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Etan G: The Interview

By [Matthue Roth](#) | September 3rd, 2009 12:42 PM
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For a while, Etan G was known as “the Jewish rapper” — you know, as opposed to one of several Jewish rappers. Nobody’s sure who was around first, but Mr. G was unarguably a trailblazer in the realm of making hip-hop palatable for nice Jewish kids. At a time when most rap songs featured half-naked women sprawled across cars, G was taking the high road, making positive self-reinforcement songs along the lines of KRS-1 or Black Star. Then, at one point, the usually-timid Jewish band [Shlock Rock](#) — creator of such parodies as “Rock Me Achashverosh” and “Give Me That Old Time Torah Scroll” — signed on Etan G as a rapper and dancer.

In 2000, G released his first solo album, [South Side of the Synagogue](#), which was an instant classic among a certain crowd — that is, Jewish day-school kids who were desperate for an alternative to cheesy “religious” music. Songs like “Yo Yo Yarmulke” and “Makin’ the Motzee” taught Jewish rituals in a way that was fun and catchy, but still educational — irreverent, but also reverent.

Etan G’s career followed in that way. Even when he fell into his “bad boy” role, like the time he got [kicked off the Chabad telethon](#), he’s still always been a positive role model — half-inspirational, half-educational, and full of joy.

While continuing to tour both alone and with Shlock Rock — as well as doing dozens of [school appearances](#) each year — G has just released his new solo album, [Foundation](#), on CD and [iTunes](#). He dropped MJL a line to talk about his new CD, and to answer a few questions about his past and his future.

Matthue: Your sound this time around has evolved a lot since [South Side of the Synagogue](#). The beats are heavier, there’s more guitar, and your hooks are more complex.

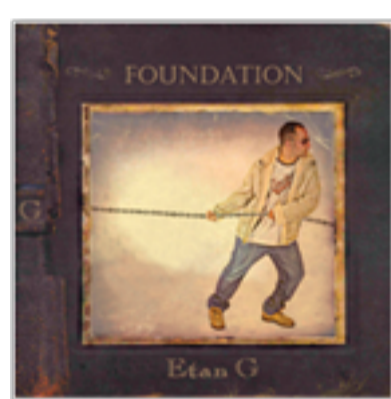
Etan G: It’s due to many factors including new producers, newer technology, different budget, different message I wanted to convey, less restrictions, different creative process, new life experiences, more confidence in the studio, more experience in the studio and much more experience with music in general — just to name a few. I also took some interesting risks and challenges in musical styles on this album, especially on songs like “Dogtag” and “This Is How We Live” — that seem to be well received.

How does is your fanbase reacting? Is your audience the same as it was back then?

I think it depends on what you thought the audience was before. My diverse core audience remains the same, with that diversity becoming even broader. There are greater numbers of fans that are not Jewish, from different Jewish affiliations and different races. It was like that with *South Side*, but considerably less so. That diversity has grown incredibly since then. It’s pretty cool!

Are you singing the vocals on “Goofin’ Around”? What’s the story behind that song? And have you ever dabbled in non-hip-hop genres of music?

It’s another example of a risk and challenge I took on this album. I am singing vocals on it. I’m definitely not a singer, but people liked it and want to hear more of it. I’m not sure “more” is what I’ll go with — but I might try another song like that.



As for the song’s story, it’s just one of those cool things about music. I was in my studio working on the lyrics and arrangement for another song for some time. I got distracted. I was just humming the tune and I just started free-styling over it. You know, no restrictions just saying whatever I could think of at the moment.

I took it to my producer, redid vocals on the studio mic, mixed and mastered it and done! The whole song from top to bottom took about an hour. I called it “Goofin’ Around” because that’s exactly what I was doing. I should have been working on the other song and instead I was goofing around on this one. I think it came out pretty cool so I put it on the album. I liked the [Bruce Hornsby](#) piano sound on it, just connected with it and went from there. I mean, the line about “Jewish time” and “runnin late all day” still cracks me up cuz it has nothing to do with anything. It happened to be that earlier in the day a friend was running late and it just came out that night when i was doing this. I kept it in cuz, hey, what the hell.

