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Matisyahu: In the face of strong threats but still succeeding

Other artists may have passed him on the Billboard charts, but in terms of cultural significance no musician today has out performed Matisyahu, the Hasidic Jew reggae / hip-hop recording artist. Around the time of his debut, the Jewish and black communities were beginning to reestablish a positive relationship just ten years after the infamous Crown Heights Riots and religious music was beginning to gain mainstream attention by mixing with other genres (i.e. rock music with Switchfoot or rap music with Kanye West). By taking advantage of those expanding cultures, Matisyahu burst onto the scene in 2003 and reinforced all of the seduction going on between the seemingly opposite musical and social communities.

However, despite all of the positive contributions Matisyahu has made, there are still threats to the diversity and expansion he has promoted. Forces are working directly against the progress made between the Jewish and black communities and the religious and hip-hop communities. Forces are undermining the work of Matisyahu and trying to paint what he represents as unimportant. In spite of all that, the man and his music have made promises that will leave lasting impacts on society.

A new global force against the diversity Matisyahu promotes

When it came to fusing the cultures of Jews and blacks, Matisyahu's most direct impact came in the United States; especially since he is originally from New York, frequently tours the states, and releases his records primarily in the US ("Bio..."). That being said, the progress between these two cultures that he embraces, promotes and blends is ironically challenged most strongly from events happening abroad.

Some accounts of the situation have the feuds starting back in the 1880s, but they are alive and well today following the events of 2004 when a government made up of a political "terror group," took over ("Internal Palestine..."). The ongoing disputes between Palestine and Israel are the surprising basis which sparks controversy between the Jewish and black communities in the US today. In particular, the United States' role in the recent developments is really beginning to divide the two communities.

Palestine and Israel have long been in conflict stemming from a religious belief that certain people (i.e. people of Israel, Jews) had a divine right to a certain land (Palestine) regardless of who currently occupied it (Palestinians). The recent developments in the age old feud between the two countries started with the political group Hamas rising to power in Palestine through democratic elections. Hamas proceeded to lose aid from many European nations by restating their belief that Israel has no right to exist and that the entire State of Israel is an illegal occupation which must be wiped out ("Internal Palestine..."). Hamas was then considered a "terror group," by many countries in the west (the U.S. included) and so aid was cut off until the new Palestinian government agreed to recognize Israel, stop the violence and accept previous peace offers ("Internal Palestine...").

The boycott of Palestine and Hamas led to the 2006 Israel-Gaza conflict, where fighting broke out between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip. The battles started after Hamas abducted an Israeli soldier and also fired numerous rockets from the Gaza Strip into Southern Israel. That same year, a war also began between Israel and Hezbollah, an Islamic resistance group similar to Hamas but not directly linked to them (though Hezbollah was later found to provide training and exchange supplies with Hamas). Hezbollah shared the view that the eradication of Israel was a necessary undertaking so they launched the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict when Hezbollah fighters entered Israel surreptitiously, attacked an IDF post and captured some IDF soldiers. Israel responded by attacking many Hezbollah positions within Lebanon, but eventually both sides agreed to a cease-fire, and Lebanon agreed to station its army along the border with Israel (Katz).

Throughout those two major recent conflicts, the United States has sided with Israel. A Congressional research study reveals,

“The main vehicle for expressing support for Israel has been foreign aid; Israel currently receives about \$3 billion per year in economic and military grants, refugee settlement assistance, and other aid. Congress has monitored the aid issue closely along with other issues in bilateral relations, and its concerns have affected Administration's policies”
(Mark).

That large amount of aid has helped Israel sustain their military presence and occupation of Palestine following the recent conflicts. In addition, President George W. Bush and former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon established good relations during their tenures and frequently showed public support for one another. They did this during their

meetings in March and June of 2001, though later in the year, in October, Sharon accused the Bush Administration of appeasing the Palestinians at Israel's expense in a bid to gain Arab support for the U. S. anti-terror campaign. This prompted United States criticism of the Israeli practice of assassinating Palestinians believed to be engaged in terrorism, which appeared to some Israelis to be inconsistent with the U. S. policy of pursuing international terrorist Osama bin Laden at all costs. However, at their seventh White House meeting only one year later, the President and the Prime Minister got back on the same page and discussed the pending U. S. invasion of Iraq and Israel's restrictions on the Palestinians (Mark).

