

# Salsa and Falafel: Music and Identity among Illegal Latino Immigrants in Israel

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*Music for us is a way of life. All our life is accompanied by music, and we can never do without it. Even here in Israel, where we are afraid of being caught by the police and deported, we dance and sing. It makes us forget the troubles and it makes us proud to be who we are. I need Salsa like I need food. I will give up everything, even my freedom, except music and dancing...*<sup>1</sup>

The old Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv is a haven of cross-cultural activity. Romanian, Russian and Ethiopian restaurants include middle-eastern hummus, falafel and burekas in their menus and non-stop commercial interactions are carried out in a mixture of languages and gestures. The bus station has always provided a fantastic cacophonous blend of sounds: Israeli, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Persian and Yemenite music blare out of the numerous cassette stalls, mixed with the sounds of buses and the human beehive. It has been the birthplace of the new hybrid musical genre developed in Israel in the 1970s alongside a social protest movement evolving out of the cultural clash between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, *Muzika Mizrahit* (Hebrew: Oriental Music). The bus station has even given its name to the genre, sometimes (slightly) pejoratively called "Central Bus Station music" (in Hebrew: *muzika shel tahana merkazit*). In recent years, a new musical genre has been added to the already busy soundscape of the Central Bus Station: Salsa.

Cultural boundaries, as well as social, economic, political and even religious ones, are constantly being marked, erased and crossed in Israel.<sup>2</sup> Ben Gurion's<sup>3</sup> vision of a "melting pot" had turned more into a mosaic where cultures clash, conflict and complement each other at the same time, constantly crossing each other's boundaries, thus giving the country its unique, vivid-to-hectic cultural texture and rhythm.

In a country that was created as a "solution"<sup>4</sup> to diaspora, the establishment

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<sup>1</sup> (Miguel, 24, an illegal immigrant from Colombia, living in South Tel Aviv).

<sup>2</sup> In a country where the physical boundaries/borders are disputable and ever-changing, group boundaries are also a very fluid notion and keep changing according to the public's agenda and sense of priorities. For example individuals divided into groups by country of origin or level of education, may find themselves in the light of a major nationwide debate, such as the recent disengagement plan, in the same group based on an ideological agenda. This does not erase cultural boundaries, but redefines them.

<sup>3</sup> David Ben Gurion was the first prime minister of Israel and one of the leaders of the Zionist movement.

<sup>4</sup> All expressions throughout this article that appear in quotation marks are based on quotes, most of them obtained in my interviews. In this case, the Hebrew word *Pitaron* ("solution") has been frequently used in this context by Ben Gurion and other Israeli politicians.

of new diasporic cells is particularly interesting and carries a unique cultural and emotional burden. In this article I will describe my experience among the community of illegal Latino immigrants in Tel Aviv, examining Salsa music as a unique identity factor, creating and helping to maintain a strong sense of “pan-Latin” identity among the immigrants on one hand, and serving as a cultural interface for interaction between them and Israelis on the other. Martin Stokes wrote that music “provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them” (1994:5). I will show how in this case music provides the means to mark and at the same time to cross these boundaries.

In the first part of this article I present the social, cultural and psychological background of the illegal Latino labour immigrants in Israel, and discuss the interaction between them and the hosting society. The second part is dedicated to music and its role in both the identity formation and the integration/interaction processes. Salsa as a pan-Latin hybrid genre, and *Muzika Mizrahit* as a pan-oriental hybrid genre, will be discussed and compared.

My fieldwork methodology involved interviews with many Latino immigrants and Israelis living in South Tel Aviv between 2002 and 2004. Many of the questions asked involved the thoughts and preconceptions of each group about the other, helping me to establish a set of generalisations, on which this article is partly based. I do not use these generalisations as means of empirical data on which to base a sociological theory, but as general ‘folkloric’ assumptions from which the cross-cultural interaction between the Latin immigrants and the Israelis has evolved.

