
Israeli culture is one of the most challenging issues in the study of the new nation states that appeared on the world scene during the 20th century. No matter the field of inquiry in which each scholar was brought up and the focus of his or her study, whether from the social sciences or the humanities, the extreme complexity of the Israeli case always calls for additional interdisciplinary inquiries. To tackle the intricate web of contrasting human factors, backgrounds, memories, ideologies and wills that shaped Israeli society and its modern culture (what we have termed in this book as Israeliness), each issue such as the subject of this book, Israeli popular music, can be better interpreted if approached simultaneously from various disciplinary perspectives.

The preoccupation with culture and national identity during the 1990s reflects a key belief held by culture professionals in all areas and fields in Israel - a belief that has been dictating and determining art and cultural practices in Israel for nearly a century, since the early days of Zionist settlement in Palestine. Namely, that Israel, being a national cultural community, should have a culture ‘of its own’. That is, it should have a set of cultural practices and art works that, as an exclusive body of contents and meanings, expresses the uniqueness and specificity of ‘Israeliness’; and that it is through routine practice of and intimate acquaintance with this unique world of contents and meanings that ‘Israeliness’ at the individual and collective levels comes into being. However, ‘Israeliness’ had to be constructed or ‘invented’, because for the early Zionist pioneers in Palestine/Israel, Israeli culture had to be necessarily different from the traditional Jewish cultures forged in the Diaspora. Moreover, since the cultures of the different Jewish groups immigrating to the new country have been diverse and conflicting in their contents and meanings, the construction of ‘Israeliness’ has been constantly a site of ideological contest and struggle. Hence, cultural anthropologists today continue to debate measure of success of ‘Israeliness’.

In other words, the ideas of a new nation and a new culture and arts are thoroughly interwoven in Israel. Popular music is a particularly important locus where the very definition of the new culture is being both constructed and contested. Indeed, another belief, shared by many media commentators and music professionals, is that popular music is a cultural form that strongly signifies ‘Israeliness’ (second, perhaps, only to the Hebrew language itself) and that it represents a convincing ‘proof’ of the existence of ‘Israeliness’ as an indigenous cultural entity.

Following this idea of the cultural signification of popular music, a major and leading argument of this book is that popular music in Israeli should be understood primarily as a major area in the symbolic representation of ‘Israeliness’. We perceive popular music in the Israeli context as an arena of contest and struggle between several musical genres and styles representing the music cultures of Jews of different ethnic and social background. This is a struggle for the recognition, legitimacy and dominance of each of these different musical styles as ‘the’ true Israeli national music. Thus, the book describes and examines the changes that Israeli popular music underwent over the past five decades as attempts to construct and invent ‘indigenous’ and ‘authentic’ Israeli music.
This book is structured along the idea of popular music as a field of national music. We examine the Israeli field of popular music as a cultural site, in which three major types of Israeli popular music engage in a cultural contest and a struggle over the formulation of ‘Israeliness’ in music, over the construction of ‘Israeli’ popular music. They are: Shirei Eretz Israel (Songs of the Land of Israel), the ‘folk’ music of Israel; Israeli rock; and Musiqa mizraḥit, the major ‘ethnic’ popular music. We present each one of them in a historical perspective, discuss their evolution and transformations, and examine the complex relationship between them.

The book is structured accordingly. Part I contains two chapters: one is a general introduction to the major positions and strands in Israeli culture; the other a review of the major institutions and organizations within which popular music is and has been produced, disseminated and consumed in Israel. Part II examines the phenomena most overtly connected to nationalist ideology, the music that parallels the ‘invented tradition’ strand of the national ideology: Shirei Eretz Israel, the ‘folk’ music of Israel (in chapter 3); the early, pre-rock popular music (in chapter 4); the unique phenomenon of leḥagot tzvayiot (army ensembles, in chapter 5); and the festivals and contests for encouraging local production of popular music (chapter 6). Part III focuses on the music most clearly belonging in the ‘globalized’ variant of Israeli culture: Israeli rock. Chapter 7 discusses and examines the first generation, and in particular the ‘founders’ of Israeli rock in the 1970s; and chapter 8 goes on to look at further developments and strands of rock in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Part IV looks at Musiqa mizraḥit, the ‘ethnic’ popular music in Israel, labeled initially as ‘other’ and struggling its way to legitimacy and recognition. Chapter 9 traces the emergence of the genre, and chapter 10 its rise and success. We conclude with a general discussion of popular music and Israeliness.