

# MUSIC



2006



2013

For 35-year-old Matisyahu, Judaism has been a rocky journey. Life for the father of three began in White Plains, New York, where he had a secular upbringing. Back then the singer was known as Matthew Miller and he spent his formative years listening to proggy alt-rock and horsing around with hallucinogens.

At age 16 Matisyahu went on a school trip to Israel, where the seeds of an overwhelming urge to explore his Jewish heritage sprouted. Although it wasn't until 19 that the burgeoning musician joined the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in New York City and took on the Hebrew name Matisyahu. Once a Chabadnik, he started attending shul every Shabbat, donned full chasidic dress – with a yarmulke, tzitzit, flat-brimmed hat and heavy black coat – proceeded to write Jewish themes into his lyrics and, most notably, began growing his trademark beard.

Musically, around that time, Matisyahu was fusing his love of reggae – particularly of the godfather of the genre, Bob Marley – with hip-hop, rock and Judaism's chazan style of melodic prayer, over which he would rap as well as sing. The combination was so unique that it caught the attention of record label bosses and it wasn't long before the chasidic reggae superstar was in high demand.

Now, 10 years on from the release of his debut album *Shake off the Dust...Arise*, Matisyahu lives in Los Angeles, has five albums and a Grammy nomination to his name and even an acting role in Ole Bornedal's 2012 horror movie *The Possession*.

Yet Matisyahu has been feeling restless. "There are so many rules in Judaism," he told *The Times of Israel*, "and if you get into them and you get obsessed and you have the kind

## Matisyahu's Odyssey

As the 'chasidic reggae superstar' brings out his new album *Akeda*, DANIELLE GOLDSTEIN explores why Matisyahu became an ultra-Orthodox Jew – and then decided to shave off his locks

of life that I have, it can make you a very unhappy person. It can make everything complicated and more stressful than it needs to be, so I kind of loosened the knots a little bit."

In the run-up to December 2011, when Matisyahu shocked fans, the media and his wife by shaving off his locks and discarding his ultra-Orthodox image, he had begun to lose enthusiasm for the religion to which he had adhered so strictly for more than a decade.

"I felt that in order to become a good person I needed rules – lots of them – or else I would somehow fall apart," he wrote of past feelings on his website shortly after the trip to Supercuts on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The reasons he had initially thrown himself into Chabad's teachings ("to discover my roots and explore Jewish spirituality, not through books but through

real life") were no longer issues for the young rapper. Gone were the days when he was so excited about having found religion that he would run through the rain (literally, as he explained in one interview) to get to *maariv* (evening prayers). So Matisyahu made the decision to discard his "chasidic reggae superstar" persona and instead trust in his own "goodness and divine mission". But that's not to say he's given up on everything: the busy singer-songwriter still abstains from performing on Shabbat and he eats kosher.

In his new album, *Akeda*, Matisyahu tackles all these topics lyrically as well as musically; reaching out for the things that inspired him when he first started writing, even if the results don't sound the same. "I'll always be chasidic reggae superstar", he assures the listeners on 'Watch the Walls Melt Down' (also his latest single) and

"got it on the inside, don't need to wear it out"

justifies on tenth track 'Confidence' that he's "got it on the inside, don't need to wear it out". And although Matisyahu has dropped much of his reggae roots in exchange for a more mainstream sound,

there's no denying his identity in the music.

Instead of heavily utilising ska rhythms and roaring rock, now the songster merely sprinkles them amongst electronica and pop sensibilities. Even his rapping style has shifted from reggae to contemporary hip-hop, in the vein of Jay Z or Lil' Wayne. This is an album of evolution and growth. It reflects the religious odyssey that Matisyahu has been through over the past decade and the turmoil he's encountered while trying to find a place that feels right for him, not just in Judaism, but in life.