So what does all this have to do with the relations Matisyahu helped reinforce between the black and Jewish communities? As Margaret Kim, BAR Editor and Senior Columnist at BlackAgendaReport.com, says, “African Americans are the group that most supports the rights of Palestinians to be treated justly - which makes Blacks the most vulnerable targets of the Israel lobby” (Kim). Basically, the black community represented one of the main oppositions to the US position in the Israel-Palestine conflict and they became the political target of Israel supporters. For example, American politicians criticizing support of Israel have all faced well funded and supported opponents in recent elections and, by in large, politicians against the US’s Israel policy lost their elections in the past five year. Two of the most prominent defeated Palestine supporters were Congressional Black Caucus members. In 2002, Earl Hilliard and Cynthia McKinney were both targeted for defeat by candidates with the seal of approval from Israel supporters and the financial backing that comes with it (Kim). Hilliard was a five-term congressman from Alabama, but he lost the primary to political newcomer Artur Davis,

who happened to be a visitor to the 2002 American Israel Public Affairs Committee convention in Washington, D.C. (Goodman). McKinney is Georgia's first African-American Congresswoman and as of 2002 was the only woman serving in the state's congressional delegation. She served in Congress for nine years and gained recognition for advocating voting rights, human rights and awareness of conflicts in Africa. Right before her primary in 2002, she was one of only 21 House members who voted against a pro-Israel resolution that passed by an overwhelming majority with 352 votes. McKinney faced Denise Majette in her primary, a retired Georgia judge with moderate domestic positions and pro-Israel views. Majette won that primary, but later chose to run for Senate in 2004 which allowed McKinney to regain her congressional seat (Goodman). The Hilliard and McKinney situations showed that if one of the prominent oppositions within the country to the US's alliance with Israel was coming from the black community and Israel is and traditionally has been an overwhelmingly Jewish state, the two developments could indirectly pit the two communities against each other, potentially creating a tension similar to the one between Jews and blacks that existed during the Crown Heights riots.

The black community's support of Palestine largely stems from a perception that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is eerily similar to hostile situations of oppression from the past (like slavery in the US or apartheid in Africa). On his social and political commentary website, TheSuperSpade.com, Founder and Contributor Brandon Q. White blatantly asked his visitors about the current controversies in the Middle East, "What will history say about where Black people stood during these tumultuous times?" White acknowledged that his question was simple while the issue is complex, but on his site he

did show the opinion that, “I have heard some say that Palestinians are victims of Israeli aggression in much the same way Black Americans suffered under slavery and segregation” (White).

A similar sentiment was echoed in an article from *The Hoya*, Georgetown University’s student newspaper, in response to a university attitude that dismissed the views of the Palestine Solidarity Movement’s annual conference hosted on campus. It provided several similarities between the Palestine situation and Apartheid that helped validate that anti-Israeli position. The article cited the expressed opinions of Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky, famous Jewish anti-apartheid activists, who both compared Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians to South African apartheid. The article also cited the South Africa’s Palestine Solidarity Committee, who noted that the popular resistance to this Israeli-Palestinian conflict was because, “South Africans who have lived through apartheid cannot be silent as another entire people are treated as non-human beings” (Khan). Also, some stats from both situations provide starting evidence. In Apartheid, the system of oppression was based on territorial segregation which consisted of an unequal division of land based on race. The country was overwhelmingly black, yet 87 percent of the country was ruled by whites only (with the majority only occupying remaining 13 percent - mostly barren land on the nation’s outskirts). Similarly, Israel rules Palestinians in their own land. Prior to the construction of Israel’s illegal separation wall, Israel occupied 78 percent of the original Palestine. Since the wall’s construction, Palestinians now only reside in 12 percent of historic Palestine (Khan).

Even if there is an ideological separation between the Jewish and black communities because of this global conflict, that doesn’t necessarily mean that physical

action will result from it. However, at least some protesting has taken place. For example, in 2003, Dr. Daniel Pipes, a historian and counter-terrorism expert, spoke at the Middle East Forum at Yale College and was met with resistance by a group called the Concerned Black Students. Pipes came to speak only a semester after a self-claimed anti-Semite, Amiri Baraka, spoke at a similar forum and was met with protests from the Jewish community. Right before Pipes came to speak at Yale, the Concerned Black Students sent out an e-mail to the Yale community that read, "Articles in the Yale Daily Herald on Baraka's 'anti-Semitic' remarks were used to condemn the poet, and the integrity of the black students on this campus. Well it seems as though the tables will soon be reversed" (Spiro). The students went on to protest, and at the protest one student was even overheard saying, "You know, we should start an anti-Lieberman-for-President group at Yale. We don't want this to become a Jewish country" (Spiro).

