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Evolution of an Icon: Matisyahu's Musical and Spiritual Journey

By Jordana Horn

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Matisyahu, born Matthew Paul Miller, is well known as a genre-busting Hasidic reggae artist who performs in tzitzit. But with his new EP, "Shattered," and current tour, he shows a new, bold eclecticism that demonstrates a simultaneous evolution in his music and religious attitudes. He's taken true steps — away from Chabad in his religious observance, and away from more conventional reggae in his musical development — and has opted instead to define his own new path.



MATT, THE JEWISH RAPPER KID FROM NEW YORK: Older and wiser, but open and loving.

Matisyahu's identity as a practicing Jew evolved gradually over the years, with its origins far from the place where he now finds himself. Raised Reconstructionist, he went on the Alexander Muss High School in Israel study program as a teenager. This was less out of a love for learning, he says, than out of a desire to get out of high school for a few months.

"Like a lot of American kids, I was not really interested in Judaism and was around that age of starting to make self-discovery. A few things kind of came together for me," he recalled. "I started listening to Bob Marley, and that informed some of my identity in terms of music and spirituality, and seeing a lot of Jewish references within reggae music was kind of a pull for me towards

piquing my interest in Judaism."

His time in Israel was marked less by spiritual epiphany than by being implicated in another student's drinking exploits (he quickly defends himself as having been found guilty by association rather than action). As a result, he was restricted to staying on the campus for his first month in Israel. "Muss was cool in the style of the learning — the seminar classrooms and the teachers were cool," Matisyahu said. "I was not studious, and never was really turned on

intellectually until much later. By no means did I become religious. But I became more interested in Judaism, and identified more as a Jew.”

After he finished Muss, he returned to New York, where he subsequently dropped out of high school after the first day of his senior year and traveled around the country. A stint in a rehabilitation center in upstate New York followed, and he then went to Oregon on a wilderness expedition trip for teenagers. “It was not necessarily for drug rehabilitation, but that was part of the reason I was out there,” he explained.

In Oregon, he identified himself as “Matt, the Jewish rapper kid from New York.” “That became my identity,” he said. “I’d come in wearing an Israeli flag draped around my back, singing prayers I remembered from synagogue in the middle of a show. It was way before I was religious. I felt some strong Jewish spirituality, though I would never go to shul and didn’t keep any of the laws. It made no sense to me.” Unlike New York, in Oregon, he said, “I was suddenly the token Jew. This was now my search for my own identity, and part of Judaism feeling more important and relevant to me.”

He moved back to New York and, as he says, “started feeling a little depressed and stuck in my life.” At that point, he started developing his reggae, spending hours in his room, writing and practicing his style to the accompaniment of hip-hop tapes, whether underground or popular. “I’d buy instrumental tapes on Canal Street, then just practice along with them, singing and rapping.

“What I was doing, it wasn’t like you could go to school for it. I never learned how to play an instrument. At that point, I was not interested or aware of the benefits of vocal training, which is something that I now take extremely seriously. At the time, I just thought of it as a stylistic kind of thing. I was doing it totally on my own, and that’s what my life was spiritually, too. I was very much on my own with that, as well. It was my solitary journey. Once I became religious, it became more about community and searching out answers through other people.”

Around that same time, he says, he started to become more interested in Judaism, taking classes on Jewish spirituality at The New School. Matisyahu approached Eli Cohen, a rabbi at New York University, about learning.

“He mentioned that there was a boy in the hospital, a Russian boy who wanted to put on tefillin, and asked me if would I go do it,” he recalled. “I think he was referring to just one time, but I thought he meant regularly. So every week, I went from the West Village to put tefillin on this boy. I’d get a kosher bagel lunch, started saying the blessing. So my experience was kind of organic in that sense.

“I’d talk to teachers and ask them, where do I go? What rabbi can I talk to, and what shul can I see?”

He recounts that at the same time, he started praying, getting himself a siddur and tallit. “I started going up on the roof of school at sunset and praying in Hebrew, even though I didn’t understand it,” he said. “That was how I started going from spirituality into some aspect of religion.”

He learned of the Carlebach Shul, located on the Upper West Side, and started going there every Sabbath, as well as wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit. It was then that he met NYU’s Chabad rabbi, Dov Yonah Korn, someone to whom he could relate.

“When I came in contact with Rabbi Korn, I felt this strong connection to him,” not least of which was because of music, Matisyahu recalled. “He had been on the Dead tour, the Phish tour, came from a similar background as me, done hallucinogenics. He was dancing on Shemini Atzeres with the Torah in Washington Square Park with all these other people.

