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Photo Credit: Ron Holtz

Mama Doni

A Rockin' Good Time!

by Rachel Harkham and Richard Frazier

History sparkles with stories of Jewish women devoted to a cause—songbirds who could knock you over with their captivating stage presence, witty lady songwriters loaded with the quirky ability to express what mere mortals feel but can't put into words, and mamas whose hearts are full of love—but there has never been a mama quite like Mama Doni, who manages to score a perfect 10 in the world of family music while she joyfully celebrates and preserves Jewish language and culture.

A Mama Doni concert is like being inside a glass of sparkling Kedem grape juice. A sweet and fizzy vibe fills the air. It's kiddie rock with a beat and a lyrical groove that even gets the grown-ups bouncing on their feet, but the heart of the concert is Mama Doni (real name: Doni Zasloff Thomas) herself, the dynamic “Jewperstar.” She's petite and blonde and brimming with Yiddish soul with a dash of Gen X irony mixed in. Her goal of melding a wide variety of musical styles with Jewish subject matter is outrageously successful: witness songs like the loping country ditty “Honey, This Ain't Money” or the melodramatic tango “Challah Day.”

Backed by a band that's tuned to every nuance of her presentation, Mama Doni pulls off a tight performance. It's plain to see *and* hear how she beat out more than 100 competitors for the Simcha award (for inspiring joy through music) at the 2008 International Jewish Music Festival held in Amsterdam. The *raison d'être* of Zasloff Thomas' presentation goes deeper than surface “shtick.” Her

devotion to Yiddish and Jewish culture is the heart of her music. What's important to Doni is the idea of giving Jewish children their own current and positive musical voice. This goal is recognized and deeply appreciated by parents and others who wish to imbue the next generation with an appropriate sense of who they are. Doni lays out her mission: “I want Jewish kids to be proud of their heritage and traditions and also to be introduced to the humor that effervesces throughout Yiddish language and culture... Through my music I hope that they can access the joy in Judaism and have a rockin' good time in the process!”

At a recent concert at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, Mama Doni played songs from her soon-to-be released CD, *Shabbat Shaboom*. Like most great performers, she brings all kinds of people together, and at this show kids of all ages participate by following her singing and dancing lead. Then presto chango, she's surrounded onstage by a gaggle of giddy moms and grandmas attired in cowboy hats doing a two-step while supplying back up to their favorite “Cowgirl Jew.”

The exquisite audience harmony that Mama Doni orchestrates at the end of the show, to a Calypso-styled “Mazel Tov,” is a brilliant collaborative musical experience. Your heart would have to be as hard as a coconut to not be swept up in the moment.

After she leaves the stage, the “Mama” part of Mama Doni comes into full

bloom. She has all the time in the world to shmooze with fans, give a hug, or get snapped for a quick pic. After this particular performance, Doni's father waits patiently in a state of contented bliss, as she personally connects with her fans. Smiling broadly, he can't help himself: “Wasn't she great! She was talking at 11 months. No kidding.” He's past proud and is at the *kvelling* point.

In addition to spreading a little Jewish joy, Zasloff Thomas considers it a small victory if she introduces a few words of Yiddish into the vocabulary of any kid or adult who listens to her music. “If I'm responsible for a kid saying ‘Man! I'm *shvitzing!*’ I feel like, in my own way, I'm perpetuating this rich and colorful language.”

It all works because there is an authenticity in the aura radiating from Mama Doni. Sure, in regular life Doni Zasloff Thomas is a mother of two, living in Montclair, New Jersey. However, the truth of the matter is that she was born just the way she appears on stage. “I always felt that I was able to connect with kids in a cool way, even when I was one,” declares Doni. Her voice becomes honed with a serious reverence when she talks about the mantle of Jewish culture that she strongly feels must be passed on by every generation. “For Jews, singing, dancing, praying, worshipping, loving, it's all the same feeling of ruach. When I am full of ruach is when I feel the most alive. I remember an incident when I was about ten years old and attending my first Bat Mitzvah. People started dancing and, consumed with this spirit,



Photo Credit: Ron Holtz

I ran into the center of the group and began to dance wildly, urging everyone to get in touch with their true feelings through movement. It was an epiphany. I knew from that moment on that this was what I was supposed to be doing with my life. I became the leader of every dance. It was my responsibility to make the dance floor come alive. Occasionally I run into people from that part of my life who haven't seen me in a long time, and they inevitably relate vivid memories of this little kid consumed with a frenzy of energy and passion."