The protest isn't coming only from aware college students either. In 1988 a group inspired by the original Black Panthers formed called The New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and starting in the late 90s they became what is today considered the largest organized anti-Semitic black militant group in the US ("New Black Panthers..."). The group is in no way related to the original Black Panthers and has actually been condemned by them for some of their homophobic and racist views, though when concerning Jews, the group claims their opposition comes from a deep belief in Islam and a disagreement with current happenings in the Middle East. Their current leader is a man named Malik Zulu Shabazz who rose to power through mimicking the previous leader's tradition of crowd frenzying hate speech. He was once quoted while leading an audience in an anti-Semitic call-and-response: "Who is it that caught and

killed Nat Turner? Who is that controls the Federal Reserve? Who is it that controls the media and Hollywood?" (After each question, the audience response: "Jews") ("New Black Panthers..."). The group frequently protests many causes, including anti-Semitism, and they champion that cause so frequently that critics have said some of their protests lack an even remotely practical agenda. For instance, in September 2001, 20 members of the NBPP protested at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum entrance with handouts that read, "There will be no peace at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and the Department of the Treasury until blacks in America receive full and complete reparations!" ("New Black Panthers...").

Despite the newest tensions that threatened the relationships between the Jewish and black communities that Matisyahu's music was derived from, the cultural gap he attempts to bridge still progresses forward. However, Matisyahu's role in helping that expand is in itself threatened as threats to his blend of music still exist.

Forces that threaten Matisyahu's combination of genres

Matisyahu has enjoyed a high level of success since his debut in 2003. His recording of a show in Austin, TX entitled *Live at Stubb's* peaked at number 30 in the Billboard Top 100 and gained platinum sales status (Billboard). It spawned a single, "King Without a Crown," that would rise to number 28 in the Billboard Top 100 (Billboard). Matisyahu toured the country headlining shows and produced three more albums to date. 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).

However, even the most successful of musical artists are still susceptible to criticism. Matisyahu might even have been more prone to negativity from critics and opposition because his act was something new, a Hasidic Jew combining his love for faith with his love for reggae and hip-hop, and some people in the music realm simply weren't ready for something so diverse and different. The criticism came from all over, and the majority of it focused on Matisyahu not being "authentic" enough – both as a religious artist and as a reggae / hip-hop artist. The type of criticism he faced is eerily similar to the backlash Barack Obama has received in his recent presidential run when certain communities have lashed out at him for not being enough like them.

For instance, New York Times music critic Kelefa Sanneh attended a performance by Matisyahu at Hammerstein Ballroom in NYC right after the release of his album *Youth*, and although she admitted the crowd loved it and that his album would inevitably climb the pop charts, her review was overwhelmingly critical of the artist. Right at the top of her review, Sanneh noted, "Monday's concert was the first of two sold-out shows at the Hammerstein Ballroom. And yesterday he released his major-label debut album, 'Youth' (JDub/Or/Epic), which is all but certain to enter the pop charts near the top. The record is dull, and the concert was often worse" (Sanneh). That statement set a tone for the rest of her critique that despite how many people enjoyed Matisyahu, his

music was not genuine enough for Sanneh. She went on to infer that he wasn't the right race to be playing the music or that his race negatively affected his ability with the following passage:

“Matisyahu's black hat also helps obscure something that might otherwise be more obvious: his race. He is a student of the Chabad-Lubavitch philosophy, but he is also a white reggae singer with an all-white band, playing (on Monday night, anyway) to an almost all-white crowd. Yet he has mainly avoided thorny questions about cultural appropriation. He looks like an anomaly, but if you think of him as a white pop star drawing from a black musical tradition, then he may seem like a more familiar figure” (Sanneh).

Clearly Sanneh is degrading Matisyahu because he didn't fit the previous perceptions of a reggae artist, and she also makes a comparison to “more familiar figures” (assumed to be like Eminem or Vanilla Ice) who received plenty of heat in their primes for not fitting typical perceptions of a hip-hop artist. Sanneh validated that analysis by closing her piece with an observation: “And as the crowd filed out, a wry young black woman working the door could be overheard singing to herself. It was a line from an older reggae song: ‘Could You Be Loved,’ by Bob Marley. ‘Don't let them fool you,’ she sang” (Sanneh). Clearly, Matisyahu's image didn't allow his music the chance to resonate with Sanneh at all.

