

CHICAGOAN SINGS THE BLUES IN ISRAEL

By HILLEL KUTTLE

DOV HAMMER strode off the stage in a plaza in central Tel Aviv on a warm autumn evening, spinning along the concrete from table to table while blowing his harmonica to patrons' delight.

His Blues Rebels band mates—a guitarist, a bass guitarist and a drummer—kept the beat going in his temporary absence that included riffs from the decidedly un-blues-like Beatles songs “Can’t Buy Me Love” and “Get Back.”

With a kick of the heels, Hammer rejoined them on stage and returned his vocals to the mix.

Hammer's embrace of the genre has helped to spread the blues gospel in Israel. At the fifth annual Tel Aviv Blues Festival in late November, he'll play two concerts and present a workshop about harmonica playing.

For the 50-year old Hammer, a Wilmette native who lives in central Tel Aviv with his wife and three daughters, it's a musical love that took root when, at age 12, he saw the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers* and immediately purchased the soundtrack.

As a teenager, Hammer would head from his family's Jerusalem apartment to the city's downtown to take in the music played by American and Canadian immigrants on the Ben-Yehuda Street pedestrian mall, a hodgepodge of country, blues, and classic rock.

Back then, Hammer—whose parents moved with their five children to Israel when he was 7—enjoyed listening to his older sister's Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Otis Redding records. He played guitar but dropped it for the harmonica, which he taught himself. Toronto native Ted Cooper, a guitarist, let Hammer perform with him on Ben-Yehuda Street—“that was going to school for me,” Hammer said—and their collaboration continued for four years.

Hammer has worked since 1993 as a technical director for the Israel Educational Television network, and while music didn't become his career, neither has it left him.



Dov Hammer, center, performing with his band Blues Rebels in Tel Aviv earlier this fall. Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler.

He performs frequently throughout Israel and abroad, playing both classic, Deep South blues and a variation that draws on the Israeli experience.

With blues, “the hard part is getting the feel,” the pony-tailed Hammer told *JUF News* over coffee three hours before the Tel Aviv concert. “As long as you're in the right key and playing the right chords, you can improvise. Blues is like a framework. That's why blues and jazz musicians can jam.”

“There's something about it that grabbed me so strongly, that's very, very honest,” he continued. “The feel is so deep. Muddy Waters said, ‘It's easy to play, but it's hard to play well.’”

Waters, a Chicagoan, was one of several influences from Hammer's native land and city.

“I've always been attracted to that culture,” he said. “As a kid, I read about the Civil War, about Martin Luther King. In Chicago, all my favorite athletes were black: [the Cubs'] Billy Williams and Fer-

guson Jenkins.”

In June, Hammer was back to attend the Chicago Blues Festival because, he explained, “I had to get my fix.” Other times, he's gotten the fix in Memphis, New Orleans, and Mississippi.

Israel's blues circle is small, but it's growing, thanks largely to Hammer, said Yamit Hagar, the Tel Aviv festival's founder.

“His playing is the most important thing that's advanced the blues scene here,” she said.

In concerts abroad, Hammer wears Tel Aviv Blues Festival t-shirts—he wore one for the *JUF News* interview, too—and talks up Israel's blues scene, which lead foreign musicians to contact her to seek concert dates, said Hagar, a former hi-tech professional who works as a music producer.

A modest festival once confined to Tel Aviv has spread this year to 50 events in more than 20 clubs, all the way to Mitzpe Ramon in the Negev and Zichron Yaakov in the north, she said, with admission free at half of the events.

EB Davis, an Arkansas- and Memphis-raised vocalist and harmonica player who lives in Berlin, said he's not surprised that Israel has a blues scene.

“It reinforces my knowledge about the impact that blues still has around the world,” said Davis, who will perform in two of the festival's shows, although not with Hammer. “You find some commonality in the blues world, no matter where you go. It has a core.”

Hammer observed that Americans will stick with favored bands and attend their concerts at every opportunity, while Israelis “always want to hear something new. It's a challenge.”

One Israeli who seems to upend Hammer's theory is Moti Shmushkevich, who came to the Tel Aviv plaza show with his adult son Yaniv. Residents of Netanya, a 20-minute drive north, they learned of the event at the last minute and made a beeline for the concert, which was free. Shmushkevich said he'd attend all of Hammer's appearances and would gladly pay admission.



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The band plays blues “on an international level,” he opined. “There's a national pride that we have here in Israel such an excellent group.”

Cooper, who moved back to Toronto in the early 1990s, travels to Israel annually. The tables are now turned, with Cooper performing in Hammer's bands.

“Every time I come back to Israel to play, I'm amazed how much better he gets,” said Cooper. “We have such great communication from playing together.” ■

Hillel Kuttler is an award-winning editor/writer for companies, non-profit organizations, and many of America's leading publications. His feature articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.