



## A documentary by Laura Bialis

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## ROCK IN THE RED ZONE

***"One of the best Israeli docs ... ever."***

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***"A Must-See."***

- Maariv

***"... the story of the power of music, a local rock `n' roll filled as much with anger and despair as with yearning and hope for peace."***

- Danna Harman, Haaretz

***"An inspiring, crazy, defiant tale from the battered border town of Sderot."***

- Jessica Steinberg, Times of Israel

***"Nothing comes closer to getting inside the Israeli psyche and soul."***

- Yossi Klein Halevi

***"...Not only a celebration of music's capacity to help people process, and articulate, pain and suffering, but an inspiring portrait of unity, and love, flourishing under horrific circumstances"***

- Nick Schager, Film Journal International

***"chilling...heartbreaking...poignant."***

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***"Without a doubt, Red Zone is the feel-good, get-angry, and get-down movie of the year."***

- Joe Bendel, J.B. Spins



**Tom Teicholz** Contributor

*I write about culture and the cult of luxury*

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LIFESTYLE 12/11/2015 @ 4:37PM | 128 views

## A Piece of Your Heart: 'Rock in the Red Zone,' a Documentary by Laura Bialis

“Rock in the Red Zone” Laura Bialis’ moving new documentary is nominally about the importance of music created in Sderot a town in the South of Israel in uncontested (i.e.non-West Bank within pre-1967 border) Israeli land that has nonetheless been the target of more than 7000 Kassam missiles from nearby Gaza. It is a film that strives to be about place, and about individuals and self-expression in spite of, or because of, the most trying of situations. Yet it is also, inevitably a film that stands outside of global politics, to reveal much to admire in the resilience, spirit and creativity of Israel and its citizens.

The Red Zone refers to the “Red Alerts” that are the 15 second warnings Sderot residents have of incoming missiles in which they must hurry to the nearest bunker or underground shelter. It is in from these underground spaces, some of which have been fashioned into music studios, performance spaces, and rock clubs that great music, and great musicians, performers, singers and songwriters have emerged.

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Byalis, who grew up in Santa Barbara and Los Angeles (she went to USC film school), describes arriving in Sderot about a decade ago as akin to arriving in New Orleans after Katrina, that is to say a city rich in musical history that not only had the world forgotten but that had been abandoned by its own country, and whose citizens remained defiantly loyal, channeling their experience into music, song and performance.

In “Rock in the Red Zone” we learn the story of Sderot, founded in the 1950s as a resettlement and refugee camp for Jews expelled from Arab lands such as Morocco and Tunisia, and at a later date, for Ethiopian Jewish refugees who escaped across the desert to Sudan before being resettled in Israel, in Sderot.

The residents of Sderot were the unwanted, the exiled, expelled from their countries of birth and left out of the mainstream of Israeli society and culture. They clung fiercely to their own culture and traditions, while their children assimilated Israeli culture.

As journalist and Israeli music enthusiast Yossi Klein Halevy explains in the film, Sderot bands began to blend the rhythms of Moroccan music and Arab melodies, as well as Polish, Romanian, and Russian rhythms into Israeli rock transforming what was considered ethnic music into world music.

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Most Americans won't know the bands who made Sderot Israel's music city, such as Teapacks and Church of Reason (K'nesiyat HaShekel) but they will understand that as Bialis says in the film "good music comes from hard places" and that just like the proliferation of English bands from Britain's industrial north and the Detroit Rock City bands in the U.S., Sderot is a cauldron in which powerful music has been forged.



Bialis focuses on Sderot musicians such as Micha Biton, whose commitment to his music is only second to his commitment to Sderot, Robby Elmaliah who has become a successful documentary director, Avi Vaknin, a music producer and performer who ran his own "School of Rock"-type music program for teens called Sderock, housed in a bomb shelter; and Yagit Haso, the daughter of Ethiopian immigrants who we meet as a teenager and who goes on, three years later, to winning Israel's version of American Idol, the Kohav Nolad Tv competition – and a successful European performing career.

During the course of the film, the real world intrudes: Red Alerts occur while filming, kassams keep falling. Homes are lost, residents flee, businesses are abandoned or closed. We see that Sderot and what they are enduring is ignored by the rest of Israel, which has become increasingly Tel Aviv and Jerusalem-centric. Protests are staged in Tel Aviv and throughout the country. And then an amazing thing happens: We see a traffic jam of cars as Israelis launch their own campaign of driving to Sderot on the weekend to do their shopping there and support the local economy and the people. It is incredibly moving to see.

Still the attacks continue, and Israel launches a Gaza war;. In time the rockets' range increases to target not only Sderot but Ashkelon and other cities to the north. And so, we see that Sderot seesaws between attacks, thriving during truces.

While War intrudes on “Rock in Red Zone,” we also watch as love blooms. As the film focuses on Avi Vaknin, with whom Bialis ends up sharing a house with, we see that focus turning into love, marriage, and children.



“Rock in the Red Zone” asks the question posed by The Clash, “Should I stay or should I go?” Each of the artists profiled in the film answers his or her own way – some stay, some leave because they can’t take the attacks anymore, others leave to pursue greater career opportunities. However, in the end, as both Avi and Laura say in the film, “You can get out of a place but you can’t get the place out of you.” Sderot stays in their heart no matter where they go; and if you go see “Rock in the Red Zone” it will have a place in yours.

