



Everyone has a favorite song – a song that stirs them, makes them cry, or transports them. Have you ever wondered about the songwriters – who they are, what motivates them, and the story behind the songs? Meet Australian songwriter, performer, pianist and producer Rivka Leah Cylich (pronounced sih-lich, with a *ch* like *Chana*), who just released her first album, “Silent Prayer,” earlier this year.

Hi, Rivka Leah. Please tell us about yourself.

I’m twenty-five years old and one of eight siblings. My sister Tauba and I are twins, born eleven minutes apart. People are often surprised to learn that I was quite shy when I was young. Whenever we had visitors, my twin would pounce on them like an excited puppy, but I would slip away quietly to my room to play with my dolls!

What’s it like to be a twin?

People have been asking me that my whole life. As a kid, I never knew what to answer. I always wondered, “What’s it like *not* to be a twin?” Now that I’m older, I’m able to see that what we have is really special. As kids, we shared everything – teachers, friends, our bedroom ... We’d stay up late every night, singing, telling stories to each other and talking. My parents would always call through our bedroom door, “Stop talking and go to sleep!”

How did your music career begin?

Our older sister took piano lessons and that’s probably what prompted my interest. I was about nine years old. To be honest, I wasn’t the most disciplined piano student. Instead of practicing my scales, all I wanted to do was figure out my own tunes. After a few years, I realized I wasn’t enjoying the pressure and stopped taking lessons.

What did you do instead?

I threw myself into my schoolwork. I decided to compete in a national quiz. First prize was a trip to Eretz Yisrael – I’d never been there and wanted to go badly. I studied late every night and won second place for my state, which made me eligible for the national finals. I put everything I had into it, studying at all hours, getting my family to quiz me ... and I actually won the grand prize! It was thrilling!

How was your trip?

I loved Eretz Yisrael so much that at the end of my three-week

tour, I called my parents and told them I didn’t want to come home! They got approval from my principal and for the remainder of the year, I was enrolled in a school in Tzefas. I stayed with a family that had two sets of twins, so I fit right in! One set was my age – it felt like we were triplets! I became very close with this family and particularly with Chana, who loved singing along with me while I played the piano. Afterward, we’d drink hot chocolate and shmooze.

When did you become a songwriter?

While I was living with the family, Chana became unwell. After I returned to Australia, I got the shocking news that Chana had passed away in her sleep. I couldn’t believe it. I felt like I was walking in a fog. How could such a terrible thing happen? One night soon afterward, I sat by the piano and started writing a song, something I had never done before. I hadn’t known I could write songs, so I’d never tried. It was a beautiful song and the more I played it, the more I found comfort in it.

I went to a recording studio with a friend who has a voice like an angel. We recorded the song and sent it to Chana’s family. They were so touched, and told me how much comfort the song gave them. Whenever I miss Chana, I play that song.

What else has inspired your songs?

After I graduated high school, I stayed in Australia and my twin sister flew to Eretz Yisrael. I really missed her; this was the first time I realized that our journeys in life would continue to separate us as we grew older. One night as I was about to fall asleep, a song came into my head. I jumped out of bed, wrote down the words, and went quickly to the piano. The song expressed everything that was in my heart; wishing my sister peaceful journeys and the strength to rise above any difficulties that would come her way. I approached a singer in my community to see if she would sing it. She put me in contact with an exceptionally talented producer and between the two of them, the song came to life. I presented the recording to my twin on our birthday. I called the song “Silent Prayer.” Later, that became the name of my CD.

Are your songs always sparked by those closest to you?

No. One of my songs was inspired by random people I met while I lived in Tzefas, like the woman who cleans the shul every Friday morning. I once saw the local greengrocer (fruit-and-vegetable seller) accept a few measly coins for a huge purchase from a poor customer, and wish her a good day like she was the richest person in the world... and then he gave her change! I remember being blown away by his kindness.

Tzefas is such a quiet area that it seems like nothing ever happens there, but people like these change the world in the most



Rivka Leah Cylich’s newly-released first album, “Silent Prayer”

silently deafening way. This inspired my song, “Bringing Heaven Down to Earth.”

Do songwriters ever get writer’s block?

I can go for months without writing and I’ll worry that maybe I’ll never write again. If I sit down and try to force a song, it can be a struggle. The words don’t flow, the music doesn’t fit... but sometimes the song just comes. It’s amazing, really. I feel privileged to be a vessel, bringing these songs into being.

How did you start performing?

I began by performing at local aged-care (old-age) homes. I knew I would find an appreciative audience there! I played and sang while these beautiful, sensitive folks swayed and clapped along from their wheelchairs or walkers. The praise I received was so enthusiastic; it gave me the confidence to seek out a larger, more mainstream audience.

What are your performances like now?

I’ve done a few performances in Melbourne and Sydney, for hundreds of women and girls. I tap into the community and find local singers who want to share their talent. Then I play while they sing. We perform songs from my album, but I like to perform well-known Jewish music, too. The audience dances and sings along. It’s like a *kumsitz*! Music isn’t about entertainment, it’s about connecting to the people you’re sharing it with.

Do you ever get stage fright?

To be honest, I still have that childhood shyness in me. When I first walk onto a stage and see so many faces in the audience, I feel completely intimidated. I have to remind myself that it’s not about me, it’s about us – it’s about connecting with all these people. Music is something we share; it’s an experience. I focus on the bigger picture. Then I can do it.

How is music “an experience”?

Sometimes we can become so busy with our own responsibilities that it can feel like we’re just swept up in an endless current. Music is one of those things that can help us rise above the waters. It gives us space to think, analyze how we feel, evaluate where we want to go; it can give us strength and inspiration to go on.

What’s your message for Binah Bunch readers?

We’re all here for a reason. Share yourself with the world – and “world” doesn’t have to mean big stages. Share yourself with your family, your friends, your school, your community. If you’re just beginning to explore your talent, believe in yourself. Whether you believe you can or you can’t, you will always be right. ●

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Meet the Songwriter!

By Rochel Burstyn