

West Coast to the West Bank

Yuri Lane says give beats a chance
Published in *Heeb* magazine

By Anastasia Goodstein

If you ever meet Yuri Lane, prepare to be beatboxed – He’s a left coast Jewish version of legends like Doug E. Fresh and Buffy from the Fat Boys. A San Francisco native, Yuri recently performed a series called “Soundtrack City,” a beatbox journey through his hometown, complete with bike messengers, dot comers, and ravers. He has plans to beatbox his way across Israel and the West Back this summer.

Heeb: You discovered your talent in sixth grade math class. What’s the story?

Yuri: I started making sounds when I picked up my first toy. I was making sound effects and character voices for all my G.I. Joe figures and dolls. Sixth grade math – I wasn’t good at math – so I was fooling around, beatboxing, and the teacher said, “Turn that radio off.” That moment I realized I had something. I was in a little breakdance crew and tried to repeat the sounds of the songs that I would hear on the radio. And then I started doing multiphonic sounds by humming tunes, like the theme song from Gilligan’s Island.

How did you choose the characters and scenes in your recent show?

Living in San Francisco all my life and taking public transportation. I based the characters on friends and on the conversations I would overhear. Every time I got on a bus or walk down the street, it’s really a character study. A character study of sound.

How have you addressed the Mideast conflict through beatboxing?

I’ve beatboxed my experiences traveling in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Ramallah. My inspiration was a trip I took to Bir Ziet to bring clothing to relatives of local Palestinians. When I was in the West Bank, I was shocked at the big disgusting settlements high atop Palestinian cities. I tired to imagine myself as a Palestinian, what it would be like to live below a military-protected housing settlement. I got a sense of Palestinian rage towards the settlers. And then going to Ramallah and seeing a Palestinian hurling a rock, and then turning to see an Israeli soldier pointing a gun, and seeing the fear on both sides. The fear of a 19-year-old Israeli officer – he’s been given orders, his heart is beating, he’s freaked out. When we went through the checkpoints, I understood the anger people feel at being so restricted in moving from place to place. But then I read about suicide bombing after suicide bombing and ask myself, imagine if the border was open? How many more willing bombers would enter Israel to kill innocent Jews? The only way I can respond to this conflict is through performance.

How did people respond to this performance?

I've had Palestinians come up to me and say, "That's what it's like," and I've had Israelis come up and say, "That's what it's like." I did a young Jewish professional meeting at a temple. Certain people loved it and certain people didn't, because of their political stance, but even they were able to accept it as a performance. Hopefully it just makes people think.

What do you plan to do in Israel this summer?

I want to travel to Israel to help bridge peace through beatbox, but the chances of that trip are becoming more difficult each day. I don't know how much more bleak it can get, how much more awful. But I think it's a great way to show that even with all this bloodshed, there are so many things that the two cultures have in common. The hospitality, the same prophets, the fiery personalities. Sharing essentially the same God. I try to get rid of all the political statements and just do it through sounds and movement. Israel is not going anywhere, and the Palestinians aren't going anywhere, so maybe it both listen to the sounds of the Middle East from a peace-loving Haight Ashbury hip-hop Jew, they can laugh and cry together and see some light at the end of thousands of years of asking can we live together in peace?