To find out where “Rock in the Red Zone is playing in your community, check: <http://www.rockintheredzone.com/screenings/> . To book a screening for your group or organization contact: [sderotmovie@gmail.com](mailto:sderotmovie@gmail.com) and . A soundtrack is forthcoming; Teapacks can be heard on Spotify; Church of Reason on Itunes and to listen to Avi Vaknin’s music see: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/avi-vaknin/id694441705>

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# THE JERUSALEM POST



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## Film Review: 'Rock in the Red Zone' Directed by Laura Bialis

By DAVID BRINN  
12/28/2014

Like the best films, *Rock in the Red Zone* raises and deals with serious questions about roots, a person's sense of belonging, and other issues.

Sometimes the documentaries that state Israel's case most powerfully have no polemics, academics or politicians in them. Instead of dogmatic ideology and the usual lineup of older male talking heads, *Rock in the Red Zone*, a new film by Laura Bialis, focuses on real people who aren't right- or left-wing – in fact, the only thing they share is that they were on the receiving end of rocket barrages fired from Palestinians in Gaza over the course of many years, and that for solace, they turned to music.

The then-Los Angeles-based Bialis, who had completed the acclaimed documentary *Refusenik*, was drawn to Sderot in 2007 after hearing about the thriving music scene in the city beleaguered by Hamas rockets. Bands like Teapacks, K'nesiyat HaSekhel (Church of Reason) and Sfatayim (Lips) had all started out in the southern city which had gained the reputation of "ir hamusica," the city of music.

Like the soul music that originated in America's south and gritty urban locales like Detroit, or the rock sounds emanating from depressed blue-collar British sites like Liverpool and Birmingham, Bialis followed the sounds to Sderot because as she narrates in the film, "I'd always heard that good music comes from hard places." She found a lot more than music. As a three-week shoot evolves into a two-year stay over 2007 and 2008, Bialis takes the viewer into a city and into the lives of people who feel cut off from the rest of their country.

Expertly combining riveting real-time footage of rocket attacks – some of them involving some of the main subjects in the film – and unhurried cinema verite scenes of debates, breakdowns, Color Red siren chaos and loving moments surrounding music, Bialis turns this from a "fish out of water" music scene film and into a gripping encounter with life and resilience, choices, defeats and triumphs.

Bialis draws the viewer in through her careful selection of Sderot personalities she chose to focus on – including articulate local musician like Avi Vaknin who ran a local music education program called Sderock in a bomb shelter, and one of Vaknin's teenage music students, a wonderfully engaging Hagit Yaso, who three years later went on to win the Kohav Nolad TV competition. By the end of the film, we've seen them grow and change and we end up caring about them.

Replete with humor, drama and a compelling narrative, *Rock in the Red Zone* tells its story in a deliberate manner that hits harder with every Color Red siren. For a subject which has been covered wall to wall in the media, Bialis provides some surprise twists to the Sderot story, some of them involving herself. One of the most captivating story lines is how the outside Los Angeles chronicler of the events unfolding in Sderot undergoes her own transformation that led to some revelatory discoveries about her connection with the city and to the people living there – one in particular.

You don't need to be a music fan to enjoy and feel touched by *Rock in the Red Zone*. It provides a powerful snapshot of the "real" Israel that shies away from politics but unflinchingly focuses on the effects of politics on the lives of people viewers can't avoid feeling connected to. Sandwiched between Hamas on the one side and an uncaring government and fellow Israelis on the other, some Sderot residents can't stand the onslaught of rockets and leave, others have no other place to go.

They all resonate straight to the heart.

Like the best films, *Rock in the Red Zone* raises and deals with serious questions about roots, a person's sense of belonging, what a country's responsibilities are to its citizens, and salvation through music. If that description sounds like a visual presentation of a particularly earnest Bruce Springsteen song, that's because, like Springsteen's most affecting work, the film forces the viewer to think about those very issues by skillfully weaving a tale with grace, dignity and attention to poignant details, not by pounding them over our heads.

With *Rock in the Red Zone*, Laura Bialis shows that she is the boss.



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### Rock in the Red Zone: Sderot Rocks On



Sderot ought to be known as Israel's Seattle, considering how many earthy and influential Israeli rock bands have hailed from there. Unfortunately, the constant rocket attacks from Gaza have thus far frightened off potential music tourists. By the time filmmaker Laura Bialis arrived, seven thousand so-called Qassam rockets had already pummeled the city of some 20,000 citizens—and Hamas was only getting started. However, Bialis would not be dissuaded from documenting the Sderot scene in *Rock in the Red Zone* (trailer [here](#)), which opens this Thursday in New York.

A Qassam is basically a flying pipe bomb loaded with shrapnel. From a legitimate military perspective, they are too unpredictable for practical use, but they are perfect for inflicting pain on innocent civilians. Of course, that is exactly why Hamas and their fellow terrorists use them. When Bialis started filming in Sderot, the city was just inside the so-called Red Zone, making it ground zero for Qassam attacks. Thanks to the alert system, Sderot residences had fifteen seconds to find shelter after a launch was detected (that's fifteen Mississippi's). Eventually, other cities started to feel Sderot's pain, but for years, Qassam attacks were a perversely localized phenomenon. Music became the coping mechanism for a deeply traumatized city.

