

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## OBITUARIES



BLACKLISTED: Jules Dassin

## Jules was put on blacklist

AMERICAN film director Jules Dassin, who was blacklisted in the 1960s, died on Monday.

The 96-year-old found success making films in Europe after he was blacklisted in America because of his ties to the Communist Party.

He was born in Connecticut in 1911 to Russian-Jewish immigrants.

He made his acting debut at the Yiddish Theatre in New York, but is most widely remembered for films he made after he fled Hollywood in the 1950s, including *Never on Sunday* with Greek actress Melina Mercouri – whom he later married – and *Topkapi* with Mercouri and Peter Ustinov.

In 1970, Dassin was accused of sponsoring a plot to overthrow the Greek junta, but the charges were later dropped.

When the regime lost power in 1974, he and Mercouri returned from exile.

Toward the end of his life, Dassin ran the Melina Mercouri Foundation, which tried to induce the British Museum to return the Elgin Marbles.



OSCAR WINNER: Abby Mann

## Trials film won Abby an Oscar

THE screenwriter who won an Oscar for *Judgement at Nuremberg* died last week at the age of 80.

Abby Mann, born Abraham Goodman in Pennsylvania, won the best adapted screenplay for the film in 1961.

*Judgement at Nuremberg* was about the post-war Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals.

He said in 1994: "A lot of people didn't want it done – people wanted to sweep the issue under the rug."

Mann tackled the Holocaust in at least two other projects, *Ship of Fools*, a 1965 film about Jews and Nazis on a transatlantic pre-war cruise, and the 1989 television film *The Simon Wiesenthal Story* about the famed Nazi hunter.

Mann also tackled American racism. His 1973 TV film *The Marcus-Nelson Murders* about a black teenager framed by corrupt cops for murder, was the basis for the long-running TV series *Kojak*.

# Why part-time cantor Svetlana was happy to escape from Soviet Union

BY SIMON YAFFE

IN Communist Russia, you could be locked up for just going to the synagogue. So when Svetlana Portnyansky had the chance to leave, she grasped the opportunity with both hands.

Moscow-born singer Svetlana said: "It was an extremely dangerous place to practise your Judaism."

"If you went to shul, the KGB would take pictures of you and you would be interrogated."

But all that changed for 42-year-old Svetlana when she went to America in February, 1991, months before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Svetlana, who now lives in Los Angeles, recalled: "I had no education about my Jewish heritage, history, religion – nothing – it was totally forbidden by the authorities."

"But my parents were culturally aware and took me to concerts and the theatre – but there was nothing Jewish."

Svetlana's father, a pianist graduate, knew Yiddish songs and taught her its rich music and songs.

After high school she attended the prestigious Gnessin State Musical Academy in Moscow and graduated in 1986, before landing a post at the city's Shalom Theatre.

After being granted political asylum in America, Svetlana was joined in LA by her mother.

"She missed me so much and wanted to be in America with me," Svetlana recalled.

Seventeen years on and Svetlana is delighted that she took the decision to leave the Soviet Union.

She said: "I go back to Moscow every year and everything is ok for the Jews there – there are synagogues and Jewish community centres."

"But I still don't think there is the amount of freedom in Russia that they like to portray."



SVETLANA PORTNYANSKY: Part-time cantor

"I am not a fan of the likes of Vladimir Putin."

Soon after arriving in LA, she was taken to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where she studied for a few months and met her husband Alex Mirmov, a Jewish engineer from Kiev in the Ukraine.

Svetlana is due in the UK next month, where she will perform at Cadogan Hall in London on Saturday, May 17.

It will be her first concert in England, although she has entertained around the world, in countries including Mexico, Australia and New Zealand, as well as most of Europe.

She describes her music as a mix of Yiddish and cantorial, as well as sprinklings of Russian romance and jazz.

And Svetlana knows all about cantorial music, as she is a part-time cantor at Temple Isaiah Synagogue in Orange County, California.

