

FORWARD

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COMMUNITY

All Jews, All the Time: A New Radio Station Seeks Young Listeners Around the World

By KAREN IRIS TUCKER

B'nai B'rith International, a 161-year-old nonprofit organization and charity, is hardly known as a hip haven through which the new generation can connect to Jewish culture. That could change, however, if the organization makes the desired impact with its new 24/7, Internet-based Jewish-music radio station, www.bnairbrithradio.org.

Launched this fall, and boasting a play list of genres covering everything from klezmer, Yiddish and cantorial music to Israeli pop and hip hop, B'nai B'rith Radio is seeking, in the words of the organization's executive vice president, Daniel Mariaschin, "to show that we are relevant and that we are speaking to the younger generations."

Competing against the glut of musical options for hip Jewish teenagers in America, however, might prove a tough challenge for B'nai B'rith Radio. Homegrown Jewish reggae, rap and Middle Eastern-influenced artists are proliferating and becoming increasingly accessible. Interestingly, there has been an immediate and positive reception to the station from across the pond in England, France and Brazil, where the musical choices aren't as plentiful for those seeking a wider variety of Jewish genres. It is possible that with such international audiences, B'nai B'rith ultimately might find fertile ground for young listeners.

While the station hasn't yet analyzed its demographics for-



STEVEN M. GOTFRIED, B'NAI B'RITH INTERNATIONAL

FRESH AIR: "We'd like to connect the Jewish world...with music," said host Dan Mariaschin, and there has indeed been feedback from communities in South America and Europe.

mally, Steven Gotfried, B'nai Brith's press information officer, pointed out the general misconception that the organization's endeavors do not reach beyond our borders. "We are an international organization with members and contributors in 51 countries," Gotfried said. "In Latin America, for example, many parts of the community are members of B'nai B'rith, and it's not necessarily an older audience."

"We'd like to connect the Jewish world with something that can bring us all together — music," Mariaschin said. "For those of us who have lamented all the problems that come with assimilation, now we have the technological tools to do something about it. We'd like for B'nai B'rith to be a bridge, a way for people to connect to this part of Jewish culture — to the arts — and also to connect to Israel."

The 55-year-old Mariaschin is actually enjoying a return to an old love, having worked as an announcer, newsman and ad copywriter for local radio in his hometown of Keene, N.H., for six years until completing graduate school. He has some formidable plans for his new station to branch out eventually. They include the implementation of children's programming and hosting public affairs roundtables, possibly to feature such subjects as the Middle East, antisemitism and human rights. Mariaschin has even set his sights on interviewing authors, via a kind of "Jewish version of C-SPAN's 'Booknotes.'"

At the moment, the B'nai B'rith Radio operation is as yet rudimentary, consisting of pretaped and preprogrammed music. Mariaschin, whose voice comes in every four to five songs, introduces segments with brief, insightful, synopses of artists and their work.

The play list, shaped by B'nai B'rith's director of communications, Jay Garfinkel (who is also the station manager), together with his son, Elon, is impressively idiosyncratic. One recent evening's song list included an instrumental version of "Etz Chaim Hi" by the Jewish and black piano and bass duo David Chevan and Warren Byrd, followed by a live version of contemporary Israeli songwriter David Broza's "Under the Sky." The station also recently aired G.F. Handel's oratorio "Judas Maccabaeus" in honor of Hanukkah, and plans to feature such holiday programming year round.

B'nai B'rith Radio would ultimately like to take its motley mix of Jewish music and programming to satellite radio, perhaps to Sirius, soon to be home to half-Jew and potty-mouth radio host Howard Stern. Gotfried says the station is in talks with Sirius, but Sirius's media relations person, Ron Rodrigues, wouldn't confirm or deny this, and only said, "I'm sorry, but we don't comment on any potential programming acquisitions."

In the meantime, B'nai B'rith Radio is focusing on its current Internet participants, whom Gotfried says it is attracting via grass-roots efforts such as the organization's newsletters, e-mail correspondence and its youth group, BBYO. Gotfried says these listeners' numbers recently averaged, on a weekly basis, around 20,500, a total that was based on hits to the bnairbrithradio.org Web site.

To find out more about the station's fans, I informally and unscientifically trolled a few Jewish chats online, describing the play list and inquiring whether anyone had been listening. At B'nai B'rith's own teen message board, www.bbyo.org, interest in, and knowledge of, B'nai B'rith Radio was decidedly mixed. "Nemo" in Cally (California) was incredulous: "There's a radio station?"

"Ooo... David Broza is quite amazing and a lot of Israeli rap is funny!" one possible listener in Maryland said enthusiastically, while another offered, "It's great and free!"

Mariaschin, however, is clearly looking beyond the formative stages of luring in his audience. "I'd love to bring on mainstream Jewish performers to talk to them about their favorite Jewish music," he said. "And ultimately, why not Kenny G. or Barbra Streisand, or others who have performed Jewish music?"

"The Jewish community," he added, "ought to have its place to go to 24 hours a day. We think we are very well positioned now to be offering that kind of service."

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