

Jewish MC rocks the mike and keeps it kosher Matsiyahu has Orthodox approach to reggae

By Joan Anderman, Globe Staff

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Forgive Matsiyahu if he doesn't make eye contact onstage. The 24-year-old beatboxer and MC doesn't wear his glasses when he performs because odds are good that a number of women won't be dressed modestly, and Matsiyahu -- a Hasidic Jew who has spent the last two years living and studying in a Crown Heights, N.Y., yeshiva -- is determined to deliver his rugged dancehall reggae without straying from the strict requirements of his Lubavitch community.

It's not overstating the case to say that Matsiyahu, who performs at the Lizard Lounge on Wednesday, is an original. The visual package is startling: Picture a young man in traditional payos (side curls), black hat, and long beard grabbing the mike and going off in front of a crowd at New York's hip Mercury Lounge, or the Knitting Factory, or Southpaw -- all rooms that Matsiyahu has sold out. The music is a fairly mind-boggling fusion as well: strains of Bob Marley and Shlomo Carlebach combine into a fluid, flawless flow of Torah-inspired rhymes.

But it's the cultural fusion Matsiyahu is courting -- a musical bridge uniting the historically cloistered Orthodox Jewish community with the world of nightclubs, secular fans, and marketing plans -- that really sets him apart.

"The rabbi would like me to be in Crown Heights, sitting in yeshiva and learning more," Matsiyahu confesses. "But right now my energy is in music. I have a way to affect people and uplift them. To give that up is to go against what God wants."

Matsiyahu has found a perfect partner in JDub Records, a young nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote Jewish voices in popular culture. Among JDub's other clients are the Yiddish-rapping hip-hop producer So Called, the Jewish indie-folk band Black Ox Orkestar, and post-punk klezmer group Golem. Executive director Aaron Bisman met Matsiyahu four years ago, when Bisman was finishing up in the music business program at NYU and DJing with an electro-acoustic Jewish soul band. JDub was in its nascent stage, as were Matsiyahu's skills on the mike, and the two made a commitment to work together as both projects grew.

"It's going to take a special kind of development because Matsiyahu has special needs," says Bisman. "He can't play on Friday night, he needs kosher food at venues, and he won't play with certain artists. But we're trying to figure out how to allow him to succeed long-term. A lot of clubs took risks with us early on, and he's drawing diverse crowds. We're being inundated with e-mails from people saying, 'This isn't my scene but he really appeals to me,' or, 'He's not where I'm at but he has an interesting message.' There isn't a lot of cool music that's also deeply religious."

Matsiyahu's debut album, "Shake Off the Dust . . . Arise!," is scheduled to be released in September. Produced by Daniel Seliger, former vice president of Rawkus Records, and recorded last fall at a home studio in Brooklyn, the album's title is taken from "L'cha Dodi," a song sung at the Friday night Sabbath service.

"The week has gone by and Shabbos is coming and spiritually, everything goes up," says Matsiyahu. "It's a transition, a time to shake off the problems and the fatigue and elevate. This unification happens. In general, in my life, that's what this whole time period has been for me."

Matisyahu grew up Matthew Miller in a Reconstructionist Jewish family in White Plains, N.Y. He was repeatedly threatened with expulsion from Hebrew School, had his bar mitzvah party at an Italian restaurant, and at 14 became a card-carrying Deadhead. Two years later, Matisyahu traveled to Israel, where he began to feel a deep connection to his Jewish roots. The next year, after nearly burning down his chemistry classroom, Matisyahu dropped out of school and followed Phish on a national tour. His parents sent him to a therapeutic wilderness program in Bend, Ore., where Matisyahu finished high school, fell in love with reggae, and started playing music.

"There was a coffee shop in town where I met a guy with dreadlocks who played guitar, and every Thursday we played there," he recalls. "I would wear an Israeli flag like a turban and we'd do crazy hip-hop chanting and people started coming in for that. Young kids started bringing turntables. We ended up putting a band together."

Matisyahu returned to New York two years later to attend college at the New School. He began frequenting the Carlebach Shul on the Upper West Side and forged a close bond with Dov Yona Korn, a Lubavitch rabbi he met in Washington Square Park. Matisyahu also bought a PA system and started collecting instrumental reggae tapes.

"I would turn it up loud on the speakers and write lyrics and rap," he says. "I didn't think I was practicing anything. There were no shows or audiences. It was how I expressed myself. I just felt that music. Lots of the reggae artists are called conscious and the words are about Jah, but they're talking about God. So many lyrics were taken from the Old Testament. I was able to find my culture and identity in Judaism and hold onto the truth in this music."

During his first year living in the Chabad-Lubavitch community in Crown Heights, Matisyahu neither played nor listened to music. Everything outside of his studies and connection with God was considered a distraction. The Torah, he says, was his art, and praying was his music. But his own songs never ceased to percolate in the back of Matisyahu's mind, and last year he returned to performance.

"I'd never heard him before our show in December at the Knitting Factory," says Rob Tannenbaum, senior editor at Blender magazine and co-organizer of the "What I Like About Jew" performance series. "My response paralleled the audience's response, which at first was kind of a collective dropped jaw at the novelty of what he was doing. I've heard tens of thousands of albums and seen probably a thousand bands as a music reviewer, and I've never heard anyone even remotely akin to what he's doing. But after a minute or two the novelty value evaporates and their jaws dropped again at the dexterity and virtuosity of it. He's an incredible singer."

Matisyahu knows that his chosen paths -- one religious, one musical -- will involve a delicate balancing act. It's easy to let things slip, he says, to forget what your real purpose is. On top of that he's engaged to be married this summer, to an NYU film school student and Orthodox Jew whom he met -- where else? -- at a gig. But he is a man on a mission. And a man with a message. Asked to explain the essence of that message, Matisyahu begins to recite the words to his song "Warrior."

"Elevating my soul, purifying my sound, like the son of a sun ray, burning up through a cloud, Torah food for my brain, let it rain 'til I drown, thunder let the blessing come down."

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