

**(Re)Voicing Race and Religion:
A Response to Sarah Imhoff's "The Man in Black: Matisyahu, Identity, and Authenticity"**

Sarah Imhoff does an admirable job of untangling the discursive threads of authenticity tied to Matisyahu, a Jewish reggae artist who creates considerable tension for those who see and hear his performances. As Imhoff examines the fascinating interplay of racial and religious identity constructions, she wonders, “Why do fans find him compelling? And why do music critics and cultural commentators love to critique him?” (5). With these questions in mind, I would first like to think comparatively about Matisyahu as he relates to charismatic Christian performances I have experienced as an ethnomusicologist and a person of faith. Second, I want to rethink perceptions and discourses of religious and racial authenticity by considering Matisyahu’s performances in terms of “blackvoice.” Third, I wish very briefly to focus an analytical lens on the critical work we do as scholars. I raise these issues to suggest that controversies surrounding Matisyahu are intimately related to the interactions of race and religion that occur within the broader sonic, spiritual, and scholarly landscapes of the United States and the Caribbean.

Imhoff’s discussion of Matisyahu’s performances reminds me of controversies that often swirl in Christian circles. The “undeclared culture war” (10) between Hasidic and non-Orthodox Jews is not unlike the theological friction I have experienced among black Pentecostal congregations, some of which coexist within the same national organization but maintain strikingly different dress codes, views on women’s roles in the church, and required “standards of holiness.” Members of one congregation sometimes see the other as either “self-righteous” in their attempt to “dress holy” or “too worldly” for their excessive liberality in a number of areas. For members of both groups, however, the notion of inclusivity can be problematic if it involves music that appeals to “any spirituality” (12), to use Matisyahu’s phrase. In Jamaica, critics of the popular genre known as “gospel reggae” often question the sincerity of performers’ conversions to Christianity. Some

observers suspect that conversion claims constitute nothing more than "a savvy marketing ploy to capture the untapped demand for dancehall music among Christian teenagers whose parents forbid them to listen to mainstream dancehall music" (Stolzoff, 2000, 268, n.4). Almost any artist singing gospel lyrics over a presumed "secular" beat can face criticism.¹

Musical controversies among Christians are thus informed by a distinction between "holy" and "worldly" expressions and lifestyles, and those on both sides of this perceived continuum make heartfelt claims of authenticity. Those on one end argue that pastors who condone secular music or allow hip-hop influenced gospel music to permeate worship services have "let down the standard" required for authentic, biblical worship. Those on the other counter accusations of "worldliness" by maintaining that their liturgical liberality resonates with the Bible's mandate to be "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). They see contemporary gospel music as an indispensable tool to attract new converts. Moreover, the "populist nature" (9) of Matisyahu's performances calls to mind participatory gospel concerts that attract a Christian audience craving forms of song and dance that are more exuberant than what is offered on Sunday mornings. What Pentecostals sometimes refer to as a "crazy praise" is felt to be both liberating (from the traditions that stigmatize physically demonstrative worship) and authentic (i.e., more in line with the praise dancing of the Old Testament King David).²

In her most critical moments, Imhoff laments facile comparisons to blackface minstrelsy, which often obfuscate the historical particularities that distinguish this tradition. The author is

¹ It is interesting that Matisyahu has collaborated with P.O.D., the Christian metal band. They saw each other as kindred spirits, pushing the envelope of acceptable musical performance, but nonetheless devout and committed to the expressing themselves in terms of the religious traditions of which they are a part. Matisyahu's cross-over is more obviously complex because his boundary "transgression" is not only religious, but can also be seen as racial. In this regard, Matisyahu calls to mind Christafari, the Christian reggae band led by white American and former Rastafarian Mark Mohr.

² The notion that King David was a "true worshiper" because he "danced before the Lord with all his might" so much so that his clothing fell off (2 Sam. 6:14) is often articulated in Pentecostal churches. King David's unabashed celebratory praise embarrasses his wife, who scolds him for his lack of restraint and is subsequently shown to be punished through her inability to bear children.

