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## 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.