

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Rabbinical student makes cross-cultural music



By **VICKY TOBIANAH**
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Noam Katz's latest album, *A Drum in Hand*, blends traditional prayers with hand drumming and rhythms from around the world.

Katz, 31, played his songs in front of 3,500 people at the URJ Biennial, a conference for Reform Jews held in Toronto last month, hoping his music would "foster community and bridge gaps between both Jewish and other interfaith communities."

Due to complete his rabbinical program at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles in May, Katz hopes to help the Jewish community develop connections with other areas of the Diaspora through social justice and the arts.

As a young child, Katz attended Jewish summer camps where he was immediately struck by the power of song leaders.

"It was transformative to watch song leaders get up in front of hundreds of people for beautiful services or a raucous song session," said Katz, who plans to move to Toronto with his wife and daughter.

He said he saw how music is able to make Jewish prayer services more meaningful.

"It was on a hilltop or in the forest, instead of in a sanctuary, and that made Judaism come alive for me. I knew that's what I wanted to be doing."

Growing up listening to Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, as well as other folk musicians, Katz quickly learned that music was something he wanted to contribute to, not just listen to.

His first album, *Rakia*, released in 2001, was a folk rock album of new Shabbat and *Havdalah* melodies. At that time, he was part of the Freedom Music Project, headed by a Jewish folksinger, Peri Smilow, whose goal was to bring Jewish and African voices together to form a gospel choir that would sing new renditions of songs from the Passover seder and songs from the civil rights movement.

"Once I was exposed to this cross-cultural musical experience, it made me hungry to start looking elsewhere for partnerships and musical influence."

Katz later met J.J. Keki, the leader of the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda.

The Abayudaya Jewish community observes Jewish laws and traditions as they were observed in the early 1900s.

Initially, the Jewish community had more than 3,000 members, but the numbers dwindled to the 600-member community it is today.

"They have to continue to pass the Jewish torch or else it won't be continued," Katz said.

They live as traditional Jews, keeping the mitzvot of kashrut and Shabbat, celebrating holidays and conducting morning prayers.

"I was just blown away by the authenticity and diversity of their Jewish music. They had their own melodies, harmonies, blending Hebrew liturgy and East African rhythms together."

After quickly forming a friendship with Keki, Katz said he "immediately felt a personal sense of obligation, knowing I had the skills as an English and Judaic teacher, as well as a musician, to contribute to their community."

With the help of the American Jewish World Services and with Kulanu, organizations that assist dispersed Jewish communities around the world, he travelled to Uganda to spend time living among the Abayudaya Jewish community.

He learned that they suffer from the common maladies facing any community in the underdeveloped world, such as poverty and malaria, but they still observe Judaism.

"It was a very different experience. For a few months, I lived in a simple room, without electricity or running water. I slept under a mosquito net and I had to learn to deal with a different, diet – their meals consist of plain rice with some vegetables and very little sources of protein," Katz recalled.

"I had to physically and culturally adapt, but the fact that we shared Judaism, a vision about education and a love of music helped me feel as much at home as I could in East Africa."

Katz helped create a Jewish youth group for the Abayudaya community, which was the first of its kind in Uganda.

"One day, we rented a taxi, stuffed 20 people in it and drove to the Sipi Falls, one of the most beautiful places in Uganda. Many of them had never been [there] even though they lived in Uganda their entire lives, because it cost the equivalent of \$1.25 to get there," Katz said.

Katz's second album, *Mirembe*, is a tribute to the Abayudaya community and the way it has helped shape his music.

"They helped me make my music more worldly, and they had shown me never to take my Judaism for granted. My music has more of a social justice theme now that had not been there before."

Katz wrote a new melody to a traditional Jewish prayer, *Am Yisrael Chai*, which was inspired by the Abayudaya community.

The Abayudaya speak Luganda, a local language in which a vowel sound is often placed at the end of words. They have adopted this speech pattern in their distinct pronunciation of the Hebrew language.

By taking Hebrew words and mixing them with the Luganda pronunciation, the song reflects the blend of the two cultures and two languages joining together to form one universal message: that the strength of God and the Jewish community will live on forever.

Another song, *Mirembe, Salaam, V'shalom*, is a tribute to the different faith groups who Katz sees as "exemplars of peace and coexistence."

Katz's newest album, *A Drum in Hand*, bridges different rhythms and influences from around the world. With a mix of Afro-pop, Spanish melodies, Middle Eastern instruments and genres rooted in Katz's own American rock 'n' roll background, he hopes the diverse album can



Noam Katz, centre, said he was "blown away by the authenticity and diversity" of the music of the Abayudaya Jewish community.

transcend barriers and make his audiences feel like part of a global community.

For more information about Katz, visit www.noam-katz.com