“They were all not from religious backgrounds, and they’d all come from the counterculture — grown up in the suburbs, upper-middle class, gone out and left home, had their experiences on the road, and then ended up becoming religious. I looked at those guys and thought, this could be me also. I could make this transition.”

He found himself at a Simchat Torah *farbrengn*, or get-together, in Brooklyn at 770 Eastern Parkway, the home base of Chabad, and felt as though a light had been turned on. “They sing all of the songs from the different rebbe’im,” he recalled. “Those songs are very powerful. I felt like this sort of sadness, or yearning, or calling that I had been struggling with. That music kind of embodied that struggle I was having, and I felt that it was calling me or pulling me into it, sucking me in.

“I had felt very alone in this religious process; I didn’t have any friends doing it, and it was a very heavy decision to become religious.”

When Matisyahu’s family was having a hard time dealing with his newfound faith, he moved in with Korn, sleeping on his couch in his two-bedroom apartment with the rabbi, his wife and their children.

“I really admired that lifestyle — being married, having kids, being religious,” he said “It was zany, weird and fun. We’d do things like stay up all night saying *tehilim* (psalms), walk to the mikveh, drink half a bottle of vodka, sit around and eat cholent and salami. I thought, this is a fun way to be religious.”

By November 2001, Matisyahu was officially calling himself a Lubavitcher, a member of the Lubavitch movement. Korn’s mentorship had a tremendous influence on Matisyahu. “I was wearing a jacket and hat before I knew it,” he recalled. “And before I knew it, I was in [Brooklyn’s] Crown Heights and completely indoctrinated into the Chabad way of life.” He took up residence in Crown Heights in spring of 2002.

Korn was also one of the first people for whom Matisyahu performed. The rabbi encouraged him, allowing him to perform at the Union Square menorah lighting as well as at NYU's Chabad House. When Matisyahu moved to Crown Heights, he stopped listening to popular music. "I was starting to learn Hasidus [the teaching of the Hasidim], and was living with the rabbi in the apartment with his kids," he said. "At that point, I stopped and pulled myself out of popular culture, going to movies, talking to girls, watching TV."

In 2004, after signing with JDub Records, he released his first album. He recorded a live album in 2005, as well as a second studio album, and became famous, performing to larger groups around the world. At the same time, his religious identity was changing.

"I've been through all these different phases in Chabad. Chabad has been a bit of a roller coaster for me. It was very pure in the sense that I totally divested myself from all of the confusion that I was living in. I wasn't getting high, I wasn't with women — I was waking up every morning and learning Torah all day. And so, in certain senses it was a pure process," Matisyahu said.

"But there was a lot of alcoholism going on, in my experience, and a lot of borderline —" He interrupted himself. "I definitely lost myself, as well, in the process, in the sense that I somehow stopped thinking for myself. I became completely dependent on other people for my sense of what was right and wrong. I felt incapable of making my own decisions. I was borderline completely losing my mind." And then, he said, he pulled himself out of Chabad.

It was during this period that he began working with the now Jerusalem-based therapist Ephraim Rosenstein, whom he now considers his personal friend and religious mentor.

"[Rosenstein] was able to help me come to some realizations that were really ground-breaking, and kept me from where I think I would have lost my mind in the state of being I was in at that time," Matisyahu said. "After that happened, once my therapy came to a certain place, and I'd gotten pretty healthy, I wanted to continue with my spirituality. I guess the therapy to me was sort of getting to know myself as a valid means of spiritual growth. I wanted to take it from a personal to an intellectual kind of thing, so we started learning together. Instead of therapy, I was paying him to discuss ideas, basically.

"I've stopped identifying with any group of Judaism. I would now call myself an Orthodox Jew. I try to keep the tenets of halachic Judaism as strongly as possible, but I don't identify with any one movement."

He noted that he has not severed ties with the movement completely: "My kids go to a Lubavitch yeshiva and are named after rebbes. I have Lubavitch friends, and we stay with *shlichim* [emissaries] around the world. I feel I have some in-depth knowledge of Hasidus and Chabad philosophy, and close ties with Lubavitch. But I don't feel the need to be any one thing.

“In Chabad, there was always the tendency to deify everything, whether it was the rebbes or the learning,” Matisyahu said. “[There was] this sense that you couldn’t ask questions about any of it, that if you didn’t accept it, you weren’t accepting the Torah. It was as if you weren’t religious, and that this was the one path and the true path and that anything outside of it, even if it was a different kind of Hasidim, was certainly looked down upon.” With Rosenstein, he said, Matisyahu relished a different mode of studying, which focused on placing teachings into historical and social contexts and then comparing them with other Hasidus and philosophies of Judaism.