For Bialis and many young Sderot musicians, it all starts with Sderock, a club and rehearsal studio conveniently located in a bomb shelter. You had better get used to seeing concrete reinforced basements. Bialis's filming is interrupted at least dozen times (probably more) by launch warnings. None of it was included for effect. It is simply

impossible to make a documentary in Sderot without the sound of explosions.

Avi Vaknin, the proprietor of Sderock, will introduce Bialis to a host of diverse musicians calling Sderot (and its outskirts) home. In many ways, their brand of rock incorporating what could be described as world music influences has conquered the Israeli mainstream, yet at that point, Sderot still felt isolated and forgotten. Since both were looking for flats, Vaknin and Bialis became housemates—and life continued, despite the constant raining terror.



Bialis is a world class documentarian who previously made the outstanding *Refusenik*, but the immediacy and emotional resonance of *Red Zone* is something else entirely. Literally years in the making, it witnesses over a decade of Israeli history from the perspective of the bullseye in the center of Hamas's target. At times it is harrowing, but it is also funny and deeply passionate, particularly the music.

Without a doubt, *Red Zone* is the feel-good, get-angry, and get-down movie of the year. When it is over, you will have seen a heck of a lot of life happening and far too much tragedy. Very highly recommended, *Rock in the Red Zone* opens this Thursday (11/12) in New York, at the Cinema Village.

## Love in a rocket-battered Israeli town

In 'Rock in the Red Zone,' director Laura Bialis shows the town of Sderot as an incubator for Israeli music, and for romance.

By [Danna Harman](#) | Feb. 11, 2015 | 5:48 PM

Filmmaker Laura Bialis showed up in Sderot in 2007. The Los Angeles native had paid her own way, curious to see the southern Israeli town that at the time was under daily rocket attack from the Gaza Strip.

She had a hunch, she says, that there was a story to be told; A documentary to be made. And so there was.

Sderot's weary, frightened but resilient residents touched her heart. Its edgy, intense music scene wowed her. The rockets raining down actually made her feel, to her parents' horror, that she could not just up and leave.

And to clinch it, she fell in love — with a local musician she was following with her camera.

In short, Bialis, who was 34 at the time, with a Master's in film production from the University of Southern California, a Bachelor's in history from Stanford and an entire life back on the West Coast of the United States - never really went home.

### Three stories

"Rock in the Red Zone," the documentary she completed over the next seven years — which had its world premiere at the Haifa International Film Festival in October, was seen at the cinemateques of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and is now being submitted to festivals around the world - intertwines several stories.

One is the story of Bialis' own personal journey, and a realigning of the meaning of home for her. Another is the story of what it feels like for people to grow up in a city where they have just 15 seconds to find shelter when the Color Red missile alert siren sounds.

Another is the story of Israel's marginalized Mizrahim, Jews of Middle Eastern descent, and the so-called development towns, such as Sderot, to which many were sent when they arrived in Israel.

And above all, perhaps, “Rock in the Red Zone” is the story of the power of music, a local rock ‘n’ roll filled as much with anger and despair as with yearning and hope for peace.

“It’s not like I didn’t feel at home in L.A. I did,” says Bialis, who had been to Israel three times before her life-changing journey to Sderot eight years ago. “I connected to the honesty and the vibe here. I had friends and I had family, obviously, but I sometimes felt I was missing a community. Israel was a place that got me, from the very first.”

She was living in the tiny Brentwood neighborhood, with her cinematographer boyfriend and three cats, completing the editing process on “Refusenik,” her chronicle of the international movement to free Soviet Jews.

And then, as if it were a scripted journey story, two things happened. Bialis’ relationship began falling apart, and she received a chance email. “It was May, and I woke up in L.A. one morning, got my coffee, opened my laptop and skimmed through a group message a friend in Israel had sent out about the crisis in Sderot.”

At the time, three or four rockets and mortar shells were landing every day in this town of around 24,000 residents, located about a mile from the border with the Gaza Strip. Over the years 13 people had been killed by the attacks, and by [some estimates](#) 75 percent of the population had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

“I was like, ‘really? I’ve never even heard of this place,’” Bialis recalls.

She did some casual Googling, then some real research, and soon realized there wasn’t much in the international media even though Sderot had been an ongoing target of rocket attacks since 2001. “Sderot was definitely under the radar. It was hard to understand what was going on there, and there was never any context — I was left wondering, ‘Where is this town? Why is it being hit?’”

One article that Bialis found mentioned a bomb shelter-turned-music studio called Sderock and described the town’s impressive popular music scene, which had produced such iconic Israeli bands as [Teapacks](#) and [Knesiyat Hasekhel](#). That, she recalls, tipped the balance for her. It sounded interesting. It sounded intense. It sounded different. And so, telling her parents she was going on vacation, Bialis — together with a camera operator and a friend who signed on as producer — set off for what was supposed to be a brief trip to Sderot.

