

## Jewish rapper Matisyahu has faith in his music

By Walter Tunis - Contributing Music Critic

On the cover of his third and newest studio album, *Light*, we see a sun-washed photo of Matisyahu looking nothing short of tranquil.

Gone is the black suit and wide-brimmed hat, traditional garb of the Hasidic Jewish faith he adopted long ago and still very much embraces. But five years have passed since Matisyahu was introduced as an almost impossible pop creation — a Hasid who rapped about life and faith over dance-hall reggae and dub grooves.



*Matisyahu, raised Matthew Miller in a traditional Jewish family, rebelled as a youngster but later reconciled with his faith. He changed his name when he became a member of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect.*

Back then, it was difficult to view the young artist as anything other than a novelty. In 2009, the look and the sound of Matisyahu have become more, well, enlightened.

"What I do is the result of a process, an organic process, which is reflective of what, I think, most musicians and artists go through when they are creating any type of work," Matisyahu said in a recent phone interview.

"For me, *Light* is really a reflection of life experience, of

life process and all that comes along with that — artistically, musically, spiritually. It's about all of these different aspects. It's a full-on expression, an immersion of self."

The album also is something of a sonic and stylistic expansion. Fans who simply go for the groove in Matisyahu's music will find a deeper pool to wade through on *Light*. The dub-style accents become more rugged and expansive on *For You*, and *Darkness Into Light* shifts

percolating rhymes that race by with the speed of a Manhattan cab ride into a groove saturated with guitar crunch.

The biggest departure, perhaps, is the album-closing *Silence*, an affirming but sobering meditation surrounded not by dance-hall beats but by the acoustic guitar ambience of Trevor Hall, who will share the concert bill when Matisyahu makes his Lexington debut on Monday.

"These styles, these sounds, come from the musical inspiration leading up to the record," Matisyahu said. "The inspiration is what you feed off of; it's what I was influenced by as a teenager who was developing and wanting to be a singer, a rapper, whatever you want to call it. More importantly, that inspiration was about finding my place in it all, about finding different ways to express yourself and not limiting yourself to just one thing."

Early inspirations for the West Pennsylvania youth who was born Matthew Miller were the forefathers of two jam generations — Bob Marley and Phish.

"Early on, the first Phish concert I went to when I was 16 years old had a major effect on me. It was the first time I ate LSD. It was a completely immersive experience — just the typical stuff you hear of in terms of experiencing life on a whole new plane of existence.

"But Bob Marley was really a leader for me. His music directed me to the path of wanting to discover my own spiritual tradition, my own heritage and the need to draw upon that."

Reconciliation and eventual acceptance of a traditional Jewish upbringing went almost hand in hand with a Deadhead-like existence while following Phish on the road. His interests in reggae and rap began to flourish just before he joined the Carlebach Shul, a Manhattan synagogue where music was encouraged. When studies led him to the Lubavitch Hasidic sect, Matthew Miller became Matisyahu.

"So I began performing my music in the Jewish world," he said. "For example, I would get up at a table, do a rap and a rabbi would hear it and invite me to play at his Hanukkah party within the community. So there was definitely a certain amount of support I received that served to sort of springboard my career.

"I'm certain there were lots of people ... that were not supportive. But I never paid much attention to that."

A debut Matisyahu album, *Shake Off the Dust ... Arise*, was released in 1994. But it was the subsequent concert recording, *Live at Stubb's*, that introduced the world to the serious dance-hall energy of tunes including *King Without a Crown* and *Chop 'Em Down*.

The songs and performances were still fueled by faith. But the album's recording locale underscored just how far-reaching Matisyahu's appeal had become. After all, Stubb's wasn't a synagogue, but a famed Austin, Texas, barbecue and beer joint.

"It felt great," Matisyahu said of the acceptance brought on by *Live at Stubb's*. "This was my dream. So, obviously, it was an amazing feeling. I had personally gone through this process of becoming religious prior to that and gave up a lot. I was taking a chance by jumping into a new lifestyle by kind of divorcing myself from mainstream culture. And I was doing it all with the belief that if I would make these sacrifices and if I would, in a sense, dedicate myself to God, then God would help me make my dreams come true.

"So it was sort of full circle for me. I felt very blessed. And I still feel very blessed to be able to make music."

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