The same could be said for Slate Magazine's music critic Jody Rosen and her review of Matisyahu's album. Rosen gave Matisyahu a little more credit for his musical

ability, but she had a similar opinion that there was something fake about Matisyahu's act. Rosen said,

“The truth is, Matisyahu isn't really a novelty—his is the oldest act in the show-business book. Minstrelsy dates back to the very beginnings of American popular music, and Jews have been particularly zealous and successful practitioners of the art. From Irving Berlin's blackface ragtime numbers to Al Jolson's mammy songs—from jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow, who passed as black, to Bob Dylan, who channeled the cadences of black bluesmen, to the Beastie Boys—successive generations of Jewish musicians have used the blackface mask to negotiate Jewish identity and have made some great art in the process...” (Rosen).

Rosen was again calling Matisyahu a gimmick act, but she also wanted to simply show that there was an ugly precedent for him. It'd be one thing if Rosen and Sanneh were isolated criticisms and accounts of Matisyahu, but that wasn't the case. He received negative reviews for one reason or another, though mostly claims of unauthentic, from music havens like *Rolling Stone* (“the strangest thing to climb the Billboard charts this year”) or buzz machines like Pitchfork.com (“a guy from White Plains, N.Y. who smoked weed and followed Phish and played in those drum circles everyone hates. One spiritual breakthrough later, he realized he loved dancehall reggae and Judaism and started making music”) (The Age / Fennessy).

Despite all the negativity working against his music, Matisyahu pressed on and still performs today. He still pushes for what he believes in – a mixing of cultures and a

mixing of music – despite the threats coming from other aspects of life. The fact that he hasn't stopped and continues to be successful has left society with some strong promises.

The promises derived from Matisyahu

Matisyahu has embodied improved relationships between the Jewish and black communities and between religion and hip-hop / rap / reggae music. For instance, regardless of the recent controversies sparked from the Israel-Palestine conflicts, the Jewish and Black communities are enjoying a level of friendship that hadn't existed since pre-Crown Heights Riots. See the "Time brings a foundation for deviation in social and music cultures" section in portion one of this essay for extensive examples, but in general there is plenty of political teamwork between the two groups as well as a shared delight in Matisyahu and his work to bring reggae back into the mainstream music culture (he was a featured performer at Reggae Carifest in New York City, one of the U.S.'s leading reggae festivals, and toured through Jamaica within the last two years) (Ellis).

Matisyahu also paved the way for other artists to not shy away from hip-hop when wanting to express themselves religiously through music. In particular, there was a wave of new Jewish hip-hop artist between 2003 and the present who starting having minimal success with what would have previously been seen as a completely illogical approach for their message ("Rap). Most recently an artist called Y-Love, who came from an Ethiopian and Puerto Rican family, has produced his own rap album that contains direct text from the *Gemara* – which is a text of rabbinical discussions from 500 CE that became the basis for Judaism's current rabbinical law (Stulman).

Perhaps the most admirable promise that has derived from Matisyahu is the inspiration he's given to youth to embrace their cultures – even if it's as unique as a Hasidic Jew who has a deep love for the culture of Jamaica and hip-hop music. Children who've seen him perform or who own his music have been compelled to tout his impact, by saying things like “As a person, he's very inspirational to people worldwide” (Altman). A concert review from 2006 even took time to note audience member David Linder was, “a 16-year-old from Saratoga, who dons a kippah “for respect” and proudly announces that he skateboards to Matisyahu's music on his iPod” (Altman). More young people are more comfortable being themselves after growing up in a society where Matisyahu can exist, and maybe Linder inadvertently was representative of this new young culture when he said: “He's like a role model to me. You never see a Jewish guy getting up there and doing reggae” (Altman).

With a music career that's less than 5 years old and plenty of energy left at the ripe age of 26, Matisyahu's career is only beginning. He has plenty of records left to produce, plenty of crowds left to impact and plenty of messages left to be heard. Yet even in his short amount of time in the spotlight, he's been able to accomplish so much – not just from his obvious success in the music industry, but in the cultural bridges he's helped to address just from merely putting himself out there for all to see and be impacted from.

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