Doni recalls her earliest memories growing up in the Washington, D.C. area, "My parents weren't performers, but they created a very artistic environment for me and my two younger sisters. Come to think of it, I did have a great grandmother who was a performer in Yiddish theater. Anyway, my parents made sure we were culturally literate. My father would purchase a record and play it almost continually for a period of time. Sometimes it was from the classical repertoire and sometimes popular, or Broadway show tunes, or folk music. Whatever it was, we got to know it really well, because it was on all the time for a month or so. Then he would find another recording. I rely on this musical eclecticism that I gained from Dad when searching for new repertoire. There are

other ways that my childhood prepared me to go onstage as Mama Doni. I was always directing my sisters and neighborhood kids in backyard productions and finding out how to give shape to a performance. Later on when I attended The Hebrew Day Institute and The Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School I was in every show I could get into."

Following a family move to Philadelphia, Doni finished high school at Akiba Academy. Along the way she attended Camp Ramah, Camp Judea, Camp Moshava, and Camp Bnai Brith and eventually served as a drama/dance counselor. Through high school she was a Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor and Hebrew School teacher. "From my earliest years I grew a deep respect for Jewish culture and language," Doni continues. "I just wanted to bottle up the things that were precious to me and present them to others. I've always felt a deep connection to older generations, especially at ceremonies where my elders would speak, sing, and dance. We must make culture a living document to be

passed on to young people, like a sacred Torah."

Studies in music, dance, and drama at Brandeis University and NYU earned Doni a degree in Educational Theatre and Performing Arts, preparing her to pursue a seven-year career in children's media and marketing as creative director for an award-winning, pioneering children's media company. During this time she met her husband and started her own family. "Having babies is what really set me on the path of creating a nurturing kind of entertainment—one that's layered with meaning and accessible on different levels."

When Doni's children's preschool asked her to take a position as music teacher in early 2007, she readily agreed. The creative juices started flowing, as Doni perceived a golden opportunity to share her love of Jewish culture with kids in a way to which they could easily relate. Dipping into the reservoir of her past experiences, she began writing and recording her own songs.

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Doni reflects, "I wanted to sing funky Jewish songs with the kids, but couldn't find the kind I had in mind, so I thought I'd try my hand at writing them myself... and the next thing I knew, I was filling notebook after notebook with music! At that time, I was swept up in a torrent of creativity. I would leave voice messages to myself containing new lyrics and song ideas all day long. In the middle of the night I would wake up with three-part harmonies, rhymes and stories in my head and rush to the bathroom to get them on paper while they were fresh. I felt I was on the cusp of creating a new kind of music that would relate not only to kids, but also to their parents and the grandparents... that, like the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, not only relates to Jewish people, but to all... music that vividly celebrates all the intrigue and delight of Jewish culture. Wow! I felt like I had been given these songs, and now I had to share them. It was so exciting, as though all of the pieces of my life and all my passions were coming together."

As a torrent of new songs came rocking and rolling along, Doni started thinking beyond the boundaries of the preschool job. In May 2008 she recorded her first album, *I Love Herring (And Other Fish Shticks for Kids)*, in her kitchen and self-released the CD to immediate acclaim. What was the next move for this Yiddishy New Jersey mom? Form a band and take a show on the road, of course. There was an instant demand for her brand of zany art and, in short order, she was performing at JCCs and temples throughout the country. Then came the international Simcha award, and all the time her eclectic repertoire was expanding with songs like "I Say Chanukah, You Say Hanukkah."

Touring the country has given Zasloff Thomas the chance to perform in front




Photo Credit: Jill Wachter

of thousands of different people. This is the aspect she loves most about her life as Mama Doni, the Cowgirl Jew. "I connect with them all; there are moments in a concert when I feel like I'm onstage at my best friend's wedding."

After releasing a 4-song EP for Chanukah and an EP for Purim, November 2009 brought a second full-length album, *Chanukah Fever*. Doni's next full-length CD, *Shabbat Shaboom*, will be out in March 2011.

The most challenging part of being Mama Doni is balancing her role as mother to two young children (6 and 4) with her performing life. Sometimes Doni's kids find it difficult to share her with the jumping and shouting children. Doni elaborates ruefully, "How would you like it if a horde of kids descended on

your mother, begging her to autograph their foreheads?" But with a tight family unit and a good support system, Zasloff Thomas makes it work most of the time.

When asked about her goals for the future, Doni pauses for a few beats. She's trying to round it down to the top five. Of course she wants to continue to write and perform music. She wants to grow her company to include videos, TV, and books. There's a family cookbook in the works. Doni even dreams of producing a family rock opera. And then there's the one about celebrating Purim onstage in Vegas with a Rabbi Elvis. What else would you expect from a singing Cowgirl Jew? 

Mama Doni welcomes visitors at www.mamadoni.com and on her Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/mamadoni>