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Protests and Concert Cancellations Deepen Jewish Artist's Resolve

Matisyahu's tour was nearly derailed, until a little Las Vegas luck changed the narrative

SHIRLEY HALPERIN · 6 HOURS AGO



Matisyahu
Courtesy CNI/Covello Nash Images

In February, Matisyahu was staring down a complete unraveling of his 2024 Hold the Fire tour. Barely a week into the 30-plus date coast-to-coast trek, two back-to-back shows were canceled — at Meow Wolf in Santa Fe, NM and the Rialto in Tuscon, AZ — citing “safety concerns and a staff shortage.” The artist, known for his fusion of reggae and hip-hop atop spiritual lyrics and themes, has a dedicated fan base that is predominantly Jewish, having adopted his stage persona as a nod to Old Testament orthodoxy. Since first breaking out in 2005 with the song “King Without a Crown,” he’s gradually adopted a more secular presentation, leaning into his influences, from Rastafarianism to the sounds of Phish and the Grateful Dead.

“It was like the rug was pulled out from under me,” says Matisyahu. “We had protesters at shows [before], but the idea of a show getting cancelled for it, I thought was far-fetched.” His response was to lambast the venues on social media, writing on X, “The only concern was a group of staff unwilling to work my show. ... We offered to supplement their staff shortages on our own dime, but to no avail. They do this because they are either anti-Semitic or have confused their empathy for the Palestinian people with hatred for someone like me who holds empathy for both Israelis and Palestinians.”

Matisyahu describes his actions in the coming days as “fight more than flight. I was, like, OK, if they cancel our shows, we will find places to play,” he says. “I located another venue, an entire security team and moved the show in a matter of three hours.”

Another Jewish act is facing a similar situation. The Monarch, a venue in Brooklyn, pulled the plug on a May concert by Israeli rock band HaYehudim (Hebrew for The Jews), because their name was deemed too political. A representative for the band, which formed in the '90s, said the club “informed our local booking agent that the event is canceled due to the ‘currently political nature of our band’ and that the club owners prefer to refrain from hosting ‘politically charged events or acts.’” They vowe to continue their U.S. dates, which include a June appearance in Los Angeles, writing on Instagram, “We do not surrender to politics. With the feelings of disappointment and sorrow, we prefer to focus on music, unity, love and freedom.”

Matisyahu is unfamiliar with the group's music, but he's not surprised, which is why he was determined to plug the dam of his concert schedule. He found a supportive ally in Brooklyn Bowl owner Peter Shapiro, whose Las Vegas venue was next on the route.

“Pete flew out to Vegas just to reassure me that he wasn't going to cancel the show no matter what,” says Matisyahu of the Feb. 16 show. “And I thought of the concept of mazel, or luck — you're in Vegas rolling the dice. So I told him, ‘Pete, you shifted the mazel. Things were kind of going in a certain direction, then we came to Vegas and rolled the dice and the whole energy shifted.’”

“We got emails and messages, like, ‘I love your venue but don't host this show,’” says Shapiro. “I’m proud that our staff showed up. Matisyahu has a song called ‘One Day,’ he’s a peaceful dude. Yes, he’s proud to be Israeli. He brought up the hostages. He didn’t shirk who he is, where he comes from and his perspective.”

Three weeks after the Vegas Bowl show, however, [a March 8 date at Chicago's House of Blues was canceled](#) citing safety concerns. Matisyahu, who said he would donate his fee to a pair of women- and medical-focused charity groups, responded with deepened resolve, writing, “These individuals and the organizations that break under their pressure threaten the bedrock of artistic expression, intellectual honesty and empathy between people with different views and concerns. ... We will continue to play shows and we will always stand tall against hate and march towards the true goal of a long term peace for all.”

Shapiro acknowledges that such pressure “is hard for a venue owner,” adding, “I have thicker skin from doing this now since 1996.”

Shapiro's bonafides include running New York City institution The Wetlands, which Matisyahu frequented in his high school years, a venue that also served as a hub of activism until it closed in 2001. “It was a place that let people express different points of view,” says Shapiro. “I’m less about trying to convey my perspective and more about a place for other perspectives to be shared. ... Music is supposed to bring people together. We have to start to focus on what’s on the other side of this.”

Peter Shapiro and Matisyahu
Courtesy Peter Shapiro

To that end, Shapiro would welcome HaYehudim to his Brooklyn stage, as he would a reggae act called Tribe of Judah, “and if there's a Palestinian group that wants to play, they should call the bowl,” he says.

As for Matisyahu, he finished his U.S. tour. “We had some protesters here and there, but amongst my fans and online, people were being supportive and stepping up and trying to help,” he says.

Soon after wrapping his last show, he flew to Israel where he filmed [a video for the song ‘Ascend’](#) featuring survivors of the October 7 Nova Music Festival massacre. A few days later, some of those same survivors joined him on stage.

“I met them when I came to Israel before the tour started, and I got so much strength from these people — hearing their stories and what they went through and how they were responding,” he says. “And I took that with me everywhere I went on tour. Through the protesting and the cancellations, there was a feeling of connection and love and power. It was a very powerful experience when they came up on stage.”

