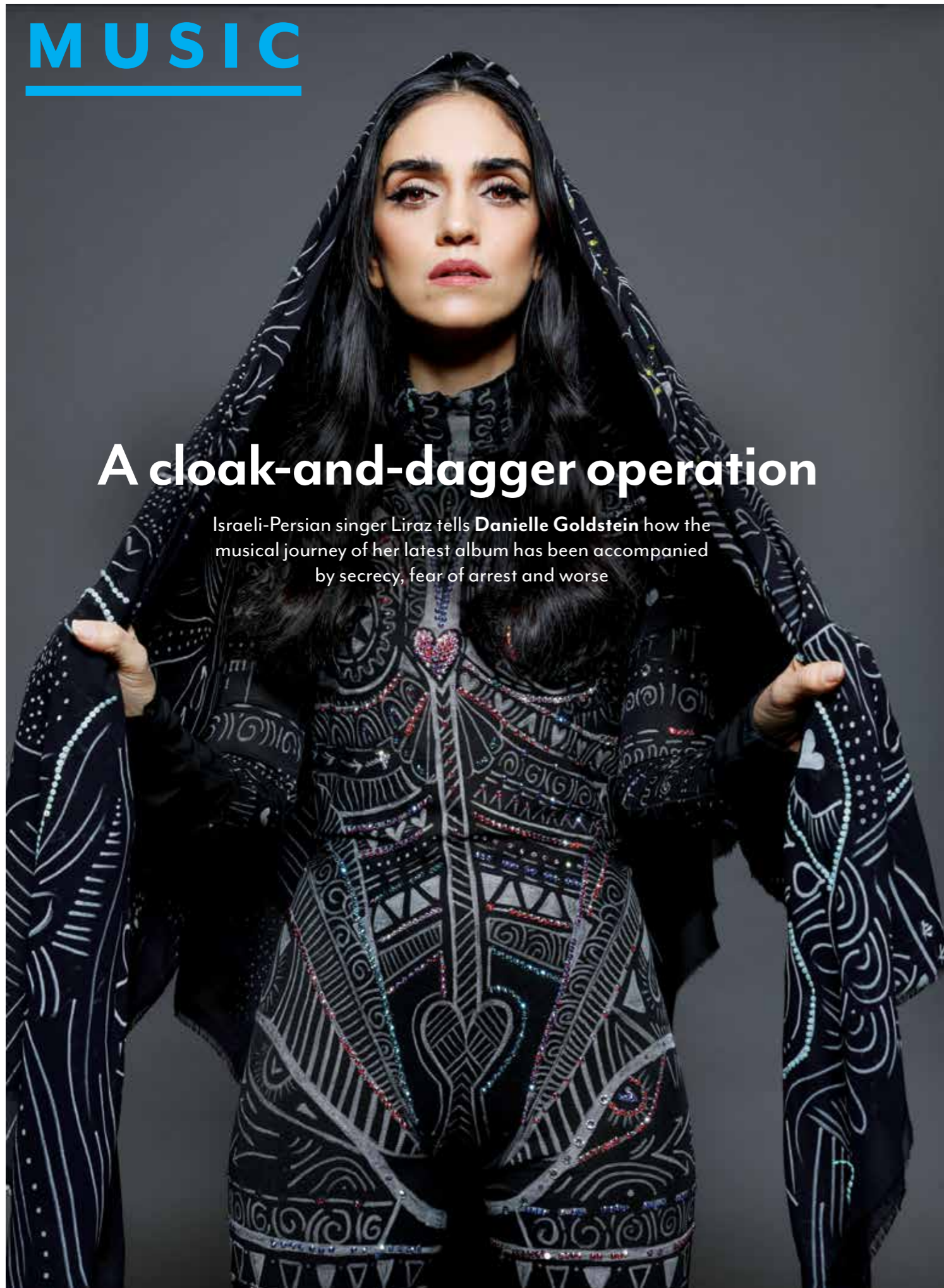


A cloak-and-dagger operation

Israeli-Persian singer Liraz tells **Danielle Goldstein** how the musical journey of her latest album has been accompanied by secrecy, fear of arrest and worse



Around midday on Thursday 25 June, 2020, an explosion erupted at an Iranian military base just 30km from Tehran. Five days later, another detonation occurred, this time in the centre of the Iranian capital. Nine more blasts followed over the next month and during this time, Israeli-Persian musician Liraz Charhi remained fraught. She was in Tel Aviv with no word from the artists she'd teamed up with in Iran. "I thought they were dead," she admits. As it happens, the initial explosion caused a blackout and, after two weeks of radio silence, she and her collaborators were able to continue. The cause of the explosions has never been determined, but some analysts have speculated that they were the result of an Israeli cyberattack.

When she set out to make her latest album *Zan*, Liraz knew how dangerous it was for her, an Israeli, to communicate with musicians from Iran. "Israel and Iran are not living in peace...Iranian people aren't allowed to visit Israel and Israelis can't visit Iran. If Iranians contact Israelis, they will go to jail."

This oppression is just one in a long list that compelled Liraz to seek out brave Iranian artists for the project. They communicated in secret via telegram and other under-the-radar methods, frequently changing pseudonyms. Another driving force behind the record is the injustice that has haunted generations of her family, who had to hide their Jewishness in Iran or leave. They chose to leave.