One of the first people she met upon arrival was Avi Vaknin, the local singer-songwriter who managed Sderock. One of five children, from a tight-knit, low-income family that had immigrated from Morocco, Vaknin, who spoke an English—at least at the start of the film—as broken as Bialis’ early days Hebrew — wanted nothing to do with her documentary.

On camera, Vaknin spoke in English, and in early segments his command of the language is about on par with the rudimentary Hebrew that Bialis spoke at the time.

“He barely let me interview him at the beginning,” she recalls. “He felt ‘people like me’ would pitch up in Sderot, take a few shots and sound bites and end up painting a stereotypical picture of what is going on here. He wasn’t into it.” Their romance is a slow burn. They become friends, then roommates and eventually fall in love. Vaknin ever so gently turns the camera lens on the filmmaker — in a bomb shelter no less — to propose.

Three hundred of hours of film, a romance amid the rockets, a Moroccan-style wedding in a Sderot backyard, a move to Tel Aviv and one baby later, the resulting movie is personal but also reflects a place and time in Israel.

### **Seven years**

Bialis spent seven years on the editing process, constantly reframing the stories in order to weave them together in the way she wanted to tell them. Toward the end of the process, last summer, Operation Protective Edge erupted. Bialis again found herself running to bomb shelters, this time in Tel Aviv.

She admits to having been very anxious — always remaining within reach of a shelter, avoiding bicycling and the beach and “flipping out” to discover that her daughter’s preschool lacked a proper shelter. “I guess when I was filming in Sderot I was so focused on the musicians and the story that I didn’t freak out. That came later,” she says.

Bialis says she often worried about how long it was taking her to complete the film. “There were some people who were giving up on me and this project. ... But in my gut I felt the story would still be relevant, and I was right about that,” she says.



## Springboard: How 'Rock in the Red Zone' Filmmaker Laura Bialis Found Her Story in a Warzone

By [Kate Erbland](#) | Indiewire December 11, 2015 at 2:56PM

**"He told me, 'Yeah, there's a bunch of kids who are making this album in a bomb shelter underground,' and I was like, 'Oh, my God, I'm coming, that's a movie.'"**

[READ MORE: Exclusive 'Rock in the Red Zone' Poster Finds a Musical Shelter From the Storm](#)

*Indiewire's Springboard column profiles up-and-comers in the film industry worthy of your attention.*

Located less than a mile from the Gaza Strip, the town of Sderot, Israel is famous for two things: Daily rocket attacks from Palestine and a thriving music scene. Despite the seemingly disparate nature of these characteristics, Laura Bialis' new documentary "Rock in the Red Zone" focuses on the link between the two — namely, bomb shelters. Because of the near-constant bombings, Sderot is home to a bevy of bomb shelters ([Wikipedia](#) notes that some people refer to the town as the "Bomb Shelter Capital of the World," which is depressing in a number of ways), many of which have helped foster creativity amongst its citizens.

Turns out, when you're spending a lot of time in a bomb shelter, you figure out creative ways to make the minutes tick by a bit faster, like by playing music with your pals.

That's the story Bialis set out to chronicle when she went to Sderot in 2007, but what she found was much more important — both personally and professionally — and her new film turns an interesting story into a compelling (and rocking) look at a unique place populated by some very special people.

"Rock in the Red Zone" is [currently playing in limited release](#). Read more from Bialis about her experiences making the film below.

## "Rock in the Red Zone"

**I woke up one morning in 2007 and I had a lot of emails from this friend of mine in Jerusalem about how there was this crisis in this town.** They were being hit with fifty rockets a day. I had been to Israel several times and had done interviews there for a different film, and had gone, what I thought, was all over the country. I really thought that I was intimately aware of what was going on there, and I thought that I read everything, so when I heard these stories of what people were going through, my first response was to try to find everything that had been written about it here, and I didn't see very much.

**I discovered this had already been going on there for years, and that just blew me away.** I was like, "What? How could something like this happen and we could just go along not knowing about it?" When I started Googling it, the couple of articles I found were about how this is a famous city of music. One band had just gone to Eurovision. That's fascinating to me, what it is like for musicians to try to create in a warzone? I just kind of had to go.

**I just up and went, I didn't stop and get the funding.** It was a totally non-rational decision, professionally speaking.

**I sent a researcher down there, I asked him to go check it out for me.** He reported back what was going on, he told me, "Yeah, there's a bunch of kids who are making this album in a bomb shelter underground. It's called The Hope Project," and I was like, "Oh, my God, I'm coming, *that's* a movie."

**When you listen to the news in Israel at night, it will have all the news, and then: "In other news, two rockets landed in Sderot today, there**

**were no injuries, two people were treated for shock and now the weather!"** When you hear that, as someone who lives in another city, you don't know what a rocket attack is really like maybe, you don't know what shock is maybe. It seems very not that big of a deal. When I showed up, I was met by these really warm people who were so grateful that I was going to tell their story. Especially coming from *America* to tell their story.