## Historical Background

In 1993, following the eruption of the first *Intifada*,<sup>5</sup> Israel imposed closures on the Palestinian territories, and the vacuum left by the many Palestinians who used to come and work in Israel, mainly in the construction and agriculture sectors, was filled by importing legal foreign workers, mostly from Eastern Europe and the Far East. At the same period, many other popular destinations for labour migration around the world tightened immigration laws and their implementation and the rumour about the easy access and high salaries in *la terra santa* (Spanish: the Holy Land) started spreading.

In addition to the legal importation of foreign workers by manpower companies,<sup>6</sup> a parallel process of illegal labour immigration from various parts of the world, including Latin America, went into full gear. Entry to Israel in this

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<sup>5</sup> The Palestinian uprising.

<sup>6</sup> The government approves quotas of visas to workers in certain areas it terms “needy” such as agriculture and construction.

case is made via two typical ways: entering on a tourist visa (usually limited to three months), pretending to be tourists or pilgrims<sup>7</sup> and staying on after its expiry; or entering under a work visa, which is usually limited in time and restricted to a specific employer, and then leaving the employer prior to the expiry of the visa and staying in Israel.

Nowadays, the border control has become much tighter. The ongoing threat of terror attacks by suicide bombers has reduced tourism drastically and tourists coming from 'third world' countries are treated with suspicion.<sup>8</sup> Since 2000, all Latin Americans under the age of forty arriving in Ben Gurion airport are thoroughly interrogated about the purpose of their visit and in many cases entry is refused (Azov 2002).

Due to its illegality and the lack of documentation, there are no official figures for the size of the illegal Latino community in Tel Aviv. Official spokesmen were even reluctant to give me estimates. But based on statistical data and crossing information I reached a figure of approximately 15,000. The estimated internal division according to countries of origin, based on an average of data collected in the course of various field surveys (Kemp, Rajzman, Resnik, Schammah-Gesser 2000:8, Mahdon 2002, Azov 2002) is around: 40 per cent from Colombia, 25 per cent from Ecuador, 10 per cent from Bolivia, 25 per cent others (Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and so on).

Each foreigner workers (FW) community has social activities that are strongly associated with it and reflect its cultural background. In the case of the Latinos, these are religion, football and Salsa (Schnell 1999:42, Azov 2002).

## Social and Psychological Background

Immigration is the major strategy of nation building in the state of Israel. The Zionist movement since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been all about gathering Jews (by religion or ancestry) from around the world in one country (Goldscheider 1992:4). As a result, modern Israel has become a society made up largely of immigrants and their descendants. To be an immigrant in Israel is, therefore, normative. However, there are two distinct kinds of immigrations to Israel these days: Jewish immigration (Hebrew: *Aliyah*)<sup>9</sup> and non-Jewish labour immigration (FW). As opposed to the Zionist ideology of quickly absorbing the

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<sup>7</sup> Many illegal immigrants, especially from the Latin American Catholic countries, used the pilgrim hat to enter Israel.

<sup>8</sup> In July 2002 a whole chartered plane of "tourists" from Chile was refused entry and returned to Santiago.

<sup>9</sup> In Hebrew *Aliyah*, the term used for this kind of 'home coming' immigration, literally means 'Going up' (to Israel). Emigration from Israel is called *Yerida*, 'Going down', and is considered by many Israelis as "betrayal". This terminology demonstrates the strong ideological context of Jewish migration to Israel.

new (Jewish) immigrants, the immigrant FWs are considered outsiders in the cultural, social and political spheres, as they are in most Western European countries (Kemp, Raijman, Reznik, Schammah-Gesser 2000:1). Fear is a constant factor in the life of illegal immigrants in Israel. There are two major sources of fear: fear from the police and immigration authorities, and fear from terrorism and war.

