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Rolling Stone Magazine

February 24, 2006

Matisyahu: Hasidic Hot Stepper

Madonna wants to party with the Jewish reggae star

By Evan Serpick.



Walking home recently from morning prayers, Matisyahu -- the Hasidic reggae MC -- got a call from his manager: Madonna wanted to invite him over for Passover Seder. A follower of the Jewish mystical tradition Kabbalah, Madonna promised to follow all the strictures of Matisyahu's faith, but he remained suspicious. "I don't know if I can go," he says. "I'll have to check it out with, like, *multiple* people, to make sure it's kosher."

Matisyahu, born Matthew Miller, grew up a Phish-loving secular Jew in the New York suburb of White Plains. Since 2000, when he underwent a conversion to Hasidic Judaism -- a devout sect that follows the religion's strictest tenets -- he's created an unprecedented fusion of reggae-style toasting and Jewish prophecy. Some see it as a novelty, others hear a unique new musical voice. Either way, Matisyahu is the strangest thing to climb the *Billboard* charts this year. His breakthrough, *Live at Stubb's* -- recorded at an Austin, Texas, BBQ joint famous for, of all things, pulled pork -- peaked at Number Thirty-two on the strength of the bouncy single "King Without a Crown." On March 7th, he releases *Youth*, which many predict will debut in the Top Ten.

Matisyahu is learning to reconcile his religion and his growing celebrity. In January at the Sundance Film Festival, he said no when Eve wanted to jump up onstage -- Talmudic law restricts contact between the sexes and forbids women from singing in public. When Christian rockers P.O.D. invited him to sing on their new album, *Testify*, he had to vet the lyrics to make sure there was no mention of Jesus. Even at shows, he has to watch himself. "There's always one drunk girl who runs up to give me a hug," he says. "I have to pull away, and they just feel rejection."

Matisyahu's music mixes reggae beats with guitar-driven rock and spacey synths. In a Caribbean patois that occasionally slips into Hebrew or Yiddish, he sings and raps about his devotion to God, praising the Torah and dissing drugs. His live show draws jam-band fans, Jewish acolytes and a smattering of Rastas. He revels in the energy of performing and was disappointed when rabbis said he couldn't stage-dive anymore, lest he end up diving into a woman.

"When he's singing, he's singing for God," says Trey Anastasio, the former Phish frontman, who invited Matisyahu to perform with him at Bonnaroo 2005. "It's incredible to be next to him onstage."

Matisyahu says Judaism and reggae go together better than skeptics might think. "In any Bob Marley song, you hear lots of powerful quotes from the Torah," he says, adding that reggae's references to Zion and the Star of David first attracted him to the music.

A traditional Hasidic black hat and thick beard usually hide Matisyahu's youthful face. He lives with his wife and six-month-old son in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. The neighborhood has the nation's highest percentage of Hasidic Jews; nearly every window has a sign that reads MESSIAH IS COMING!

It's a world away from Bend, Oregon, where Miller got his start. After he struggled with drugs and dropped out of high school to follow Phish, his parents sent him to a hippie-ish drug-treatment center where teens go on "vision quests" in the woods. He started beatboxing and singing at coffeehouses as MC Truth, alongside a dreadlocked friend, MC Mystic, playing Rick James covers and reggae classics. "He was a cool guy, a total stoner," says Rob Ainsworth, who lived with Miller in Oregon. "He was a little burnt out, but music was incredibly important to him. You could tell he was talented."

Sitting down to sip soup at a kosher restaurant, Matisyahu recalls his shows as MC Truth. "It was wild," he says. "We would drink a big pitcher of mushroom tea, and I'd come out with a turban on my head and a huge Israeli flag, and we'd walk around throwing sage on people." Eventually, Miller returned to New York, where he met a rabbi in Washington Square Park who led him into the Orthodox fold. Around the same time, Miller honed his flow, listening to Jamaican dancehall star Sizzla. Soon after he began growing his beard, Matisyahu started performing at a youth center in Crown Heights and working on his 2004 debut, *Shake Off the Dust . . . Arise*. "It was like the pieces of the puzzle coming together," he says of playing reggae while becoming religious.

At Bonnaroo 2005, Matisyahu talked Anastasio into letting him onstage, a performance that essentially launched the rookie's career. When Matisyahu returned to the festival stage the next day for a solo set, 10,000 fans were waiting for him. His profile grew last year until "King Without a Crown" became one of the most requested songs on top alternative station KROQ in L.A.

With *Youth's* debut in March, Matisyahu is already dreaming big -- maybe parlaying Madonna's Seder invitation into an opening spot on her summer tour. Maybe more. "I'm planning to do this for a long time," he says. "At least as long as I have more to say, I have more to give."