**We initially went and had a three-week shoot.** It was a pretty small crew of a cameraman, me, my producer and we also had a couple of local people helping us. It was a pretty small band of people. We did sit-down interviews with people, the teenage musicians, the older musicians, then we would film their rehearsals and some concerts and stuff around town. We kind of knew we were going to have to rely on other photographers for the kind of crazy footage, because unless you're just standing by with a police scanner, you can't possibly capture [the rocket attacks].

**After that shoot, it was very much the feeling that we had captured a snapshot of this place, but we didn't really have a story.** We'd met these people, we'd heard about the history of music in this town, we'd learned what it was like to live under rocket fire. I had this instinct that if I really, really wanted to get the story, I'd have to live there.

**One of the challenges was, there were a lot of people doing music.** I had no idea who to follow, what was going to happen there. I was kind of all over the place. I had a lot of footage, because I didn't know what was going to happen.

**There's a very good local film school that is in Sderot.** I didn't know that when I moved there. So I kind of moved to this town that was populated by all these film students, which was really cool for me.

**It took a long time, because I had never intended in a million years to make a personal film.** One of my mentors, he told me, "I hate to say this, but most people who make personal films get dragged into it, kicking and screaming." And that's exactly how I felt.

**I wanted to show everybody what I saw.** It wasn't about, "This is about me, personally," it was about what I'm seeing through my eyes, and how do I bring that to people who have never been to this place? It ended up being



the way to tell the story that worked. Some people have issues with personal films, and I did.

**For years, it was this struggle to finish it.** "Are we going to get funding?" We had to keep switching editors, and we ended up with this amazing editing team at the end. It's hard to have a film that goes on for years that's unfinished. People ask me about it, and I'm like, "This was a slow-cooked project."

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

[READ MORE: Abramorama Set to Release Israeli Music Doc 'Rock in the Red Zone'](#)

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## An Other Conversation

Posted: 11/10/2015 5:30 pm EST | Updated: 11/10/2015 5:59 pm EST

As a film programmer, in these difficult and chaotic times in Israel, I find it more complicated to run a festival that engages with the topic of Arabs and other minority populations in Israel. Both sides of the conflict are hesitant to engage in activities that bring the two sides together. Violence between Arabs and Jews erupts almost daily, driving citizens to lynch and attack innocent bystanders, while racism becomes an accepted part of the vernacular and even part of successful election campaigns. In addition, the artistic community feels under scrutiny of a threatening ministry of culture. And from another side, there is a growing movement advocating the boycott of Israeli art and threatening artists that dare to work with Israel (or Jewish institutions). Just last week one of [the closing night films of Other Israel Film Festival](#) was pulled by the filmmakers, keeping a much needed voice from the community. With both sides in such, turmoil, where is the hope?

I found hope this weekend at the [Other Israel Film Festival](#). Amidst the violence, boycotting and polarization, comes a festival that dares to have conversations and asks the audience to listen to one another. If you look online at comments on any article relating to Israel/Palestine, you will see slogans thrown back and forth. People who care about these topics need to hear one another and change the culture of violence and silencing to one of dialogue and understanding.

This goes for the American Jewish community as well, which has become completely polarized when it comes to Israel. No one can have an event about Israel without feeling threatened by one side or another.

The founder of the Other Israel Film Festival, Carole Zabar, talked about seeing a film about the people of Sderot, a community only known for being in the headlines as the leading victim of the rockets from Gaza. Through this film, *Rock in the Red Zone* by Laura Bialis, she got to see the people and understand why they are there in a way that the news never managed (or never tried) to convey. The film received a standing ovation when presented this past Saturday night at the festival, and more importantly, almost 100% of the audience stayed to discuss and better understand the situation.



The politicians, through the media control which voices are heard and which narrative will live on. Through films we learn of other narratives that exist. The feature *Censored Voices* by Mor Loushy tells the story of soldiers who recorded their less than euphoric feelings about the 1967 war. This war is celebrated in Israel with no question of the consequences. Of course, others see this war as the turning point towards Israel's ethical downfall. Regardless, this film shows soldiers who care about Israel and care about the ethical implications of this

war. To me, this film is hopeful. Some like to hide Israel's self-criticism, noting that since Israel receives enough criticism from the world, the Jewish community should only praise Israel. But showing the world that Israeli soldiers are human beings who are disturbed by their actions in a time of war is one of the best things you can say about the Jewish state. I am surprised by anyone who is not disturbed by the actions of war. And hearing young filmmakers who care enough about their country that they feel this narrative must be told, is promising. Once again, the entire audience stayed after the film to discuss and listen to the director's voice.



Both of these films open this coming week in NY theaters. This is an opportunity to truly see the diversity of people and voices beyond the stories that are featured in the headlines. These stories return to people their humanity. But more importantly, this is an opportunity to change the way we discuss Israel. We need to learn to listen and not just to voice our opinion. We need to hear things from other perspectives and for them to hear you. The breakdown of communication only dehumanizes an already brutal conflict. I am hopeful when I get to present films that challenge and push the conversation forward.

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# Love and persistence amid the Kassams

Laura Bialis's new documentary, 'Rock in the Red Zone,' tells the tale of the southern border town of Sderot

BY JESSICA STEINBERG | December 12, 2014, 8:54 am |

**L**aura Bialis found love, and the subject of her latest documentary, "Rock in the Red Zone," in Sderot, the southern town on Israel's periphery that has been barraged with Kassam rockets for the last 14 years.