“Shattered,” which comprises four songs, reflects this newly acquired intellectual and musical diversity. On the one hand, the tracks divert from his reggae stylings into new areas of electronica and rap; one of the tracks is with the electronic music duo The Crystal Method, famed for working with Fatboy Slim and with The Chemical Brothers. The EP’s first track, “Smash Lies,” dares listeners to challenge their musical assumptions about Matisyahu from the get-go, with banjo, synthesizers, rap and electronically modulated vocals. On the other hand, all the tracks reveal an attempt to convey messages of Jewish spirituality more deeply and subtly. Many of the lyrics were co-written by Rosenstein.

“I took classic Jewish works and stories and things that are really universal. I found them within Judaism, but any spirituality or religion around the world would identify with the themes,” Matisyahu said. “I tried to take in certain situations, like current events that I felt fall in line with those themes. The lyrics are an outgrowth of the philosophy, but manifest themselves in a more current format.”

One song, “So Hi So Lo,” stems from a famous story of Nachman of Bratslav. “This was his most famous story about two kids who get lost in the wilderness and have to make it through,” he said. “That became the theme, in a lot of ways, for the record and especially for this one song, that theme of being children in the forest.

“It’s central to Judaism — the exile, *galut*, is compared to being lost in darkness, dream, forest, wilderness. There’s a sense that the people are still traveling through that in their own ways, in terms of spirituality.”

The story took on another dimension on another track, as he became more aware of refugee camps in Sudan and Ghana and of child soldiers in Africa. “I had heard a story about some child soldiers that had escaped from a group and traveled 1,000 miles across the desert to safety,” he said. The song connects the story to another legend of Nachman of Bratslav.

Matisyahu’s music and religious attitudes reflect a new openness to the external world. The performer now listens to Icelandic band Sigur Rós, as well as to reggae star Sizzla. Yet his relationship to popular music now is different from what it was prior to his Crown Heights musical hiatus.

“Before I came into religion, I completely depended on music to be the glue that would bring my experiences together,” he said. “Walking down the street and not listening to music, everything felt disjointed and chaotic. When I was listening to music, it all came together. That was what music was for me. It’s what gave me my inner sense of hope and of unification of my own dreams, of what I wanted to do with my life and of overcoming the whole world.

“After I became religious, I didn’t feel the need for that anymore, the need for music to make that happen,” he said. “If things were chaotic and disjointed, I wanted to feel that, not to use music as a false glue. It was almost like getting high. It felt like I was cheating the reality, conning myself into this place. So I never again returned to listening to music in that same way.”

He struggles, he says, with balancing the secular and religious worlds, trying not to notice, for example, women at his shows who are dressed immodestly, yet not being able to wholly connect to his audience as a result.

“I find it somewhat strange how American society completely physicalizes and sexualizes women, and then the women are the ones who take that on, and those women are supposedly part of the feminist revolution and want to be seen as something beyond sexual objects,” Matisyahu said. “But the reality is that sexuality is a very powerful thing. Men or women, whatever, you see someone who’s sexy.”

He is quick to note that he doesn’t condemn people who take a different approach to modesty: “I’m not like, ‘how dare they come to my show like that!’ People are who they are. I put myself out there; they can come dressed how they want and do whatever they want while they’re there. But for myself, it’s kind of funny. I feel some sort of block. Sometimes I want to be totally open, want to take everybody in, make that connection with the audience. If I see a pretty girl, dressed sexy, I’m almost afraid to look at them. I feel like they’re going to think I’m looking at them in a sexual way.

“I wasn’t raised religious — I’m from the whole American culture. When I started putting on a yarmulke, I said, I represent much more. I represent these things, and I cannot be a hypocrite. Normally if you’re religious, you don’t look at women. But in my situation, I’m supposed to be open and loving. And so it stays in the forefront of what I’m dealing with, and how to balance it all.”

In response to my question of what “much more” meant, he said: “I think what I represent to a lot of people is sort of like someone who is a regular guy, a normal guy. A lot of people — young, Jewish, non-Jewish, whatever — are going through similar experiences of trying to figure things out. I think a lot of people see themselves in me, either in a certain genuineness or humility maybe. I don’t see myself as this big star; I see myself as a kid who is still trying to figure it all out and put it together.”

Exemplifying one of his many supreme balancing acts, one of our conversations transpired over cell phone as Matisyahu was driving an RV through the Toronto night, answering my questions with grace over the yells of a hysterical toddler while simultaneously trying to follow the GPS directions to his wife's grandmother's house.

Before we hung up, I asked if the GPS was working.

"I guess I'm not as far away as I thought I was," he responded.

Jordana Horn is a lawyer and writer at work on her first novel.