

CT JEWISH LEDGER - FRONT COVER

CONNECTICUT JEWISH LEDGER

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1929 • WWW.JEWISHLEDGER.COM

Vol. 80 No. 50, ©2008 • \$1.00 • Friday, December 12, 2008 • 15 Kislev 5769



CONVERSATION WITH...

Janet Macoska

By Cindy Mindell

Since 1974, photojournalist Janet Macoska has been capturing rock's brightest stars on film. Published widely in *Rolling Stone*, *People*, *US*, *Vogue*, *American Photo*, *Cream*, *16*, *Teen Beat*, *The New York Times*, and *The London Times*, Macoska's work has also been featured regularly in VHI's "rockumentaries." She is the photographer for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, and her photographs are part of the permanent collection there, as well as the National Portrait Gallery in London and in *Hard Rock Cafés* around the world. *David Bowie*, *Led Zeppelin*, *AC/DC*, and *The Kinks* are just a few of the artists who have used her work on their album covers.

Her coffee-table book, *"Jews Rock!"* has just been published (Victoria Ann Fehberg, publisher, ARTVISION EXHIBITIONS, LLC), featuring a foreword by Norwalk rabbi Brian Leiken. Macoska spoke with the Ledger about the project.

Q When were you bitten by the rock and roll bug?

A: I've been a lifelong rock and roll fan, like Rabbi Brian. We're both very passionate about the music and the history behind the music. I started loving rock and roll when the Beatles hit the country in 1964, when I was 10. Their music led me to look at the music of the '50s and eventually led me to my career. I started shooting professionally at the age of 20, in 1974. That's 34 years of doing photography in the music business, and I still am passionate about it and love it.

Like Rabbi Brian, I grew up in Cleveland, which is considered the birthplace of rock and roll, though many cities will claim that honor. As Rabbi Brian wrote in the book's foreword, it was Clevelander Leo Mintz, owner of Record Rendezvous, who launched the music to a wide audience through his friend, DJ Alan Freed. In the early '50s, Mintz was seeing kids, both black and white, dancing to the rhythm & blues "Race Records" that he would bring to his store from the South.

He knew that if he could get a platform for that music, kids would dig it. In 1952, Mintz booked the Cleveland Arena for a concert, which sold out and had people waiting outside to get in. That's when we had our first rock and roll riot. He had to come up with a name for the music and the phenomenon he was witnessing. "Rock and roll" comes from various lyrics from the Race Records, and is terminology for sex. Mintz created a name for the exciting music.

He actually bought a Saturday-night segment of time on WJW Radio for his friend, Alan Freed, who was a classical-music DJ and thought Mintz was crazy. But the music took off, and was hugely popular. Alan Freed became a



Janet Macoska

"IF YOU LOOK AT THE SCOPE OF ROCK AND ROLL, THERE ARE SO MANY JEWISH MUSICIANS AND SONGWRITERS WHO HAVE INFLUENCED THE GENRE..." SAYS JEWS ROCK! PHOTOJOURNALIST

superstar in New York, and Leo Mintz gets forgotten. His main intention was selling records, and he expanded to seven stores in Cleveland.

Q How did the idea for a book about Jewish rockers evolve?

A: I'm not Jewish – I'm a lapsed Catholic – so I come to the project from the rock and roll standpoint and as a writer and historian. Last year, a Cleveland businessman who had bought some of my photos asked me, "Have you ever thought about doing an exhibition on Jewish rock and rollers?" He Googled and started reading off names, and I had to tell him to stop once he'd quickly reached 20. I thought, "I've photographed all these people," and by the time I'd gotten to the parking lot, I knew I needed to do it. No one had told the story.

Every Jewish musician has helped America's music evolve, following the tradition of Tin Pan Alley, the Gershwins, etc. – Jewish-Americans making music of our time. If you look at the scope of rock and roll, there are so many Jewish musicians and songwriters who have influenced the genre. Every corner I turn, I find another story I want to tell.

Q How did you hook up with Rabbi Leiken?

