

Pioneering a cure

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MEL BEZALEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

When the first pioneers arrived on these shores almost 100 years ago, they carried with them numerous and varied cultural identities, a reminder of their home communities that, in many cases, had evolved over many generations.

Music was a significant facet of this, says the New York-based Rabbi Greg Wall, producer of Pioneers for a Cure (PfaC), a charity project officially launched on Yom Ha'atzmaut this year to raise funds for cancer research through re-recording and distributing pioneer songs. Thirty tracks were recorded over the past two years in a New York studio, and are now available to download.

Wall admits he knew very little about pioneer music before undertaking the mammoth task of coordinating the new recordings, by well-known modern artists such as Neshama Carlebach, David Broza, Pharaoh's Daughter and Tovah Feldshuh. In fact, the idea was not his own. Wall's friend of 10 years, who is being identified only as "the anonymous benefactor" (he financially supports the entire project), proposed the fundraising scheme to Wall two years ago, along with fellow American PfaC teammates Beth Ravin, a music industry mogul who sits on the Grammy committee, and Ricky Orbach, founder and head of nonprofit record label Joodayoh.

The benefactor's aim is to raise \$100,000 for cancer research by the end of 2009 through downloads of the tracks, which can be purchased separately on the PfaC Web site (www.pioneersforcure.org) or iTunes Web site for \$1.99, \$9.99 or \$99.99, so each track raises money independently.

Few facts are known about the benefactor: He has a passion for music and Israel, he owns the studio Wall used to record and produce the tracks and he's part of a major American Jewish philanthropic family. Additionally and most significantly, he recently lost a second family member to cancer and many in his immediate circle are cancer patients or children of patients.

The theme of pioneers seemed obvious to the benefactor, who is a "big fan" of the folk tradition, says Wall. "Anyone involved in doing something that that hasn't been done [before] needs to have a pioneering spirit. He felt we all needed to be pioneers in coming up with a cure for cancer in our lifetime."

THE IDEA of a manufactured culture fascinates Wall. The Jewish National Fund saw an opportunity all those years ago to fuse the disparate immigrant groups and "realized that to build a country, a common thread was needed," Wall explains on his blog "PioneerProducer." So the JNF commissioned well-known composers to write folk songs that could be sung by everybody, together, and taught to future generations.

"I think it's unprecedented that a folk culture was created by design, as opposed to evolving over generations," says Wall. "Although Eastern European folk music evolved over generations, as did Sephardi folk music, Israeli folk music was, 'Boom, we're just going to get this music out here because we need it.' I thought that was an amazing story."

For Wall, who feels deeply about the idea of art representing a culture, especially in the Jewish tradition, the "story" element of the pioneers' history is essential: "It's part of Jewish history that could have been relegated to the dustbin of history if we hadn't done this."

AT THE start of the project, Wall recognized that he had a lot of research to do. "I knew '*Hatikva*' and '*Zum Gali Gali*,' but my interest in music is more modern," he says. "I'm pretty expert in Eastern European Jewish music, [but] I didn't know too much about prestate Israeli music."

Wall scoured several music archives, including one at Brandeis University, where he found a "treasure trove" of information. He was seeking out potential tracks for the project, but enveloping his musical discoveries was a chronicle of history that ensnared his attention. He found that because there was no access to the media or recording industry, the JNF had printed the commissioned pioneer songs' lyrics (in Hebrew and English transliteration) and melodies on hundreds of thousands of postcards that were distributed to Jewish communities around the world. Composer Hans Nathan, from the Jewish community of Berlin, heard about the JNF's initiative and was inspired to send postcards to leading Jewish composers of the day - Aaron Copeland, Darius Milhaud, Kurt Weill, Ernst Toch, Stephan Wolpe and others - beseeching them to write new works based on folk tunes. "This to me is the real artistic attractiveness of the whole project," Wall says.

After researching extensively, Wall based his own method for recruiting artists on Nathan's, and soon the Israeli pioneer song project was named "the postcard project," which would act as phase one of PfaC. Once the initiative reaches its \$100,000 goal, the team will embark on phase two - American pioneer songs.

Wall e-mailed the postcards to artists, but wanted them to feel like the recipients of the original JNF postcards: "I purposely didn't send people sheet music or recordings [of the original pioneer songs]," says Wall, "A lot of the songs were never recorded anyway, but even the ones that did have existing recordings, I didn't want people to be influenced by any other performance."

As producer, Wall facilitated all the tracks, which range from bluegrass to Latino to Middle Eastern, and played on seven. He also wrote many of the arrangements, though some artists were more "self-contained" and asked to contribute their own personal arrangements.

WALL, 49, is mostly famed for his role in klezmer revival. A clarinet and saxophone player, he is a member of several ensembles, including The Later Prophets, Hassidic New Wave and Klezmerfest - and recorded tracks for PfaC with the latter two. Wall grew up in a nonobservant Jewish home in a Boston suburb, and moved to New York in 1982 to "seek his fortune" as a jazz musician. When he began playing hassidic music in Brooklyn, Wall says he became exposed to a new, spiritual aspect of Judaism he'd never known before.

