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Spiritual return

'Mama Doni' comes home with her band

by Aaron Leibel, Arts Editor

This Sunday's concert will be a physical -- and spiritual -- homecoming for Doni Zasloff Thomas.

"Beth Tikvah, that's where I grew up learning what it is to be Jewish," says Zasloff Thomas, 36, known professionally as Mama Doni, about the synagogue in which she became bat mitzvah. Later, it merged with Temple Israel to form Tikvat Israel in Rockville, where Mama Doni and The Mama Doni Band will perform.

"I owe them [the shul] my whole Jewish spirit."

During her time living in Rockville between the ages of 3 and 13, she attended both the Hebrew Day Institute, where she "was excited by the music" she learned, and the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School where she performed in the musicals Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and Oklahoma -- in Hebrew.

"I went to every Jewish camp imaginable" as a kid, she says, mentioning Camp Ramah, Camp Moshava and B'nai B'rith Camp. She was a bar and bat mitzvah tutor and dance and Hebrew teacher at the camps, the musician says.

"The themes of Jewish and arts were always happening," she remembers.

After graduating from the New York University with a degree in theater education and the performing arts, she worked in New York City in children's marketing and as a creative director for a children's media company. Then came marriage, a move to Montclair, N.J., and kids.

Two years ago, she was at her kids' Jewish Montessori preschool reading books and singing. After she had finished, the head of school offered her a job as the music teacher; she accepted.

When she couldn't find appropriate music to share with her students, Zasloff Thomas decided to write her own.

At home one snowy day, she had a "Jewish creative aha moment" and wrote "Sportin' My Kippah."

That began "the explosion of songs" that burst out of her into a notebook. She wrote 30 songs in three weeks, filling a notebook with "songs and song ideas celebrating Jewish culture, including Jewish food, Jewish humor and Jewish sensibilities in all different genres of music," she says, including reggae, rock, disco, Latin and klezmer.

"After I had all those songs, I felt I should do something with them."

She found music producer Adam Nelson and they produced the first Mama Doni CD, I Love Herring (and Other Fish Shticks), which was released last year. (Subsequently, there have been three more CDs -- I Love Purim, I Love Chanukah and the latest, Chanukah Fever.)

Last year, at the International Jewish Music Festival in Amsterdam, her hastily assembled Mama Doni Band won the Simcha Award for "inspiring joy through music" in competition with 100 other bands from 15 countries.

Since then, the band -- Zasloff Thomas, lead vocalist; Justin Goldner, guitar; Alex Tyshkov, bass; and Cliff Ramsay, drums -- has been on a "Jewish whirlwind," performing in Jewish community centers, synagogues, schools and festivals all over the East Coast and elsewhere.

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In her music, the singer/composer says she wants to share the Jewish spirit she gained in her years in the Washington area "in a way that kids can get, no matter what their background."

She also wants to write music that parents and grandparents would appreciate because "the content is 'Jewishkeit.' "

"Parents are enjoying it because it is music that is fun and cool, and kids love the energy and beat of music," she says.

The show, which will feature songs from her CDs, is "an interactive, fun, family experience," she promises. Kids will receive chocolate gelt, dreidels, a bracelet, T-shirts and chances to take part in the program.

The concert, at Tikvat Israel at 4:30 p.m., is free and open to the public. Tickets for a brisket and latke Chanukah dinner after the concert, at \$12, \$9 for children 3-12, are available by calling 301-762-7338.

Reader Comments

Posted: Thursday, December 10, 2009

Article comment by: **Felicia Black**

This should be a great concert! The Chanukah dinner after the concert is sold out.

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