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MUSIC

'We Are Here' concert at Salt Shed will have music from the past, played now 'when we need it most'

By Rick Kogan  
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Music producer Ira Antelis works in his home studio in Jan. 2021. He is one of the creators of the 'We Are Here' concert coming to the Salt Shed. (f. Jason Wambseans/Chicago Tribune)

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Sitting across from Ira Antelis, having lunch one day last week, the conversation was, as it was at nearby tables, about the tragic troubles in the Middle East.

"Heartbreaking," he said. "And what we need is hope in these dire times."

Antelis is a man of seemingly boundless energy, enthusiasm and ideas, and his latest is coming Nov. 6 at the Salt Shed, that handsome new concert venue hard by the North Branch of the Chicago River.

It is called "We Are Here: Songs From the Holocaust," a one-night-only event featuring dozens of local talents. "It is not a Jewish show," Antelis says. "It is a show about humanity and about coming together."

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He then told how this came to be, how in 2016 he was moved by the death of Elie Wiesel and began to explore the life and work of the Nobel Prize-winning author, activist and Holocaust survivor.

Antelis discovered a book, a songbook more specifically, titled "We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust." It was compiled by Eleanor Mlotek and Malke Gottlieb and published in 1983. It had a foreword by Wiesel.

It was a revelation to Antelis, a gathering of songs written in the shadow of the horrors of World War II. "I know a lot about music because I've spent my whole life devoted to and making it," Antelis said. "But I never knew or imagined that songs were being written in, and were able to survive, the camps and the ghettos."

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Antelis came here in the mid-1980s to make music and first did so with the esteemed composer William Russo at Columbia College. He became one of the city's most successful and admired music producers/songwriters, working with such artists as Marc Anthony and Christina Aguilera. He was also a filmmaker and the mind behind hundreds of commercials such as "Be Like Mike" for Gatorade and "What You Want is What You Get" for McDonald's.

He has mentored a generation of younger musicians, such as [Nikki Lynette](#).

"I am used to juggling a lot of things at once," he says. "I'm not out to get rich and famous for this. It just makes me feel good knowing I am helping people."

And as COVID-19 was devastating the planet, he created a website called the We Have Loved memorial, which let visitors contribute names and photos of loved ones lost to illness. These became part of a gallery of the deceased, accompanied by music.

Amid all this activity, as well as being married with a teenage son, Antelis learned through a 2014 doctoral dissertation there were 14 additional song books published in the postwar years, each filled with songs specific to a camp or ghetto.

"These are not all tragic songs," Antelis says. "Even though most of the composers knew that death was coming, still they created and what they composed were not songs of sorrow but of love and family and the world as a better place.

"The writing was an act of resistance but also of a cry to the future, even though these songwriters and composers could never have imagined that their songs would ever be heard 80 years later."

By chance, he reconnected with an old friend when visiting family in New York. Rabbi Charlie Savenor, who was teaching a class on Holocaust memoirs at the time.

As they talked of old times and current passions, the idea of collaborating on a project that would focus on the Holocaust began to take shape as a concert. They would take one song from each book, and "honor the writers and people who put the songbooks together."

"We Are Here" was first performed at Chicago's Temple Shalom on the North Side in April 2022. The next performance was at New York's Carnegie Hall in January.

[Schedule](#)

"It was an amazing thing to see lines around the block at Carnegie Hall," Antelis said. "Three thousand seats and all of them were filled."

Featured on stage were such stars as Harvey Fierstein, Joel Grey and Chita Rivera.

Antelis has a lot of friends and a lot of connections in the music business and has been able to spread the "We Are Here" word. "One person leads to another leads to another," he says. "People have been so receptive."

And so on the Salt Shed stage will be such performers as harmonic genius Howard Levy, guitar wizard Fareed Haque, high school choir groups, Steppenwolf Theatre's Tim Hopper, Tom Higgenson of the Plain White T's, Jake Lockett and Miranda Rae Mayo of "Chicago Fire," Paris Schutz of WTTW-Ch. 11's "Chicago Tonight" and many more.



Fareed Haque plays jazz guitar at the Green Mill in Chicago in June 2006. He is one of the musicians participating in the "We Are Here" concert at the Salt Shed. (Wes Pope/Chicago Tribune)

"Ira showed me the music and he's written a beautiful melody for the mournful song I will be playing," says Schutz, also a pianist and singer who has played with bands but mostly solo at local venues. "I'm very proud to be part of this event. I think it will provide a new dimension to what is happening in the world today."

The host will be Savenor, who says, "The diversity of voices in the concert constitutes a chorus of love and harmony when we need it most."

The group of presenters, who will introduce the songs and provide some context and biographical information about the composers, will include Bill Kurtis, U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, Sen. Tammy Duckworth and others. Proceeds will benefit the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center.

"Diversity is what we are after," says Antelis. "Howard (Levy) is Jewish, Fareed (Haque is) Muslim and the rest of the participants are of many different faiths and feelings, all drawn together to show that from horror can come a sense of peace."

*"We Are Here: Songs From the Holocaust"* will be 7:30 p.m. Nov. 6 at Salt Shed, 1357 N. Elston Ave.; tickets from \$79 at [www.saltshedchicago.com](http://www.saltshedchicago.com)

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Tom Higgenson of the Plain White T's arrives at the opening of 'The SpongeBob Musical' at the Oriental Theatre in Chicago in June 2016. He is one of the musicians participating in the 'We Are Here' concert at the Salt Shed. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

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