It was during her fourth trip to Israel that the 41-year-old filmmaker, born and raised in Los Angeles, discovered the intensive music scene that has developed in Sderot over the course of many years. She also came across Sderock, a bomb shelter music studio, and its manager, musician Avi Vaknin.

Seven years later, "Rock in the Red Zone," which premiered at the Haifa Film Festival in October, will be screened in Sderot, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem this month.

Bialis is now married to Vaknin, and they're the parents of a four-year-old daughter.

"It's a love story, and it's not me and Avi, but falling in love with this place that is so inspiring," said Bialis. "It was like unpeeling layers of an onion."

Bialis, whose Los Angeles upbringing included tenuous connections to synagogue and observance, had visited Israel twice as a child and once for an extended period of time while working on "Refusenik," her documentary chronicling the movement to free Russian Jews.

The USC School of Cinema graduate spent time during that three-month period with former refuseniks Natan Sharansky, Yuli Edelstein and Yosef Burg, and took some Hebrew classes at night.

It was that stay that clinched her own connection to Israel, but it was only upon returning to Los Angeles that she first heard about Sderot. An Israeli friend who regularly emailed articles about Israel sent one that referred to the southern town.

"At the very end, it mentioned rockets falling in Sderot," said Bialis.

A self-professed novice with regard to Israeli geography and news, Bialis said she figured Sderot must be a Jewish settlement located over the Green Line if it was getting bombed. That was not the case.

“I didn’t know much at the time, and I just couldn’t figure out how that could be happening,” she said.

She started wondering how people could live through that kind of disruption in their lives.

“How do they get things done if they have 15 seconds to get to a bomb shelter,” she said. “I felt the whole picture wasn’t being given.”

Her interest was further piqued when she found out that Kobi Oz and his band Teapacks were from Sderot.

Bialis was between projects and came back to Israel for a quick visit, gathering a film crew and heading down south to explore the border town.

“I figured I could tell the story through the experience of the musicians,” she said.

When Bialis first landed in Sderot in 2007, Vaknin was the somewhat uncooperative manager of Sderock, willing to help when she wanted to interview his young clients but uninterested in being interviewed himself.

A son of a local family, he was also a guitarist and budding singer/songwriter who had been working on his debut album for the last four or five years, said Bialis.

“His music was really what we were looking for,” she said. “It was the music you’d imagine, the music that comes from really hard places, and we found it, this guy with this amazing album that he hadn’t released yet. He was a perfectionist.”

Vaknin was, however, something of a challenge. He was always too busy to stop and talk to her. When they planned to drive in a caravan of cars to Tel Aviv for the performance of a Sderot youth band, he drove off without Bialis and her crew.

But Bialis was accustomed to being patient when it came to befriending new subjects.

Her first professional documentary, “TAK FOR ALT – Survival of a Human Spirit” told the story of educator and Holocaust survivor Judy Meisel and the trip Meisel took — with Bialis in tow — back to Eastern Europe to visit the ghetto and concentration camp she was confined in and places in Denmark where she recuperated after her liberation, as well as her involvement in the anti-racist movement in the US.

Bialis's student film, "Daybreak Berlin" about the last day of World War II in Berlin, entailed building a bunker from scratch on a Hollywood lot and then having to clean it up to avoid a \$25,000 fine.

"I'm the only crazy person in my family," Bialis admitted. "I choose topics that I think are important and that I think should have a larger footprint."

Vaknin didn't know about her dogged persistence. It was only when Bialis returned to Sderot for several months, intending to work solely on the new film, that he took her — and her art — seriously.

"He was shocked that I would come back," she said. "He told me he didn't like the press, because they would just come to Sderot and take pictures of people screaming after a Kassam had fallen and that's not what Sderot is."

The local and mainstream press hadn't paid much attention to the small town full of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia and the Jewish communities of the Middle East until the rockets started being lobbed from the nearby Gaza Strip in the early 2000s. Sderot became known for images of houses turned to rubble and residents crying, shouting or stoic in response.

Bialis, in the film, attempts to show the complexity of the place and its people.

"Sderot is kind of like a parallel universe, a crazy existence, and it's amazing and crazy that people keep on with it," she said.

Bialis introduces viewers to the town's residents, to Vaknin, his bandmates and their roommates, to the owner of the local cafe, and to Micha Biton, a local musician who speaks eloquently and at length about the struggles of living one's life in a place like Sderot, as well as Teapacks vocalist Oz, and Hagit Yaso, a young Ethiopian-Israeli who ended up winning TV talent show "A Star Is Born."

She wove together the events of the last seven years, the rockets and army incursions, including the most recent one last summer, as well as joyous post-Passover Mimouna celebrations and activist efforts by Sderot residents and other Israelis to bring the town's security issues to the fore. There are also hints about her love story with Vaknin, a relationship that seemed to have taken them both by surprise.

It began when Vaknin helped Bialis look for a place to live upon her return to Sderot.

"He asked me to bring him back a special microphone he bought on eBay, and he said he'd help me find an apartment," said Bialis.