In 1997, a government decision was reached that “the number of the foreign workers should be lowered in the frame of a multi-annual programme” and the government’s strategic approach was clearly described as “seeing the large scope of foreign workers as an unwanted phenomenon from the point of view of society, economy and security” (The State Controller report 1998). The outcome of this decision was ongoing waves of deportations. In September 2000, a young Colombian FW, Carolina Sanchez, jumped to her death from her balcony fearing the police coming to deport her.<sup>10</sup>

Another source of fear is the political and internal security situation in Israel. In January 2003 a bomb exploded in Neve Sha’anán Street, a street mainly populated by FWs. The FWs gained some public sympathy when the media reported cases of injured FWs who were afraid to go to hospitals for treatment, for fear of being reported to the police and eventually deported. Suddenly their fate got tenaciously entangled with their Israeli neighbours’ fate. Even so, when asking my interviewees what they feared the most after this incident, terrorism or the police, the answer was unanimous: “the police”.

### **Interaction with Israelis**

Latinos are unique among the FWs when it comes to interaction with Israelis. In his 1997 field research, Yitzhak Schnell asked Israeli residents in South Tel Aviv to mention the main characteristics of the FWs living in their neighbourhood according to their group origin (each group consisted of approximately 15-19 per cent of the total number of FWs in the neighbourhood). The result was in favour of the Latinos, who were described by Israelis as “friendly” and easier than all the other FWs communities to interact with (Schnell 1999:43).

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to clarify that the policy of the Tel Aviv municipality is completely different from that of the government, as I was told by the head of the municipal welfare services in South Tel Aviv, Yehiel Mahdon: “The municipality wants to help the FWs to integrate and create a community life, have social and welfare services and have future plans for them, but the government is against it and they are looking at it as a ‘temporary problem’. Whenever we come up with a suggestion or a request for budget for a future plan, they don’t want to hear because they consider it as an attempt to legitimise the status of this community. Our attitude [the municipality’s] has two main reasons: the first one humanistic of course, but also we know that if we do not take care of them and give them basic social benefits and help them create a healthy community life, this will be a social time bomb which will explode in our faces sooner or later. I don’t care if they live here with or without a visa. If they live in Tel Aviv, I need to take care of them, their children and their families” (interview with Mahdon, 2002).

In my field research, the Israeli interviewees mentioned some points of similarity between Latinos and Israelis, which may further explain their advantage in comparison to the other FW communities in Tel Aviv, in terms of integrating and interacting with Israelis. An obvious one was physical appearance: unlike other large groups of FWs from the Philippines, Thailand and Ghana, the Latinos have similar physical features and appearance to many Israelis, Caucasian with a dark complexion. Many of them could be mistaken for Israelis.

On the behavioural level, the Philippine, Thai and African immigrants are viewed by their Israeli neighbours as "quieter", while the Latinos, on the other hand, were described to me as "loud like Israelis, warm and friendly, hot tempered, using physical gestures in abundance". Some of my interviewees also pointed to a "similar business mentality" among Israelis and Latinos, which makes it easier to conduct business with them: informal arrangements (Spanish: *de palabra*, meaning 'by word') and "handshake contracts" (Spanish: *mutua confianza*, meaning 'mutual trust').

Another important advantage in integrating is language. According to Azov, Latinos speak better Hebrew than other FW groups. The reason being that, unlike the other groups, most of the Latinos in Israel do not speak English at all (which is the main foreign language in Israel), only Spanish. Therefore, they have to learn Hebrew quickly to get by (Azov 2002). Coming from Catholic countries, and highly formally educated (Kemp, Raijman, Reznik, Schammah-Gesser 2000:9,14), most of the Latinos, unlike the other groups, come to Israel with some previous knowledge of the country's history and its religious heritage.

Another important factor facilitating easier integration is the contact with the established Latin American Jewish community. According to Adi Azov, the head of Mesilah, the Centre for Assistance and Advise to the Foreign Community in Tel Aviv, the Latin American Jewish community in Israel, mostly from Argentina, is quite eager to create social contacts and to help the Latino FWs. In fact many of the volunteers in Mesilah are Israelis from Argentinean origin.<sup>11</sup>

As for leisure, many of the Latinos come from the *costa* (coast) areas in their countries, and can easily adapt to the Mediterranean beach culture in Tel Aviv: hot humid weather, shorts and t-shirts, swimming, hanging out on the beach, playing beach games and so on.