"Lots of family members left for Israel," explains Liraz. "They have always been Zionists and each one of them wanted to fight for their freedom. My grandmother wanted to sing, which she was not allowed to do even before the revolution [of 1979], my parents were teachers and they wanted to have a good influence in Israel. They were not aware that they would never go back. Sometimes I ask my mother, 'If you had known you would never see Iran again, would you still leave?' She always says no."

Brought up in the quiet outskirts of Ramla, a city in central Israel, Liraz got a culture shock at age six when her family moved to bustling Ramat Hasharon, just 20 minutes north of Tel Aviv. "I was dark-skinned and in Ramla people are like that, they're from Yemen, Iraq and Iran." Ramla has a high proportion of Jewish immigrants from other Middle Eastern countries and Pakistan. "Then all of a sudden, I went to a city where most people were Ashkenazi and white... I really felt the difference."

For most of her life, Liraz says that she's never been clear on who she is. "I never felt that I belonged to Israel fully and of course I didn't belong to Iran, because I didn't know it. All I knew were the stories of my family, who'd arrived from Tehran back in the 60s and 70s. My parents had thick Iranian accents and were struggling

to be Israelis when Israel itself was a very young country. I didn't know what I should be learning – the lullaby of my mother's tongue? Or the Israeli lullaby that she's trying to sing, but I know she isn't singing correctly? At some point I got sad and confused by the fact that I felt foreign in my own country, so I made an agreement with my teenage self not to be Iranian."

Such strong denial left an emotional hole in her heart, which she tried to ignore while pursuing a career in acting and music. She starred in movies including *Turn Left at the End of the World* (2004), *Fair Game* (2010) and *A Late Quartet* (2012) alongside Philip Seymour Hoffman, and released two albums in Hebrew: *LIRAZ* (2005) and *Only You Allowed* (2012). "I got a good agent and manager in Los Angeles and started to work between there and Israel, which was an incredibly beautiful life, but this hole in my heart got bigger because I was so close to Iranian culture."

Having connected with relatives in LA – or "Tehrangeles" as it's dubbed by its Iranian community – Liraz realised there was a whole world she'd been missing out on. "In LA, for the first time I could actually sense an Iran that I'd never known. I went to the food markets and restaurants, I explored the Iranian neighbourhoods. I found out there is a long street with lots of music shops and I started to dig in and collect music by Iranian idols of the 70s." The pull of her heritage was so powerful that one day she decided to quit her day job. "I was going to four or five auditions daily and one day I just called my manager and said: 'I'm not going. I don't want to be in a room full of beautiful actors all wanting the same role. It's not fulfilling.' It was at that point that I decided to sing in Farsi. It happened like a car crash. Boom!"

Now she embraces her Persian roots, from the music to the food to traditions. Though she considers herself "spiritually" Jewish, rather than religiously, she says she lights Shabbat candles, bakes challah with her two daughters, and fasts on Yom Kippur. "I love the after-fasting drink of Iranian herbs called *falode*. It's made with very thin noodles [vermicelli] and *golab* [rose water]." She's also returned to some acting, playing a Farsi-speaking Mossad operative in Apple TV's recent spy drama, *Tehran* (2020). In 2017 Liraz released her first Farsi album, *Naz* (an Iranian word to describe a polite and timid woman).

Naz comprises 10 tracks, nine of which are covers of pre-revolution songs by Iranian artists she loves, such as Googoosh



and Ramesh. "It was my first idea for the Iranian world," says Liraz, "and I went into it very cautiously, asking all the time, am I doing the right thing?" When it came to *Zan*, her second album (released in late 2020) confidence wasn't an issue. If anything,

buoyed in the eighth month of her second pregnancy, she had a fierce certitude. "Furiously frustrated and fat", she scrawled down lyrics that would become the LP's opener, 'Zan Bezan'. "Zan is woman," she says, "and *bezan* has three meanings: 'sing', 'woman sing' and 'bring it on'. I recorded this and said: 'I'm going to release it and ask Iranian musicians to work with me.'"

So began her *Zan* journey: an organic unravelling with no predetermined end. "This project is not about my art and dreams. I have to tell the story of my grandmother and of the muted Iranian women." The result is a unique mix of Persian tradition and Western mainstream, with added grinding synth. "Everyone notes the synthesizers," laughs Liraz. "It took us so

long to build that specific sound, because I wanted it to be the same one that annoyed me [as a child] when I went to weddings and parties. I used to hate it and suddenly I love it and want to play it loud."

Another popular sound from the Middle East, that of the boxed zither (*qanun* in Persian), runs throughout the album, although you wouldn't know it seeing Liraz's live set-up, which is a modern guitar-drums-keyboard affair. No doubt this nods to her love of American and UK artists, such as Peter Gabriel, Joni Mitchell and Madonna, all of whom she discovered via the record shop near her childhood home. "There were days I missed school just to visit," she smiles. *Zan* also emanates a joyful triumph that'll have you chanting along even if you don't know the words.

"I just did what my heart needed to," she says honestly. "Life is short and I wanted to be something that I believed I could be. In Hebrew we say *tikkun* – to fix." And with *Zan*, Liraz is encouraging listeners to do the same, to follow their hearts. "Breaking walls and fighting for freedom is not something we should wait for."

She shares a news story about a group of women in Iran who protest by singing in public spaces and photographing themselves holding headscarves high. "Sing about it, write about it," she enthuses. "It doesn't have to be against the law, or violent, it just has to be done with pure freedom." ■

Zan is out now. Visit fb.com/LirazOfficial for info.

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