

Darkness into light

By [DAVID BRINN](#)

Walking the streets of Jerusalem's Nachlaot neighborhood during the Tishrei onslaught of holidays, Matisyahu, his wife Tahlia and their two sons, look just like any other young, haredi family out for a stroll. And that's just the way the 30-year-old American singer likes it.



"It's a combination of hanging out with my wife and the kids, and trying to get some spiritual clarity and strength from being in the Jewish homeland," said Matisyahu, who since his 2005 breakout hit "King Without a Crown" has helped make tzitzit and peyot cool among the MTV crowd with his free-flowing mix of hassidut, reggae and hip hop.

"I've been in Israel for the last three years on Tishrei, and part of what I come here for is to get away from [music](#). In the US, it seems like every Jewish musician I bump into on the street wants to play with me," he said.

Despite the vacation, Matisyahu couldn't stay away from music too long, which is why he's appearing in Israel twice with his band, the versatile jamming Dub Trio, Wednesday night in Jerusalem's Sultan Pool, and the next night at a hastily added show at The Barby club in Tel Aviv. That's not to mention the impromptu appearances the singer has been making, like joining jazz saxophonist Danny Zamir onstage last week at Tel Aviv's Tmuna Theater.

"Danny is a really good friend. We were at the New [School](#) in Manhattan in the Village together back at the beginning of the decade. My roommate was a guitar player and hung out with jazz musicians, and Danny was part of that circle," recalled Matisyahu.

"We both started getting interested in Judaism and I would spend Shabbos with him across the bridge in Hoboken. Then we didn't see each other for a while. In the meantime, I became religious and moved to Crown Heights, and we sort of lost touch. When it came time for our college graduation ceremony, we both showed up fully religious with kippot and beards. We were both freaking out."

And Zamir isn't the only Israeli musician who pushes Matisyahu's eclectic buttons.

"There's also this guy I met last night at Danny's show - Duvdev [Amit Duvdevani] from Infected Mushroom, the trance, electronic band. He's really cool, he did a remix in one day of one of my songs and turned it into a seven-minute dance track. We're talking about doing something together."

Clearly, Matisyahu's world revolves around music, and has done so even back in White Plains, New York, when he was growing up as Matthew Miller in a Reconstructionist Jewish household.

BUT BEFORE music, there was ice hockey.

"I never really thought about music as a kid. I wanted to play hockey. But then one year, I broke my collarbone before the season started. And somehow I developed a bad reputation and was kicked off the team. At that point, I started getting into music, particularly Bob Marley," he said. "From then on, that was all that was important in my life, not academics or anything else."

There was one other ray of enlightenment that entered Matisyahu's consciousness in his teen years that also tugged at his soul, and it was due to a high school semester in Israel, studying at the Alexander Muss High School in Hod Hasharon.

"It was definitely life-forming. I was 16 and it was my first time away from home," recalled Matisyahu.

"I remember one moment. They took us up to Mount Scopus around sunset to look at the Old City. For the first time I got all emotional and swept up in the idea of me being part of the Jewish people. Until then, it was a minor component of my identity, but it began to raise my awareness of the history and ancestry and rich background that I had. It was overwhelming."

Of course, that one experience didn't transform him overnight into an observant Orthodox Jew.

"The next day was Yom Kippur and I remember buying a bageloh from an Arab vendor. But that experience planted the seed," he said.

Upon his return to New York, the music seed took hold again, this time courtesy of hippie jam band Phish, whom Matisyahu became a fanatical devotee of.

"After my time in Israel and my spiritual life-changing experiences, I came back to high school and was depressed. But then I went to see Phish and took some LSD. At that moment, I knew exactly what it was that I wanted to do - to play music," he said.

However, the bedazzled teen didn't pursue his dream in any logical manner, and instead informed his perplexed [parents](#) that he was dropping out of school to follow Phish around the US on their tour.

"They weren't happy, but a lot of what I learned and the life experiences I had that have contributed to who I am today came from these alternative methods," he said.

Eventually, Matisyahu drew closer to Judaism, adopting an Orthodox lifestyle affiliated with the Chabad movement in 2001, and at the same time, launching his music career. In 2004, he released his first album *Shake Off the Dust... Arise* on the JDub label, and when his idol Trey Anastasio of Phish invited him onstage at the Bonaroo music festival the next year, his career took off.

THE DIZZYING spiral upward, complete with high profile appearances on The David Letterman show, knocked the singer off-kilter for a while, as he struggled to balance his spiritual and professional demands.

"At first, I was very strict with myself - the religion, praying three times a day, keeping kosher, I held tight to those things to keep some stability in my life," he said.

"I would find myself driving around in a van with the band and crew who were not even Jewish. It forced me to kind of reconnect with myself, and find some kind of balance of who I was and who I wanted to become. It's taken me a few years, maybe five years to become comfortable with who I am."

That effort included distancing himself from the Lubavitchers a couple of years ago and beginning to explore other religious avenues in the Orthodox world. When he's in Jerusalem, he spends much of his time with the person he describes as his "[teacher](#) and mentor," Efraim Rosenstein, a noted Kiryat Arba psychotherapist, who the singer credits with helping him regain his spiritual footing.

Since ending their therapist-patient relationship, the two began a deeper friendship that resulted in Rosenstein collaborating on lyrics with Matisyahu on his new album *Light*.

"In terms of actual lyrical content and ideas, we spend a lot of time together discussing things. And a lot of the ideas for songs come from that," he said.

While many of Matisyahu's earlier songs are clearly Chabad-oriented, with calls for "moshiach now" and short clips of Lubavitch rabbis talking theology and offering blessings, the material on *Light* take a less overtly religious bent. And the [music](#) - featuring different musicians, writers and producers like Trevor Hall, Good Charlotte and members of Fishbone - branches out beyond the reggae/hip hop arena into a more mainstream sound encompassing electronica, pop and folk, which hasn't sat well with some longtime fans.

"It wasn't that I was trying to do anything different, I was just basically trying to express myself in the method that felt best," said Matisyahu.

"At one time, it may have been making a classic roots reggae record, or a live album. For me now, I don't have one specific direction or style. I wanted to bring in different elements and styles, but it wasn't a conscious decision. I'm very satisfied with how it came out."

He's also very satisfied with his new band, Dub Trio, with whom he's been working for only a few months, and their ability, like Phish, to take off on the standard song structure and improvise with inspired jamming. Even audiences in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv who are used to Matisyahu's high energy shows may be surprised by the increase in intensity.

While he'll be leaving the country soon after the Barby show, Matisyahu thinks about Israel throughout the year, and like many observant American Jews, would like to fit aliya into his future.

"I would really like to make aliya, but when the time is right for me," he said.

"I'm going to be on the road for most of the next year, and I don't know what I'm going to be doing next. That sort of determines where I'll live. Being in Israel for me is the place to be when I don't have anything going on. But I don't know if I'm going to be in that position in the near future."

At least, he'll always have Tishrei.