

The "It" Guy

Musician, educator and charisma-laden Renaissance Man Billy Jonas visits Metro Detroit.

Hazzan Daniel Gross | Special to the Jewish News

Three years ago, I traveled with several local Jewish educators to my hometown of St. Louis to attend a conference called Songleader Boot Camp. This is a unique leadership training program for all Jewish educators, not just musicians. I benefited greatly from the conference, but the greatest part of this experience for me was meeting a fellow musician and educator from Asheville, N.C., named Billy Jonas. My first encounter with Billy was hearing him in an evening concert that featured several different performers.

From the moment Billy ascended the stage, I was riveted.

There is something rare that all great performers have, and it is not something that can be taught. It is something innate. There is no word for this in the dictionary and, therefore, I call this "it." "It" is the ability to be completely natural and free on stage, capturing the complete and undivided attention of the audience. When you go to a dance, theater or instrumental performance, and you find yourself focusing on one person, that's because this person has the most "it."

Billy has "it." And he is bringing "it" for a weekend of events March 25-27 at Adat Shalom in Farmington Hills.

Billy's performance style is one of a kind. He's a singer, guitarist and "industrial re-percussionist" — a term that Billy coined. This last element was most captivating for me. More commonly known as industrial percussion, it is the taking of household items and converting them into instruments. You may have encountered this with guys on the street enthusiastically banging away on buckets after a Tigers game or in the theatrical show *Stomp* or perhaps in your own kitchen when you gave your child those pots and pans to bang away on until it was time to reach for the Advil.

Billy has created an art form out of this genre, and his percussion kit sounds like a top-of-the-line drum kit. Watching him maneuver and master the different drums is a sight and sound to behold. Moreover, Billy's voice is natural, clear and beautiful, and emanates from his heart. All of these characteristics combine to become "it" and create a truly unique talent.

He also is a gifted songwriter, whose poet-

ic lyrics are accessible, meaningful and powerful. His music is original, memorable and catchy, so much so that when I came home from the conference with his CDs, my entire household was singing his music — and continues to do so, three years later. What is so special about Billy is that his music is for all ages. He is a true folk artist.

Lastly, Billy is an educator. I had the privilege of learning from him as he led several workshops at the conference. Billy grew up in a Conservative Jewish household in the suburbs of Chicago. His Jewish roots are deep, strong and sincere. He combines his knowledge of Jewish tradition with modern sensitivities that touch on the body, mind and soul. The latter element, the soul, is one that we often struggle to connect with, and Billy has a special gift of making the intangible seem tangible.

In preparation for Billy's visit and for this article, I asked him the following questions:

DANIEL GROSS: When and how did you become an industrial re-percussionist?

B.J.: It all started in summer camp, sitting around the campfire, where the counselors were singing these great new songs: "Blowing in the Wind" and "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Inevitably, the songs would get more and more upbeat and people played whatever was at hand — buckets, sticks, handclaps, rocks, keys to jingle ... I was hooked! Then, in high school, my friends and I would have jam sessions in the kitchen on the pots and pans, using chopsticks as our mallets. In college, I was in a band called the Big Bang Theory, which took it to a new level. The rest is history.

D.G.: Have you ever performed in Metro Detroit and is there anything special about this area that you are excited about?

B.J.: I have often traveled to the Detroit/Ann Arbor area to play — the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts], the Ark and various libraries. I grew up in the Midwest [Chicago] and spent my summers in Michigan, so returning to Detroit feels like coming home!

D.G.: What do you hope an audience member will take away from your performance?



Billy Jonas

B.J.: Joy, wonder and connection. That's it! Joy in collective creativity, singing along, hearing great music; wonder from looking at the world in a new way, through the lens of the songs I will bring; connection to one's own deep heart, the other audience members and the great beyond ... That's all there is.

D.G.: Why is it important to you to include Jewish songs in your repertoire?

B.J.: I have a brand-new CD recording called *Habayta* — homeward, a collection of songs inspired by my work and experiences as a cantorial soloist in the Jewish community in Asheville, as well as around the world [U.S., Canada, U.K., Israel]. These pieces are all reflections of my journey toward greater understanding and embrace of my heritage, my continued wrestling with it and with God. For me, Judaism is a conversation at its core. I see these songs as heartfelt contributions to the discourse. *

Daniel Gross is cantor at Adat Shalom Synagogue.

details

Billy Jonas will perform 6 p.m. Friday, March 25, at the Shabbat Rocks Service & Dinner program, followed by a presentation by Jonas (reservation required and a fee for dinner); 10 a.m. Saturday, March 26, Soulful Shabbat: Mindfulness & Meditation with Billy Jonas; and 11 a.m. Sunday, March 27, at a family concert with his band. Adat Shalom Synagogue, Farmington Hills. (248) 851-5100; adatshalom.org.