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precisely on point in her incisive assertion that “constructing a contemporary Jewish artist’s performance of reggae as blackface can actually obscure the ways that blackface and minstrelsy have historically worked to construct and constrain black bodies and experiences” (28). I suggest that thinking in terms of “blackvoice”³ may help to make sense of what Imhoff rightly identifies as “asymmetrical historical comparisons that can distort both the history and the contemporary subject” (27)--a “quick collapse of minstrelsy, blackface, and Jews singing music influenced by black traditions” (20). Matisyahu does not wear burnt cork, dreadlocks, “or make any attempt to ‘look’ black or Jamaican” (26). His performances are, however, informed by “his beloved hip hop and reggae” (4). I suspect that for many critics, it is the way Matisyahu *sounds* that is most disturbing. It even leads some observers to denounce him as “unequivocally terrible” (18). While Matisyahu “does not sing about Rastafarianism or about growing up in the ghetto,” I believe the performer’s attempted connection is felt through the timbre of his voice and the musical “accent” of his performances.

Although Collie Buddz is “is a white reggae musician” (23), it seems reasonable that reviewers would embrace him as authentic. Unlike, Matisyahu, who comes across as “faking patois” (18), Buddz lived in Bermuda since age five and likely speaks in ways that register as consonant with the musical style he performs. His *sound* authenticates him. By contrast, one reviewer finds that Matisyahu “spectacularly fails” at singing reggae, in large part, I gather, because his accent is deemed inauthentic. It is interesting that although neither Bob Dylan nor the Beastie Boys performed as black musicians, like many popular musicians of the twentieth century, their voices contained traces of blackness, intended or otherwise. Perhaps the notion of blackvoice opens up a space for critical

³ In *Four Parts No Waiting: A Social History of Barbershop Harmony* (Oxford University Press, 2003), Gage Averill “argue[s] against the subtle visual bias of the ‘blackface’ label and for a deeper appreciation of ‘blackvoice’--the stereotyped representations of black dialect, vocal mannerisms, and musical style that was a product of the minstrel stage” (2003, 11).

inquiry into the ways in which debates concerning authenticity rely on a complex layering of both sonic and visual perception.

I sense in the words of the critics whom Imhoff cites a discomfort that may stem largely from the sonic performance of *a particular kind of* “musical blackness”⁴ by a Jewish man who, while not unproblematically “white,” is nevertheless quite obviously not black. Certainly, the critics Imhoff cites rearticulate the understandings of race and commercial success already at work in the broader societies from which they stem. Matisyahu’s whiteness may not be what is “essential” (19) about him, but some commentators suggest that the history of white-black cultural appropriation and economic exploitation in American popular music renders whiteness the most *relevant* aspect of his identity. At the very least, Kelefa Sanneh and other critics push us to continue grappling with the role of historical, economic, and symbolic power in Matisyahu’s performances.

I want to conclude simply by noting that there is, I believe, something clearly at stake for us in the ways in which Matisyahu and other performers are strategically represented by fans and critics and in the ways we, as scholars, choose to re-present them. To what extent might our subjectivities, sometimes hidden behind the “curtains” of scholarly work, impact our assessments of performers such as Matisyahu and his detractors? Might our scholarly descriptions and analyses constitute yet another construction of Matisyahu? Where, if anywhere, is the “real” Matisyahu? Imhoff points out that “the discussion reveals more about the cultural situation of the critics than it does about Matisyahu or his music” (18). She is surely correct. Both Imhoff’s article and my response to it constitute discursive repositionings of Matisyahu that likewise reflect our particular “cultural

⁴ Musical blackness, like “blackness” itself, is, of course, a socially learned phenomenon. But as Kyra D. Gaunt puts it, “Since the phenomenological experience of being musically black continues to register for African Americans, scholars cannot, and should not, seek to erase its presence, because anti-essentialist rhetoric wants to throw the baby (African American cultural identifications) out with the politically incorrect bath water (racial essentialism)” (*The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, New York University Press, 2006, 49-50). The concept of musical blackness has been used in reference to African American expressive culture. I evoke this concept here because it applies to Matisyahu’s performances as yet another type of boundary crossing. Matisyahu’s performances might just as fruitfully be understood as “musical Jamaicanness.”

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situation.” Imhoff’s analysis is most valuable for the attention it calls to Matsiyahu’s continual repositioning by fans, cultural critics, and scholars of religion and culture.