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Soul Singer-songwriter's leap of faith leads from synagogue to solo career

 By Keith Snider
BANNER RELIGION WRITER

Four years ago, Dan Nichols walked into a synagogue looking for a place to pray and walked out with a job. He's walking out again.

Nichols came to town, guitar in hand, chasing a familiar dream. He wanted to write songs and perform them at the Bluebird Cafe. He was young and very enthusiastic.

Nichols also wanted a spiritual anchor.

And when Rabbi Ken Kanter discovered Nichols had worked as a cantorial soloist at a North Carolina synagogue, he hired him on the spot to lead worship services at Congregation Micah.

"I figured I needed a roof over my head and I'd still be using my voice," Nichols says. "So I took the job."

Meanwhile, he nurtured the dream.

Now, Nichols has finished cutting *The Day After Tomorrow*, a project he describes as "introspective narratives of my real and not-so-real life" and perhaps the beginning of a solo career.

He isn't scared about quitting his day job at Congregation Micah, and he's itching to perform the new material. He's

less thrilled about shopping the album to music labels.

"I don't know if my stuff is hit-radio material," he says over a cup of hazelnut coffee in his Bellevue apartment. "If nobody wants to play it or says, 'we just don't get this,' I'll go to cantorial school."

Nichols, 28, finishes at Congregation Micah this month.

He admits cantor-turned-rocker isn't the typical career path. Nor is it the one he intended.

He picked up the guitar at a Jewish summer camp when he was a teen-ager, then played with a college band that occasionally opened for Hootie and the Blowfish while he finished a music degree at University of North Carolina. Once he graduated, a rabbi asked Nichols to lead services and teach children at a Reform synagogue in Raleigh, where he lived at the time.

Nichols, who also teaches music at Westminster School in Nashville, says he's energized by the enthusiasm he finds in kids at the school and synagogue.

"Whether I'm teaching them Hebrew, Jewish songs or Torah stories — or just passing on the joy of being Jewish — they're so open," he says. "It's a beautiful, pure thing and I cherish it."

His own playful side is apparent in his music, which mixes serious themes and edgy, often whimsical arrangements.

One of the new songs, *The Invisible Man*, is a two-minute carnival of sound layered over lyrics about the effects of crime. Another song, *High and Dry*, narrates the odd, frustrating dance of lovers who can't seem to deal with the same problem at the same time.

"It's like Legos," Nichols says of his songwriting. "I was totally into Legos and Micronauts as a kid."

"I don't think I'm manic-depressive, but I'm close."

There's nothing religious in his solo material — not even anything explicitly Jewish — unlike the CD he and friend Mason Cooper released two years ago with their band E18hteen. Several of those songs had Hebrew lyrics and one, *Candle*, tells Christians trying to convert Jews, "I wish I were a candle that I could make light of you."

"Both my parents chose Judaism so I wasn't born into it," he says. "I'm a Jew by choice. It's a very reflective decision. But I've made that decision and I wish people would respect that."

E18hteen's more ambiguous songs could be about the relationships of lovers or about the relationships of humans and God, he says.

The band still plays at colleges and before Jewish crowds and youth camps, where Nichols runs the kind of workshops that got him excited about music as a kid.



Dan Nichols is trading in his life as a cantor for the pursuit of his rock 'n' roll dreams. Behind him is his co-producer "Void."

Nichols also met his fiancée, Elysha Konicov, at a summer camp — as well as the rabbi who will marry them in May.

"It's blissful. It's beautiful. It's a totally cool Jewish experience," he says of the camps.

Nichols says he settled on Nashville because he grew up outside Indianapolis and figured he'd get chewed up by the music scene in New

York or Los Angeles. His first shock was showing up for an audition at the Bluebird and seeing a line of maybe 200 other singers.

"They wanted to hear one verse and a chorus," he says. "I forget what I even played."

While music and performance can't

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be separated entirely even in his cantorial singing, Nichols says that setting is different.

"I have to know what's ahead — that I have to go up a seventh and it's gonna be hard. I gotta know the Hebrew. I gotta know what's going on in the Jewish world and in the congregation," he says.

"But the spotlight can't be on me. It's worship. I'm focused on the liturgy and trying to get people to a place where they're deeply in

prayer."

When he's playing in a club, he wants the crowd to study his quirks and move into the dark corners of his mind. And he likes it loud.

"Wear earplugs," he warns. If the career fizzles, he'll move on, he says. He can still teach. And there's always graduate school and the life of an ordained cantor.

"My goal isn't to get signed. It's to write good stuff. And I love to perform," he says. "If cantor school happens, that's a 24-7 thing. That's serious."

Keith Snider may be reached at 726-5982 or by e-mail: ksnider@NashvilleBanner.com