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<sup>11</sup> The Latinos are in fact the only group of FWs with a 'sympathetic' Jewish community from their original countries, ready to help and to establish cultural connections. This can be explained by the fact that unlike the Jewish communities from Eastern Europe, mostly Holocaust survivors and their descendants, Latin American Jews do not feel that they were betrayed by their non-Jewish compatriots. As for the FWs from the Far East and West Africa, these regions do not have large Jewish communities.

Finally, Latin American music in general and Salsa in particular are very popular among Israelis. Many of my Latino interviewees told me how surprised they were to hear Latin music on Israeli Radio and at the bus station cassette shops when they first arrived. "I immediately felt at home", Jaime, 22 years old and from from Venezuela, told me.

### **The Role of Salsa Music in Self and Group Identity**

The connection between music and identity has been widely researched. For example, in her book on Zouk, Jocelyn Guilbault writes: "Musical genres have often played a crucial role in the expression and negotiation of identity" (1993:203).

In the case of the Latino FWs in Israel, I suggest that Salsa has a triple psychological identity-related role. Based on interviews with Latino FWs, I found that it helps them "feel at home" and to overcome homesickness. Second, it is instrumental in creating a pan-Latin identity and a social environment among the Latino FWs, in spite of the fact that they come from different countries with different national identities. Finally, it gives them a sense of pride when interacting with Israelis, due to the popularity of Salsa music and dance in Israel. It is used both to mark the boundaries needed for their self-identity, and to cross the boundaries between them and the hosting society.

### **The Israeli-Latino 'Salsa Connection'**

Due to the current wave of deportations, Latino FWs are afraid of visiting the clubs they used to frequent together with Israelis in quieter times, such as Bailatino in central Tel Aviv. However, they "cannot live without music and therefore take risks", as they say, and frequent private parties organised by Israeli Salsa *aficionados*. Such was the party I attended at a private home in Jaffa where there were approximately a hundred people, of which over forty were Latinos who felt they were "the stars" of the party. The Israelis watched their dancing with admiration, talked to them in Spanish, and danced with them. This was the only time during my fieldwork that I encountered a group of Israelis and a group of illegal immigrants interacting on equal terms, having fun and having respect for each other and each other's culture.

Leo Chavez makes an interesting observation about the way host societies regard illegal immigrants, suggesting that the larger society endows the identity, character and behaviour of the illegal immigrant with mystic qualities (1998:23). This kind of mystification has mostly negative, yet sometime positive, aspects. Some Israelis (especially, as I noted, from low social backgrounds and poorly educated) also endow the FWs with some mystic and

even 'demonic' qualities. I heard some Israelis living in South Tel Aviv near to FWs from Ghana, talking about "the Africans dealing with witchcraft and Voodoo". Many Israelis have labelled FWs from Thailand as "dog eaters", following some incidents reported in the press. When it comes to the Latinos, the main mystic qualities attributed to them are connected to their sexual charm and the way they dance.<sup>12</sup>

Dalit, an 18 year old Israeli girl told me:

*When you go to a Salsa club, you see the way these guys [the Latino FWs] move, and it is like witchcraft. They move their torso and look into your eyes and you just melt. It's not just being sexy. It's witchcraft, I tell you. I know too many incidents of broken hearts because of these guys...*

The Latinos are aware of the effect their music and dancing have on Israelis.

