

# Artist of the Month

## Idan Raichel on Central Park's SummerStage: 'Beyond Words'

By Ellen Freed

NEW YORK — To hear the Hebrew, Amharic, and Arabic songs of The Idan Raichel Project is to be transported to a musical arena that goes *beyond words*. Standing among a crowd of 4,000, I was struck by the mysterious power of this music to engage deep emotions within me without my having to understand the lyrics. The words were there, speaking of love and tolerance (so I'm told), but it is the music—haunting, spiritual, lyrical, and rhythmic that seemed to arise from the bowels of the earth, inspiring an immediate global citizenship of spirit. I must admit to an initial tear or two before being swept away by the sheer genius of the singers and musicians.

Idan Raichel, the 29 year old Israeli keyboardist, songwriter, producer and architect of the group, received a heartwarming ovation as he sat down stage right to join his seven fellow musicians. For two hours, this New York audience was presented with a global palette of songs



Idan Raichel, performing in Central Park.

based on Ethiopian, Arabic, African and Yemenite musical traditions, Middle Eastern folklore and chants as well as biblical psalms. *Im Telech* ("If You Go") was sung poignantly by Cabra Casey, an Ethiopian born in a refugee camp in Sudan who grew up in a diverse immigrant com-

munity in Southern Israel. With Hebrew lyrics, it speaks of the longing of a girl who no longer sees any emotion in her lover's eyes. *Siyashaya Ingoma* ("Sing Out For Love")—a moving anthem that captures The Project's underlying message—was performed by South African Bongani Xulu who joined the band after seeing Raichel at a concert in his native country.

Other works included *Azini* ("Comfort Me") in Arabic sung by Mira Anwar Awad, an Arab Israeli from Haifa, *Brong Faya* ("Burn Fire") with vocal and percussion by Sergio Braams originally from the Suriname, on the Caribbean coast of South America, and *Im Tachpetza* ("If Thou Wishest") based on lyrics from the traditional Yemenite prayer book performed by Yihia Tsubara, 76, and his son Shalom Tsuberion. Completing the group was Raichel's right hand man and closest collaborator, Israeli drummer and producer Gilad Shmuely who has played an essential role in the development of the band since its beginning.

The Idan Raichel Project began in a recording studio set up in the basement of the Raichel household. The time was early 2002 and the place was Kfar Saba, Israel. Working with a variety of invited musicians and singers from differing backgrounds and traditions, Idan's goal was to create a totally unique sound that reflected both the cultural diversity of Israel, as well as the use of contemporary technology and recording techniques.

Idan decided to name the resulting collective of eight musicians "Idan Raichel's Project" (later changed to "The Idan Raichel Project") because he envisioned the group as a collaboration among equals. The idea was for each member to bring his or her own culture and talents to the stage where, significantly, there would be no "front man." Says Raichel:

"If I had called the album just 'Idan Raichel,' people would have thought that Raichel is the main voice on all the songs. I wrote the songs and I arranged and produced them, but I perform them together with other vocalists and musicians. On the other hand, we are not a group. It's something in between..."

reviews.

To quote *Billboard Magazine*: "This disc is surely one of the most fascinating titles to emerge in world music this year. The tunes are terribly alluring, and each song definitely has a life of its own. Raichel's U.S. debut is a multi-ethnic tour de force."

*The Times of London* also raved: "The ethnic elements are cleverly rewired with modern grooves to create an ambient journey that thrillingly bridges the traditional and the modern."

Walking through Central Park in the early evening on June 17th among the thousands of people fortunate enough to have attended the SummerStage concert, I realized that The Idan Raichel Project is a musical call



Gilad Shmuely on percussion...



The band gets everybody 'rocking'...including the audience!



Ethiopian singer, Cabra Casey singing 'Im Telech.'

Little did he know that his creation was embarking on a journey that would lead to international prominence within five years.

The first album entitled *Idan Raichel's Project*—released in Israel in late 2002—went triple-platinum and secured Idan's status as an Israeli pop icon. In 2005, a follow-up album, *Mi'Ma'amakim* ("Out Of The Depths") included new hit songs and further cemented Raichel's popularity in Israel. At the same time, the Project began touring internationally around the world thrilling audiences from New York to Singapore. Finally the group's first international album, *The Idan Raichel Project*, was released in 2006 on the Cumbancha label to enthusiastic

to action commanding us to feel our humanness. Every song is infused with Raichel's inspiring philosophy:

*Our ability to live in peace with each other depends first and foremost on our ability to accept all that is different between us. I want to get closer to you, but let me be who I am. I welcome you coming closer to me, while respecting who you are. On our own individual paths we are looking for the bread, the water, the wind and a dignified life. And yes, we all cling to love...The Project is all of you. All of you are The Project.*

In this territory, (if only for two hours) national borders disappear, language barriers vanish, and races fade into a world united by its diversity.