

## The Story of Shabi Katzir:

# Back to Ladino Roots

**In his new upcoming CD: "Canticas Que Me Canto Mi Madre" or "Songs which My Mother Sang to Me," Katzir expresses the Unique soul of the Ladino music.**



Shabi Katzir: Ladino is my soul.

by Gad Nahshon

"One day I woke up and said to myself: I must go back to my roots. In reality: I must go back time and again to my old mother in Israel. I must listen to her stories and songs, I must, through her, link myself to our legacy, to our unique heritage. Sad to say, the old generation passed away, like my father. And the younger generation does not link itself to the old traditions. My heritage, my old culture is the Ladino culture, the Ladino language. I was raised as a child on this culture and now I understand that the mission is to preserve it, to give it new wings. For me, my mother is not only a mother, but a tower of the Ladino culture and customs" said Shabi Katzir.

Shabi Katzir is a well known Israeli-American singer. He had a great career in Israel: shows, concerts, a T.V. star, and a recording

artist. Today he lives with his family in the U.S.A. He sings, records, tours the U.S.A. Jewish communities, performs for the State of Israel and he is also connected to A.B.C. and a friend of many media stars or actors, from Peter Jennings to Elliot Gould, for example.

Shabi tells me his life story: "I was born in Bulgaria. My original family name is Alkozer. My family tree goes back to Spain, to the city of Toledo. Like many Bulgarian Jews, I am Sephardic Israeli and my culture is the Ladino one.

During the second World War, my father was sent to a labor camp. But he survived. Most of the Bulgarian Jews survived the Holocaust. In 1949, my family made Alyiah. Our life in Israel was very hard. We lived in a tent. Later we settled in Kfar Aharon: all the villagers were Bulgarian or Turkish Jews. The ruling culture was of

course the Ladino. We spoke Ladino, our religious services were held in Ladino, our Hagada was in Ladino. But there was a process of erosion. We wanted to be Israelis or real Sabras."

Shabi Katzir loved music. And he decided to develop it into a professional career. He studies music with great teachers such as Itshak Edel. Later he started to perform in concerts. But his breakthrough came when he established, with other singers, a vocal group called: "The Brothers and the Sisters." This group turned out to be a great success story: concerts, radio, T.V. Many of its songs became hits: "Our original idea was to sing the 'Beatles' songs but we became a group which recorded the best of the Israeli songs. We were very, very popular" said Shabi Katzir. Later he came to America and started to build for himself a new American career. Today Shabi Katzir is dedicating his musical career to the Ladino culture.

Since he is a singer, of course, he sings and records the best of the Ladino songs. He also promises to introduce his audience to Ladino songs which are not known to the public. In his new upcoming CD: "Canticas que me canto mi madre" or: "Songs which my mother sang to me," Katzir expresses the unique soul of the Ladino music. "Canticas" is also the title of his special concert or show, the best of the Ladino songs. The show that can be booked by calling 732-390-1461 or 212-598-0678 is based, also, on the performance of another Ladino singer, Ofri Eliaz, a singer and also a voice teacher in Manhattan. Eliaz has a long experience in performing with the Sahar Ensemble, Yoavlim and many other groups. She has experience in radio communication and acting. Eliaz also has a strong commitment to preserve the best of the Ladino culture.

For many years the Ladino culture has been forgotten in Israel and abroad, but in the last two decades one can see a new revival: many tend to go back to their Ladino roots. The Ladino is the culture of those Jews who were expelled in 1492 from Spain, but they carried their heritage. Many Jews died when looking for a new host country. Many were saved and settled in countries such as Tur-

key. Their culture did not disappear. You could find it in the Balkans or in North Africa. You can find it even in this country. Jews from Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey brought it to America at the beginning of this century. They established communities, synagogues, and even two major newspapers in Ladino such as La America and La Verita. The Jews here used to relate to these Ladino Sephardic Jews as "the Turkinos." But the young generation decided to be Americans. Period.

But there is a revival of the Ladino culture all over the world, a strong moral call to preserve it, to keep this heritage alive. Yeshiva University, "The Shephardic House" in Manhattan, leaders such as Rabbi Marc Angel of



Ofri Eliaz

"Shearit Israel" and Dr. Janice Ovavdia are doing anything to preserve this heritage. In Spain, the Spanish government itself is helping to preserve and develop this unique culture. They help to rise the conscience of the Ladino culture. And in Israel, recently, the Israeli Knesset, by a law, established the Israeli National Authority for the Ladino culture.

"I would like, as a child of a Ladino family, and as a singer, first to integrate myself into this new revival and, second, to contribute, by my performances, shows and recordings, to the success of this Shephardic-Jewish revival. It is an authentic Sephardic soul music. We must preserve it. This is a moral obligation, especially, for people like me whose roots go back to Toledo, Spain," remarked Shabi Katzir.