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'That Chanukah Girl' is joyfully Jewish

Mama Doni and her band celebrate Hanukkah with fun, funky music

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When Doni Zasloff Thomas' kids were in preschool, she suddenly found herself hired on as the resident music teacher.

It was a match made in heaven. Thomas, a singer, songwriter and artist, who graduated from Brandeis University with a degree in educational theater, says she'd always wanted to share her love of Jewish culture with kids — and not just her own — in a fun and cool way. She began writing, recording and soon, had an entire act.

Kids and parents across the country know her as Mama Doni, and she and her band — The Mama Doni Band — were honored with a 2011 Parents Choice Award for their CD, "Shabbat Shaboom." Expect quirky, offbeat and unpredictable when Thomas and The Mama Doni Band perform at JCC Rockland on Sunday. They'll offer up everything from reggae, rock and disco, to klezmer and "Jewgrass." The songs range from "Latke Man" to "La Vida Dreidel" and "Dear Hanukah Harry."

"My show is wildly fun," she says, "it's a engaging, exciting concert for the whole family, and believe me, everyone will be dancing; I might even bust out with the Hanukkah gelt in the middle of the show."

Thomas says her goal is to make the holiday exciting and accessible. "I want to show kids that it's hip and fun."

That said, there's a deeper purpose to her lunacy. Thomas says that it's important for the younger generation to understand and embrace their Jewish heritage and culture. "When I started out, I wanted to sing funky Jewish songs with the kids but couldn't find the kind I envisioned, so I thought I'd try to write them myself," says the New Jersey mom who has been described as a "Yenta Stefani."

"I felt I was creating a new kind of music that would make sense not only to kids, but also to their parents and the grandparents — creating music that speaks to different generations, that makes sense not only to Jewish people, but to people of all backgrounds."

Thomas has enough energy to fill multiple arenas and she's here, there and everywhere. There's a television pilot in the works, more CDs, a book and performances all over the country.

As for her own kids, who started her down the road to stardom, she says, "They really love my music, and I always say they are my best critics. When I record something new, I bring it to them first," she says. "If they ask me to play it again, it's good; if they say, 'what else do you have?' ... well, not so good!"

Doni Zasloff Thomas is Mama Doni. She and her band will perform at JCC Rockland on Sunday. / Jill Wachter

Written by Karen Croke

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If you go

What: Mama Doni presents Chanukah Fever
When: 4 p.m. Sunday
Where: JCC Rockland, 450 W. Nyack Rd., West Nyack
Tickets: \$12, \$15 at the door
Info:
www.jccrockland.org. For more information on Mama Doni, go to www.mamadoni.com

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