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ARTS

Mama Doni: An Act Too Fun to 'Passover'

The Mama Doni Band delivers its brand of music with a Jewish twist on Sunday at Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael.

By **Steve Wilson** | [Email the author](#) | October 2, 2010

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When Doni Zasloff Thomas was asked to become the official music teacher at her daughter's pre-school in Montclair in 2007, the big question was not whether to take the position. It was what kind of music she wanted to share with the kids.

"It was a Jewish pre-school," Zasloff Thomas said. "And I was looking for something super fun, super hip and all about the culture of being Jewish."

She couldn't find exactly what she was looking for, so she just started writing her own music.

"I found a producer and, the next thing you know, I can't stop writing songs," she said.

And with that decision, Mama Doni was born.

The Mama Doni Band, which will perform in Springfield on Sunday, can best be described as children's entertainment with a Jewish twist.

Most of Mama Doni's music is original content, inspired by various aspects of Jewish culture, including food, holidays and Jewish history. This is evident in songs, such as "Latke Man" and "The Funky Gold Menorah," as well as "Shabbat Shaboom," her fourth CD, which releases in February.

Additionally, the band's songs can be filed into just about every genre imaginable: disco, pop, reggae, folk, country, hip-hop and a type of bluegrass that Zasloff Thomas fondly calls "Jewgrass."

In addition to original content, the band, which performs special shows for Purim, Hanukkah and other holidays, also takes traditional songs and changes them around to get kids on their feet and dancing.

"There is a traditional song you sing at Passover seder called 'Dayeinu,'" she said. "We decided, for one of our Passover shows, to do a Disco Dayeinu with a whole disco dance number."

Although many of the band's shows—more than 200 in two years—take place at Jewish community centers and synagogues, Zasloff Thomas explained that also perform at many kids' festivals, camps and museums, or as the Jewish portion of religious festivals.

"If we're performing for a crowd of all backgrounds, we might change it up a little bit," she said. "Our music is really intended to be appropriate and cool for everybody. It's really about culture."

In 2009, the band began performing nationally. Although Mama Doni occasionally performs outside of New Jersey, she said it has not had too much of an effect on the other people in her life who call her "mama," her two kids, ages 4 and 6. Unlike many bands, the Mama Doni Band does not go on tour for months at a time and rarely out of the country.

"We'll get hired to do a show in, say, Houston," Zasloff Thomas said. "I'm there for a night and the next morning, and then I leave."

One notable exception is the International Jewish Music Festival in Amsterdam, where the band won the 2008 Simcha Award for "Inspiring Joy Through Music," just a few months after Zasloff Thomas began writing music. She said she had applied to be considered for the festival and sent a demo on a whim and, shortly after, found out that she was one of more than 100 acts selected to perform.

"It was a huge deal, and we just kind of fell into it," she said. "After we won in 2008, we were invited back the following year to do a big concert and workshop."

In fact, workshops have become a huge part of the Mama Doni Band's repertoire. Zasloff Thomas draws on her time as a music teacher, seven-year experience as the creative director of a children's entertainment company and educational theater studies at New York University to teach early childhood educators how to incorporate Jewish customs into the classroom.

She said her band, which includes Eric Lindberg on guitar, Alexander Tyshkov on bass and Cliff Ramsay on drums, is excited for Sunday's show in Springfield.

"This show is going to be a little taste of a whole lot of different things, kind of a greatest hits of all of our albums," she said. "And we always give out some free CDs and T-shirts to get people up on stage and rocking out."

The show will be a 1 p.m. at Temple Beth Ahm Yisrael. Tickets are \$8 in advance and \$12 the day of the concert; they can be purchased by calling TBAY's Early Childhood Program Office at (973) 376-0539, ext. 22.

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