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Sunday, November 29, 2009

Rock, reggae and rap — with a Jewish twist



Doni Zasloff Thomas was surprised to discover she had a talent for writing kids' songs. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

By Nancy Sheehan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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"I say Chanukah, you say Hanukah

I say Challah you say Halla

I say Chumus, you say humus

What the heck is going on?"

A Mama Doni concert, *that's* what's going on, and if you like disco music — or rock, reggae, rap or a Latin beat — Mama serves it all up with a Jewish twist. The suburban housewife-turned-musical-marvel from Montclair, N.J., will make her Massachusetts debut with a family Hanukkah show at the Jewish Community Center Tuesday night.

Mama Doni Hanukkah concert

Where: Worcester Jewish Community Center, 533 Salisbury St., Worcester
When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday
How much: Free

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Don't expect the traditional songs your great-grandmother (and her great-grandmother, probably) sang along with. Doni Zasloff Thomas is a mother of two and the lead singer and songwriter of The Mama Doni Band, which also includes a drummer, bass player and guitarist in a grouping that has been called a "wacky, Jewish indie-rock band for kids." Mama Doni's specialty is redefining traditional Jewish music through a catchy blend of styles including reggae, rock, disco, klezmer and a cross-cultural hybrid she affectionately calls "Jewgrass." She pulls it all off with a hip, generation-spanning style and lots of humor.

Mama will perform songs from her debut album "I Love Herring (& Other Fish Shticks for Kids)," along with cuts from her highly entertaining second CD, "Chanukah Fever," released Nov. 24. The set list will include an upbeat mix of songs including "Latke Man," a retro-swing, potato-y pop song; "The Funky Gold Menorah," a kid-friendly version of hip-hop (Mama is a momma, remember); "La Vida Dreidel," which we could describe as "Ricky Martin goes for a Hanukkah spin"; and "I Say Chanukah (You Say Hanukah!)," a steel drum-fueled song with a highly danceable Caribbean-Yiddish flavor.

Mama Doni is very busy these days with shows mainly on the East Coast, but with an L.A. gig also on the roster. The band won the Simcha Award for "Inspiring Joy Through Music," in competition with more than 100 bands from 15 countries at the 2008 International Jewish Music Festival in Amsterdam. Her performance schedule has become so busy that she has had to give up a music teaching job to handle it all. She did, however, find a few minutes to speak with us over the phone recently.

QHow did a nice New Jersey housewife get mixed up in all this show-biz stuff?

A"I didn't know I was going to do this. My children had the that-Mom-comes-into-class-day in pre-school and I started singing a song with the kids. After the class the head of the school pulled me aside and asked me to become the music teacher for the school. And I said 'Are you serious?' and she said 'Yes.' Then when I started thinking about what kind of music I would want to share with these kids, I couldn't find what I wanted to say, so then it turns out, apparently, I could write songs. The next thing I knew I had notebook after notebook filled with ideas for songs."

QThere was a big leap there. What was the first step? The first song?

A"I actually looked up on the Internet 'how to write a song.' I Googled it and nothing happened. I thought 'Oh, forget it.' And then it was a snow day and the kids were at home. I don't know what hit me but all of a sudden I came up with this idea and I just wrote this sort of bluegrass-style song, and I felt like someone else had written it. I can't even explain it. It was, like, 'Did I just write that?' Then, literally, by that night I had already written two more and then I'm on the carpool line and I'm leaving myself messages with lyrics and harmonies are popping in my head. It was like this crazy thing, this crazy Jewish explosion."

QHow did it lead to a Hanukkah album?

A"There's so much other holiday music out there. There are Christmas songs that are just everywhere, and I wanted to write songs that anybody could listen to — any age, but also any background. And I wanted songs that would share the Jewish culture, especially in this holiday time, to share Hanukkah with people in a different kind of way that wasn't so much religiously based but more about how we celebrate through our culture. I'm calling them Jewified jingles."

QHow has the audience reaction been?

A"What I'm trying to do is create an experience where the children are loving it because they're at a rock concert and rocking out and learning about Jewish culture and also create music that parents are going to like. And because the content is all about Jewish culture, a lot of the Jewish grandparents hopefully will be included because it's about stuff that they know about. What grandma doesn't like talking about latkes? So my most heartwarming and emotional moments actually are when I see a child, the mom and the grandmother together all having this experience and enjoying it. If I can bridge these generations in that way it's even bigger and more beautiful than I could have ever dreamed."

QSo you never dreamed it would come to this?

A"It's like all the things in my life that I have loved over the years all just came together. I can't even explain it. I couldn't have dreamed it. I'm so overwhelmed and I get so emotional when I think of the response because I wrote these songs in my living room and my kitchen. I had no idea that anyone would even like it. I just did it because I liked it. I wasn't even sure I was ever going to tell anybody about it. And now here I am and I have fans. It's really strange, and really cool."



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