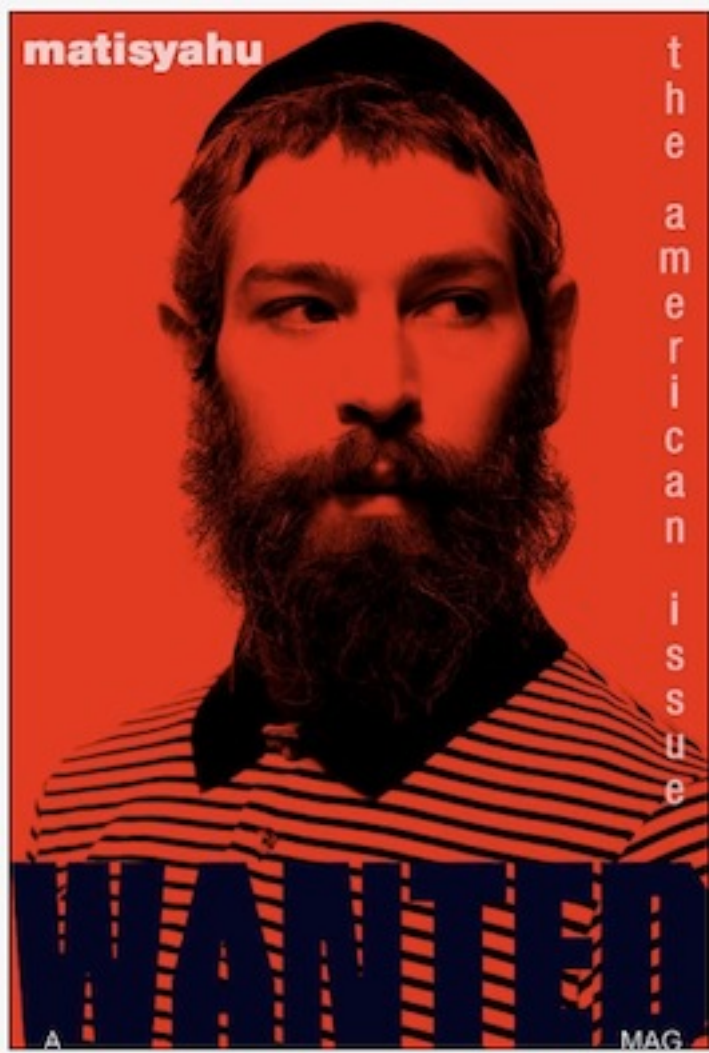


WANTED

A MAG



Matisyahu

Written by Daniel Alonso

WANTED had the opportunity to speak with a true original, Matthew Miller, better known to listeners as Matisyahu, the New York City-based Hassidic Jewish musician. His new album, *Light*, which debuted in the top 20 on the Billboard charts, is out now on Epic Records and the single "One Day" is the official anthem for the upcoming 2010 Winter

Olympic Games.

You grew up in White Plains, New York but at the age of sixteen, decided to take part in a study program in Hood Acheron, Israel. Through that experience you embraced certain views and beliefs that can be found in your music today. Firstly, as a young man, what motivated you to move around the world and delve into religion?

When I was a kid I went to public school. Although my parents were not Orthodox, they felt it was important to instill a Jewish identity in me so I went to a Reconstructionist Hebrew school three times a week after school. It was a drag; I couldn't play football with my friends because it conflicted with practice and I was the only boy in a class filled with rich girls from Scarsdale who tormented me until we reached adolescence. At some point, someone came to speak to us about a three-month program in Israel that we could go on and effectively miss school --I jumped at the opportunity.

What was that experience like and was there a defining moment that changed you?

My first night there I went out and almost got sent home for being with some kid who got smashed and came back to the campus drunk. After that it was really interesting. I became friends with the kids who had taken L.S.D. on the plane ride over. I started smoking, eating falafel and pursuing the freedoms of being away from home. It was sort of like college but two years early and in a foreign country. About a week into the trip they took us to Mount Scopus, which looks over Jerusalem. The sun was setting and the Islamic chanting was blaring from East Jerusalem over the loud speakers. The city was golden and I felt something ancient inside me. For the first time I felt that being Jewish mattered. It wasn't about showing off dance moves to the song, "O.P.P." at some rich girl's bat mitzvah back in New York or smoking hashish and eating falafel --it was real. I felt that there was this ancient beautiful spirituality that informed who I am and I had somehow missed out on my authentic heritage. That started my spiritual revolution but it wasn't until many years later that I actually became religious. The next eight years of my life was about searching out spirituality through many means but not religion. I just began to feel that there was something in me at my core that was Jewish and it resonated powerfully. However, I didn't quite know what it meant.

