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Matisyahu: Bringing together genres of music and different audiences

Historically, it seemed like an unlikely mix. No one overtly tried to mix the cultures of Hasidic Judaism and the black community before. No one overtly tried to mix religious messages with mainstream rap, R&B and reggae before. However, when recording artist Matisyahu broke into mainstream culture in 2004, these were the exact gaps he threatened bridge. Now was as good a time as any for an individual like Matisyahu, a devout Hasidic Jew rap/reggae recording artist, to come around. The cultures he tried to bring together (both musically and socially), had been in conflict with each long before his arrival.

The existing social and musical cultures

It was August 19, 1991 and the next three days would drastically alter the relationship between two groups of people. In the Crown Heights neighborhood of New York City, there had previously been tensions between the Jewish and black communities. Some Jews were afraid to go into the “black” parts of the neighborhood out of fear of getting mugged or shot, while some blacks saw Jews as taking over the

neighborhood and receiving special treatment from police and public housing offices (Lee & Goldman). In the years directly leading up to '91, incidents between Hasidic Jews and blacks occurred. In '87 there was a protest march by members of the black community against what was considered Hasidic surveillance harassment. In '89, several Hasidic Jews reportedly beat a young black boy of only 16 years old because he was suspected of slashing a Hasidic Jew during a robbery (Foderaro).

However, it was those three days in '91 when the infamous Crown Heights Riots took place. A Jewish man was returning home after visiting the cemetery one evening. Upon his return back to the neighborhood, the man got involved in a car accident that ended with the car striking two young, black children who were on the sidewalk. The Jewish man was found to not have a driver's license and later fled to Israel before charges could be filed. The two children were taken to local hospitals but died upon their arrival (Kifner). The days after this incident were charged by a feeling that the two victims of the accident didn't receive the same medical treatment as the man who caused the accident. Fires were set, a police car overturned, shops looted, Hasidic Jews and blacks threw bottles and rocks at each other and even a visiting rabbinical student from Australia was killed during the rioting (Kifner). The riots attracted the attention of civil rights leaders (Al Sharpton was there within days). They became the subject of documentaries and film interpretations. They may have even won Rudy Giuliani the mayorship of New York as former mayor David Dinkins significantly lost the Jewish vote in '93. Ten years later in 2001, two New York Times reporters who covered the original incidents (Felicia Lee and John Kifner) wrote a follow-up piece. It was entitled "In Crown Heights, A Decade of Healing After Riots, but Scars Remain." It called the riots the "ugliest racial spasm in

decades,” and one woman in the story was quoted as saying, “There is a little healing so far, but not much. There are really two cultures that are different” (Lee & Kifner). They may have lived side by side, but there was a distinct separation between these two groups of people.

Also in the American conscientiousness in 1991, musical deviation was occurring. First there was a deviation from the traditional rap scene. Vanilla Ice, a white rapper from Miami, FL, hit it big with his single, “Ice, Ice, Baby.” He was considered one of the first non-black rappers, but Ice’s musical content was similar to other rappers at the time. Although he is considered one of the pioneers of the “sampling” technique popular in rap today, his skin color was what really differentiated him from previous rap acts – not his music (“Catching up with...”). This phenomenon would later reoccur when Eminem hit the music scene in the late ‘90s, however both his career and Vanilla Ice’s were short lived. Staying power for the non-black rapper was an issue and the sheer number of non-black rappers was miniscule. The problem wasn’t that these acts weren’t out there either, as Vanilla Ice would later point out:

“I’m glad there’s another white guy out there having success because it’s all been on my shoulders for so long. There’s a lot of talented -- white, Puerto Rican or Jew -- if you’ve got skills, you’ve got ‘em. More than half of all the hip hop record sales are white people and I think that might be a result of my record helping people to accept hip hop. If you grew up in my generation, you’re going to be influenced by Run DMC, the Beastie Boys and also listen to Metallica -- music wasn’t segregated anymore. So lots of

folks out in rock today are still hip to what's going on in hip hop today. It's kind of cool" ("Catching up...").

