

spotlight

HYIM

relix november 2004

W

hen most people talk about world music, they imagine alien sounds from exotic, unrecognizable places. For Oakland singer/ songwriter Hyim Ross, world music is more a matter of intimate experience. He is, after all, a world traveler.

“In 1998, me and my brother took off for a year, traveled around the world,” he says. He goes on to describe an epic journey that took him through Europe, Israel and Egypt into Africa, India, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. “We took a donkey cart across the Nepalese/ Indian border at sunrise, a classic moment. Played music in the Himalayas with a bunch of drummers— I was beatboxing, and that blew their minds. Studied sitar in Varanasi, India, played this one-string guitar on the street in Ethiopia. I had my little travel guitar and that was the way I connected with a lot of people.” As Hyim speaks, the spirit of a thousand significant moments animates his face, memories carried across the globe that are still close to his heart. It’s clear he possesses grand vision, not only in his sense of adventure but in his artistic sensibilities as well.

Hyim—Hebrew for “life”—self-produced his debut, last year’s *Let Out a Little Peace*. The album is a soul-stirring expression of his dedication to global unity through music. It’s a pendulum of styles and feelings, swinging between sunny *mento* rhythms, spiraling Cuban *son*, urgent hip-hop manifestos, and pensive balladry—quite a sweeping achievement for a first outing. Though the album sports several ecstatic party-starters, its most striking aspect is its profound emotional depth. Hyim’s music holds a rare gravity, borne of 21st century angst tempered by lessons of gratitude gleaned from his time abroad.

“Traveling definitely affected my music,” he says. “When I came back I almost couldn’t talk for fear of saying something trite.” During our conversation, his outward sense of calm is relaxing; onstage, he’s so animated he comes off like a lady-loving cartoon b-boy. “I like the party, for sure,” he says, “but I need the quiet as well.” That well-balanced temperament is a product of both his family history and his own bottomless spiritual thirst. “My parents have always been cool,” he says. “My bio-

logical father was a pianist who played ragtime and country, and my mom was into classical and folk music—a lot of Bob Dylan, Linda Ronstadt. My stepdad was definitely into jazz—Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Hubert Laws.” Singing since he was old enough to talk, Hyim was encouraged by his family to pursue his musical interests. But it took discovering hip-hop to really turn him on to his own potential.

“From an early age—like fourth grade—I was listening to hip-hop. I started making beats at 12 or 13, and that’s also when I started recording. I had a drum machine, a mike, and a synthesizer, and I’d just plug into a boombox [my parents] gave me.” Before long, his love of urban music led Hyim to son, a sexy, syncopated style of Cuban dance music. Several years later, in the winter of 2001, he made a pilgrim-age to Havana, where he spent two weeks studying piano with Cuban master Irvin Ferreiro Alfonso. “We became friends while I was there,” recalls Hyim. “He invited me to his wedding—it was the first time I danced the merengue. We’d finish off a bottle of rum during every lesson— that’s how I learned mon-tunos,” he says, referring to the repeated, syncopated vamps found throughout Cuban music.

Such lifelong dedication to self-expression inevitably leads to the spiritual implications that underlie all art forms. Absorbing wisdom from several religious traditions, Hyim has distilled his spiritual outlook into a message of empowerment that’s irresistibly positive. Playing live—solo on piano and beatbox or with the Fat Oakland Orchestra, a powerhouse band that includes full percussion, horns and a rock-solid rhythm section— he exudes joy and passion. His glowing charisma brings to mind other fearless performers like Michael Franti and Ben Harper. “I was born Jewish,” he says, “but I’ve spent time in sweat lodges, meditated in Buddhist temples, prayed at mosques in Egypt.” Even with so many streams, the current of Hyim’s convictions runs deep. “You know, they say the sweetest honey comes from many flowers.”

Hyim makes a point of staying active in the Bay Area community, dividing his time between gigging, writing music and his job teaching at a local Jewish synagogue. (“I love kids,” he says. “I teach one course in ethics and another called ‘Cultivating Peace.’”) Despite his exhausting schedule, Hyim has found time to record at his tiny home studio in Oakland. His sophomore effort is due this January.

“This will have the eclectic taste of the last one,” he says, “urban world beat, but more up-tempo. *Let Out a Little Peace* was a call into the night for consciousness, whereas this one is more celebrating the sweet and beautiful aspects of life.” If Hyim was given a gift for music, it’s his intention to give a gift back to the world with every song. “Just being able to play and learn and teach,” he says, that’s not just making peace, that’s the experience of peace.” www.hyimvibe.com

<http://www.relix.com>