

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Jewish Music Fine-Tunes Cultural Identity

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The Sephardic rock band DeLeon will perform at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on Dec. 19.

One of the surest signs that the winter holidays are coming is the mushrooming of stations dedicated to playing nothing but the music of the season.

And there have never been more options for listening to Chanukah music, even if the offerings don't come close to the level of Christmas music on both terrestrial and satellite radio. In addition to SiriusXM's Radio Hanukkah, which will air on its Channel 68 from Dec. 16 (the first night of the holiday) to Dec. 25, Pandora is streaming multiple channels for the fifth consecutive year, and both Spotify and iTunes radio have streams dedicated to music inspired by the Festival of Lights. The increased availability and profile of Chanukah music is no surprise to Ivy Weingram, associate curator at the National Museum of American Jewish History. She sees it as the most visible example of the natural progression of the role of Jewish music — and Jewish musicians — in establishing Jewish identity in the United States.

These for-profit content providers wouldn't be offering Chanukah music, after all, if there wasn't an

audience to listen to it and the accompanying commercials.

Weingram, who co-curated the museum's latest exhibit, " 'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah," which focuses on the interplay between Jewish Americans, music and identity, said the holiday's music — like most every other kind of liturgical and secular Jewish music — is about grafting together old and new traditions.

"Music allows us to build bridges to other communities," she said, whether it's Jews like Irving Berlin creating the classic "White Christmas" or Bob Dylan recording "Little Drummer Boy," or non-Jews like Woody Guthrie singing "Hanukkah Dance" or Don McLean performing "The Dreidel Song."

"I think Jewish musicians have found a creative way to meld backgrounds and status into American popular culture," Weingram said. "And isn't that our dream — to bridge our existing background with American culture and American life, to move from the outside in, in a creative way?"

Culture plays an ever-more important role in how we define ourselves as Jews. At a time when "having a good sense of humor" is seen as an essential part of Jewish identity by 42 percent of the respondents to the 2013 Pew Research Center's "Portrait of Jewish Americans," it's only natural to explore how music, another cultural touchstone, influences our identity.

Music has been a core element of Judaism and Jewishness for millennia — from the melodies that flow through our Shabbat and holiday services — think the Kol Nidre chant heard only during Yom Kippur — to klezmer music that stems from Eastern Europe to Chasidic rock bands to John Zorn to contemporary folk singers.

It is an influence that continues to grow, judging from the output of music classified as Jewish. At the University of Pennsylvania's Robert and Molly Freedman Jewish Sound Archive, which already boasts a catalog of 5,000-plus albums and 73,000 songs dating from the turn of the last century to the present, Bob Freedman said he can't keep up with new Jewish music releases — a number that has been estimated to be around 250 new albums each year.

Freedman, who founded and still maintains the archive at 80-something, sees this as a great problem to have.

"When I say I am optimistic" about the future of Jewish music, he enthused, "I'm not kidding! All over the world, there are people who have been trained by klezmer musicians — in America, the former Soviet Union, England — composing new music and lyrics."

And that is in addition to the liturgical, rock, Sephardic, jazz, pop, Yiddish, children's and every other sub-genre of music that has enough Jewish content or intent to be included within the "Jewish music" rubric.

For both musicians and audiences, this abundance of music can be an "agent of Jewish transformation," said Lila Corwin Berman, a Temple University history professor and director of the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History. She asserts that understanding the history and potential of Jewish music can enrich our Jewish experience. To that end, the center is staging "Sounds Jewish," a series of programs exploring the myriad of ways that music has affected Jewish life in America.

"Most creative Jewish musicians are thinking about how music can touch and connect people," she explained. "Even songs that can feel a little kitschy can make people feel close to each other — it can lead to something more. When people sit down together and they all know the same music, that

creates a sense of community.”

For tunes like Adam Sandler’s “Hanukkah Song” and “The Dreidel Song,” she said, even “people who aren’t Jewish know that song — it gives them a connection to Jews and helps them cross lines.”

In addition, music’s “low bar for entry” makes it an ideal gateway to Judaism, Berman said.

