



# Matisyahu shatters conception of 'Jewish' music

## Matisyahu performs

Matisyahu will bring his unique sound to the Wellmont Theatre in Montclair on Sunday, Nov. 2, at 8 p.m. Admission is \$27. Flobots and Mishka will also perform. For information, call 973-935-5668 or visit [wellmonttheatre.com](http://wellmonttheatre.com).

by **Ron Kaplan**

**NJJN Features Editor**

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Matisyahu refuses to be pigeonholed. The Grammy-nominated singer makes an incongruous figure, jumping around on-stage in hasidic garb, bringing a sound that might otherwise never be heard by a significant segment of the Jewish community.

But none of this seems to matter to the entertainer born Matthew Paul Miller.

With his Orthodox attire and, well, unorthodox musical choices — blending traditional Jewish themes with reggae, rock, and hip hop — Matisyahu said he wasn't concerned that people might consider him a gimmicky performer.

"When I started out, everything snowballed very fast. I was on the road constantly playing shows or recording," he told *NJ Jewish News* in a phone conversation from Milwaukee, where he was set to launch his new tour after

Shabbat on Oct. 18. "I wasn't reading papers or interviews. I didn't have time to think about it. I was also pretty young and didn't think about the danger of being classified as a gimmick." The music was so real, he said, as was his Judaism.

The 40-city tour — which includes a Nov. 2 appearance at the Wellmont Theatre in Montclair (see box) — coincides with the release of his new extended-play CD, *Shattered*. The four-song EP features tracks from his new full-length album, *Light*, which is due out in early 2009.

Matisyahu said his agents don't specifically look for venues that would attract a large Jewish audience; his is a "universal kind of music."

"Reggae spoke to me for a multitude of reasons. It's a soul kind of thing; it's hard to put your finger on," he said, comparing it with religious faith.

He recalled his exhilaration the first time he took the stage at a club in Mount Vernon, NY, before a "100 percent black audience in a low-income community." The reaction was astounding. "People went crazy," he said. And why not? Why should there be anything odd about a white Orthodox Jew performing music that is traditionally associated with Caribbean musicians? "It's like a white basketball player who plays a good game. He knows he plays well. It made complete sense to me [that] people would like the music and be taken by it."

He continued to perform in karaoke bars and at "open mic" nights to similar raves. Audiences "were more taken by the music than by the image," he said.

Matisyahu released his first album, *Shake Off the Dust...Rise*, in 2004. The next one, *Live at Stubb's* (2005), reached the number one spot on *Billboard's* Heatseekers chart. The third, *Youth* (2006), debuted at number four in the *Billboard* Top 200 and the top spot among reggae albums. *Youth* was nominated for a Grammy for Best Reggae Album.

Matisyahu, who makes his home in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, said he wasn't raised in a "traditional Jewish setting" nor was he sure what traditional Jewish music entailed. His is "a deeper connection beyond stylistic choice."

And what about the perils of the music profession world, with its constant temptations for overindulgences in any number of vices? "It's difficult in the industry," he agreed. "I have to be focused and on top of myself. It's a slippery slope and easy to fall down." He reinvigorates himself with periodic visits to Israel. "I was blessed," he said. Judaism provides him with "an outline of how to live, things that are okay, and things that aren't. Once I separated myself into holiness, once I cut myself off from the negative influences and transformed myself, I have a lifestyle that focuses on the holy.

"As long as I'm tapped into that davening and real meaning...I know what's at stake. I *have* to have a relationship with God or my music won't have any meaning.

"I don't feel I have to be one thing or the other," he said. "The idea of being a Jew — a simple Jew — is taking Yiddishkeit wherever I can find it."