A: When we found Rabbi Brian, I was doing research and I read about this rabbi connecting

rock and roll and Jewish tradition at his synagogue. I called him and knew immediately that he got what I was wanting to do. He told me that his dad is the mayor of Shaker Heights [a Cleveland suburb] and I said, "You're the voice of 'Jews Rock!'"

Rabbi Brian is a more enthusiastic researcher than I am. He's so good at finding the stories, individual as well as stories of a people and a culture. He can connect all the dots. It all started with the photos and some stories, and the first part of what we're doing is the book.

Q As you speak and present exhibitions around the country, how are people responding?

A: We're still at the beginning point of rolling this out. After Thanksgiving, we did a small presentation at the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Cleveland. People are very excited to hear Rabbi Brian speak, not only because he's a good speaker, but because he really knows his stuff. It opens up more and more questions. People are fascinated with the topic.

It started with a photography book with some narrative, and there will be another book with more narrative. We're going to do a DVD based on Rabbi Brian's presentation, to make something that will serve as a way to tell the story to a wider audience at JCCs, libraries, and other institutions.

Q In your experience, was a rock star's background ever an issue?

A: Background hardly ever came up. And with that you have a story that is a theme to explore, because it's the nature of the world back then. In the '50s, '60s, '70s, Jewish artists who wanted to be popular in the mainstream would many times change their name, hiding their Jewishness and wanting to be accepted for the music they were creating. A lot of them put that aside – their Jewishness was their own personal, private area of their life. It's sad that they didn't feel they could be themselves; they actually created personas. For example, the members of KISS created cartoon characters. They didn't want any part of their real selves to be onstage. To be a rock- or pop-star, they felt it necessary to bury their Jewishness. Would that happen today? I don't think the climate is the same. I hope we're more accepting, so that artists don't have to do that.

A story about Connecticut Rabbi Brian Leiken and the (Jewish) history of rock and roll appears on page 12.

Comments? Email cindym@jewishledger.com.

THE RABBI AND THE ROCK STARS NORWALK ROCK MAVEN RABBI WRITES THE FORWARD TO "JEW'S ROCK!"

By Cindy Mindell

NORWALK - There are three significant moments in Rabbi Brian Leiken's love affair with rock and roll.

There was the time he awoke to the opening harmonica on Springsteen's "Thunder Road" wafting into his childhood bedroom from his older brother's fumble.

There was the morning, just a couple of years ago, on his drive to work at Temple Shalom. The CD he was listening to was of a cover band playing Simon & Garfunkel, The Mamas and The Papas, and Billy Joel, and he realized that the artists were all rock stars with Jewish backgrounds.

The Cleveland native was already familiar with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, built in his hometown in 1995. Then he found the Challah Fame, JewsRock.org's virtual tribute to rock stars who are practicing Jews or who have Jewish backgrounds.

In March 2007, Leiken organized "Rock of David" at Temple Shalom, a celebration of Jewish rock musicians and songwriters that drew 350 people. The concert featured the Westport-based Heart and Soul, a band of professional musicians who have all played with various rock luminaries, and commentary by Leiken on the Jewish backgrounds of the artists represented.

The Ledger ran an article announcing the concert, which was found recently by Challah Fame photographer Janet Macoska, who has been snapping rock musicians, Jewish and otherwise, for the past 30 years.

Macoska contacted Leiken to talk about her book project, *Jews Rock!* The next thing you know, Temple Shalom hosted a month-long exhibit of some of her photos, and Macoska asked Leiken to write the forward to her new book.

JEW'S AND BLACKS COLLABORATE

"In my research, I learned that the history of Jews in rock goes beyond the stars Janet had photographed," Leiken says. "Back to the late '40s and early '50s African-Americans were moving up north in the Great Migration, and Eastern European immigrants and their children were going into new businesses, many into the entertainment industry



Rabbi Brian Leiken



JEW'S ROCK EXHIBIT COMING TO WEST HARTFORD

The photographer exhibition, *Jews Rock!*, will be on display at the Mandell Jewish Community Center in West Hartford, Feb. 28 - April 5. Rabbi Brian Leiken and rock photographer Janet Macoska's joint multimedia presentation will be presented on Saturday, February 28 at 8 p.m., followed by a book signing. Books will be available for purchase. For more information visit www.mandelljcc.org.

like Hollywood and the music industry. As African-American musicians were moving up north, they were meeting Jewish businessmen and developing these new relationships."

