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NEWS: ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

It's December, which means...The annual Chanukah wrap-up

By PAUL WIEDER

It's the 12th year we've been doing this, folks, so let's dispense with the introduction and get right to dispensing advice about dispensing Jewish CDs as Chanukah presents. Here are eight, for some reason:



Eugene Marlow: *Heritage Ensemble: Celebrations*

The first three tracks this Latin jazz combo presents are Chanukah songs. This time, "Chanukah, O Chanukah" and "Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel" are given a South-American swing, "Moaz Tzur" is quietly pensive, and "Sivivon" becomes a ballroom number. There are two Purim songs-"LaYehudim Haitah Orach" is a Havana hora, and "Mishenichnat Adar" is a Carnival, um, carnival. Then there is "Halleuyah," which takes a melody for Psalm 150 and makes it sound like it was written by Chopin. I don't need to tell you about the Ensemble's work and history because the final track is a discussion about exactly that.

Chicago a cappella: *Days of Awe and Rejoicing*

This is not pop a cappella, like *Straight No Chaser*. This would more accurately be called a choir, as nearly all of the 22 tracks come from the High Holiday prayerbook. The accuracy of their sound is remarkable, considering that this ensemble does not perform Jewish music as a rule. The small-but-powerful group has done early-music pieces, Shakespeare poems, and even a Christmas album. Their choice of Jewish music speaks highly of the quality of the melodies that drew them to it. They more than do our heritage justice with their soaring solos and angelic harmonies, and they also invited cantors to participate. The lyrics are mostly Hebrew, with some English, but the music goes right to the soul.

Paul Zim: *Let's Make a Seder*

This recording takes the listener through the Haggadah with straightforward instructions and rousing song. It is excellent for those attending or leading their first seder. It hits all the highlights, and is a highlight itself. Zim has recorded countless albums on every aspect of Jewish music, for both adults and children, in his big, avuncular voice. Here, he mixes music ranging from Babylonian to Israeli, plus some original arrangements, like a delicious charoset.

Mama Doni: *Shabbat Shaboom*

When it comes to Jewish children's music, Mama Doni pins the tail right on the donkey's tuchas. She is the whole package- upbeat, educational and silly. Like Jim Henson, she takes children's entertainment seriously and lavishes on high production values, while never sounding condescending or chirpy. The tracks channel the 1950s, reggae, tango, rap, country, and klezmer. "Shabbat Queen" borrows from ABBA's "Dancing Queen," while "Faklept" moves from the Andrews Sisters into gospel. Mama Doni is the let's-do-something aunt, the stay-up-late babysitter, the you-come-too big sister every kid needs.

Celebrate: *Jewish Lullabies, Vol. 1*

The ongoing Celebrate series collects the best contemporary Jewish musicians around a genre or theme. This is the first lullaby compilation, and it won a Parents' Choice Award. Craig Taubman spearheaded the Celebrate anthology project, and he contributes two tracks here. Acts like Moshav Band and Josh Nelson move from rock to rock-a-bye, while Israeli star David Broza sings an Elizabeth Bishop poem; it's good to hear daddy-voices singing goodnight for a change. Of course, mommy-voices are here, like Vocolot's Linda Hirschhorn and Elana Jagoda. The songs are in a mix of Hebrew and English, and are almost all acoustic. They are also soft, tear-jerking, and just plain beautiful.

Craig Taubman: *How Good*

Taubman spends a lot of time on his Celebrate series, touring, teaching and other projects, so it's great to see him doing what he does so well- put out great albums like "Inscribed," "Holy Ground," and this one. "How Good" is the English translation of the liturgical words "Mah Tov." This is one of Taubman's explorations of the Shabbat prayerbook. Guest vocals include Josh Nelson, Chicago's Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi, and Debbie Friedman. Also expect to hear some itchy reggae, insinuating electronica, sophisticated pop, and a surprising amount of anthemic rock.

Elijah P.: *Through God's Eyes*

Jewish rap is no longer a novelty, but a well-established subgenre. Elijah P. is a talented "spitter," which means he can enunciate his rhymes with force, clarity, and alarming speed. His focus is the idea that there is much wrong with the world- as in the song "Why This World So Bad?"- but that no problem is insurmountable with Divine aid. His hip-hop incorporates descanting vocals, crunching guitars, and glistening keys. Finding positive messages in hip-hop is difficult enough, and while Jewish hip-hop is no longer rare, it is often saucy and sarcastic. His message, as well as his skill, make Elijah P. a standout.

Theodore Bikel: *Sings Yiddish Theatre and Folk Songs*

Hatikvah music is a publishing label dedicated to reissuing old Jewish material, left languishing on vinyl LPs, on CD. Theodore Bikel- also an accomplished actor- is the Pete Seeger of Jewish song, preserving and popularizing Jewish melodies of old. Here, he wraps his Borscht-rich, Broadway-big voice around beloved Yiddish classics like "Di Grine Kuzine" and "Mein Shtetle Belz." Also fun is "Beygelach," an ode to the bagel. Here are the workers and families, the musicians and the scholars of the Old World and New. Here is the pathos, pleasure and passion, of generations, given glorious voice... by a pretty glorious voice at that.

From our home to yours- have a happy, *haimish*, harmonious Chanukah.

Paul Wieder is public relations manager at the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

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