

*Changing Shades: Marketing the Man in Black*

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Sarah Imhoff's perceptive paper offers worthy insights on the issues of authenticity that "Hassidic Reggae Superstar" Matisyahu inspires within a broad landscape of American, and American Jewish, discourse. Yet her thesis—that "there is so much cultural interest in Matisyahu because he symbolizes the difficulty with constructing identity and determining authenticity" (2)—addresses only a part of this performer's complex cultural topography. I respond here by addressing the "back end" of that topography: the producers who noticed, mediated, and marketed Matisyahu as part of a broader artistic and philanthropic effort to engage young American Jews in discourses about Jewish identity and authenticity. Apart from Matisyahu's personal performance style or message, the figure himself was selected and marketed, I suggest, specifically to raise the questions of authenticity that Imhoff addresses.

Matisyahu, like almost every other commercially successful musical artist, did not become a figure of public interest on his own. Rather, he was the first major promoted artist for the JDub record label: a label created to "push forth a new understanding of how one can connect to Judaism."<sup>1</sup> Co-founded in December 2002 by NYU Music Business program graduates Aaron Bisman and Benjamin Hesse, JDub received its seed funding from the Joshua Venture, one of the earlier Jewish venture philanthropy organizations to arise at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Joshua Venture's "primary goal

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jdubrecords.org>, from April 19, 2003.  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20030618040339/http://www.jdubrecords.org/>

[was] to strengthen a new generation of leaders who are launching innovative projects and organizations that contribute to a vibrant, just, and inclusive Jewish community.”<sup>2</sup> Bisman’s selection as a 2003-2005 fellow after a competitive application process ensured that the label—provocatively named after a derogatory Syrian Jewish term for Ashkenazic Jews—would follow a similar agenda. Along with other recipients, including Amichai Lau-Lavie (Storahtelling, a theater troupe devoted to dramatic and sometimes radical reenactments of Jewish scripture), Idit Klein (Keshet, a GBLT organization for Jews in greater Boston), it took on an explicit agenda of Jewish cultural transformation through the active questioning of perceived norms of Jewish identity and authenticity.

Like other Jewish media-based organizations coming up at the time (such as Jennifer Bleyer’s *Heeb Magazine* and Roger Bennett’s *Reboot*), JDub had to address the problem of parlaying a transformational Jewish cultural agenda in a miniscule and largely unsustainable market (i.e., young Jews) into a broad presence that would have relevance to a widespread audience. *Reboot*’s record label, *Reboot Stereophonic*, accomplished this task by engaging in a full bore, professional media campaign while making a small amount of actual product. Bisman and Hesse, meanwhile, carefully built Matisyahu’s career by combining the efforts of a “street team,” successful attempts to include Matisyahu in widespread interest stories about the new hipster Jewish cultural agenda, and effectively chosen and marketed events promoting Matisyahu to Jewish young adults and college students as a hip Jewish ambassador. Matisyahu, for his part, also capitalized

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<sup>2</sup> <http://web.archive.org/web/20011206000240/www.joshuaventure.org/mainindex.html> (references the site as of November 21, 2001).

on resources provided by the media-savvy Chabad Lubavitch, whose leaders pursued a religious outreach agenda for largely the same population with a similarly hip image. Through these actions, Matisyahu often became the literal face of the storied new approach to Jewish identity; and JDub, as a result, became a model for successful Jewish venture philanthropy.

The careful development and marketing of Matisyahu also brought the singer strategically into the reggae scene. Although Imhoff states that “music critics have been consistently lukewarm about Matisyahu” (18), in fact he was received with a combination of bemusement and surprised admiration in the initial phase of his career with JDub. Part of the reason this aspect of his career does not come out as strongly in Imhoff’s paper, however, is because of Matisyahu’s genre marketing—a flexible matter derived from his jam-band background. Although JDub promoted him from the beginning as a “Hasidic Reggae Superstar,” Matisyahu’s initial media appearances largely framed him within the much larger hip-hop scene: singing alongside Israeli and Palestinian rap artists in a JDub-sponsored “Unity Sessions” concert in Brooklyn that attracted 3000 people in summer 2004, emphasizing his beat-boxing skills in 2004/early 2005 national television interviews on CNN and other media outlets, and being introduced by Jimmy Kimmel on his first major talk show appearance as “the most popular Jewish rapper since MC Hammer.”<sup>3</sup> Especially in the latter two cases, Matisyahu benefitted from low expectations—Kimmel, according to a conversation I had with Bisman, initially wanted to feature Matisyahu as a novelty act, and eventually gave in when JDub insisted that the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HfDagzdulw> (accessed February 14, 2010).

show give him a full musical guest treatment; he then proceeded to surprise his host with an “uncharacteristically” effective performance.<sup>4</sup> JDub thus used the flexible boundaries between reggae and rap/hip-hop in the mainstream entertainment world to its advantage in both introducing Matisyahu to the world, and shifting the discourse about his abilities from novelty to “for real.”