Is it hard to strike a balance between the more inspirational, feel-good Jewish stuff like “Foundation” and straight-up party rhymes like “Jonesin’ 4 G”?

I’m not sure there needs to be a balance. I think it’s just different musical styles. I think the packaging is different but the messages or themes are similar. *Foundation* is about G-d, believing in ourselves, and building our own foundation. In the case of the Jews the Torah would be an ingredient of that foundation.

The original lyrics for “Jonesin’ 4 G” were all about me, me, me. When I got into the studio and revisited those lyrics that were written some time earlier, it just didn’t feel right. I just didn’t feel I had to be that guy — you know, Kanye-like, where I have to brag and boast. It’s just not me.

Instead of me being the desire of what one would be “Jonesin’ for, let me tweak it so the G is G-d and the party I’m talking about is the Simchas Bais Hashoeva when the 3rd temple comes. Imagine, if you will, the best red carpet event you can think of. Flashbulbs going off as the Jews walk into the 3rd temple to party like we’ve never partied before, Paris, Britney and Lindsay try, in vain, to get in and realize their fame and wealth can’t do anything for them here. They say that the Simchas Bais Hashoeva will be a party unlike anything the Jewish people have ever experienced and I’m always up for a good party. And if it’s G-d’s party, man, I am so down for that!

In a way, you’ve become kind of a staple of Jewish music — when we have lots of guests for Shabbos, there’s always someone who’s waiting in line to wash their hands before bread and starts going “Makin’ the, makin’ the, makin’ the motzee.” There’s nothing really like that on your new album — did you want to avoid writing another “yarmulke song” or “motzee song”?

There is actually a live version of “Makin’ the Motzee” on this album [as a bonus track]. I would never hear the end of it from the fans if I didn’t put a version of it on. It’s unbelievable how that song — lyrics written in 20 minutes in the summer of ‘92 on a friend’s couch — became the “Freebird” of my life.

I’ve performed that song in just about every music style imaginable, for people of all walks of life — on Shabbos in front of 5 people, on stage in front of thousands, on TV in front of hundreds of thousands, on radio in front of millions. It has stood the test of time and I love doing it each time. It never gets old.

Are you still doing a lot of school shows? How do you bridge the gap between entertaining and, well, teaching concrete lessons?

Ahh, you speak of Edu-tainment, or “Ed-Jew-tainment” — sorry about that — so lame — I apologize! I still do school shows but they’ve evolved into me speaking to groups of kids with songs performed within the context of whatever I’m speaking about. I also suspect you are referring to songs like “Makin’ the Motzee” or “Yo Yo Yarmulke” as teaching concrete lessons. Since “Motzee” was the only one I wrote, I would say that it is the exception to the rule.

I’m also not the guy you want to hear concrete lessons from. There are great teachers and great teaching musicians, like Shlock Rock, who do an awesome job of teaching concrete lessons and entertain.

I think I am more of a message guy (“Foundation,” “Believe”), an idea or story guy (“This Is How We Live,” “Change The World,”) or the presenter of a concept in a unique way (“Jonesin4G,” “Redemption Time”). Or consider “I Remember, I Recall” which is all about Jewish history. It’s all a form of education, but without a “lesson plan.”

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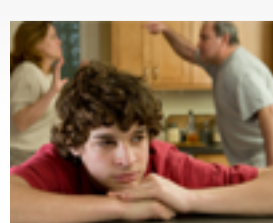
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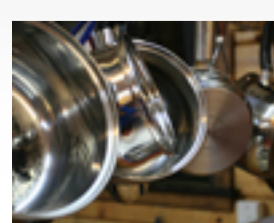
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