

## A Singer's Journey: Rediscovering my roots through Sephardic Song

I was born in Casablanca of Judeo-Spanish heritage on my mother's side and Moroccan Jewish on my father's. My family was also deeply influenced by French culture (Morocco was a French protectorate from 1911 to 1956) and by Argentinean culture, my great grandfather having immigrated to Buenos Aires in the early 1920s.

My Judeo-Spanish roots, however, were the more powerful and resilient. Though dormant for many years, growing up in Casablanca, Paris and New York, they began to push through my multicultural surface and blossomed in song - Sephardic song!

The music became a means to reassert my heritage. In learning and arranging for guitar, voices and percussion the vast repertoire of hauntingly beautiful Sephardic melodies and verses, I felt a joy and fullness of purpose that made the musical experience profound and complete. These songs spoke to me in the hidden language of unconscious and deeply emotional experiences.

In the words of my friend, Bob Ore Abitbol, a fellow Sepharad, poet and philosopher, whose itinerant life has mirrored my own:

On est toujours de son pays  
Quoi que l'on dise, quoi que l'on fasse  
On traîne toujours sa nostalgie,  
Ou que l'on vive ou que l'on passe,  
Jamais, jamais ça ne s'oublie  
On est toujours de son pays.  
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We are always from one's own country  
Whatever we say, whatever we do  
Our nostalgia follows us  
Wherever we go  
It is never, never forgotten  
We are always from one's own country.

Remembering and reconnecting to one's "own country" is a powerful human need. You find that your deepest voice can harmonize with other voices that share something of your past, something of your cultural soil. Having spent over 10 years performing opera with companies throughout the United States, it has given me a special pleasure to immerse myself in the music of my ancestors. I have embraced this oral tradition and have added my own compositions to it. It has been a magical gift in my life.

Following many of my concerts, I am often pulled aside by fellow Sephardim in their 70's, 80's and 90's from all over the Sephardic Diaspora, who ask me to write down the words and music to songs they have been singing all their lives and want passed on for posterity. I recently spent an afternoon with a 94 year old woman from Turkey who knew many songs I had never heard of, and I know many hundreds of songs, often 3 or 4 melodies to the same text, or many texts to the same melody. She even knew verses to that old warhorse "Los Bilbilicos" which were totally new to me. A few years ago, I was also given the Ladino words to the *Hatikvah* (written for the 1957 Zionist Congress in Israel) by a very special friend, Rebecca Levy, who spent the last years of her life at the Menorah Home for the Aged in Brooklyn, New York. Such experiences have not only given me great personal satisfaction but have also served to deepen my commitment to preserving Sephardic culture.

This, however, has been only the beginning of a much more profound realization that while the Jewish cultural tapestry is infinitely varied, our Judaism binds us all as one people. In much the same way that a beautiful melody binds a secular and religious text. The well known *Shalom Alechem* Shabbat prayer is sung to the same tune as the most famous of Sephardic songs, *Cuando El Rey Nimrod*, celebrating the birth of our father Abraham. The same is true for the prayer *Tsur Mishelo* which is also the melody for one of the most poignant Sephardic love songs ever written, *Los Bilbilicos*. Conversely, an *Adon Olam* can be sung by congregations in Casablanca, Caracas or Curaçao, to musical styles as diverse as our brothers and sisters who live there. It has become one of my life's greatest blessings – and what makes my Judaism most meaningful – to be able to share the many treasures of Sephardic song with audiences throughout the world. But finally, the message and the music transcend their origin and the boundaries become more permeable as we allow others into our world and take a journey into theirs.

This collection of Sephardic songs represents but a small fragment of a vast and infinitely diverse repertoire. The songs chosen for this volume are some of my personal favorites which I have been performing and recording professionally since 1991. The chords, tempo markings and verses I chose to include are simply my take on this material. It is my hope that these songs will inspire you to delve further into a unique and deeply rewarding cultural legacy. – G.E.

**Gerard Edery** (singer/guitarist/composer/recording artist) was born in Casablanca and raised in Paris and New York City, speaking several languages throughout his childhood while absorbing a variety of musical traditions spanning three continents. Trained as a classical baritone at The Manhattan School of Music, he has sung more than 30 roles with opera companies in the United States. Mr. Edery is also a cantorial soloist for The Village Temple in New York City and is a frequent guest at Synagogues and Jewish Community Centers throughout the United States and Canada. Considered one of the leading interpreters of Sephardic Song, he has been honored with the Sephardic Musical Heritage Award and has received a Meet the Composer grant for his original songs. His musical, *Song of the Turtledove*, co-written with Noa Ain, was presented by the Premieres Festival at Lincoln Center. Mr. Edery performs regularly with *The Sons of Sepharad*, *The Ivory Consort*, *The Gerard Edery Ensemble* and with storyteller Peninnah Schram, in *The Minstrel and the Storyteller*.

Gerard Edery has been featured in major concert halls and festivals in the United States, Canada, Europe, the Far East, Israel, Morocco and Mexico. He has performed at the United Nations in New York City and the Palais des Nations in Geneva, The Smithsonian Institute, The Library of Congress, The Holocaust Museum, Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, The Cervantino International Festival in Mexico, The Fez International Festival of Sacred Music in Morocco, and at Lincoln Center, Alice Tully Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, The Jewish Museum and The Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, to name a few. Mr. Edery is a prolific recording artist and has released ten CDs on the Sefarad Records label.