

Young hip Jews leading a Hanukkah music makeover

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(RNS) Put on your boogie shoes -- the new Hanukkah songs are here!

What last year seemed like a happy coincidence has become a hip new Hanukkah tradition: groups of harmonizing young Jews releasing seriously Jewish, yet seriously danceable, songs for the Festival of Lights.

The Maccabeats, who scored more than 6 million hits on YouTube last year with a song about flipping potato latkes are back this year with a boppy reggae tune.

"Miracle" explores the spiritual meaning of Hanukkah, which commemorates the successful revolt led by Judah Maccabee against an ancient king who tried to quash Judaism.

Also coming out this week: an original Hanukkah song from the Fountainheads, an Israeli ensemble whose song for the Jewish New Year this September -- a quirky Jewish cover of the 2010 World Cup anthem -- garnered nearly 2 million YouTube hits.

For Hanukkah, the Fountainheads wrote "Light Up The Night," a hip hop/gospel tribute to religious freedom, with both English and Hebrew lyrics.

Jews worldwide are embracing these culturally contemporary Jewish music videos. Mark Kligman, a professor of Jewish musicology at Hebrew Union College in New York, couldn't be happier.

"I met the Maccabeats and I said, 'I really want to hug you, because you're the ones who are going to keep my kids Jewish,'" said Kligman.

He said the Maccabeats, Fountainheads, Aish Ha Torah, The Groggers and a host of college a capella groups are breaking ground with Jewish music in a different way than the icons of Jewish music of the last generation.

Musicians like Jeff Klepper and the late Debbie Friedman -- who brought folk and other contemporary music into the synagogue -- felt they had to justify their departure from tradition, he said.

With the Maccabeats, "there's no apologizing," Kligman continued. It's as if they're saying: We're so comfortable with being Jewish that we don't really have to think about it.

The Maccabeats are all students or graduates from Yeshiva University in New York City. Yeshiva students, who tend to practice a modern Orthodox form of Judaism, study secular subjects and Jewish law.

Maccabeats director Immanuel Shalev, now in law school, said he and his friends were a "nerdy Jewish a capella group" four years ago. "Candlelight" brought in offers to sing all over the world -- from megachurches in Texas to a Jewish school in Hong Kong.

The Maccabeats' ode to latkes -- a takeoff of British pop star Taio Cruz's "Dynamite" -- caught on in part because the melody gets stuck in your head. But for Jews, Shalev said, the song hits more chords.

"It can be difficult to be a Jew on Christmas," he said. "And when you have something to rally around as a Jew, it can be really exciting."

That happened on national television in 1994, Kligman said, when comedian Adam Sandler sang "The Hanukkah Song" on "Saturday Night Live," listing celebrities that many people didn't know were Jewish.

Emerging Jewish groups today can thank Sandler, Kligman said.

"That really carved out a space for people to be excited and to celebrate being Jewish," he said. "It used to be that you were proud to be Jewish, but you kept it in your back pocket."

This year, the Maccabeats hope fans will rally around a Hanukkah song that's a little more soulful than last year's tune.

At the invitation of Hasidic reggae rapper Matisyahu -- a Jewish musical phenomenon in his own right -- they turned out an a capella version of his "Miracle." The song refers to the miracle of the Hanukkah story: when the victorious Jews reclaimed the temple in Jerusalem, they had enough oil to light their lamp for one night but it lasted for eight.

The Fountainheads see their last video's success as a bit of a miracle, and have also been invited to perform in venues around the world. Like the Maccabeats, they began singing together as a diversion.

The group spends most of their days studying Jewish and secular subjects at Ein Prat Academy, a Jerusalem school that bridges the year between army service and college.

Last year, an Ein Prat teacher noticed that many of his students had musical talent, and suggested they make a video. Rewriting pop songs for the Jewish holidays, they made videos for Hanukkah, Purim and Passover, and then struck Internet gold with "Dip Your Apple" for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

And though many of the videos are shot to maximize goofiness -- the Rosh Hashanah one includes "Angry Birds" and a mock battle between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker -- the Fountainheads are also hoping to deliver a message.

"We do our best to present a new Israeli-Jewish identity," said Shani Lachmish, a lead Fountainhead singer who studies Jewish philosophy and drama therapy, "one that transcends divisions and highlights the things we all share in common."

But there's got to be some competitive spirit, right? Both the Fountainheads and the Maccabeats are sending their Hanukkah videos into cyberspace at almost exactly the same time. Who will get the most hits?

There's no competition, both groups insisted, because they're trying to promote the same idea.

"Adhering to your faith and tradition is something that doesn't have to be old and archaic," Shalev said. "You can take something modern and infuse it with Jewish belief."