

PERSPECTIVE: METRO AND BEYOND

Jewish rockers mix Torah with today's tunes

"We're Jewish and we rock."

— Mason Cooper, member of the Jewish duo Eighteen

Met with a couple of musician guys for lunch the other day. They were funny, energetic, thoughtful.

Some might say a little crazy too.

They have this dream. They want to make some music history. In the heart of Protestant Music City, Dan Nichols and Mason Cooper want to be the nation's first Jewish rockers.

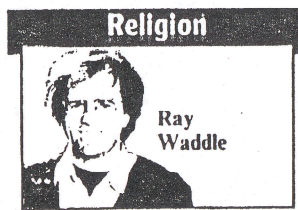
Last week, the two Nashville transplants finished up their first CD. The cassette tape version came out last spring. They call it *Life*. They call themselves Eighteen.

They want to shake up the conservatism of Jewish youth music. A lot's happened in pop music since Peter, Paul and Mary.

"I see kids who are sliding away from their connection to Judaism," Nichols said.

"There's no spice, no connection. So we asked ourselves, 'How come no one's tried this kind of music to touch them?'"

There are other Jewish bands, but none with a following that can claim to be alternative pop. Folk-



singer Debbie Friedman is massive on the Jewish music circuit, especially among baby boomers, and is on the verge of being a crossover success.

Yet most officially sanctioned Jewish youth geared music remains traditional, liturgical, acoustical.

Nichols and Cooper say they'd like to see Jewish pop instincts updated in a world where the kids are listening to Weezer and Alanis and Hootie, not Donovan.

"We don't look at it as competition with other styles," Cooper said. "Jewish music ought to range from liturgical to modern rock."

Can Torah mix with the Gin Blossoms? What rock'n'roll is doing for Christian youngsters — and the lu-

crative business called Contemporary Christian — Eighteen would like to do for Jewish kids who are starved for a religious message wedded to a pop groove.

"Our question was, 'How do we hit these kids and make them feel proud of their identity?'" Cooper said.

"We call it Modern Jewish Rock — it lets kids know that being Jewish is OK, they don't have to assimilate. Being Jewish doesn't have to be at odds with culture."

Cooper, 34, and Nichols, 27, bring complementary talents to their duo. Nichols was an antic guitar rocker and songwriter in a popular North Carolina band before moving here a couple of years ago. Cooper brings music business contacts and keyboard experience. He spent seven years in Los Angeles, where his management company worked with Megadeth and George Michael.

Having moved here, they met at their temple, Congregation Micah, in summer 1995. Nichols had been hired on there as cantorial soloist; Cooper did a stint as a Sunday school teacher of 15-year-olds.

They noticed the same thing:



Mason Cooper, left, and Dan Nichols make up the duo Eighteen. The call their music Modern Jewish Rock.

Many kids were doing time in parallel worlds, learning Bible portions, listening to Green Day. Must the two worlds never meet?

They started writing songs. Two on the CD are in Hebrew, one a love lyric from the Song of Songs.

The rest are in English, indirectly touching on Jewish ethical themes of making the world a better place, finding self-respect and serenity of spirit.

One tune, *Candle*, blurts out the frustration of a Jewish person react-

ing to a Christian who's eager to make a convert.

"We've been through this before/ yet every time I feel singled out/ ... You call me friend/ You know not my name/ You know not my life ..."

They worked up a demo tape, took their act on the road. Their audience would be ready-made — the many Jewish summer camps across the region. They played at several over the summer and got the affirmation they were seeking.

Audiences danced at synagogue concerts. They even moshed in the social hall of one Cincinnati temple.

The duo also sold nearly 1,000 tapes during their tour. (The CD is available for \$15, the tape for \$10, by calling 1-888-LIFE181.)

So Eighteen may yet find its niche. They dream of some day sojourning to that land of plenty — the crossover market — but for now the plan is to give Jewish youngsters something to sing about.

"I'm rarely analytical about trying new things like this," Nichols said. "I just dive in and see how it feels. This one's feeling great."

Rock the Casbah. ■