

From L.A. to Casablanca and back again



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Vanessa Paloma brings Sephardic, Mizrahi songs to Los Angeles Jewish Symphony

by Jonathan Maseng

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On May 16, 2003, a series of suicide bombings struck Casablanca. The target: Jews. Luckily, the suicide bombers were not particularly savvy, and the Jewish targets they struck were empty for Shabbat. Although no Jews were killed, nearly 30 Muslims died as a result of the blasts. In response to the bombings, Morocco's King Mohammed VI staged a rally to demonstrate his support for the Jewish community; this was right in the middle of the Second Intifada. That's Morocco for you — a country that in turn enchants and surprises, according to the Jewish-American singer Vanessa Paloma. When Paloma visits Los Angeles this week to perform with Noreen Green and the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, she'll be bringing a musical taste of the country she loves and now calls home.



Vanessa Paloma

"I moved to Morocco in 2007," Paloma said, speaking on the phone while sitting under a tree on the campus of Indiana University, her alma mater, on a warm spring day. Paloma, who'd just finished performing, recounted the journey that took her from a mostly secular life in the United States to an observant Jewish one in Morocco.

The impetus for her journey, she said, was the time she spent in Los Angeles after college, when she founded a musical group, Flor de Serena (Siren's Flower), which performed Sephardic music. As she dug deeper into the music, she started to see that "maybe there's actually something a lot deeper going on here." After spending some time in Israel, she said, she decided it was time "to make my life more whole, to practice what I was singing, in a way." And so she applied for and received a Fulbright Scholarship and headed off to Morocco.

The first thing you have to understand about Casablanca, she said, is that "it's a huge city. Casablanca is really a metropolis. ... There are about 7 million people." And sprinkled among those millions of Moroccans is a small but thriving community of Jews. "It's a city that has kosher restaurants, many synagogues, three Jewish clubs and four Jewish schools," she said.

Nevertheless, Paloma soon found that integrating herself into the Jewish community was harder than she expected. "It's a pretty insular community," she said. "Fifty or 60 years ago, there were 350,000 Jews in Morocco, and they existed on all different levels of the society." Today, the community numbers one-hundredth of that.

Paloma found it easier to be accepted outside the Jewish community. "I have a project that I've been doing with a Moroccan woman singer and with a Spanish woman; we do the three ... women and three religions, and we've performed that all over Morocco. ... It's actually been easier for me to have friendships in the Muslim community and in the foreign community," she said.

But she didn't give up. As a feminist, it was hard for her to deal with the fact that "all the communal organizations are completely run by men," she said, but she soon learned that the women of Morocco held a hidden power. "The women might not have a lot of formal power, but they have a significant amount of informal power. ... Many times people try to get to a decision-maker through the female side of [their] family."

The songs of these Moroccan-Jewish women particularly appealed to Paloma. They apparently had also appealed to the 19th century painter Eugene Delacroix. "Delacroix ... stayed in a Jewish house in Tangiers when he came to Morocco," said Paloma. "He has a very famous painting of a Jewish mother and daughter in Tangiers, it's this family Ben Shimon, who were a very prominent family."

Paloma also learned to love her new country despite the difficulties. She told one tale of having to communicate with a blind oud player who only spoke Arabic, and how they eventually learned to make music together. "Even when you have seemingly nothing that can connect you to somebody else, you can actually really communicate in a very beautiful and powerful way."

Noreen Green, artistic director of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony and music director of Valley Beth Shalom, plans to put Paloma's talents and Spanish skills to use during her March 31 performance with the symphony. "We use Sephardic music as a bridge between the Latino population and the Jewish population," Green said. The concert Paloma will be performing in kicks off a celebration of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony's 18th anniversary.

"We've really made a mark on L.A. in the last 18 years, and it's a wonderful celebration," said Green. "We're doing other Mizrahi songs, I have a Persian woman singing some Persian songs and the choir singing some Ladino songs."

Paloma will also perform a piece about the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. "It turns out that the show is on ... the anniversary of the signing of the edict of expulsion from Spain," said Paloma. When Paloma realized the significance of the date, she asked her friend, composer Michelle Green Willner to compose a piece, which will be premiered that night.

Paloma married a Moroccan Jew, and their child attends a Jewish academy in Casablanca. She's also busy at work trying to build a Jewish music legacy in her new home. "I'm actually in the process of founding a Moroccan-Jewish sound archive in Morocco, because I feel like its very important for Moroccans to have access to these memories, the music and also the oral histories," said Paloma, who's simultaneously doing doctoral studies at the Sorbonne.

"I really feel that Morocco can be a very important example for the whole world, not just toward the Arabs, but toward the West to show a different way of understanding Jewish-Muslim relations," Paloma said. "Any relationship has moments of tension, so I think that realizing that there is a place today where people still live in this coexistence that we always look back to" — the Golden Age of Spain — "we're still living it in Morocco."

A version of this article appeared in print.

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