*All week I work on a building site and my Israeli boss always shouts at me. But in the weekend I am a king: when these [Israeli] girls come to my room and I play salsa and dance with them, or when I go to the parties, I know they want me. We don't dance for them. We dance for ourselves, but they admire the way we move... when I dance I feel proud that I am a Latino. But when I see them watching me, I become even prouder. Maybe the police think I am inferior, but Israeli girls don't think so...*<sup>13</sup>

When a party in Jaffa that I attended got into full swing, and after many bottles of Maccabee beer, the Latinos asked the DJ to play some *Muzika Mizrahit*. Now roles change; the Latinos ask their Israeli partners to teach them the movements. They easily learn them and take over the dance floor again with sensual belly dance movements.

## Muzika Mizrahit

*Muzika Mizrahit* is a musical genre developed in Israel in the 1970s. It is a blend of Arabic music, with Greek and Turkish melodies, adapted into western

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<sup>12</sup> The 'mystification' factor does not necessarily contradict the familiarity and similarity factors as described in the previous section. In certain cultures it can complement each other. Many Israelis are born into a cultural mix of folkloric beliefs and 'superstitions' (especially among lower social levels). Even here boundaries are being crossed regularly where charms and spells against the evil eye cross from Eastern European to Moroccan communities and back, the most popular one being the *hamsa* (Arabic: five, indicating the five fingers in the palm), an open palm shaped cameo seen in Israel in many forms from key holders and home decorations to just being said (with or without a complementary hand gesture) as an expression in response to a complementary remark that can activate the evil eye. The 'positive' mystification of a person or a group of people can therefore cohabit with a sense of familiarity and interaction. This can also be compared to the attitude towards mysticism in Latin America, where mysticism and familiarity do not contradict each other, and where the mystical and the rational can live side by side.

<sup>13</sup> José, 21 from Colombia

pop and performed on western instruments according to western pop harmony and structure with the 'flavouring' of Middle Eastern and Balkan instruments (*oud*, *bouzuki*, *darbukka*), melismatic singing, and sections of free rhythm vocal and/or instrumental improvisation (in Arabic: *taxim*).

Socially, the music emerged from the communities of Sephardic Jews from North African and Middle Eastern origin, in the poor neighbourhoods mostly occupied by these communities (Hebrew: *Shchunot*). *Muzika Mizrahit* was for many years, and still is, the subculture pop music of Israel. Until the late 1990s, radio and other media in Israel were ruled by the hegemony of 'European' culture, dictated by the Ashkenazi Jews from European origin while the culture of the oriental Sephardic Jews was considered either 'ethnic' or inferior. The emergence of *Muzika Mizrahit* was part of the 1970s protest movement of Israelis from oriental origin "lifting up their heads", politically, socially and culturally. *Muzika Mizrahit* was also coined "Central Bus Station music" as it was cheaply produced and mainly distributed via cassettes sold in stalls in the old Central Bus Station.

*Muzika Mizrahit* has seen a significant change in status in recent years (Finegold 1996:2). Nowadays it has its own radio and television programmes: production quality has improved drastically and the genre has moved from the "bus station" labels to mainstream record companies. *Muzika Mizrahit* has crossed into the Israeli mainstream and many now consider it to be the "real Israeli pop music" , incorporating east and west.<sup>14</sup>

### Muzika Mizrahit and Salsa

I asked all my Latino interviewees which Israeli music they like. Forty out of forty-two answered *Muzika Mizrahit*. I suggest that the most obvious explanation is that the interviewees are more exposed to this kind of music in the bus station, where they live and hang out, or their places of work (where they come in contact with 'working class' Israelis among whom this music is very popular). But perhaps there is more to it than this. I have noticed many similarities between musical, social and behavioural aspects of *Muzika Mizrahit* and Salsa. I believe this comparison can help explain the phenomenon of a new, discriminated minority (Latino FWs) being attracted to the music of a past (and in many ways still present) discriminated and stigma-baring minority (Sephardic and Oriental Israelis), and help in better understanding the social and musical connection between Israelis and Latinos.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In 1999, as the head of Israel's leading record company, I was the first to sign a *Muzika Mizrahit* artist to a major label. In 2005, the winner of the Israeli version of 'Pop Idol' came from this genre, starting a whole public debate about the status of *Muzika Mizrahit*.

