Alumni

Beat the Rap

By
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|
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On a sunlit street in a small desert town outside of Be’er Sheva, a child stops to listen to the coins rattling in his father’s pocket. The father, noticing his son’s amusement, taps the coins together. A rhythm develops. Spellbound, the child’s fingers dance along.

For Gal “James” Sivan, this was his earliest encounter with drumming. “I loved listening to that,” he recalls. On the ground, his foot bounces, in tempo, against his Columbia Business School backpack.

In many ways, Sivan ’10BUS is your typical MBA student. He keeps eye contact, sits up straight, and speaks directly. But how many of his classmates in Corporate Finance or Marketing Strategy could say they once performed in front of 50,000 people, or opened for Run-D.M.C.? Flash to 1994. Sivan, then 19, was finishing his mandatory service in the Israeli army. “I was in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, but for just one night each,” says Sivan, who was the drummer in the army’s jazz band. “We would show up, perform, and then leave,” he explains, likening the visits to Marilyn Monroe singing for American GIs in Korea (all members of the army’s jazz band were exempt from combat).

In the U.S., *Rolling Stone* had just run a cover of rap artists Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. The Beastie Boys were headlining the Lollapalooza festival, and Notorious B.I.G. was in Manhattan’s D&D Studios, recording his seminal album, *Ready to Die*. Hip-hop had arrived. But Israel, like the rest of the world, had yet to catch up.

A couple of rap-loving high-school friends in the town of Yavne decided to change that. Their group, called Shabak Samech, was looking for a new drummer. Sivan auditioned and made an impression. “Because of my jazz training, I could learn a song after hearing it once,” says Sivan, smiling. “They weren’t used to that.” Four

days later, with Sivan on drums, the group performed at the farewell concert for a popular Tel Aviv rock club. The show was broadcast on the army's radio station Galgalatz, one of the most popular stations in Israel. It was Shabak's big break. "For the first time in my life, people were telling me I was amazing," says Sivan. "I was never the same." Yossi Fine, a bassist who has worked with David Bowie and Lou Reed, and who was Shabak's fi rst producer,recalls Sivan's transformation: "He used to stop the show, come up to the mic and say, 'I'm the best drummer around' — and then he really became it."

Six months later, the group released the single "Shabak Samech Imperia" from their self-titled album, and Israeli music was forever changed. "Shabak was the first group to combine hip-hop and rock in Israel — to popularize it," says Loolwa Khazzoom '91BC, who chronicled the rise of Israeli hip-hop for *Rolling Stone*.

The video for "Imperia" shows Sivan at his drum set, wearing a surgical mask and a chain-link necklace. A mob of youths in baggy pants and backward baseball caps parade through the sandy streets of Jaffa, a mixed Arab-Jewish district of Tel Aviv. Eventually, for no apparent reason, they carjack an old Cadillac sedan, smash the windows, and fl ip it over. "We were," says Sivan, "one of the first groups to curse in Hebrew."

This attitude, along with the name, cemented Shabak's raucous reputation with Israeli audiences (in Hebrew, "Shabak" is a deliberate misspelling of the acronym for the Israel Security Agency, which is analogous to the FBI). While most Israeli rap addresses political issues, Shabak's early songs talked about parties, fun, and, of course, ladies. One lyric from "Imperia" loosely translates to, "Shabak Samech is an empire / See how all the females get hysterical." Not exactly Yehuda Amichai, but the kids loved it.

Then, as in many bands, competing personalities led to conflict. "You know, we made a revolution," says Sivan. "It's like Robespierre. You do your damage, and then you end up under the guillotine." After seven years and four albums, Shabak broke up in 2000.

Sivan is now in his mid-30s. "When you're in your 20s," he says, "you think that in order to play music, you have to be a musician. Now, I still play drums, but I play because I enjoy it." Post-Shabak, Sivan pursued his fi rst love, engineering, at Ben–Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. After a few years developing applications for

mobile platforms, he applied to business school to become better suited for management.

Although Sivan cut his once rock star– length hair (he’s now a consultant for Booz & Company), every so often, during long hours in Uris Hall, he would look to his hip-hop days for guidance. “Shabak made me realize the value of creating a safe environment for ideas. Spending five minutes brainstorming and not dismissing everyone else’s ideas is hard to do in a band *and* in business school. A group can’t always identify from the start the value of what it’s doing.”

He pauses, and taps a couple of coins together in his pocket. “But if you let go and listen, what you think is nothing can turn into something.”

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