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Black Hebrew singer is the voice of a marginalized Israel

Ahtaliyah Pierce, the latest musical phenomenon to emerge from the African Hebrew Israelite community, grapples with pursuing her dream of superstardom while trying to uphold her community's values of modesty and discretion.

By Andrew Esensten | Feb. 1, 2013 | 1:24 AM | 4

"I want to be a superstar," the aspiring singer from Dimona says on a recent episode of "The Voice Israel." "I want people to stop on the street and say, 'It's Ahtaliyah Pierce! Can I take a photo?'"

As a contestant on one of the most popular television shows in Israel, with almost a million viewers per episode, Pierce is starting to realize that dream. She wowed the judges in the head-to-head portion of the competition and, under the tutelage of mentor Sarit Hadad, has advanced to the live performances, which begin Saturday night.

But it has not been a pitch-perfect journey for the 17-year-old, who is the latest musical phenomenon to emerge from the African Hebrew Israelite community, also known as the Black Hebrews. Like Ophir Ben-Shetreet, a fellow contestant who was recently suspended from her religious high school in Ashdod for singing in public, Pierce has discovered how difficult it is to achieve superstardom while trying to uphold her community's values of modesty and discretion.

"I want the kehila [community] to be happy and be proud of me for what I'm doing," Pierce said in an interview last week at the Tel Aviv offices of Reshet, the television network that produces "The Voice Israel." At the same time, she admitted, "It's a lot of pressure on me because I'm a teenager, and we want to experience things that we haven't experienced in the kehila."

Slipping between English and Hebrew, often in mid-sentence, Pierce spoke about her mostly happy upbringing in Dimona as one of 21 children. (Polygamy is part of the Hebrew lifestyle, and Pierce calls three women "ema," or "mother.")

She also described a highly regulated environment where indulgences like make-up and popular music are forbidden. After wearing pants for her blind audition, she said the community leadership requested that she wear skirts. The producers of "The Voice Israel" have been considerate of her needs, she

said.

With her unusual background, Pierce has managed to raise the profile of her community and of the show itself, media experts said.

"Her presence highlights the show's affiliation with global culture rather than just Israeli culture and music," said Michal Hamo, a lecturer in the School of Communication at Netanya Academic College who studies reality television. However, Hamo noted, greater visibility "doesn't necessarily promise more tolerance or acceptance in the long run."

The Hebrews began arriving in Israel in 1969, having left the ghettos of the United States in order to reconnect with their roots as self-identified descendants of the Biblical Israelites. For many years they lived on the margins of society. Today they enjoy normalized relations with the state and, as permanent residents, serve in the Israel Defense Forces.

The community is still widely, if stereotypically, known for its world-class musicians. Pierce is not the first to appear on a televised singing competition; Eddie Butler represented Israel at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1999 and 2006. Yet she represents a new generation of those born in the community who want to participate more fully in Israeli society.

Unsurprisingly, she comes from a family of performers. Her father plays the drums and her biological mother, Rahkeedah Baht Israel, is a dancer. Baht Israel, who moved to Israel from Chicago in 1977, said that she wants her daughter to succeed but is wary of fame and the temptations that come with it.

"I don't want her to be consumed by this," Baht Israel said in an interview in the community's Village of Peace, a former absorption center on the eastern edge of Dimona. "I don't want her to lose who she is - her culture, what she stands for, what she was born into - in the excitement of being famous."

While Pierce has won over many viewers with her ebullient personality and infectious smile, she has also faced some backlash from both outside and inside her community. She said she saw comments on the show's Facebook page after her head-to-head performance calling for her elimination because she is "not one of us."

Meanwhile, some Hebrews were displeased with Pierce for saying in an interview on the show that life in the community can be a "headache" due to the strict cultural guidelines, which include fasting on Shabbat and abstaining from meat and dairy products. "Even though I represent my community, I came [on the show] for me," she says on camera. "'The Voice' is my ticket out."

Her father, Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda, said he supports her budding career despite the risks of exploitation.

"Many entertainers have been sold one-way tickets to nowhere and worse," he said, pointing to the late Whitney Houston, who befriended the Hebrews and visited them in 2003.

A 12th grader at the community's school in Dimona, Pierce has been excused from classes during the taping of the show but manages to study for her upcoming matriculation exams on the long train rides between Dimona and Tel Aviv and during downtime in the recording studio. After the show she said she aspires to be an officer in the army and to work with children.

Her immediate goal, though, is to "make it to the gmar," she said, using the Hebrew word for "finals." She has already won over the other judges.

After her inspired performance of "Lady Marmalade" in the head-to-head part of the competition, Shlomi Shabat apologized for not recognizing her potential and Aviv Geffen showered her with praise: "You're international. You moved great, you sang great. You're the best one in Sarit's group."

As for her large family, many of whom have attended the tapings of the show in their colorful handmade garments, they are proud and protective of their emerging star.

Elamar Edwards, an older brother and a musician himself, said Ahtaliyah is an inspiration to the youth of the Hebrew Israelite community. "She gives them the courage to follow their dreams," he said. "This just shows that you don't have to leave the community in order to be successful."