Moreover, as an up-and-comer, Matisyahu was largely welcomed into the reggae fold: just as Imhoff frames of the treatment of Collie Buddz (23), the reggae scene had little to lose from accepting an aspiring toaster who impressed with his novelty, his competence, and his common appeal to the “Old Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Matisyahu also appeared to play a role in diversifying the genre’s performers and expanding its audiences. Imhoff’s quote from D’niscio Brooks (29) rings true: there seemed to be no problem accepting his authenticity, as long as he remained a supporting player in the scene (like Collie Buddz). The reggae scene, in turn, pumped up Matisyahu’s popularity: JDub’s Jewish-themed concerts generally hosted a few hundred people each at the time; the larger venues in whose lineups JDub arranged for him to appear, such as Carifest and Bonnaroo, hosted predominantly non-Jewish audiences. Matisyahu’s friable Jewish positioning here—as framed by his management and its mandate—thus joined larger discourses about the presentation of Jamaican and mainstream musical authenticity; but his embodiment of

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<sup>4</sup> I received a similarly surprised “You know, he’s actually pretty good!” reaction from hip-hop scholars when I first discussed his career in a paper at the Society for Ethnomusicology’s annual meeting in November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize here that to followers of Rastafari, reggae music is hardly a central part of the ideology. From a commercial perspective, however, reggae and Rastafarianism have often been conflated.

those same discourses also became an effective vehicle for bringing Matisyahu to larger and larger stages.

When Matisyahu's album sales began to top the reggae charts, however—an observation that to many artificially connotes both commercial and cultural domination—the critical tide began to turn, with reggae critics in particular going on the offensive. The 119,000 copies Matisyahu's album *Youth* sold in its first week ranked it #4 on the overall *Billboard* albums chart, just below the 137,000 copies of the *High School Musical* soundtrack (which by then had been out for several weeks).<sup>6</sup> But because Matisyahu's album sales also counted in the smaller reggae market, it became the greatest one-week sale of a reggae album of all time. This level of notoriety (preceded by the success of his *Live at Stubbs* album on the same charts) changed the game significantly: as with other top-ten non-Jamaican reggae artists before him (such as Snow and UB40), Matisyahu became both an important figure for the financial wellbeing of the reggae genre, and a controversial representative of its authenticity. The critique Imhoff brings up from Kelefa Sanneh of Matisyahu's race and nationality must be seen in this broader context: at the time of Sanneh's Hammerstein Ballroom review in March 2006, three of the seven reggae artists that had broken into the *Billboard* top ten were non-Jamaican, clearly leading to consternation among reggae purists. Jody Rosen's critique, meanwhile, largely assailed Matisyahu *because* of his popularity, bringing into play a Jewish cultural studies

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<sup>6</sup> Katie Hasty, "Juvenile's 'Reality' Upends Ne-Yo At No. 1." *Billboard.biz*, March 15, 2006. [http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/news/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1002197180#/bbcom/news/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1002197180](http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002197180#/bbcom/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002197180). Accessed February 15, 2010.

field that had grown tremendously over the past few years alongside Jewish venture philanthropy's focus on "culture" funding; six months later, notably, Rosen would himself capitalize on the "Jewface" discourse he employed in his article through the release of the *Jewface* album on Reboot Stereophonic. Matisyahu, meanwhile, left JDub for more mainstream representation soon after Sanneh's review; and shortly thereafter he left Chabad as well, breaking out of the "Jewish" frames each organization imposed upon him in pursuit of larger markets and a greater (and likely more ambiguous) freedom of self-expression. The Christian music industry was one of these markets (it sold more than 53 million units in 2006, compared with just over half a million units in the reggae industry in 2009).<sup>7</sup> Matisyahu's c. 2006 choice to record with P.O.D., a group whose previous two albums had sold more than 6.3 million copies worldwide, was thus a shrewd career move as well as a "spiritual" collaboration.<sup>8</sup> The authenticity debates Imhoff chronicles, therefore, did not take place around a static figure. Rather, Sanneh, Rosen and others engaged with the image of an artist/artiste whose transitioning management was already seeking new identity valences with which to promote him. Matisyahu's rise

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<sup>7</sup> I have been unable to find reggae album sales from before 2009. They were likely somewhat higher in 2006, though not nearly reaching the figures achieved by the Christian music industry (44.9 million units in 2006). "Reggae Sales Struggle." *Dancehallusa.com*, Posted November 13, 2009 (<http://www.dancehallusa.com/?p=7043>; accessed February 15, 2010); "Christian/Gospel Music Album Sales Rise in 2006." <http://www.emicmg.com/press/pressRelease2.aspx?id=510971&archives=1> (accessed February 16, 2010); "Industry Overview 2009" [http://www.cmta.com/GMA\\_Industry\\_Overview\\_2009.pdf](http://www.cmta.com/GMA_Industry_Overview_2009.pdf) (Accessed February 16, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> P.O.D.'s 2006 album, however, did not do as well as its predecessors, selling c. 500,000 copies worldwide. Nonetheless, that number was approximately equal to the reggae industry's *total* 2009 sales—which included 57,000 copies of Matisyahu's latest album, *Light*.

and subsequent critiques, in other words, derived as much from a reading of the music industry as they did from Matisyahu's own choices.

In essence, then, Imhoff's important discussion of the discourses of authenticity surrounding Matisyahu constitutes in my view one side of a carefully constructed tautology. On the other side, or "back end," of this tautology, the conversations Matisyahu engendered in the first phases of his career were ostensibly funded by venture philanthropies, who felt that open questioning of Jewish authenticity and identity would revitalize Jewish life; and the conversations themselves were curated and promoted by a recording company founded on the premise of furthering this transformative Jewish agenda using mainstream discursive techniques. JDub's successful mediation of Matisyahu, in turn, opened a space for the reggae industry to herald the singer's arrival, and, upon his domination of the reggae charts, provided fodder for a backlash. Matisyahu's case thus shows how effectively this back end transparently spurred exactly the issues of identity and authenticity Imhoff describes, through a judicious and interconnected seeding of the broader entertainment industry, media critics, and—via the conversation sustained in this forum and others—the flows of academic discourse.