Listeners to the genre were diverse, but it was still tough for a large, diverse group of performers to have success within the rap community.

Another musical deviation was also occurring during the decade. The nineties would become a breeding group for religious ideas to enter mainstream music. Bands like Creed and P.O.D would bring religion to the mainstream and pave the way for future groups such as Relient K or Switchfoot to do the same. However, bands crossing over from religious music to mainstream music was still an obscure happening (Ross). Even more obscure were bands that did this and weren't in the same category of Creed, P.O.D, etc. All of these bands were Christian bands, and all of them were of the modern rock genre. Religion was still relatively taboo in all musical genres, but even more so in genres that weren't modern rock. Particularly opposed to religious undertones was the rap and R&B genre, which was often criticized for promoting non-religious themes like the degradation of women, criminal activity, drug usage, sexual promiscuity, etc. (Gordon). Even one rap's most popular current artists, Kanye West, recently reflected on how the musical genre and religion were seldom if ever mixed. In his hit single, "Jesus Walks," off the 2004 album *The College Dropout*, West reminded us about mainstream rap having no place for religion with lyrics like, "So here go my single; dog radio needs this / They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus / That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes / But if I talk about God my record won't get played. Huh?" (West). West's lyrics summed up the existing culture pretty well. If you wanted to talk about religion, music wasn't the forum to do it, and rap music in particular was not an option.

Time brings a foundation for deviation in social and music cultures

With the conflicts between the Jewish and black communities and the rap and religious communities, the nineties were not a time where an artist like Matisyahu could be created and thrive. However, over the next ten years there would be cultural evolutions both socially and musically that would create the right atmosphere for an individual to start bringing together seemingly opposite communities.

In a social realm, the black and Jewish communities made significant progress by the time 2004 rolled around. Directly in Crown Heights, organizations were formed to better the community that included both Jewish and black persons (such as Mothers to Mothers, which since 1992 has brought together black and Jewish mothers to talk about their fears and dreams). Largely that neighborhood remained peaceful but separate however, as one community leader noted in 2001, “The atmosphere just before [the riots] happened was very calm. Just like now” (Lee & Kifner).

In a larger realm however, the two cultures took strides to learn from the incidents of the early ‘90s and begin to better relationships between them. Civil rights leader Al Sharpton (who responded to the Crown Heights riots within days) took a trip to Israel in 2001 to meet with Authority leader Yasir Arafat. According to Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (a prominent figure in the Jewish community), Sharpton was,

“someone who was antagonistic to the Jewish Community. However, after September 11 he said that he wanted to make a bold gesture of

reconciliation to the Jewish community. I hope that all my Jewish brothers and sisters will extend not just an olive branch, but a warm hand of familial friendship, seeing Rev. Sharpton as a friend of the Jewish community, a friend of the State of Israel” (Noel).

Gestures like Sharpton’s were symbolic for the mending that was occurring between the two cultures. The acceptance of Jews by blacks and blacks by Jews was becoming largely evident especially in a certain public realm – the public political atmosphere. For instance, in the months leading up the 2004 president election, polls would reveal a surprising twist in the race for the Democratic nomination.

“It’s odd to say the least --Joe Lieberman, first ever Jewish-American presidential candidate, leading the Democratic field in support from black voters. But according to a recent USA Today/Gallup poll asking black Democrats who they liked best from a list that included Al Sharpton, that’s exactly what is happening today. The first explanation most political observers give for this popularity is also the most obvious: name identification. A former vice presidential candidate gets a head start from having his name on the leftover blue and red bumper stickers that still decorate the rear ends of cars across the country ... And since the 2000 campaign ended, even before he knew for sure he would run in 2004, Lieberman spent time cultivating support among African-American leaders in Washington and around the country” (Hayes).