<sup>15</sup> The question of whether the similar experience of discrimination and economic disadvantage is connected to the cultural similarity as demonstrated in the musical part of the comparison may lead to a whole new and very interesting discussion based on Marxist theory. Also, I have

Both Salsa and *Muzika Mizrahit* emerged in the 1970s in immigrant communities in the poor neighbourhoods of large urban centres: the *barrios* of New York and the *shchunot* in Tel Aviv. Both could be seen as a cultural expression, based on a rich cultural heritage, of a need to create an identity and source of pride by a minority immigrant group suffering from discrimination and humiliation.

Musically, both are blends of the hosting society's western pop music with structures, rhythms and instrumentation coming from the groups 'origins', Cuban music the case of Salsa, and Arabic music in the case of *Muzika Mizrahit*. Additional influences come from neighbouring countries with music traditions that are close to the 'origin', but have a lighter feel, and from smaller groups of immigrants that are culturally related to the largest immigrants group. (In the case of Salsa it is *Musica Tropical* and *Cumbia* from Colombia, *Merengue* from Dominican Republic and *Plena* and *Jibaro* from Puerto Rico. In *Muzika Mizrahit*, it is Turkish and Greek *Tsiftetele* music.)

Rhythmically, both are strongly identified by and based on a time line, a repetitive rhythmic pattern with a strong syncopated feel, played on a typical percussion instrument. The *Clave* is the time line and heartbeat of Salsa, usually played on the *Clave* instrument, and the *Wazn*, also known as 'doom tak', is the repetitive rhythmic pattern of Arabic music, widely used in *Muzika Mizrahit*, and usually played on the *darbukka*, or hand-held drum (Touma 1996:46-54).

Structurally, many *Muzika Mizrahit* songs have a short instrumental response at the end of each vocal line, drawing on the Arabic *Lazima*<sup>16</sup> (Finegold 1996:7). This is also characteristic of Salsa, where the instrumentalist often completes the vocal line by some kind of instrumental response.

Both genres are characterised by lyrics of melancholic longing (to a loved one, to the homeland and so on) on one side, and fun and escapism on the other. In *Muzika Mizrahit* there is an even clearer division between two kinds of songs: *Shirey Dika'on* (Hebrew: songs of depression) that are slow and melancholic (equivalent to the Latin *Bolero*), and *Shirey Hafla* (Hebrew/Arabic: party songs) that are up-tempo, rhythmic, with fun/naïve and highly escapist lyrics.

Both genres are strongly associated with particular styles of dancing, with

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not considered in this article the many differences between the two genres, which could provide insight in further studies. My aim in this short comparison is to show a range of similarities between *Musika Mizrahit* and Salsa that may explain the mutual attraction between both cultures, and boundary crossing processes.

<sup>16</sup> A term in Middle Eastern music indicating a short instrumental response to a vocal phrase imitating its last few sounds.

a strong sensual/sexual connotation, using the belly and torso areas as the "focal point". At the same time, interestingly (but not surprisingly), both cultures have a history of suppressed sexuality. In many regions in the Americas, dancing was viewed by the colonials as a sinful activity, connected to the African slaves with their lack of morality and "strong sexual appetite". The colonial authorities and the Catholic Church saw music and dance as "a threat to the established political and moral order" (Wade 2000:21-22). Likewise, at various stages of history in the Moslem world, belly dancing was considered a sinful, sexually arousing, immoral activity and belly dancers were considered "prostitutes" (Touma 1998). Furthermore, in the Orthodox Jewish tradition the singing of a woman is considered sexually arousing and is forbidden to be heard by men. This is based on the Talmudic expression "*Kol Ba'isha Erva*" (Hebrew: "the voice of a woman is like her sexual organ"). There is strong connection between music, dance and "sinful sexual activity" in the history of both traditions: Latin American (Salsa) and Judeo-Moslem (*Muzika Mizrahit*). At the same time, both genres have very sensual and 'sexually arousing' ways of dancing.