In Chicago, Leonard Chess met Muddy Waters and several other musicians playing Mississippi Delta blues, and signed them in 1950 to the newly created Chess Records, the first successful independent record label in the U.S.

At Atlantic Records in New York, Jerry Wexler brought in musicians playing more faster-paced music, and coined the term "rhythm and blues."

Cleveland record-store owner Leo Mintz noticed that his customers were increasingly interested in African-

American music. So he stocked more of it, and helped DJ Alan Freed land a gig at WJW, where he played the new music. Freed is remembered as the first to use "rock and roll," but it was Leo Mintz who taught him the term.

Jewish-Black collaboration continued in the late '50s in New York City, where the Brill Building was home to a number of Jewish songwriters, composers, and lyricists - among them, Moe Leiber and Jerry Blotter, Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. Many of the rock-and-roll number writers there were turned into major hits by black doo-wop bands.

JEW'S ROCKERS EMERGE

The first Jewish rock-and-roll star, Bob Dylan, was born Robert Zimmerman in Hibbing, Minn. Zimmerman wasn't interested in his Judaism as a boy, but found his passion in music, mostly folk and blues. He came to Greenwich Village, met record manager Albert Grossman, the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, signed with him in 1962 and changed his name. In his wake, a number of Jewish stars emerged, including Lou Reed, Carol King, and Simon & Garfunkel.

In the late '60s, the Woodstock music festival was organized by four Jews on a farm owned by a Jewish man, Max Yasgur, and included performances by at least 14 Jewish musicians.

"Among the 400,000 people who attended, I like to think there was plenty for a minyan," Leiken says.

By that time, there were Jews in all aspects of the music industry, and that's when Macoska started her photographic exploration.

THE 70S AND BEYOND

The '70s Punk-music movement was full of Jewish musicians and themes. Gene Simmons of KISS, the renowned glam-rock band of the '80s, was born

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Chaim Witz in Haifa. Paula Abdul's father was a Syrian Jew who fled his native land. Both sides of Billy Joel's family were Jewish. His paternal grandfather had founded a successful mid-order textile and clothing company in 1920s-era Germany, and lost his business when the Nazis came to power. The documentary film, "The Joel Files," follows Billy Joel and his brother as they travel to their ancestral Nuremberg.

"Now you have a whole slew of Jewish rock stars coming back to their tradition and starting to infuse it into their music," Leiken says. Mattisyahu was born Matthew Miller in Pennsylvania. He became a Chasid in Israel, but never lost his love of music, especially reggae. "He saw a lot of parallels between the Jewish tradition and reggae themes," Leiken says: "being oppressed and hoping for freedom and redemption, and he started writing songs about Jewish tradition and putting them to reggae melodies. He's been acclaimed as a new reggae star, connecting young Jews to their tradition, and giving them a sense of pride."

Phish recorded and performed "Avinu Malkenu" and "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav." Gustaf recorded an album of Chanukah songs. Bare Naked Ladies have a dreidel song on a holiday album. "Part of this is a reaction to Christian rock," Leiken says, a genre that started tentatively in the late '60s and exploded in the '90s.

It's an untold story, revealed in bits and pieces, "but no book has done it justice, especially if you compare it to the story of Jews in Hollywood," Leiken says. "One reason it hasn't been told is that it's still unfolding."

Leiken sees a parallel between the Jewish rock experience and "The Jazz Singer," the 1927 film. Al Johnson plays a young Jewish man whose father is a cantor. When the son leaves home to sing jazz, the father disowns him, even stopping shiva. At the end of the film, as the father lies dying, the son comes back and sings Kol Nidre at his father's deathbed.

"I almost see 'The Jazz Singer' as a forecast of the story of Jews in rock," Leiken says, "since jazz was the rock and roll of the '20s."

Comments? Email cindy@jewishledger.com.