If his poll numbers weren’t enough, Lieberman’s actions provided even more evidence of the outreach occurring between blacks and Jews. During his Vice President run in 2000,

Liebermann called Eddie Bernice Johnson, head of the Congressional Black Caucus, to ask which caucus members he might support with his Political Action Committee.

Among his contributions was a \$1,000 check to the reelection effort of Rep. Earl Hilliard of Alabama - and Hilliard had a long record of hostility to Israel. He refused to sign a resolution in support of Israel's war on terrorism, and sponsored a bill, after September 11, that would have lifted sanctions on states that sponsor terrorism. After a 2003 primary race, Hilliard warned of a "future with a great deal of conflict between African Americans and Jews in this country" and suggested African Americans would seek "retribution" for his loss (Hayes). Lieberman's outreach to Hilliard was emblematic of just how far the relationship between the two cultures came in such a short period of time.

Also paving the way for Matisyahu was the rise of religious tones in mainstream music. In the 21st century, overtly religious artists were experiencing success like the genre had never before seen. In 2002, the mainstream rock / Christian act Switchfoot had four of their songs featured on the soundtrack for *A Walk To Remember*, a movie starring Mandy Moore which made \$41 million in the U.S. and earned Moore an MTV Movie Award (*A Walk To Remember*). In 2003 the band released *The Beautiful Letdown*, which sold 2.6 million copies, reached number 16 on the Billboard Top 100 and featured two singles ("Dare You To Move," and "Meant To Live,") that both cracked the Top 10 in Billboard Modern Rock charts (Billboard). The band would go on to still sell nearly half a million records (449, 102 to be exact) with their follow-up album *Nothing Is Sound* only two years later. Also in 2005, the Christian music genre as a whole became the sixth best selling style of music, totaling 39.2 million units sold ("Nielsen..."). Even in non-traditional music settings, like the wildly popular Fox program *American Idol*, religious

music would gain exposure and popularity with artists like season two runner-up Clay Aiken, season three contestant George Huff, season five contestant Mandisa Hundley, season one contestant RJ Helton, season three winner Fantasia Barrino and season two winner Ruben Studdard (“American Idol...”).

Maybe even more vital to creating a culture that would make Matisyahu possible, was the first major hit that fused rap and religion – Kanye West’s anthem on the need to express religion in music, “Jesus Walks.” The single rose as high as number 11 in the Billboard Top 100 charts and was only the second rap song to ever be nominated for “Song of the Year,” at the Grammy Awards (it was nominated in 2005) (“Biography...”). While he was largely the only artist to have major success with a rap and religion mix, West really started a conversation about mixing the traditionally secular genre of rap with religion. Some people in the church disregarded West’s song, like Rev. Matthew L. Watley, a youth minister at Reid Temple AME Church in Lanham, Maryland, who said, “I think that Kanye's offering is sort of like a Hostess snack. It's a good, quick something to ingest, but probably not enough to make a full diet for a person seriously committed to their faithful orientation” (Hopkinson). Others in the religious realm were quick to embrace West and his song. In late August of 2004, Ebenezer AME Church in Fort Washington was criticized when the New York Daily News published a gossip item saying the church paid West \$30,000 to perform two songs there. Three thousand young people paid \$10 for tickets to see West, who agreed to stop by the church after a concert with Usher at the nearby MCI Center. Rev. Tony Lee, the youth minister at the church, had only good things to say about West and his work:

"It's a challenge when Kanye could talk about drugs and guns and violence and he wouldn't get half the flak that he gets for talking about Jesus. My question is what statement is the church sending to a person like Kanye who is trying to reach out? He comes for the sinners and he comes for the sick, and we are upset because he is not coming in the usual way. That single is anointed, and I'm telling you I'm seeing the fruits of it. It is not every day in a church where over 300 young people give their life to Christ. I'm not going to be mad at Kanye about that. I'm affirming that brother. God bless him" (Hopkinson).