She said: "There is a lot of emotion in the music I sing in shul. I only do it part-time, as I don't have time to do it permanently, but I love it so much, especially when I see people's faces and when they hum along."

Despite travelling all over the world, her favourite place will always be Israel.

In fact, she recently returned from the Jewish state where she played 14 sell-out concerts.

Svetlana said: "Israel is an indescribable place, it is somewhere that is just so inspiring to me."

"I feel a need to go there a lot and I love every inch of the place. I definitely would have gone to live in Israel had I not moved to America."

Svetlana has put on performances all over the world, but her most memorable one remains Argentina in 2000.

She recalled: "Eight years ago I went to Buenos Aires to do a concert and I knew that my great uncle had emigrated there from Russia a long time ago."

"I went into the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires and told them my great uncle's family's name and amazingly, I received an email a couple of months later from one of my family who I had never met."

Svetlana later returned to Argentina, taking with her mother and youngest son Philip.

She said: "I had arranged for 28 members of our family in Argentina to be there and after I had finished a song, we had the lights focus on them."

"My mother was so shocked, she did not even know about this branch of the family in South America."

"It was the most emotional moment of my life, everybody was in tears."

Svetlana's albums include *Popular Jewish & Russian Songs & Romances*, *Masterpieces Of The World Classical Music* and *Russian Romances*.

www.portnyansky.com

# Sista gets personal on Diaspora album

BY ROBERT CLAYTON

WHAT do electronic dance beats, drum 'n' bass and reggae have in common with traditional Mediterranean, Arabic and Balkan sounds?

The answer is that they have all been fused together to form the basis of Watcha Clan's latest album, *Diaspora Hi-Fi – A Mediterranean Caravan*.

The group's French lead singer, Sista K, explained: "The idea for the album was that it was to belong to a diaspora population."

"We wanted to represent the movement of a population and how they bring their sounds with them."

"The album is a new turn for the band because it is more personal and, for myself, it is what I've wanted to make for a long time."

Sista K – real name Karine Hallakoun – was born in Marseille to an Ashkenazi Lithuanian mother and a Sephardic Algerian father.

"My parents met when they lived together on a kibbutz in Israel," she said.

"They only came to France to



SISTA IS DOING IT FOR HERSELF: Watcha Clan featuring Sista K

see their family, but ended up staying a lot longer."

"Back then in the northern quarters of Marseille, no-one cared who was Jewish."

Once she had completed her schooling, Sista K ignored the advice of her father to take a doctorate in mathematics in favour of following her heart.

She said: "At the time, I was living in a very musical community."

"I began making music with them for fun at first, but then it

began to take up a larger part of my life."

"My father was very disappointed with my choice and didn't want to help me at all, but I had known for a long time that that was what I wanted to do."

Sista K began performing in reggae and other Afro-Caribbean styles before forming Watcha Clan, allowing her to write her own original compositions.

She explained: "I met Super

Ju, who was in a rock 'n' roll band at the time."

"I was inspired by his energy on stage and wanted to make music with him."

"I really like the fusion of Indian music with techno, and wanted to fuse Yiddish music with techno in the same way."

The group's first two albums, *Nomades A.K.A* and *Bastion*, sold around 20,000 copies in France and throughout Europe.

And 10 years after the group formed comes *Diaspora Hi-Fi*, which itself was three years in the making.

"We wanted to make a real, human project and so first we had to travel," she said.

"We recorded the album in Oran, Algeria, and in Agadir, Morocco."

"We used to describe our music as live electronic rock, but now we say it is world 'n' bass because it combines world music with drum 'n' bass."

"We are touring around Europe until October, and we hope to come to England very soon."

The album is currently number one in the World Music Charts Europe.

And once their tour is over, the group will be off again gathering more inspiration for their next album.

Diaspora Hi-Fi – A Mediterranean Caravan is released on April 14.