

Hasidic Hendrix Is Hard Rockin' in Hebrew

Fans Wear Hip Downtown Black and Dance the Hora Between Sets

By GEOFF SHANDLER

There are several things Yosi Piamenta resembles but guitar hero is not one of them. In his mid-forties, chubby and wearing spectacles, he looks like Oliver Sacks on laundry day. He smokes heavily, and his smile is so ever-present that it is, well, a bit discomfoting. His beard is dense, like steel wool, and he's stocky. He looks just like an ultra-Orthodox guy from Canarsie, which he is, though Yosi Piamenta is much more than that. Yosi Piamenta is the greatest ultra-Orthodox rock guitarist in the world. Yosi Piamenta is the Hasidic Hendrix.



There are several stories as to how and when Mr. Piamenta first was called the Hasidic Hendrix, but the name has stuck. Still, he's not quite like Jimi. When Hendrix started a show late it was because he hadn't finished all of his pre-concert drugs. When Mr. Piamenta comes on late it's because it took a while to get a minyan together backstage. And Mr. Piamenta's music - he releases his latest album, "Strings of My Heart" (self-produced) this week - isn't quite rock as most New Yorkers think of it. For one thing, he sings in Hebrew; most of his songs have names like "L'Shana Habaah" or "Harebbi M'Lubavitch." Mr. Piamenta's group combines traditional Jewish melodies, classic chasidic songs, early Weather Report, jazz-fusion, and the sort of meandering jamming that characterizes rock bands of the tie-dye set. And then there are Mr. Piamenta's solos - furiously picked even as he appears to be strumming, swirling not in the style of Hendrix's acid-washed blues but along the chordal lines of "Hava Nagila." Perhaps wisely, many of the songs are mostly instrumental. "Yosi is not known for his voice," admits fan Shlomo Drazin.

But while the music may not quite compare to that coming out of the more secular world, if

you're looking for an authentic subculture in indie rock you probably couldn't do better than New York's quietly growing chasidic rock community. Some of the bands, like Moshe Antelis' Rikud, are hardly rocking; they're the sort of wedding outfit that mildly plays reggae versions of traditional Hebrew ballads and a lounge music-tinged "Hine Ma Tov." The band Rock B'Simcha, on the other hand, proudly bills itself as "Zep on Torah," even though their heavy metal has more in common with bands like Helmet or Metallica (that is, if Helmet or Metallica took to singing in Hebrew and dedicating songs to Jonathan Pollard). You almost have to love a heavy metal band that between songs tells the crowd, "Alright, now we're gonna do some horas!"

Despite these differences, in some very conventional ways the fans of these bands fit the indie rock stereotype. For one, they smoke a lot: the girls, the guys, the bands, all of them light up. They work the bar, drinking their Coronas and Rolling Rocks. They like their music loud, and even if the women tend to line dance regardless of the tune, a few of the men have managed to get the head-banging motion down pat. If they aren't quite up to par on the indie fashion front - at Mr. Piamenta's most recent show ties, sweater vests and yarmulkes were the order of the day - they have some things figured out: this is a community, after all, that wears that hip downtown black a lot.

And if chasidic rockers and their fans aren't quite rebels in the conventional rock sense, they're certainly rebels in the broader sense of the word. Appreciating - let alone playing - hard rock is not common in the tightly knit, ultra-Orthodox community, and almost all of the musicians have had to overcome serious doubts. "Eventually, I realized that God had given me a gift," says one, "and that there was nothing wrong with playing rock."

After a recent show at Wetlands (one of Mr. Piamenta's relatively uncommon public performances) wound to a close in the early hours of the morning, some young men stood out on Hudson Street, waiting for the minivan that would take them back to Crown Heights. "Yosi Piamenta is the greatest!" exclaimed one, while his friend raised his fist in the air and awkwardly declared, "We rock! We rock!"

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