



MIRI BEN-ARI: FROM THE MIDDLE EAST TO KANYE WEST

Miri Ben-Ari knows her look—a willowy frame with olive skin and a mess of soft brown curls—completely contradicts her energy. Musically, the Israeli-born, classically trained violinist wields a beautifully carved instrument, but she considers her technique “dirty”—channeling a rapper. In fact, one of her most recent collaborations included a high-profile stint writing and performing string arrangements for Kanye West’s *The College Dropout*. In conversation she exudes the directness of an army soldier (she served her mandatory two years in the Israeli army), intentionally bypassing her background and pushing the conversation toward music.

Still, examining her childhood in Ramat Gan, just outside Tel Aviv, proves crucial to understanding her affection for rap and hip-hop’s rawness. “[Israel is] very hip-hop as far as having real talk—being sincere, being direct, saying whatever the f— you want to say, the whole mentality. It doesn’t matter

how educated you are,” she explains. “I think it’s because of the struggle that my people went through. We have the worst situation, so we go through the military, which gives you a military head. Israel is rough... hardcore.”

Now she’s translating hip-hop in her own style with her solo effort, *The Hip-Hop Violinist*—a moniker given to her by former Fugee Wyclef Jean. With guests like West, Fabolous, Lil’ Mo and John Legend, Ben-Ari samples Middle Eastern-tinged rap, motivational R&B and even a portion of Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*. Ben-Ari is aware her spin on hip-hop will raise an eyebrow or two. Still, she’s relishing the challenge to musical barriers with consistent honesty. “It’s part of crossing the lines,” she says. “Whenever you’re real, if you say something that you’re not supposed to say, you don’t really follow protocol. And people are like ‘Did you just say that?’

“What I do is the same. ‘Did you just say that on a violin?’ Damn right I did.”

Cory Albertson