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Queen of Hebrew Music Shoshana Damari Gave Up on Family Life, but She Had No Other Choice

Damari, whose Yemenite roots were part of her appeal, touched the American dream, but preferred the Israeli one. Two men who spent four years making the documentary film 'Queen Shoshana' discuss what they did – and didn't – include





The late Israeli singer Shoshana Damari. 'If you make a film about a woman with urges, its true importance immediately gets distorted.' Credit: Sami Ben Gad



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Jan. 2, 2022 12:39 PM



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May, 1948: Zionist organizations were working feverishly to help tens of thousands of Jews seeking to immigrate to Israel who have been detained in camps in Cyprus, due to a Britain's longstanding policy of barring Jewish immigration. The immigrants, many from Poland and Romania, were living under difficult conditions in the camps and frequently suffered from hunger.

Delegations of Hebrew teachers were organized by the kibbutz movement and sent to the camps. A special committee for the Cyprus detainees collected clothes and shoes. The Joint Distribution Committee was tasked with handling culture and, in that capacity, they brought Shoshana Damari to Cyprus. She was only 25 years old, but the singer was already quite well-known.

"The sounds of 'Ani Mitsfat' and 'Kalaniot' can be heard everywhere, in every camp," the Israeli newspaper Davar wrote on May 28, 1948, referring to two of Damari's most popular songs. The would-be immigrants "kept the concert programs that we sent – 10,000 of them – and are memorizing the songs."

Alongside Hebrew-language hits that Damari sang, with music by Moshe Wilensky, she surprised the detainees by singing the traditional Yiddish folk song "Raisins and Almonds." According to reports in the Hebrew press, the song



was the highpoint of the show, and left the audience in tears. Damari, too, got choked up at times and had to pause her singing.





Kobi Farag, left, and Morris Ben-Mayor. 'We were seeking to show her complexity.' Credit: Hadas Parush

The above anecdote is featured in “Queen Shoshana,” a documentary film now being broadcast in two parts on Hot 8, and emphasizes the notion that Damari’s personal story is intertwined with the history of Zionism. But in addition to her status as the queen of Hebrew music, the documentary sheds light on less known aspects of her life – for instance, her career on the international stage, filling concert halls like Carnegie Hall and Radio City in New York, and her friendships with artists such as Nina Simone and Nat King Cole.

Damari is portrayed as a feminist and the film highlights her choice to focus on her career over her marriage and raising her daughter. Rare, fascinating and sometimes invasive archival footage shows the pain of her husband, Shlomo Bosmi, who served as Damari’s impresario when she was first starting out. But after her career took off, he became the man who waited for her in Israel and raised their daughter.

Kobi Farag and Morris Ben-Mayor worked on the film together with Shauly Melamed for almost four years. They dug through Damari’s personal estate and other archives. Her royal crown and glamorous dresses are still there, but her halo has faded a bit with the passage of time.

'She will be missed by the entire nation'

Shoshana Damari, diva of Israeli popular song, 1923–2006

Shoshana Damari, 'Queen of Israeli song,' dies at 83

Damari worked on behalf of the Zionist surprise in the years preceding and



modesty reigned. The pomp and glitter of her performances defied that culture. I asked Farag and Ben-Mayor to what extent did Damari view herself as exceptional, both in terms of her performance style and her talent.

Damari performing at the Tsavta theater in Tel Aviv. Credit: Ya'acov Sa'ar

"Shoshana indeed had some Hollywood traits," Ben-Mayor replied. "To me, she's kind of like Norma Desmond, the heroine of 'Sunset Boulevard.' And by 'Hollywood,' I also mean a kind of Hollywood darkness."

"I believe that when she started out, she didn't see herself as exceptional, because there were other singers of a similar type then, like Esther Gamlielit and Bracha Zefira. But later, by the time she was performing overseas, I assume she had already recognized her talent and that she was an exotic, exceptional figure."

Farag added "It's also connected to how much your environment makes you



Shlomo, her husband, recognized her talent and may also have helped her navigate her dream.”

“When she moved to the group Li La Lo, she was already exceptional amid that theatrical troupe. So even before she believed in herself, her early environment pushed her and polished her talent, and she began to believe that she was something special.”

המלכה שושנה - הטריילר הרשמי



Problems with Wilensky

One of the challenges Farag and Ben-Mayor had to cope with was the oral legend surrounding Damari’s relationships: She was rumored to be a woman who loved many men and had many affairs. The film hints at it, including clear hints that she had had a relationship with the composer [Moshe Wilensky](#), who wrote the music for many of her songs, though it never says so explicitly.

