

## Piamenta Plunges into the Mainstream

### Yossi Piamenta, Orthodox guitar virtuoso, snares Jimi Hendrix's old producer

By Ben Smith

After almost two decades on the simcha circuit, guitarist Yossi Piamenta is moving beyond the world of Jewish music: he's just begun work on a new album at Jimi Hendrix's own Electric Lady Studios with Hendrix's old producer, Eddie Kramer. Publications from the Village Voice to Time magazine had been "discovering" the bearded, bespectacled, and yarmulked guitarist for years, but since his move to mainstream New York venues like Wetlands and Tramps, he's become an unlikely celebrity, a fusion guitarist with a devoted following who has begun to resent the media moniker, "the Hasidic Hendrix." He may be getting sick of the comparisons with Jimi, but as he recently told New Voices, "Hendrix was my guitar teacher, really."

Piamenta grew up in 1960s Jerusalem, listening to the music of his Sephardic family, of his Arab neighbors, and of the exploding rock and roll scene. He was the kind of Jimi Hendrix aficionado who knew the name Eddie Kramer (Hendrix's producer), and he "came to America having in mind to meet Eddie Kramer. Kramer produced Hendrix, who was my hero," Piamenta said, adding that he always felt that if he ever did anything big time, he would "like Eddie Kramer to do it." Piamenta had heard from a friend that Kramer, who also worked with Piamenta favorites Kiss and Led Zeppelin, was still active; the friend told Piamenta that Kramer "was by me for Shabbos" and that he was interested. Five years passed before Piamenta felt ready to court a major label with a professionally produced album. He mentioned his hopes of working with Kramer to his managers. The good people at Yidstock Ventures laughed. "They told me, 'you know how the big shark in the sea eat the small fish, that's how he will eat you—he's real big time.'" Piamenta was beginning to give up hope when this August, sheer luck brought Piamenta and Kramer together. Piamenta and his band, the Mizrahi Rockers, were gearing up for the "First Catskills Rave," an all-night party to be held at the venerable Alladin Hotel. Both local and national media loved the image of Orthodox boys leaping into the "moishe pit," and the week preceding the show brought Piamenta a new level of TV and print exposure. Eddie Kramer caught Piamenta on a Fox morning show and called the "Piamenta Hotline" that flashed across the screen. At the time, the producer was feeling ready to re-enter his old haunt, Jimi Hendrix's original Electric Lady Studios on West 8th Street in Manhattan, and he was looking around for a musician. Kramer and the Piamenta band were in the studio together within two weeks, and Piamenta is ecstatic about the arrangement: Kramer is "a nice guy, a serious producer—he knows what he's doing; he came to listen and what he had to say was right on the money. It's only a nice thing, on the side, that he's a Jew, because I really wanted him for his artistic quality," he said. How does Piamenta explain his success? "Jerusalem—that's the key to the whole thing," Piamenta told New Voices. "It's a

young country—fifty years old—the Jewish population in Israel is fresh and they came from all over the world.” The young Piamenta had access “to all the cultures that exist; being Israeli you know on one scan of the radio you could hear Arabic music, religious music, rock and roll, British music, European, Mediterranean, African music—you could hear everything.” In Jerusalem, “I always felt like a native,” Piamenta said. And well he should: Piamenta’s family has been in Jerusalem since the Spanish Inquisition. He was a local musician when jazz great Stan Getz heard his virtuosity and gave Piamenta his big break. He followed Getz to America in 1976, toured with him, and stayed in his house. “New York,” said Piamenta, is “a tough city. Jerusalem gets your spirit up; New York is more materialistic.” But ironically, Piamenta had to leave the Promised Land to find religion. Just before his first flight to New York, Piamenta told New Voices, he searched his predominantly secular childhood home for a memento of his life in Jerusalem. In the back of a closet, he came across the tefillin his grandfather had given him for his bar mitzvah. Something clicked, and “that was my first step into Judaism.” Not long after his arrival, Piamenta married an Israeli cousin living in Florida and began keeping the Sabbath. In New York, Piamenta soon met the charismatic Chasidic leader, the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson. The Rebbe “gave me more yiddishkeit than any other man in the world. Many times, if I had a major question I would write to him.” Piamenta channeled his skills into traditional Chasidic music and performed for the Rebbe. “I would always follow his latest instructions—I considered myself to be very close with him,” he said. But Piamenta never became a Chasid; he attends a Syrian shul in Brooklyn and keeps Jerusalem Sephardic customs at home. Philosophically, he’s unaffiliated: “I belong to the Torah, to the Jewish people. . . . It’s good enough to be an observant Jew. To me all the Jews are the same, as any Jew, as any person, all the people.” The 1970s in this country may have debased the word “fusion,” but Piamenta’s music is almost impossible to classify without it. His first purely secular album, this year’s instrumental *Strings of My Heart*, mixes a bluesy feel with Sephardic melodies and blends jazz with guitar-driven rock. “But really, rock and roll—the cutting edge of the late sixties to early seventies—was where I grew up,” Piamenta said. When he became religious, Piamenta limited himself to playing traditional Jewish music. But he continued listening to his favorite secular bands: Metallica and Pink Floyd, Pearl Jam, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. “I watch MTV, I watch VH1—I think I am very much in tune,” he added. Piamenta has no regrets about his years playing Jewish music, but he’s happy that “now for the first time I’m going out with my own music.” This October 19 at Tramps, he’ll be playing “not necessarily to a Jewish audience, just for whoever loves music.” So far, Piamenta has enjoyed the cultural mixing and mild celebrity that his foray into the mainstream has brought. Now his devoted Orthodox audiences in tzitzit (fringed undergarments resembling a tallit worn by religious men) and long skirts mingle with secular hipsters at well-known clubs. Piamenta himself just flew out to Los Angeles for a week to do his part for the Chabad telethon. But as long as he was in the neighborhood, he made a guest appearance on the new Roseanne Barr show.

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