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Jewish Ledger • December 12, 2008

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

A DOCUMENTARY ON BOB DYLAN'S CHRISTIAN PHASE

By Jay Michaelson

NEW YORK (NEXTBOOK) — In a telling moment in Joel Gilbert's new documentary "Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years," an interviewee says that when Dylan became a born-again Christian, in two short years he went from being an American Jewish hero to the "greatest apostate of the twentieth century."

Surely this is right. I know my mother has never forgiven him, and I suspect many other Jewish mothers haven't either. What a betrayal. It's as if Sandy Koufax pitched on Yom Kippur, but worse because Dylan embodied a specific kind of Iberian American Jewish hope that someone would speak truth to power, and that the world would listen. These were very Jewish dreams, and Dylan fulfilled them for awhile.

But the question remains: Why did Dylan temporarily convert to Christianity in 1979 and record two religious albums proclaiming the word of God? It remains an enduring mystery, and for many Jews, the ultimate *shanda* for *al goyim*: one of "our" greatest heroes becoming one of them.

Unfortunately, "Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years" doesn't answer these questions. After two hours of seemingly unedited interviews, ludicrously amateurish clip art and clichéd religious imagery, viewers emerge as unenlightened as we were at the outset. Widely advertised (for a documentary), "Jesus Years" is an unauthorized biographical film. Dylan did not participate, did not grant an interview and did not even authorize the use of his music.

It's also just not a very good movie. The film cannot resist illustrating any point in the cheesiest way possible. Art this bad can make religious people look dumb or crazy, or both.

Yet "Jesus Years" nearly succeeds in spite of itself. The film's spiritual center is Pastor Bill Dwyer of Los Angeles' Vineyard Christian



Fellowship, who Dylan called in late 1978 seeking counseling (at least according to Dwyer). Dwyer is a down-to-earth, no-bull— kind of guy. But Dwyer is cagey: like a good pastor. He doesn't violate confidence, and we're left clueless as to the exact nature of his relationship with Dylan. It's not until the very end of the film — long after I would have stopped watching had I not been reviewing it — that we get any inkling of why Dylan reached out at all. Only Dylanologist A.J. Weberman mentions, in passing, that Dylan was addicted to heroin in the late 1970s, still reeling from his recent divorce and dislocation. He was, indeed, a lost soul — and Jesus found him.

In one of the few snippets of actual Bob Dylan footage in the film, he says that he "never cared too much for preachers who were just looking for a contribution," but that he found something real in Dwyer's teaching of Jesus. This is an illuminating moment. Throughout his career, Dylan has embraced both sincerity and desimulation; his latest incarnation, as a mustachioed journeyman musician, is made of equal parts authenticity and con. What his earnest early fans never

realized is that this was true from the beginning. Here was Robert Zimmerman playing as Woody Guthrie — or, as Todd Haynes' brilliant "I'm Not There" suggested, a minstrel version of an African-American folk singer.

The film consists largely of a series of interviews with true believers, many of whom are Jews. Many Jews will probably find it impossible to look beyond his transparent attempt at outreach. We're too accustomed to the endless efforts to convert us — and Bob Dylan's "Jesus Years" often seems to be one.

Not surprisingly, the film spends very little time discussing why Dylan left Jesus — and turned to Chabad-Lubavitch, no less — after just two years and 2 1/2 albums. Again, Weberman sheds the only light on the subject: Dylan came to believe that his Christian advisers were exploiting him. What a disappointment that must have been: the old-time religion turned out to be yet another con. No wonder Dylan spent most of the 1980s wandering in the pop wilderness, only regaining his footing at the end of the decade.

"Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years" is more a symptom of this pattern than a study of it, exploiting Dylan's fame to get Jews like me to sit through testimonies of salvation in Christ. Its warped perspective gives the sense that Jews for Jesus is a nationwide force rather than a peculiar outlier, and that the secular world is coextensive with aimlessness and lies. Yet in objectifying and exploiting Dylan, it also subtly manages to humanize him.

Jay Michaelson is a columnist for the Forward, a founding editor of Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture, and the author of "God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness, and Embodied Spiritual Practice." Reprinted from Nextbook.org, a new read on Jewish culture.