When was it that you decided to pursue music?

I always loved music. As a kid I would dress up like a rock star and perform air guitar to "Beat It" for the adults. I also performed in chorus and plays in school. When I dropped out of high school in my senior year, it was to follow the band Phish around the country. The only time I felt happy was when I was listening to music. At my first show

I dropped acid and that night I knew that I had no other choice. I felt music so deeply it was all I could ever do to be happy. I was 16. You mentioned in past interviews that during your youth and as a young adult, you chose to devote a lot of your time listening to two specific artists – Bob Marley and Sizzla -who later served as main inspiration to you. After the period when you embraced religion, you returned to music and began to listen to a wide array of artists.

Did that cause you to be a more eclectic musician from early on or did that type of eclecticism come about later in your career?

It went like this. I started listening to Bob Marley when I was 14 years old. I heard him constantly, referencing The Bible in his works. The only place I had heard the words Zion, Judah or Exodus before that was from my Israeli Hebrew teachers and I was usually trying to faze them out. When Bob spoke the words, "We know where we're going/ We know where we're from/ We live in Babylon/ We're going to the promise land/ Exodus!" it resonated in me as truth. I became very intrigued to find out more about The Torah. Then I went to Israel. I continued to listen to Bob's lyrics, "Grow your dreadlocks/ Don't be afraid of the wolf pack/ Keep your culture don't be afraid of the vulture." So, I did just that. I grew dreads and smoked weed and listened to reggae music religiously for inspiration, wisdom, self-empowerment and identity. I began to write rhymes and sing in that style. When I was about 19 and starting college in NYC, I got introduced to Sizzla and again first and foremost was moved by his music and his voice. Also, he quoted The Bible often in a way that was majestic and mystical and that mixed with the newer sound, (more beats i.e. hip hop drums then classic reggae rhythms was appealing to me being a teenager during the golden age of hip hop.) As a source of spiritual inspiration it all began to feel empty to me and I started to feel that I was missing the mark. I did what I always have done in my life when I felt lost or stuck, I prayed. I snuck up to the roof of the new school with a prayer shawl from my grandfather and a Hebrew prayer book. Although I had no idea what the words meant, I felt I was reaching out to something bigger then myself that actually cares about this world. I put on a yarmulke soon after and for the first time in my life it felt like I was representing myself in truth. I began my journey towards becoming religious and eventually moved to an ultra orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn where I completely divorced myself from popular culture including music. I stopped listening to all music and instead began to find inspiration through listening to the "nothing." (To delve into emptiness, into the God who cannot be heard, felt, or seen, the God of Israel.) As I began to re-assimilate myself into the equation, I began listening to music again and it mainly wasn't reggae. Though I still have a deep love for reggae and it feels like home for me in many ways I am touched by music and have always been touched regardless of the genre. I think it is that way for most musicians.

You have been vocal about your religious teachings inspiring you spiritually as well as musically. Has it always been crucial to you not only to entertain, but also to touch your listeners on a deeper level?

I have never understood the idea of music being entertainment. It is inherently holy. I felt that even as a young teenager, it always opened me up emotionally and mentally.

Within the combination of beats, the delivery of your lyrics and the distinctive affectations you use, a harmonious balance is formed between concept and music. Was it a challenge not letting any of the elements outweigh one another?

For me the concept and the music are really one thing. The music is the concept and vice-versa.

For many, there is a preconceived and often times cringe worthy idea of what "religious music" looks or sounds like. You definitely shattered a lot of those beliefs by singing and rapping about your religion and at the same time avoiding categorization. How were you able to successfully do that?