With the conversation started and support existing for a fusion of religion and rap, the groundwork was finally set for an artist to come along and fuse cultures once so overtly opposed to each other.

Matisyahu finally on the scene

After growing up in White Plains, N.Y. and spending parts of his schooling in Colorado, Israel, and Oregon, a man named Mathew Miller heard a profound spiritual calling. Heavily influenced by the reggae and hip-hop sounds of his day-to-day soundtrack, Miller wanted to bring about a revolutionary way of sharing his religion to the masses ("Bio"). He'd take the name his parents called him all his life after forgetting what the formal name he received at his bris. So in 2003 Matisyahu (the Hasidic form of Matthew), began practicing music after asking a rabbi in Crown Heights whether or not his quest was a valid one ("M on M").

“That first time my rabbi heard me play, I remember doing what I do, with my eyes closed, not because I was envisioning the music, but because I was really afraid to see what his reaction was going to be. When I opened my eyes at the end, Rabbi Goldberg had a glimmer in his eye that said ‘Ah, Matisyahu!’ He had seen I wasn’t just some yeshiva kid who wanted to go to a club but understood that I have some kind of talent” (“MonM”).

Matisyahu had previously performed after high school with a Jewish band called Pey Dalid, but now he was focusing on channeling his spirituality through the musical genres he grew up loving – rap, hip-hop, and reggae (Blum). Matisyahu sighted two of biggest influences as Bob Marley and Phish (a modern jam-reggae band), and ironically he would later receive his big break from one of them (Serpick). In 2004, he signed with JDub Records, a not for profit record label that promotes Jewish musicians, and released his first album, *Shake Off the Dust...Arise*. The album didn’t make the charts and Matisyahu was left to obscurity. His music was not the issue though; he just needed to gain exposure for his new breed of religion and rap. He would rise to prominence on a faithful day at Bonnaroo, a large mainstream yearly music festival held in Tennessee. At the 2005 festival, nearly 77, 000 people were attending and Matisyahu would create a buzz among them after he talked Trey Anastasio, lead singer of the band Phish, into letting him play a set (Serpick). He would make many, “breakthrough performance” lists for his sets at Bonnaroo including Glide Magazine and JamHouston.com. Bonnaroo would prove to be an event that brought Matisyahu’s message to the people and launched his career.

After his Bonnaroo appearance, Matisyahu's most recent CD, a recording of a show in Austin, TX entitled *Live at Stubb's*, would start gaining popularity. It would eventually peak at number 30 in the Billboard Top 100 and gain platinum sales status (Billboard). The record spawned a single, "King Without a Crown," that would rise to number 28 in the Billboard Top 100 and make Matisyahu a mainstay in Top 40 radio (Billboard). His popularity would escalate to the point that Carson Daly, former host of MTV's Total Request Live, called him, "the most exciting thing in music today," on several occasions on his late night show. Even those who criticized Matisyahu as a "schtick" performer couldn't deny that there was a level of genius and talent in his music. Slate Magazine said of his impressive debut, "Matisyahu has become the most famous Hasid this side of the Baal Shem Tov, the movement's 18th-century founder," and, "The Top 40 has always been a pageant of excess, absurdity, and trans-ethnic pastiche, but there's not really a precedent for "King Without A Crown," (Rosen). All of this for a man who was combining rap, reggae, and religion with lyrics like, "I want *Moshiach* [the messiah] now," making shout out paeans to "*Hashem*" (Orthodox Jews' favorite term for God), and "Me no want sensimilla .../ Torah food for my brain" (Matisyahu).

