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HEEBONICS

HIP-HOP BAND DISPLAYS ISRAEL'S DIVERSITY

By EZRA GLINTER
Special to the CJN

Sha'an Street is a familiar face on the Israeli hip-hop scene. For 14 years, the burly, 38-year-old Jerusalem rapper has been leading Hadag Nahash, arguably Israel's most popular hip-hop group.

Together, the six-member band has been turning out hit after hit, experimenting with an impressive array of musical genres and pushing the political envelope with socially conscious lyrics.

But despite having almost a decade and a half of musical innovation and commercial success behind it, the veteran hip-hop outfit isn't willing to give up its place at the forefront of Israeli culture.

In 2008, four of its songs were featured on the soundtrack to the Adam Sandler movie *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, exposing the band to a world-wide audience.

Now, with the release of its new album, 6, and a North American tour culminating with a Feb. 28 show at the Mod Club in Toronto, Hadag Nahash is proving that they're still ahead of the game.

"I would say that we took another step with this album," said Streett, en route from his home in Jerusalem to a show at the popular Tel Aviv venue The Barbie.

"We took it to psychedelic places, we took it to reggae places. I feel that we recorded solid tunes in a bunch of different genres."

The new album also features four songs in English, something Hadag Nahash never did on any of its previous five releases.

"I speak decent English, and a lot of times when we're jamming in the studio and rehearsal room, we're going to be jamming in English, and we decided, 'Let's record this stuff,'" Streett said.

While the album's official release party won't be until March 25 in Tel Aviv, Hadag Nahash's new material will be on display when the band takes to the stage in Toronto.

"We're going to try out a whole bunch of new tunes on all you guys," Streett said. "Toronto is the last date on our tour, so we should be very much ready by then."

Sponsored by Canadian Friends of Hebrew University (CFHU) as part of its Be U Be Hebrew campaign, the concert coincides with Purim and includes a costume contest with a free summer course at Hebrew U as the top prize. Proceeds from the concert will go toward the university's Vidal Sassoon International



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Center for the Study of Antisemitism.

The show also takes place at the beginning of Israeli Apartheid Week, a pro-Palestinian event held each year on university campuses across North America, that advocates for a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel.

According to Ravid Dahan, the band's North American manager and director of Motek Productions, the timing of the concert is intentional.

"Purim isn't necessarily the best time to go out on tour, but for us it's important to do it now because of Israeli Apartheid Week," she said.

Moshik Galanty, CFHU's director of student recruitment and alumni relations, agreed.



From left, Guy Mar, Shlomi Alon, Moshe Asraf, Sha'an Streett, Yaya Cohen Harounoff and David Klemes of Hadag Nahash.

"The anti-Israel [elements] managed to make the apartheid week a national thing in Canada. Everyone knows what it is, and what we're trying to do is to create a week of pro-Jewish pride," Galanty said.

"The concert itself is a fun event. It's Purim, it's a costume party, it's going to be a very nice event that students can participate in."

Despite Hadag Nahash's de-facto role as ambassadors of Israeli culture, the band has made a name for itself – and distinguished itself from other Israeli hip-hop artists such as Subliminal – based on the left-wing, anti-establishment content of its songs.

Numbers, a track from the 2003 album *Lazooz* (Move), compares the wages of Israeli CEOs with the unemployment rates and poverty of other citizens. More controversially, the song *Gabi and Debi* contrasts the Zionist ideals taught in Israeli schools

with everyday societal problems, and depicts Theodore Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, doing drugs.

The band's most famous track, *The Sticker Song*, from its 2004 album *Homer Mekomi* (Local Material), was written by acclaimed Israeli novelist David Grossman, and takes its lyrics from the plethora of political bumper stickers plastered on cars in Israel.

According to Streett, however, while Hadag Nahash doesn't often support the policies of the Israeli government, it does illustrate the diversity of opinions within the country and the ability of different sides to have their voices heard.

"It's definitely true that there are few good things I can say about any [member of the] establishment, any prime minister or any government that's been around

in this country ever since I've been born, but the fact is that Israel is a democracy and that we are allowed to sing what we believe in," Streett said.

"I had a meeting with some guy in the [prime minister's office] and I said to him, 'Have you read our lyrics? You know that we're not going to put any Israeli flags behind the stage and we're not going to change even one word in one song,'" Streett recalled. "But he said, 'Israel is a democracy and we're proud of the

fact that we allow different voices to be heard in this country.'"

Hadag Nahash also uses its shows as a chance to reach out to Palestinians and fellow peace activists. At a performance in Austin, Texas, Streett talked to Palestinian activists from the stage, inviting them to put aside their differences for one night and join the party.

"Hadag Nahash is pro any peace activist in the world from any religion," Streett said.

"Anybody who's helping push this region in the direction of peace and not of war, anybody from any religion or any ethnicity who's helping push my hometown, Jerusalem, to a state where there's no more mess, is welcome at our show."

Hadag Nahash performs in Toronto on Feb. 28 at the Mod Club, located at 722 College St. For tickets and info call 647-889-0071.