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Section: Main

Page: A1

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Jewish music strikes a mainstream chord

Hasidic reggae, hip-hop artists inspire a following by melding roots, genres

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ALBANY - Over Latin fretwork and hip-hop beats, Josh Norek, stage name Josue Noriega, raps in English, Spanish, Hebrew and Ladino, a Spanish-based Jewish language akin to Yiddish.

"Ya know I get down like the Lubavitcher rebbe," Norek, 29, from Delmar, shouts over his band, the Hip Hop Hoodios. Next to him rock a tambourine-playing brunette, wearing 3-inch red heels and a black tank top with the words "Hoodia Honey," and a guitarist with piercings and a do-rag.

In truth, the sparse crowd in the Temple Israel ballroom is more used to bar mitzvahs than a bicoastal alternative band, but the boys and girls throw their hands in the air to the rhythm.

Singing often fills the synagogue, especially at this time of year during the Jewish High Holidays, a 10-day period of repentance that ends Thursday with Yom Kippur. Music has always played a major role in Judaism. Many Jews have written pop songs - Norek's grandfather wrote lyrics for Frank Sinatra.

That said, the religion is rarely the subject of mainstream music. That's changing. A new generation is crossing over.

Gigs by two of the most prominent bands hitting mainstream ears bookend this week in the Capital Region. The Hoodios, whose name is a play on the Spanish word judio, which means Jew, played Sunday at the Albany synagogue.

Matisyahu, who bills himself (not unreasonably) as the Hasidic Reggae Superstar, has sold out his show at Troy's Revolution Hall on Sunday night.

"I thought the whole thing was going to be a novelty," says Willobee, the programming director for WEQX, an independent radio station in Manchester, Vt., that broadcasts throughout the Capital Region. Instead, Matisyahu's single "King Without a Crown," from a live album recorded at Stubb's BBQ in Austin, Texas, has hit bigger than anything Willobee has seen in the past decade.

Like others in the music industry, Willobee says the crossover appeal of bands that began on Christian radio have primed radio listeners for music based in any spirituality.

"He strikes a chord that's a common denominator with alterative music listeners," Willobee says. "Would he be as popular if he was not a Hasidic rapper? I don't know. What would his music be about?"

Adam Gardner, one-third of the popular band Guster, has formed a second project called the LeeVees with a musician from the Zambonis. Their Hanukkah album comes out Oct. 25 and already is available for download on iTunes. They will open for the Barenaked Ladies this fall, including on Nov. 19 at Turning Stone Casino and Resort in Verona, Oneida County.

Aaron Bisman's New York City promotions and record company, JDub, has been an engine for pushing Jewish artists toward center stage. Bisman and Matisyahu have worked together for more than four years. Another JDub band, Balkan Beat Box, is an indie-magazine darling and is opening the Troy show.

For Jews, like other immigrant groups, success meant forsaking the cities for the suburbs and assimilating into American culture, Bisman said.

For burgeoning Jewish artists today, they embrace their roots and use them for inspiration.

"There are some parameters," Bisman says. "It not only has to be Jewish. It has to be good."

The musicians allow younger Jews to identify with their religion and culture in a new way, says Howard Greenberg, the director of education and youth services at Temple Israel.

"What we're really seeing here is a degree of curiosity on the part of people in general toward one another," he says. "And religious people are willing to not compromise their art for who they are.

"Someone can be a religious Jew and be into reggae and hip-hop."

Matisyahu, born Matthew Miller in White Plains in 1979, grew up playing music. After meeting a rabbi from the ultra-religious Hasidic movement, Miller changed his name to the Hebrew equivalent and began strictly adhering to Jewish laws and practices.

Matisyahu won't perform on Jewish holidays or the Sabbath, which in Judaism runs from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. He won't make contact with women because Hasidics believe the sexes shouldn't mix and men shouldn't touch women who aren't relatives. He stopped stage-diving because he realized women might touch him, says Danny Buch, a vice president of promotions and artistic development for Sony BMG RED, who has traveled with Matisyahu on tour.

The singer regularly consults with his rabbi. During prime touring season this spring, he worried about playing during the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot, a holiday that commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments, Buch says. The rabbi told him that since making music is his livelihood, he could play on. Matisyahu's religious practice has cost him gigs and alienated some women, but Bisman says the artist has always maintained his consistency, which helps.

"We did it on our own terms from the get-go," he says.

This weekend's show in Troy will be Matisyahu's first after a two-week hiatus for the High Holidays.

Hip-hopper Norek hasn't labeled himself religious. He's a music fan who translated Tom Petty songs into Spanish for class at Bethlehem High School, spent a semester studying in South America in college and landed a job as a publicist for bands filed

under categories like rock en espanol or Latin alternative, which mix modern sounds with traditional Central and South American music.

"I realized I could still be myself and not have to cater to a white audience," he says, as the band tuned up in a synagogue room where the temple board of directors usually meets.

"Latin Jew - it sounds like a weird experiment in a lab," he says, laughing. Instead, he was just another suburban kid of the 1980s. "Most of us didn't grow up listening to klezmer," he says.

What the Hoodios and Matisyahu share is the ability to bring together genres that appeal to different audiences.

On the West Coast, the Hoodios offer the Chicano, or young Mexican, crowds what may be their first exposure to Hebrew or a klezmer horn line, Norek says. On the East Coast, the Hoodios are a hipster Jewish band, exposing that audience to cumbia rhythms.

Two seniors from Norek's alma mater didn't know the band, and they aren't sure they would buy the CD. Emily Forrest, 16, says she didn't have a job to pay for it, anyway. They liked the show. They really liked the tambourine player's shoes.

"I think it's cool that they give it a more modern edge," Forrest said.