There is no one that cringes more at this than me. I have worked hard to bring the notion of humility into my music. This is the key. The problem with religious music is that it starts from the point where the writer claims to have the answer and the music serves merely as a secondary thing, a vehicle or an afterthought in order to impart an idea to the public masked in the music. This notion of ultimate truth is scary. Millions of Jews and others have been murdered for thousands of years because certain religions felt and continue to feel they have the answer. This type of religious music is based on the same thing, just a little nicer. Luckily its mostly crap mainly because these people are not inspired by music in the first place. Rule number one when it comes to making any kind of art is to be a listener. Only when one listens with an open heart can one be touched deep enough to turn around and create.

There are very few white rappers who reside in the Pantheon of Hip-Hop. For a variety of reasons, many are considered novelties at best and hoaxes at worst. Did you ever face resistance to your music or a push to change who or what you are?

The very first time I walked into a record company. It was Loud records in the late 90's and Wu Tang was still going strong. I was not yet religious but the A&R men didn't get it. I played one of them a track and he was like, "you're a Jew aren't you? Why are you singing about slavery and shit?" I guess the only Jews he knew were the heads of the record company, two yidden from Long Island. Can't blame him I guess. . .

Do you still face any of that or has the cynicism worn off over the past few years?

It's an uphill battle but I like the challenge.

On last year's album Light, you started by writing songs with your friends, some who had different musical backgrounds that consequently led to you incorporating different sounds and styles. What prompted the move to experiment on the record?

Like I mentioned before, I have always loved music regardless of genre. It's just that as I was developing my style as a vocalist I was mainly influenced by reggae. As time goes on and I listen to more and more music from various genres I begin to incorporate and develop and grow. I think that's how it is for all artists. If someone does the same thing over and over they are probably closing themselves off to something natural.

You described the song "One Day", the first single released from Light, as less distinct and more accessible than some of your other songs. What made it such a departure from previous efforts – was it the songwriting, production, etc?

I believe there is an art to making a good pop song, writing a song that is accessible yet meaningful. I have been waiting for an opportunity to fully invest myself in writing this kind of song because I feel it is a deep thing to be accessible and to have something that is relatable. It is something that crosses boundaries regardless of race, age, religion, etc. It is about humanity. It is so deep. I believe this is the ultimate role of music, of religion, and of Judaism. When you turn on the radio it is so bad; talented artists and musicians singing about totally meaningless things. I feel it is poison. It is a desecration of music and humanity, which is so holy. People need meaning. I feel blessed to have had a part in writing this song.

When you are writing and recording, is accessibility something you often keep in mind?

First and foremost I express from the place of inspiration. If that goes in line with accessibility, I feel blessed. A few months back, I attended a "Jews in Punk Rock" lecture at the YIVO Institute hosted by members of The Heartbreakers, The Ramones and Patti Smith Group. All of the speakers, some religious, some not, likened the physical act of performing in concert to experiences that matched the spirit of religious services.

While many musicians can perform well and entertain, very few are able to stir up such enthusiasm and passion with audiences – how are you able to do that night after night?

I try to go into each show without expectations or the need to control the outcome. I feel the true mastery in performance is the ability to let go, to allow for something fresh and real to happen, to be present in the space and allow for the people there to resonate in you, to be non judgmental and last but not least let the music take over and create the magic that's inherent to it.

A lot of the ideas you sing about, specifically peace and freedom, has served as inspiration for artists and thinkers throughout the years. In American culture, it was last seen at its peak during the free love and protest eras of the 1960's and 70's. In your opinion, what does it mean to you to be "free" and is the utopia-like world you sing of a possibility?

In my religion there is the ancient idea of a utopian society. I go for it. It is a choice, to believe or not to. I think there is a place within that is hopeful and that is not bound by intellect or any limitation of what our minds tell us isn't possible. I feel that place within is at the core of what it means to be Jewish. Actually, Jews were being murdered for thousands of years because of this idea. In the words of Nietzsche, "The world doesn't hate the Jews because they killed God but because they gave birth to him." Something like that. . .

What are your plans for the future – touring, recording, etc?

A new version of "One Day" that features Akon will be dropping on January 26. I will be touring Hawaii, South America, Australia, Europe and the States this year and I will also be going to Israel to play with my friends' band Infected Mushroom. I'm also focusing on being a dad and husband, letting go and appreciating life --breathing, praying, living, exploring and singing. It's all about simplicity.