Matisyahu would go on to tour the country headlining shows (including a stop at Syracuse's Landmark Theater last fall) and to produce three more albums to date while still maintaining his devout religious practice (no shows on the Sabbath day for instance). The first was entitled *Youth*, and it landed at number 4 in the Billboard Top 100. The album made history by earning the best opening sales week for a reggae album since Nielsen SoundScan began tracking data in 1991. It sold 119,000 copies its opening week, which placed it ahead of Sean Paul's 2005 reggae set *The Trinity*, the previous best at

107,000 copies. With *Youth*, Matisyahu joined Sean Paul, Snow, Shaggy, UB40, Damian "Jr. Gong" Marley and his father, Bob Marley, as the only reggae artists to crack the top 10 on the mainstream Billboard chart (Billboard). The album got even more critical praise than *Live at Stubb's*. It received a better review from Rolling Stone than the previous album, as the review stated, "the world has never seen a Hasidic Jew rocking payos side-locks and the mike with equal devotion," and "His band plays one-drop roots reggae like a group of Jam Cruise vets" (Relic). Even VIBE, a traditionally black, urban music magazine, found room to include and sing the praises of Matisyahu. They included links to his video for "King Without A Crown," on their web site and proclaimed "All rise for Hasidic reggae rapper Matisyahu," when talking about how studio-ready the artist was on *Youth* (Rashbaum).

With the success from his first two albums, Matisyahu officially arrived on the music scene and left audiences and critics everywhere experiencing something completely new to them. The impact Matisyahu would have on the cultures he invaded, would flush out immediately.

Implications of Matisyahu

Matisyahu's music was giving other cultures not typically associated with rap, reggae, and hip-hop inspiration to take chances and it was bringing together diverse crowds that included members of many communities including the once opposed Jewish and black communities.

For instance, in 2005 prior to his release of *Youth*, Matisyahu was invited to perform at the major annual reggae festival, Reggae Carifest, held in New York. His performance was well received on all accounts. The Jamaican entertainment web site, Partyinc.com, sang his praises. Their article on Matisyahu said, “It isn’t often that a Jewish guy singing reggae songs and doing beat-boxing is booked to appear on Reggae Carifest, NY’s annual reggae show. But this year it’s different,” and “[Already] popular among Jewish kids for his blend of traditional Hasidic song and Reggae, Matisyahu is ready to break into the Reggae crowd. I’ve seen him perform twice and each time was amazed at his talent and the spirituality of the music. Even better was the pure-sounding reggae (and accent!) that accompanied his singing, rapping or beat-boxing” (Ellis). The article also pointed out how impactful Matisyahu was on the Jewish community (“Matisyahu’s impact on Jewish kids has been tremendous. At a recent concert in NY, he drew a crowd of at least 450 people, the majority of which was kids not more than 16 years old.”), and it pointed out how Matisyahu was scheduled to perform in Jamaica in the near future (Ellis).

Perhaps just as impressive as the crowds and conversations he was starting; Matisyahu opened the doors for a number of similar acts (artists combining seemingly opposite cultures and art forms). Between 2003 and the present, artists such as 50 Shekel, Etan G, Shlock Rock, Black Hattitude, and Skryfs began popping up with minimal success as they tried to combine Jewish messages and rap, hip-hop cultures (“Rap”). Other non-Jewish acts were also choosing rap, hip-hop to promote their spiritual beliefs. German produced act Gentleman produced reggae music since 2004. His music promotes cultural peace through his lyrics and he is accepted as a genuine reggae artist in Jamaica

today – a white, German reggae star gaining praise in Jamaica might not have been possible ten years ago (Morris). Also rising to a level of prominence, the Muslim beatboxer Kenny Muhammad. Muhammad isn't overtly religious in his music (his work is more beatbox than rhyme) but he is quick to point out his cultural roots in interviews (Lucky). Muhammad has even joined Matisyahu on some of his national tours and performed with the New York Symphony Orchestra in 2005. ("Kenny Muhammad...").

A modern culture where Jewish and black communities can embrace each other only 10 years after epic violence against each other, and where musicians can not only have success singing about religion, but they can do so in whatever musical genre they choose, is something new and still evolving. However, if all the forces legitimizing him are any evidence (or as his popularity and success can show) Matisyahu is a new force in mainstream culture and he isn't about to stop his message anytime soon.

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