“As one of the interviewees says in the film, we’re all sexual creatures, we’re all human beings,” Ben-Mayor said. “And I would add, what’s wrong with that? I



“If you make a documentary film about a man who slept with 100 women,” Farag added, “he comes off as a macho man and it remains a film about, say, Serge Gainsbourg the artist. But if you make a film about a woman with urges, its true importance immediately gets distorted.”

“Our film doesn’t ignore it, but tries to keep it in proportion,” he continued. “Not everything people said about her is true, and we weren’t necessarily interested in investigating it all.”

Damari’s encounter with Wilensky seems like a meeting between an artist and her muse. On the other hand, it’s clear that he got tired of her, and after their creative ties ended, said harsh things about her. To what extent did she behave like a diva?

“When we began working on the film and mentioned it to friends and others, everyone asked whether we’d talk about her affairs, her rivalries, her feelings of superiority,” Ben-Mayor said. “And our answer was always that we’re actually seeking to show her complexity. Of course we heard all the gossip and every possible story.”



Farag added, “First and foremost, this was a professional relationship that led to Shoshana being what she was. But it also led to Wilensky being who he was. In a relationship, any relationship, there are cloudy days and sunny ones. They had disagreements, but there was also love and respect for what they had created together until their dying day.”

The film features nice archival footage about her encounters with artists like Nina Simone and Nat King Cole, truly the greats of the era. On American radio, they said she looked like Ava Gardner. But she never reached the top ranks. Did she miss out on the American dream?

“Perhaps, but as she says in the film, ‘I could have become an American singer with cleavage, but should I have abandoned my own lane? A lane I fought for all my life and for which I sacrificed my family and everything else?’ In the end, that was her choice, like all the other difficult choices she made,” Ben-Mayor said.

“Let’s not forget that in the United States, she was marketed as an Israeli national singer, as an exotic voice from a far-off land,” he continued. “I don’t see how it would have been possible to turn her into an American star.”

“She tasted quite a bit of the American dream,” Farag added, “but she apparently felt that she was very much from here and that they needed her here. This was a time when the state wasn’t taken for granted, and she was part of the story of the state in the making. She had a role to play. In 1948, she went to the United States for the first time and performed at fund-raising galas for the state. And she raised quite a bit of money. She didn’t feel American. She felt like a woman of the world, but also like an inseparable part of something that was happening here.”

Damari says she wouldn’t have given up her career to nurture her family and be a mother, which was a rare statement for the time. What kind of emotional price did she pay for that?



From 'Queen Shoshana': Damari and her daughter Navah. Credit: Sami Ben Gad

“We know that during the final years of her life, she spoke with her daughter, Navah, every day by phone,” Ben-Mayor said. “Sometimes these were loving conversations and sometimes they were painful, loaded ones.”

“I assume Shoshana searched her soul throughout her life and not just at the end. On the other hand, I don’t think she could have chosen otherwise. For her, the stage was the most important thing of all.”

“When you have a talent like that,” Farag added, “the world grabs hold of you. She apparently expected that those around her would understand her. Even her husband understood that there was something bigger than him there, that he couldn’t keep her close, he had to let her fly.”

The film is based on Damari’s enormous estate, among other things, but she remains a fairly private individual through it all. For instance, we get no inkling about her political views or how involved she was in writing the songs she sang. Did you leave out large parts of her life on purpose?