They eventually stumbled upon a 200-square-meter (2,153-square-foot) house in Sderot with a dunam of land (10,763 square feet) out back. Bialis was excited about the possibilities and wanted

to rent it. Vaknin thought she was crazy, especially when she suggested they move in together and split the space and costs.

His reaction, said Bialis, was typical Sderot.

“How am I going to tell my parents I’m moving in with a perfect stranger from America that no one knows?” she said.

At the time, Bialis was still involved in a long-term relationship; she and Vaknin were just friends. Friends who could barely communicate, that is.

“Sometimes we would stop and load Morfix” — the dictionary app — “because I didn’t understand what he was talking about,” she said. “And it was the same for him.”

They figured it out. Bialis and Vaknin got engaged in June 2008 and were married in September — in their backyard, after compromising with his parents and having a huge henna party before the wedding.

There are only a few hints and references to their romance in the film, which is far more focused on the ongoing Kassam onslaught and how both the budding and veteran musicians of Sderot deal with the situation.

“It’s a huge film,” said Bialis. “You could make a film only about Sderot and Kassams or only about music. Stuff is happening all the time.”

As for Vaknin and Bialis, they made a pact that they wouldn’t leave Sderot because of the rockets. After the army’s first incursion into Gaza in 2009 left Sderot rocket-free for a period of time, the newlyweds moved to Tel Aviv, mostly to help boost Vaknin’s career and ease Bialis’s aliyah process.

Vaknin was about to release his first album and needed to be closer to Tel Aviv and its music scene.

“People told him to take the chance and go,” said Bialis. “He felt some sort of limitation; he’d gotten to the top of the pile in the south, but where was he going to go from there?”

Once they moved to Tel Aviv, Vaknin was invited to join a studio as well as other albums of other musicians, including Shlomo Artzi and Kobi Oz.

At this point, Bialis doesn’t know when or if they’ll move back to Sderot. They visit Vaknin’s family almost every weekend, but for now, their home is in Tel Aviv. In fact, when rockets began falling across a wider swath of Israel last summer, they found themselves in the bomb shelter again, but this time in Tel Aviv.

Ironically, said Bialis, Sderot now feels like a fortress, as dozens of shelters have been placed throughout the town, with schools, kindergartens and other public spaces built within inside bomb shelters.

For Bialis and Vaknin, however, a return to Sderot would be about the place, its people and its spirit.

“There’s a defiance [about the people of Sderot], of this is who I am, this is who I’m going to be,” and it’s reflected in the music, said Bialis. “Their music actually made an impact in changing Israeli music and it’s amazing that it came from that background. When it comes on at parties, I have to get up and dance.”

*“Rock in the Red Zone” will premiere in the Sderot Cinematheque on December 13, 7 p.m.; at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque on December 18, 9 p.m.; and at the Jerusalem Cinematheque on December 25, 8:30 p.m.*



# Love and Rock 'N' Roll in Sderot, an Israeli City Under Near-Constant Fire

A new documentary from filmmaker Laura Bialis explores the influential music scene in a place you'd least expect

By [Beth Kissileff](#) | August 4, 2015 1:28 PM



The story goes like this: A woman journeys to a desolate, forsaken, and unlovable place for purely professional reasons. There, she falls in love—first with the place itself and the brave spirit of its people, and then with a local who becomes her husband and the father of her child. Now, she's made a movie about her experience.

The woman is Laura Bialis, whose documentary film *Rock in the Red Zone* recently [premiered](#) at the San Francisco Jewish Festival, and will open to a wider release in November; and the place is Sderot, a city in southern Israel near the Gaza Strip that's populated mainly by Jews from Moroccan backgrounds (with some Persian and Kurdish Jews also in the mix), who settled there in waves of mass immigration in the 1950s. For years, Sderot—a city far from the center of Israel with limited economic and educational opportunities—has been [shelled by rockets](#) over 2500 times since 2012. In fact, the city has special underground playgrounds so that kids who have to spend much time in [bomb shelters](#) will have something fun to do. (A recent study showed that 40% of Sderot's children [suffer](#) from post-traumatic stress.)

And yet, Sderot is home to an important part of the Israeli music scene. It's the place of origin for bands who employ both contemporary Israeli and North African rock influences, such as Teapacks, Knesiyat Hasechel (Church of Reason) for which poet and writer [Shimon Adaf](#) wrote lyrics, and Sfatayim (Lips). In fact, in Sderot, Bialis met Avi Vaknin, a musician who would soon become her husband, as well as Hagit Yaso, an Ethiopian immigrant who won Israel's reality TV show, "A Star is Born," in 2011, and musician Micha Biton. In a phone interview, Bialis told me, "The movie is really about an investigation of the creation of art under fire."

In 2007, the Israeli-born Bialis, who grew up in Los Angeles, traveled there after completing [REFUSENIK](#) a film about the thirty-year movement to free Soviet Jews. (She has also previously made a film about a [Holocaust survivor turned civil rights activist](#) and a documentary [feature](#) about Kosovo. A graduate of Stanford and USC film school, Bialis considered traveling to Sderot after an Israeli friend sent her an article about the flood of rockets that land there; her decision was cinched upon learning that Israel's entry to the 2007 Eurovision song contest, the Kobi Oz-fronted band Teapacks, was from the town.