On a social level, both Salsa and *Muzika Mizrahit* superstars achieve legendary status, sometimes beyond any kind of superstardom known in the pop world. According to the *Rough Guide to World Music*, the status of Salsa stars in Latin America is similar to the status of football players in England. (Steward 2000: 496). Artists are becoming 'Queens' and 'Kings' in the terminology of both Salsa and *Muzika Mizrahit*. For example, Celia Cruz is known among Cubans in exile as *La Reina de la Salsa* (Spanish: The Queen of Salsa) and Zohar Argov is known as *Hamelech* (Hebrew: The King) in the *Muzika Mizrahit* world. The fact that both musical cultures developed in groups with poor economic backgrounds, emphasises the status of their 'royals' even more. One can often see local superstars driving in flash cars and wearing heavy gold jewellery through the streets of the poor *barrios* or *shchunot*.

Perhaps one of the most important points of comparison is that both these musical genres represent a newly created collective identity of a group of discriminated and economically weak immigrants from different, but related, ethnic origins. Salsa symbolises a pan-Latin identity, while *Muzika Mizrahit* is the soundtrack of a pan-Oriental identity in Israel. The European Jews' prejudices against the Oriental Jews led to the creation of a pan-Oriental social, political and cultural identity and *Muzika Mizrahit* is the musical expression of this collective identity (Finegold 1996:6). Hence, Jews from different oriental origins (and in some cases very different musical origins), such as Yemen, Morocco, Iraq and even Greece and Bulgaria, have created a pan-Oriental musical genre known as *Muzika Mizrahit*, which in a way reflects the view the 'other society' (the European Jews) has of them as collectively 'Orientals' (in Hebrew: *Mizrahi'im*). A similar process happened with Salsa in the USA, where immigrants from different Latin American countries, cultures, and musical traditions were collectively looked upon as 'Latinos', and in a parallel

process created a pan-Latin musical genre known as Salsa. In the micro-cosmos of the Latino illegal immigrants in Tel Aviv, the role of Salsa, as an identifying and unifying factor among various Latino groups and as a cultural interface between the minority group and the hosting society, proves to be just as important.

## Conclusion

I have shown how music has become an important factor of identity in the life of a new immigrant community emerging in Tel Aviv, a community of illegal workers from Latin America. In addition, it has the power to become a medium of interaction between the community and the hosting society and helps in restoring a sense of pride among the community, so is badly needed in a situation of living on the fringe of society. I have also outlined musical, social and behavioural similarities between Salsa and *Muzika Mizrahit*, which I claim can perhaps explain the high level of interaction between Latino FWs and Israelis. Furthermore, the similarities between the Latino illegal immigrants and their Israeli neighbours, and between *Muzika Mizrahit* and Salsa, can explain the mutual attraction and the process of boundary-crossing between both cultures and both groups. At present, this is still a very careful 'tiptoeing' kind of crossing, however, the mutual interest in each other's music is a fertile ground towards the development of an interesting music scene based on interaction between musicians from both genres. In the current climate, the illegal status and constant fear of deportation prevents active musical interaction on a regular basis, however, looking at the history of Israeli pop music and the successful integration of *Muzika Mizrahit* into Israeli mainstream pop music, which seemed socially impossible until the 1990s, as well as similar processes in other cultures, perhaps this is just a matter of time.

## Dedication

*In January 2003, a few months after the summer that I spent in Tel Aviv for my first fieldwork, two suicide bombers blew themselves up in the Old Central Bus Station, on the street frequented by many illegal foreign workers, and where I used to sit, drink beer, eat falafel and listen to Salsa with my Latino friends and informants. Twenty-four people were killed and 111 wounded, many of them illegal foreign workers. I dedicate this article to them and to the victims of terror everywhere.*

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