

The Megira Mystery

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Charlie Megira died not once but twice for his art. This is the story of an Israeli artist who went his own way, created a mythical character and broke down along the way.

On November 5, 2016, Charlie Megira was found dead in his apartment in Berlin. He left behind his wife and son Adrian, who was then four and a half years old. Charlie - or Gabi Abudraham, his actual name - was 44 years old when he lost the battle against his inner demons. Apparently he fought to the very end. When Gabi was found, his guitar was plugged into the amplifier and all the effects were on. Was it even Gabi who died in that apartment? Or had Charlie killed Gabi several years earlier? Perhaps this was just "the last performance of Charlie Megira" as his friend Boaz Goldberg put it at the end of his fragmented documentary Tomorrow's Gone - which is currently screening at film festivals. An enticing portrait of a fragile man, friendship and Rock-n-Roll.

A sound from another planet

It was my friend Rasmus who introduced me to Charlie Megira. Rasmus only likes strange things and normally comes up with strange videos to show me. This time it was Charlie Megira & The Bet She'an Valley Hillbillies performing the song Turn Around at a festival in Berlin. It was unusual, among the most remarkable things I have ever seen or heard. Like a sound from another planet. It was David Lynch's dreams of Elvis and Roy Orbison's lost son. A fair for bastards and stray dogs. I have never ever heard anything that sounded so broken and healing at the same time. Nor have I ever heard music that is so similar to its influences, yet so different from them at the same time.

When I got home, I decided to find out everything there was to know about Charlie Megira, and to buy all his music that I could get my hands on. But the problem was that he did not exist on the internet except for that video Rasmus showed me. Ok I'm exaggerating a bit for the sake of the story, but it's actually not that far from the truth. After spending a few days navigating the internet in search of information about the mystery man from Israel, I discovered the following: an old Bandcamp page with an option to download songs (no information on respective albums whatsoever); A blog post stating that he had died (nothing about how); And a vinyl record on Discogs on sale for SEK 3,000. That was basically it.

It was earlier this year that the record label The Numero Group started releasing some of Megira's albums digitally. Albums which were previously mainly released on CD-R and

distributed at live gigs. Numero Group has been very helpful in my quest for answers regarding the mystery of Megira. This way, I also got in contact with musician and director Boaz Goldberg. Boaz and Megira were once good friends, and now he's made a documentary about Charlie Megira. The film recently premiered at the Docaviv film festival in Tel Aviv, where it was positively received, and I hope we get a chance to see it here at the Stockholm Film Festival as well.



Photo: Boaz Goldberg

Chaotic Indie scene

Gabi Abudraham was born in Beit She'an, Israel, on October 10th, 1972. In his film, Boaz Goldberg says that he didn't know much about Gabi when they first met in 1995. He only knew - according to rumors - that Charlie never held a guitar until he was 20, that he served as a military cook and barber, and that he attended boarding school.

In Tel Aviv at the time, Megira played in a band called The Shnek, and Goldberg was a bass player in Knack Pop, a band Charlie loved. During one of The Shnek's gigs, Charlie got hit by a bottle thrown at his head, and continued playing until he fainted, which ended the gig abruptly. Goldberg says it was during this time that Gabi began to develop a character reminiscent of

Roberto Benigni in a Jim Jarmusch film, as a way to survive the harsh environment of Tel Aviv's indie scene in the mid-1990s.

When The Shnek dissolved, Gabi disappeared for several months, and he and Boaz lost contact (the first of several times). When Gabi returned, he had a CD-R titled Da Abtomatic Meisterzinger Mambo Chic by Charlie Megira. The character Charlie Megira was born and the ball was now rolling.



Photo: Courtney Chavanell

"His guitar playing sounded like a flower"

When I ask Goldberg about Megira's guitar technique, he replies that Megira's story is like the legend of Robert Johnson, who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for becoming the world's best blues guitarist.

If you just listen to Golgotha Rock, the introductory song on the solo debut album from 2001, it's enough to understand what Goldberg means by that. Megira's haunting, slightly creepy guitar playing is so original and stylish that it's hard to believe it comes from someone who started playing at the age of 20.

- No one played like Megira! His guitar playing sounded like a flower. You know: saturated colors, a shape that feels sculpted and complex, and at the bottom - thorns reminding us of its roots. In this case, punk, garage, dirty and dangerous Rock'n'Roll.

But Charlie's music was so incredibly bursting with influences of everything from dirty rock to jazz, shoegaze, ambient and everything between heaven and earth. How did he connect with all this music? Was he a collector, or just a sponge who heard something once and was immediately able to channel it?

- Charlie was not only an incredible musician, but also the smartest music consumer I've ever met in my life - and I've met quite a few. He had a large collection of records, vinyls and cassettes, but he wasn't just a compulsive collector. He really spent an incredible amount of time just sitting and listening to music.

Created his own rules

Contrary to what many believe, Israel during the 1980s was not at all as isolated from the western world's popular culture as many think. There were record stores and radio channels as well. And if you lived in a more remote place like Charlie did in Bet She'an, pirated cassette tapes were a big thing.