At the time, her future husband, Avi Vaknin, was running a program called “Sderock” which gave local kids a chance to express themselves through music. Though Vaknin was willing to let her interview the kids he taught, he was initially uncooperative with Bialis herself, thinking she was a person who was just going to come to town briefly, get some footage and leave. But time—Bialis **edited** the film over a 7-year span—and her willingness to bring sound equipment he needed from the States, changed his opinion—so much so that they were married and now have a daughter.

Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and author of a recent **article** on Israeli music is quoted in the film. Via email, he wrote: “The remote town of Sderot was the unlikely setting for a breakthrough in Israeli music in the 1990s that brought East and West together in a new rock fusion. Thanks in part to the musicians of Sderot, Israeli culture today reflects our amazing diversity. That’s one of the crucial stories this film tells. The other is how the people of Sderot have withstood years of rocket attacks from Gaza. The intersection between these two stories has created one of the most compelling Israeli documentaries in years.”

A music industry insider once told Bialis that her film exemplified the “birth of hip hop, about kids in the ghetto, making art out of their pain.”

*Rock in the Red Zone* will be released nationwide in the fall. Watch the trailer below:



## ROCK IN THE RED ZONE - TRAILER

from [Laura Bialis](#) PLUS



02:42



**HD**

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## Rocking out in the rockets' red glare

Thursday, October 15, 2015 | by sue fishkoff

American filmmaker Laura Bialis “knew nothing” about Sderot in May 2007 when a friend sent her articles about Kassam rocket attacks that regularly plagued the Israeli development town on the Gaza border.

More than 7,000 Kassams had fallen on Sderot in the past seven years, she learned. Half the population had left; those who remained lived in a constant state of alert, rushing to bomb shelters several times a day. They’d been living that way for years.

“It shocked me to the core,” says Bialis, who’d spent three months in Israel in 2004 filming “Refusenik,” her documentary about a former Soviet Jewish activist, and who was now a regular visitor to the Jewish state. “How could this be going on and I’d never heard about it? Two people died that week in Sderot and it wasn’t even reported” in the media, she says.



*Laura Bialis and Avi Vaknin with their daughter, Lily, in 2014 photo/courtesy rock in the red zone*

Bialis became obsessed with the plucky, hard-hit border town, and when she discovered its burgeoning music scene — arguably the most influential in Israel — she was hooked. “It was a totally untold story,” she says.

She started filming in Sderot that summer. She traveled back and forth to the U.S. for months, and in December of that year decided to move to Sderot. She rented a house with her film’s main protagonist, a rising musician, so she could “get inside his head,” she explains.

She did that, and more — she married him.

“Rock in the Red Zone” is the documentary that came out of her multiyear adventure. It is an intimate portrait of a handful of musicians who channel the pain and chaos of living under attack into soulful, biting song. The film screens Thursday, Oct. 22 in Sebastopol as part of the Sonoma County Jewish Film Festival. Bialis will be on hand for a Q&A after the screening; her musician husband, Avi Vaknin, will perform.

“Avi did not want to be part of the movie at all when we started,” Bialis told J. by phone from their home in Tel Aviv. “He was very skeptical about the press, he didn’t like how Sderot was portrayed in the Israeli media. They just show up and do a superficial job.”

When she told him she was so committed to the project she was moving to Sderot, he slowly got on board. But Bialis insists there was no thought of romance when they first rented a house together. “He thought it was kind of weird” to share a home with a woman he wasn’t involved with, she says. But she was eager to get to know him and his friends as intimately as possible, to tell the story of a town under siege through exploration of the daily lives of those making music there.

“What is it like to make music in a war zone? That’s what I wanted to show,” she says.

The film — shot mainly from late 2007 to early 2009 — provides a fascinating look at Vaknin and his

friends. Editing and extended research, including the acquisition of Israeli television footage, took an additional five years, and the film was finally finished in 2014. Bialis and Vaknin are now taking it on the film festival circuit, beginning this month.

Bialis is obsessed with telling the story of Sderot to American Jewish audiences who think they know Israel, but who, like her, don't often see beyond Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"I want to bring [to viewers] the intensity, the tumult, the crazy, creative energy that's coming out of this place," she says. "Sderot, as much as it's in the periphery, is a symbol of Israel. The way Israel acts toward Sederot is, in a way, the way the rest of the world acts toward Israel."

The couple and their 5-year-old daughter still spend most Shabbats in Sderot with Vaknin's family and friends. And like everyone in town, Bialis has a "red alert" app on her smartphone, which lets them know when a Kassam has been launched from Gaza, giving them 15 seconds to get to a bomb shelter.

Near the end of the film, Bialis is interviewing Vaknin in a Sderot café when a red alert sounds. A Kassam lands right next door; a minute later Vaknin returns to his seat and nonchalantly orders pasta.

"With cream sauce?" the waitress asks. He nods.

"For me, that's Israel," Bialis says.

**"Rock in the Red Zone"** screens at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 22 at the Rialto Cinemas, 6868 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Q&A and live music follows. \$20. <http://www.jccsoco.org/filmfestival>