

Matisyahu's Inner World

A few years have passed since his gold certified album, *Youth*, was all the buzz in 2006. So yes, a chunk of time spent out of the headlines has gone by, but all hasn't been quiet on the Matisyahu front.

The reggae/hip-hop artist, known for his devotion to Orthodox Judaism, has been touring hard all summer with his comrades from Dub Trio to promote his latest studio effort, *Light*. The album shows us a new side of Matisyahu's artistry—music that's less exclusively influenced by reggae and less dependent on his Hasidic rapper image for novelty marketing purposes.

"It's quite a bit different than previous stuff I've done," Matis says of *Light*. "This record is more audible, it comes from a broader spectrum of influences. It has more dynamics and shifts in energy."



And that broader spectrum of influences that Matis speaks of, it stretches well beyond the bounds of music. The album was, in part, inspired by a quasi-psychedelic Jewish fairytale, "The Seven Beggars."

The fairytale was written in the 1800s by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who was known for crafting cryptic stories that were layered with Jewish mysticism. Matis explains that, like many meaningful pieces of art or teaching, Rabbi Nachman's stories contain "a lot of really beautiful points that you have to dig for, but [the lessons] are worth it when you arrive at them."

Identifying with a mystic, storytelling rabbi would seem off the beaten path for most Orthodox Jews. Yet for Matisyahu, faith and music—and the psychedelic pathway that, for him, brought the two together—are intrinsically connected.

At sixteen, religiosity and his passion for music first twinned when Matis became intrigued as to why the Bob Marley songs he loved quoted passages from the Old Testament. He describes that playing onstage with Trey Anastasio at Bonnaroo in 2005 "felt like destiny," because nearly a decade preceding the Bonaroo performance Matis was tripping on acid at a Phish concert and felt that Anastasio looked at him, communicating that he [Matisyahu] would one day be blessed with the opportunity to do what Anastasio was doing.

Matis elaborates on the connection: "Music and belief in God, they're both part of my inner world, my struggle," he says, "to me, God is where you go when you feel constricted by your own limitations—and when I don't necessarily know how to reach out for that help, music is my voice, the instrument that I use to reach out."

In a way, Matisyahu's explanation is simple: his music and faith come out of the same place from within him—and maybe their shared origin shouldn't come as such of a surprise. It just seems as if audiences don't know how to react when the music they are hearing does not align with the image they have in their heads of what a reggae or hip-hop musician should look like.

"We don't live in such a big world anymore. Everyone has access to all kinds of music and art. Artists have the ability to choose what music speaks to their soul." Matis says too that although the image he was initially marketed under was "very much Hasidic Jew," he finds it frustrating when people expect him to don a certain look at all times. "I'll go into a restaurant wearing jeans and a tee-shirt and a trucker hat, and someone will be like, 'So, what does it feel like to dress in Hasidic garb?' And I'm like, yeah dude, I have a beard...but so do half the guys in Brooklyn."

On top of toning down his Hasidic rapper image, Matis' style has changed in numerous ways since he released his first album in 2004. He says, "I know now much more clearly the sound that I like, and how to get it." He also explains that he is better able to control "what it is that I want to do with my voice. I've spent the last five years just learning vocal technique, and I still see so much room for growth."

After *Light* debuts, Matis expects to continue touring with Dub Trio (he “can’t imagine playing with anyone else right now”), and adds: “I’ll continue incorporating my life into the music and vice-versa. I’ll just keep doing this and be content.”

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