

Aural legacy of the Jewish East

The fifth Sephardic Music Festival gets underway, with an eclectic mix of performances set for various venues

• By NATHAN BURSTEIN

For most New Yorkers, “Jewish music” means klezmer: plaintive fiddles, wailing clarinets and other vestiges of a largely vanished Eastern European culture.

But at the Sephardic Music Festival, a New York City tradition now in its fifth year, the world of Jewish music gets explored from an entirely different angle, focusing on the aural legacy of Jewish communities from Spain and the Muslim world.

Kicking off last night at the 92nd Street Y in Tribeca, this year’s line-up will stretch across seven nights of programming, with highlights drawing on the traditional sounds of Iraq, Yemen and other distant communities. Unfolding at venues including Webster Hall, Joe’s Pub and Brooklyn’s Knitting Factory, performances at the annual Hanukka series will also mix in contemporary elements from a variety

of other musical genres – including the reggae of the hassidic performer Matisyahu and club-ready rhythms from local rappers.

“The idea of the festival is to raise awareness about Sephardic culture and the groups performing it,” says festival founder Erez Safar, a New York-based musician and producer who performs under the name Diwon. “It turns people on to different bands and sounds.”

Showcasing musicians from Israel and the New York area, the festival opened with a concert by Smadar Levi,

a Sderot native who draws on her family’s Moroccan heritage as she sings in Hebrew, Ladino and Arabic. She was joined at the show by the Sarah Aroeste Band, a group that also strives to preserve Ladino – a Spanish-Hebrew hybrid that developed in pre-Inquisition Spain – with the help of rock, funk and jazz elements.

Rounding out the mix for the evening was Galeet Dardashti, a New York transplant from Texas who comes from a line of Jewish musicians from Iran.

Depending on the show they attend, festival-goers may hear a relatively traditional mix of Middle Eastern sounds, though other performances will combine those sounds with additional styles.

IN HIS OWN music, Safar, who says he was inspired to start the festival after seeing klezmer’s “resurgence” among young New Yorkers, combines electro hip-hop and Yemenite sounds, occasionally mixing in Moroccan Jewish and Jamaican dancehall elements as well. (In perhaps his most novel experiment, the musician remixes the Friday night prayer “Lecha Dodi” with “Right Now (Na Na Na),” the Top 10 single by the Senegalese-American hit-maker Akon.)

While groups like Pharaoh’s Daughter and Electro Morocco have gained a New York City following with their Sephardi-flavored sounds – both bands will also perform at the festival – the

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The biggest show at the event will be headlined not by a Sephardi performer but by Matisyahu, the hassidic reggae star



TRADITIONAL AND NOT-SO TRADITIONAL. Scenes from last year’s festival, including Electro Morocco (far left), Pharaoh’s Daughter (second from left)...