- Charlie was obsessed with Elvis his whole life, and I think his first guitar hero was Johnny Marr from The Smiths. Charlie also read a lot and was heavily influenced by Kafka. He spent some time in a military prison (for refusing to carry a weapon), and that's where his infatuation with Jim Jarmusch's aesthetics in *Down By Law* began to manifest itself in the character he later turned into. This was part of Charlie's greatness as an artist - the ability to create this fusion of different influences that no one else would think of combining.

When Boaz describes his friend, an image emerges of a person who was utterly uninterested in what other people considered to be cool or cliché. He created his own rules. Boaz says Charlie

was a person who could go from talking about Elvis's greatness as a singer to suddenly praising Richie Sambora's fantastic guitar technique in Bon Jovi.

How did he get along with other musicians then? Did he find someone who shared or understood his vision or did he work mostly alone?

- There is no doubt that he dictated the vision. He was a dominant band leader, very charismatic. His strategy was to gather inexperienced musicians so that he could "mold" them. There were rumors that his bandmates would often burn out by the endless rehearsals and repetitions in the beginning. Then at the end of his career, when he toured in the United States, he completely changed his attitude. He dropped the rehearsals and instead just went on stage and kicked ass, a bit like an old rockabilly band from the 1950s.



Photo: Michal Bassad

"I've heard many people say he didn't really want to succeed"

When it came to the recordings, Charlie was in complete control. No digital tools were allowed, only a pure analog chain and manually transferring to a computer.

- I know that Charlie was often dissatisfied with the final result and in many cases wanted to re-mix, or even record the whole thing all over again. It was like an artist who was ready to burn up his paintings as soon as they were complete.

Why didn't Charlie Megira's unique sound reach a broader audience? Was it that he didn't want to break through? Would that be a form of self-sabotage?

- I've heard many say just that, that he didn't really want to succeed. But I certainly think he did! Just look at him and listen to his music. You don't create a character like Megira unless you want people's attention!

In Goldberg's excellent documentary, we hear Megira - as a newborn character - talking about himself and what he wants to achieve. Megira is sitting on a chair with his enormous hairdo - like a young Dylan dressed up as Elvis in a costume party. He's swaying back and forth, laughing a lot and smoking even more. His mannerisms reveal Gabi's burdening shyness. A shyness that is now starting to hide behind a more confident alter ego, which has yet to take over the whole body. In this very early interview, it feels that Gabi is still there in a way, while Megira is gradually growing inside him. In the interview he says he wants to create something extraordinary. That he wants to revive a past that has never existed. And right there and then, it feels like he is articulating his cultural contribution, thus making the mystery of Megira a bit more comprehensible.

- Yeah, that's absolutely correct. Megira was a kind of spiritual being who made a very physical form of rock'n'roll. It certainly had political and social causes as well: there were no Greaser rockers in Israel during the 1950s. It was a completely different world than California or New York. The Mizrahis (Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries) and Ashkenazis (European Jews) lived in vastly different universes. The real 1950s for Jews in Israel were very collective and socialistic. But Megira - the character - sounded and looked like an independent rocker with a lot of attitude. Megira was the reflection of a time that never existed in Israel.

I'll leave it unsaid whether this thought brings us closer to an answer as to why Megira never had a breakthrough. But Megira later moved to Berlin with his wife and son Adrian. I don't know, but I'd assume that the many layers of cultural differences contributed to record companies being sceptical about signing him. Megira was like a fictitious retro-figure, a hypothesis of what an Israeli rockstar might have looked like in the 1950s - if such a culture had existed. So what happens when you move this figure to a place where 1950s rock culture was actually a reality, and retro culture has long been saturated? Of the few interviews available, it becomes painfully clear that many chose to interpret Megira mostly as a comic figure. When in fact it was about life and death seriousness, with only a tasteful touch of humor.



Photo: Alexandra Cabral

On tour with The Strokes singer

Megira nevertheless received some attention in Europe - although it didn't lead to immediate success. Berlin led him forward to tours in the United States. He also toured as opening act for The Strokes singer Julian Casablancas. But listening to radio show interviews from that time with American comedians and music journalists, I get the feeling that already then something very beautiful was about to be destroyed. Like Megira the character has long taken over, and that he now needs to be rescued from himself. The language barrier and cultural clashes sometimes result in interviews which balance on the brink of ridicule. Like the character is so strange that the interviewer takes the easy route - and just assumes that everything is just a joke, a crazy gimmick - even when Megira talks about serious things like the importance of contemplating one's own death. Goldberg also describes how Megira's character took over entirely during this time, and that he himself started calling his friend Charlie.



Photo: Kari Koty

For Megira, it was no joke, but far from it. Actually, he died twice for his art. First as Gabi, the shy boy who had to give way to his alter ego who would realize his vision. Why Megira chose to take his life a second time, we will obviously never know for sure. But Goldberg raises this question at the end of his documentary: What happens when the character you created to protect yourself begins to break down?