those hits on the radio and in front of live audiences. It seemed a given that she would transition into an equally successful career as an adult.

Then, as a young woman, she made a startling discovery: she is Jewish.

It wasn't that she didn't know she is a Jew, as she sang at the Prague Jewish Community Centre every year for Chanukah and Purim. But the traditional songs she performed were for her simply words and melodies she memorized and "parroted" back.

As for the meaning behind the songs – and her religious identity – that had purposely been kept from the young girl. Fearful of the anti-Jewish sentiment circulating around eastern Europe at that time, Lichtenberg's mother felt she was protecting her child from the fate she and millions of other Jews had suffered.

"My mother was in the Terezin camp for 2-1/2 years," Lichtenberg says. "My father died in Auschwitz. My mother and grandmother had survived, and my



Lenka Lichtenberg

mother had survivor's guilt. She never gave me any details of my Jewishness. In many ways, she blamed her Jewishness on all the horrible things that had happened to her, and she was protecting me by not telling me more."

Once Lichtenberg began to delve into her family history, however, she felt a powerful draw toward Judaism. During a trip to Masada in 1987, she had her personal epiphany. "I had been a rock singer and a folksinger," she says. "But then I had my moment in Israel where I discovered that I needed to be a Jewish singer."

And not just any kind of Jewish singer. With no prior exposure to the old Germanic tongue, the petite blond decided she would sing primarily in Yiddish, and soon became adept enough to start translating lyrics from the English.

"I still need some help, but I'm definitely getting more proficient," she admits with a self-conscious smile.

Recently, Lichtenberg has started exploring her attraction to Middle Eastern sounds, a genre she'd once overlooked because she didn't feel the exotic melodies fit with the thick, heavy Yiddish words. On *Free*, Lichtenberg threw the mantle off musical convention and

created a collection of songs that fuse Yiddish and Middle Eastern influences with radical abandon.

"The CD's title is *Free*, which is fitting because I finally felt free to take my music into my own style. A lot of Yiddish music style is not caught up to where it should be," she says.

The album's success has inspired Lichtenberg to continue smashing boundaries and focus on a more collaborative approach to songwriting. So perhaps it's fitting that her upcoming show, aptly titled *Bridges*, features a selection of the singer's Yiddish songs merged with music by Palestinian-Canadian artist Roula Said.

With a performance schedule full enough to keep anyone busy, the mother of three has somehow found time to also explore Jewish liturgical music. Her upcoming project, *Songs for the Breathing*

Walls, combines recordings taken from concerts at more than a dozen European synagogues, many of which are located in towns whose Jewish populations have been wiped out.

"I suppose it's somewhat ironic, as I was brought up an atheist, but this project is possibly the most significant thing I may ever get to do, and one unbelievably deep in my heart," she says.

So with Lichtenberg's adult life dedicated to exploring Judaism through song, how does her mother – who struggled so deeply with her own Jewish identity – feel about her daughter's chosen path?

"She doesn't understand it," Lichtenberg admits. "But I think by now she's used to it."

The Lula Lounge is at 1585 Dundas St. W. For tickets to Lichtenberg and Said's show, on April 7 at 9 p.m., call 416-588-0307.

Liz Taylor was a strong supporter of Israel

JTA

Academy Award-winning actor Elizabeth Taylor was buried at Forest Lawn in Glendale, Calif., on March 24, the day after she died, in accordance with Jewish law.

The popular actor, known for her violet eyes and her plethora of husbands, died March 23 of congestive heart failure at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where she had been hospitalized for about six weeks. She was 79.

Taylor converted to Judaism following the death of her third husband, Mike Todd, who was Jewish, in a plane crash and before marrying Jewish singer Eddie Fisher.

She denied that she had converted because of her Jewish husbands, saying that she had wanted to do it "for a long time." Her 1959 conversion at Temple Israel of Hollywood was well attended by the press.

Taylor made a point of travelling to

Israel and fundraising for the Jewish state during the Arab boycott in the 1970s. Her films were banned in much of the Arab world. She was a supporter of the Kabbalah Center in Los Angeles.

She reportedly offered herself as a hostage for the more than 100 Air France hijack victims held by terrorists at Entebbe Airport in Uganda in July 1976.

In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a lawsuit challenging Taylor's ownership of a Van Gogh painting that was claimed by a Jewish family. The family said the painting was looted from their relatives during the Holocaust.

Taylor won two Oscars, and is remembered for her roles in *National Velvet* and *Cleopatra*, among many others.

She also supported with her time and money several AIDS-related charities, including founding the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation.



Elizabeth Taylor, centre, at the Jerusalem Wall. [Israel Sun photo]

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