

City Lifestyle

Jew rock man!

Local band ready to take secular music with Jewish message to the masses

By Drew Walen

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Can Nashville be the cradle for the Jewish rock movement?

That's what Dan Nichols and his band E18teen are trying to find out. Much the same way young Christians took the thunder of secular bands and brought it into the church, Nichols, who converted to Judaism at age 7, is attempting to do the same by bringing distorted guitars and thumping bass into the temple and unleashing it back into the public consciousness.

E18teen's latest release, *Be Strong*, manages to take conspicuous aim at the commercially successful sound of bands like R.E.M. and Bare Naked Ladies which could have something to do with Nichols' upbringing in the North Carolina area and playing shows with Hootie and the Blowfish and Ben Folds.

While his contemporaries went on to varied success, Nichols felt he needed to focus on his passion



Photo by Mike Strasinger

He could have gone the way of Hootie, but Dan Nichols heard a higher calling.

for Judaism and left the Carolina hills for Nashville, where he became a cantorial soloist at Congregation Micah. It was there he met his future partner Mason Cooper, the other half of E18teen. Cooper was no novice to the

music business, having written with songwriting legends like Bernie Taupin and artists like George Michael and Cheap Trick.

"We became really good friends, golfing and hanging out. And the topic of music came up,"

Nichols said. Seeing the correlation with Christian rock bands like D.C. Talk and Jars of Clay, the duo set out to write the kind of songs they would want to listen to.

What defines "Jewish" rock? According to Nichols, it takes one of three elements to qualify — if it has some Hebrew in it, teaches a Jewish value or has some music element of a traditional Jewish melody.

Once the band got underway, they had to choose a name. "We had suggestions like They Might be Doctors and Yechudi and the Gefilte Fish, but we wanted something that wasn't silly or schtick," Nichols said.

E18teen, on the other hand, has a special significance. In Hebrew, each letter in the alphabet has a correlating number. The Hebrew letter "chi," which also translates to "life," serves as the number 18.

With Nichols' supportive links into the Jewish community as a cantorial soloist and song-leader, E18teen was given a chance to perform at a few gatherings of

North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY). "The very first show we played was in Cincinnati," Cooper recalled. "They said, 'We're going to give you a shot, but there's 300 kids here and we suspect 30 are going to listen to you.' Well, it was the exact opposite — 270 stayed and listened."

The band's first disc sold approximately 1,300 copies through live shows and their Web site, www.jewishrock.com, over a two year period. *Be Strong* has already sold over a thousand copies in just six weeks, while their following has grown ever larger.

"There was a mission behind this album," Nichols said. "I wanted to make it rock [harder than the first album]. I wanted it to be Jewish. And I wanted to make no apologies about it. I wanted to push that envelope. I'm trying to clarify my own Jewish experience. And I'm sharing it because I'm getting fed

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back it's having value — that kids are gaining a sense of hope and sense of connection and understanding of [what it means to be Jewish].”

With over 2 million active teens involved in Jewish youth groups, the market may prove to be a sizeable niche. It could grow even larger if the multitudes of young Jews who are not affiliated with Jewish activities still dis-

cover the music. “It’s a finite market compared to the general mass market, but it’s a very captive and loyal audience,” Cooper added. “The groups we have touched in the high schools are growing up, and they’re bringing us into the colleges and into their communities.”

While there are a few other artists attempting to market similar music to the same audience as E18teen, “I can count them on

less than one hand,” Cooper admitted.

But more than being a marketing tool, the music is really a spiritual search for Nichols and Cooper. “Music is a metaphor for togetherness,” Nichols said. “It’s utopian dreamer kind of stuff, but it’s something that I have felt and resonated with since I was kid. It hit me over the head and said this is important. Do this. That’s why I do it.” **CP**