“Shoshana is no longer with us. Some questions were left on the cutting room

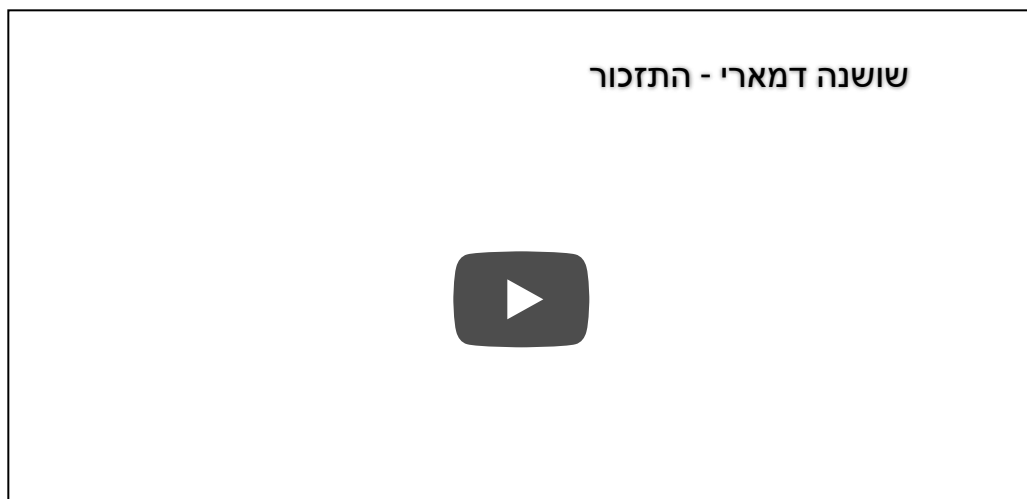


film, not life itself. We work with the information we manage to get and can't answer questions we don't have the answers to. When we opened the container where her estate is stored, we felt lucky as documentary filmmakers. On the other hand, there was a feeling of discomfort, because we were invading the privacy of someone who has passed on. So we also realized that we had to draw a line that we wouldn't cross."

The film doesn't say a word about Yaffa Yarkoni, her rival. Why not?

"The ostensible rivalry between Shoshana and Yaffa was dreamed up by the media and the gossip rags," Ben-Mayor said. "In real life, they felt great affection for one another and admired each other. In one clip that didn't make it into the film, from Damari's funeral at the Cameri Theater, there was a touching moment when Yaffa, already very old, laid a wreath of poppies on her coffin and cried." The gesture was a nod to Damari's song "Kalaniot," which means "poppies" in English.

"Part of what was very amusing about Shoshana was her regal arrogance, which was permeated with a lot of humor and self-awareness," Farag added. "She wasn't really threatened by Yaffa, but she sometimes liked to amuse herself with this rivalry. In their later years, they mainly enjoyed working together and laughing about it. Sometimes they did joint interviews. But the relationship wasn't really significant for Shoshana."



Idan Raichel is sorry

Damari won the Israel Prize and a long list of other prestigious awards, but as is evident in the film, her story had an unhappy ending. She was largely alone and forgotten, until she had a comeback, to some extent thanks to Israeli musician [Idan Raichel](#). I asked the filmmakers whether they view her as a tragic figure.

“I think she liked being alone,” Ben-Mayor replied. “She chose solitude, with all its difficulties. There were many people around her, including dear friends, but my feeling is that she preferred her own company.”

Did she suffer from racism because of her origins?

“We have to tell the truth; Shoshana didn’t suffer much from racism,” Farag said. “She came here during the early wave of Yemenite immigration, in the 1920s, straight to Rishon Letzion rather than to a transit camp like the later immigrants. Of course she lived in poverty, like everyone did at that time, but she wasn’t discriminated against.”

“Indeed, the opposite was true. People at that time saw Yemenite culture as reflecting the power of diversity and the ingathering of the exiles,” he added. “Her relationship with Wilensky created something local and Israeli that could only have happened in this land.”



A scene from 'Queen Shoshana' Credit: Sami Ben Gad

To what extent will her music stand the test of time? Contemporary music seems to have drifted very far from what she represented.

“At one of the last memorials for her,” Farag said, “Idan Raichel got up to speak and told Shoshana, at her grave, that he was sorry to say, but nobody in the younger generation listens to her songs any more, and that not all songs remain the way we hoped they would after we die. There were tears in his eyes when he added that if any young singer today makes it in Israel, it’s largely thanks to her and the path she paved, even if they don’t know it.”

Your films about Yossi Banai and Shoshana Damari, as well as “Photo Farag,” are largely based on archival material. This week, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation’s governing council announced that it was raising the price on the



“Israel’s history was largely documented by the only station we had here,” Farag answered. “Our parents paid the television and radio license fees for years, as we did, which makes us shareholders in the material. All Israelis are. The recently announced move to raise the corporation’s archives fee to 3,000 shekel (\$950) for the use of a single minute of archive footage destroys any possibility of people like us producing films that weren’t made for the corporation.”

“In other words, any film that uses archival material and isn’t funded by the corporation will have zero financial feasibility,” he added. “It seems like someone is trying to wipe out competition and preserve exclusivity. In our view, it’s a monopolistic move. The broadcasting corporation has millions that belong to the public, and it ought to find a way, and a price, that won’t undermine Israeli productions.”

Farag added that their films could not have been made under the new rules.

“We’re launching a battle and taking this opportunity to call on the communications minister and the culture minister to intervene, and, of course, on all creative artists to join us.”

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