“Music gives people an experience, and it gives them something that can be very social without obligating them to a set of rituals or observances — it can become a form of community,” she said, adding that the next wave of Jewish musicians is taking full advantage of this phenomenon to improve and expand on that potential. “People are really working to open up the music so that it can be a platform for learning, for being educated and connected.”

One of those people is Joey Weisenberg, who recently moved here from Brooklyn, to where he continues to commute back for his role as the creative director at the Mechon Hadar educational institution.

Weisenberg, 33, has been lauded for his ability to reach people of all types of musical skill to create what he calls “spontaneous Jewish choirs.” For him, the key to helping people better appreciate music and, by extension, Judaism, is learning to listen through the twin prisms of kevah and kavanah.

“Kevah is the fixed structure of Jewish life, and kavanah is the spontaneous flow of inspiration that you try to erect toward spiritual goals,” he explained.

He often focuses his classes on nigunim, wordless melodies that can be repeated over and over with endless variations.

“Singing one nigun opens up more pathways than all the words in the world,” he said. “And you don’t have to have any expertise to sing a nigun — it is an ideal tool for reaching across all boundaries.”

Weisenberg’s bona fides — in addition to being an accomplished instructor who will be teaching at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2015, he has released four albums of Jewish music and written a book called Building Singing Communities — are just part of what makes him successful at building musical togetherness. He can also empathize with students who feel most connected to Judaism through music.

“I personally feel myself to be one foot in and one foot out” of the more religious aspects of Judaism, he revealed. “I would say the music has always been around as a way of reaching past the dogma; it is my tool to reclaim some warmth, some beauty and our communal spirit.”

One place to see that spirit displayed this season is at the annual Hanukkah Concert put on by the Cantors of the Old York Road Corridor. As David F. Tilman, director of the adult choir of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel and one of the concert organizers, put it, such events demonstrate the power of music to not just bring people together, but to set individuals who may otherwise be uninvolved on their own path to Judaism.

“To study Torah requires a discipline that may be lost,” Tilman said. “As the literacy of our people

declines, the music of our people becomes the vehicle that brings us together. It doesn't require great scholarship, and you don't need much experience to acquire" an affinity for it, he said.

Ginny Wexler illustrates just how Jewish music can lead to more engagement. The Oreland resident converted from Catholicism for her 1978 marriage and joined the choir at Beth Sholom Congregation, where Tilman served as cantor for decades before joining K.I. She not only wound up staying in the choir for 25 years, but learned how to read the Torah and Haftarah, became a Bat Mitzvah and ultimately led services at Beth Sholom during some summer Shabbats.

"The choir really pulled me in and got me involved — it gave me a home and a way to feel more comfortable in the synagogue and in services," she recalled. "Music in and of itself is a huge part of Jewish life. I can't imagine something impacting me more than that — it brought me into the community like a hug."

Another local group will get the honor of displaying the range of Jewish music at one of the most high-profile locations in the world. The Shabbatoners, the award-winning Jewish a cappella group from the University of Pennsylvania, will perform on Dec. 17 at the annual White House Chanukah celebration.

For Sarah Beckoff, a Wharton junior from West Orange, N.J., and the president of the Shabbatoners, the gig is just another opportunity to do what she and her 14 compatriots love.

"What is so special about being in a Jewish group is being able to sing and share a culture and values," she enthused. Music on campus "provides an attraction for those unaffiliated with Judaism," she said, noting that the Shabbatoners includes Modern Orthodox members like herself as well as Reform and unaffiliated members.

When the Shabbatoners aren't performing for the leader of the free world, they give concerts at synagogues and other venues across the country and the world, including high schools.

"We give talks to the students to tell them about how the Shabbatoners is a way to stay connected to Judaism in college," Beckoff explained.

Shabbatoners singer Sophie Beren, a sophomore from Wichita, Kan., echoed the feeling that Jewish music has the power to bring people together.

"It's a social equalizer," she wrote in an email. "When people come together in song, everyone is contributing to one sound as one group, one whole." To further make her point, she quoted the 19th-century German poet, Heinrich Heine: "When words leave off, music begins."