Matisyahu will next lend his voice to the organization [If You Heard What I Heard](#), whose focus is to share stories from the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, the last generation to hear of the experiences firsthand, at a charity event scheduled for May 8 in Beverly Hills.

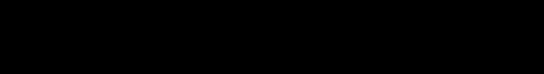
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BY SHIRLEY HALPERIN



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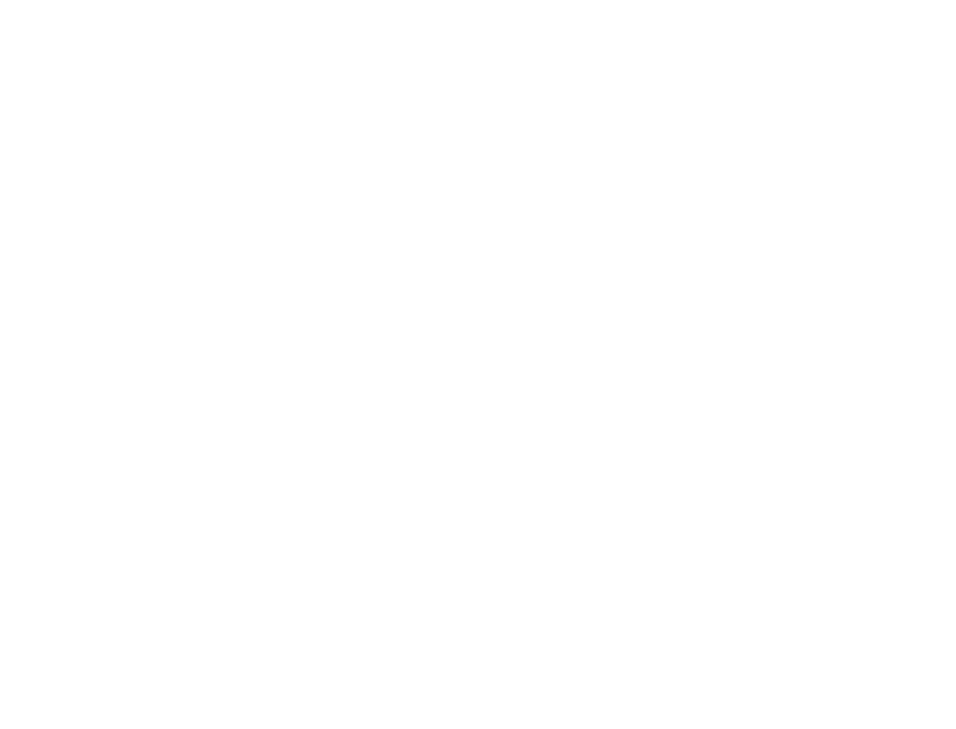
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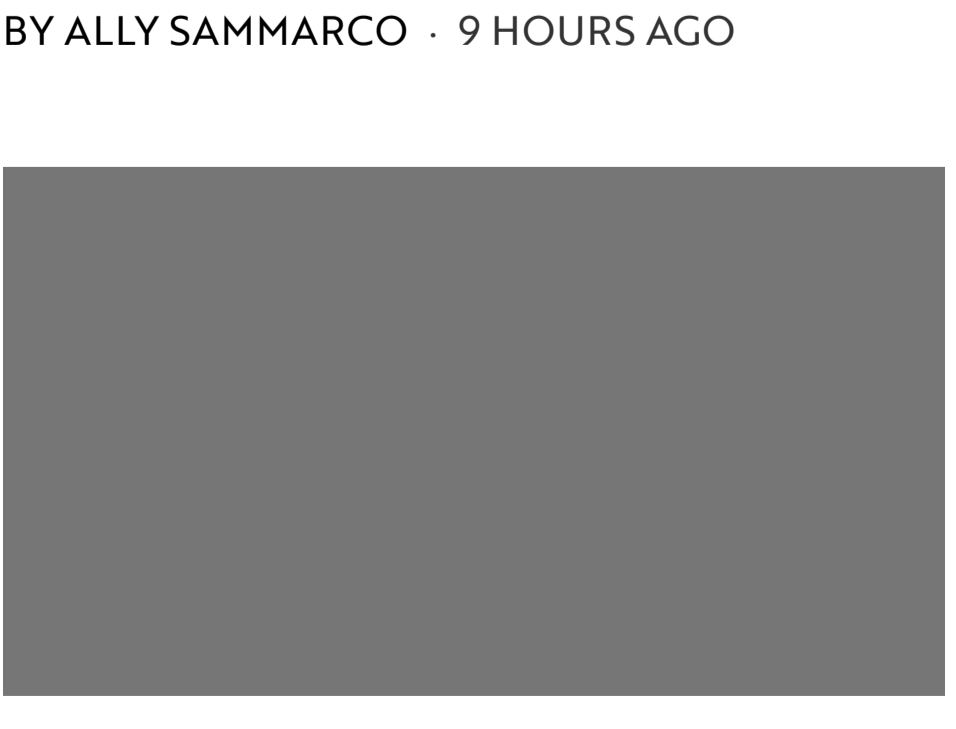
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