"My mother always told me Orthodox Jews were crazy," he says. "When I met some, I found out she was right, and I loved it. I loved the commitment."

He began delving deeper into Judaism simply to help his children with their homework, but found himself enraptured. In 2006, Wall was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, though he has no congregation and works as a full-time musician. "I have a perverse hobby of studying medieval rabbinic literature,"

Wall says, "just to be able to open a book and read in the original Hebrew. All translation is a biased commentary, and I wanted to be able to find out from the original source."

He also applies this principle to music: "Just like music, I go back to the old scratchy records no matter what it is. If I'm learning jazz music or klezmer, I want to hear it from the source. I don't want to hear someone's cover of it."

Most of the PfaC artists lived in or around the New York area, such as Grammy award-winning voice ensemble New York Voices, Soulfarm lead singer Noah Solomon and Jewish music performer Rebbe Soul, but others, such as David Broza, reside here. Regardless of location, every artist recorded his track, which Wall designated, in his studio. "I tried to make the *shiduch*, so to speak, so there would be a connection with the song itself and the artist," he explains. "I could hear the artists doing it even before I sent it out to them... I [gave] them an unpolished stone and [they had to make] a gem out of it - and that's our job here, artistically."

Folk music of this variety was new to many of the modern artists, which "goes along with the pioneering theme," enthuses Wall. "I feel the artists were able to grow from it musically... instead of reaching for the familiar or the easy, in some of the cases, the artists had to go beyond themselves."

This had also been true of the composers approached by the JNF, almost a century ago. These conservatory-trained classical composers were asked to compose folk music, which was "the equivalent of giving a scientist a pick and a shovel and [sending him] into the field," says Wall. "The fact that they were able to feel good about it and see the effect their work would have was amazing and very inspiring."

This same idea was especially relevant and real for the modern artists who hadn't sung in Hebrew before, such as Neeyah Lynn Rose, an African-American who performs "*Shir Shomer*" (Watchman's Song) with Rebbe Soul. Wall helped her prepare and proudly exclaims, "It was perfect."

Additionally, Abbi Rose, who is famed for her children's music, performed "*Hazorim Bedima*" (They Who Sow in Tears) with a children's choir and worked tirelessly to pronounce the Hebrew correctly.

Although the artists had their songs handpicked on their behalf, they each chose their own cancer charity to fund-raise for, with each charity owning the performance rights. "We wanted it to be personal for the artist and every single artist had some kind of connection or story, and in some cases a significant connection," says Wall.

SCOTTISH-BORN Karen Rosen, who performs "*Yeled Katan*" (Little Child) and now lives in the US, is a cancer survivor herself, and tragically lost her mother and sister to the disease. "For her to be able to take this and use it as a way to make a musical statement as well as raise awareness of her particular cause is amazing," says Wall. Rob Schwimmer, pianist on "*Gam Hayom*" (So Too, Today) took part in PfaC as a tribute to his mother Ruth, who died from multiple myeloma. Another example is one member of the New York Voices, who has a spouse currently battling cancer.

"I love the idea of the music giving back," says Neshama Carlebach, who says she feels honored to have been the first artist to record a PfaC track. "My whole career has never been about anything other than bringing *tikkun olam*. The reason I chose the children's charity [Israel Children's Cancer Foundation] is because I became a mother two years ago, and once a woman becomes a mother, I have faith, passion and love for all children the way I never had before. The chance to be a part of that is very beautiful."

Dudu Fisher, whose Shavuot track "*Saleinu al K'tafeinu*" (Our Baskets on Our Shoulders) was released

last month, explains that he joined PfaC because of his wife's volunteering with Ezer Mizion, a health support organization which has a large cancer support division. Fisher often performs at the organization's events to raise funds for its bone marrow bank. "Until we have a cure for cancer, everyone who joins the war on it is a pioneer. I hope that many more will join and help fight it," he says.

Frank London, a klezmer revivalist who accompanies Rob Schwimmer on trumpet, duly acknowledges PfaC's role in fighting cancer, but also points to the historical importance of the project: "It is all of our wish that, in addition to helping the fight to cure cancer, the Pioneers for a Cure project brings an interesting slice of Jewish musical history to light, that it shows the creative vitality of the Jewish music scene in New York with its mix of Americans and Israelis and people from all over the world, Jews and non-Jews, and people from every part of the spectrum of observance and belief."

Wall concurs - the main driver of the project is raising money for cancer research, but PfaC is also a "catalyst for creating new work," he emphasizes. "What we're trying to do is provide a model for artistry and philanthropy... when people make their own contribution, they know they're not only helping support the charity, they're also keeping real relevant Jewish art going."

In this quest for preservation, Wall and his team commissioned Israeli artist Mira Sasson to document the project with oil paintings of the PfaC artists. Sasson, who now lives in New York, attended every recording session to paint. Her pieces have been transformed into custom postage stamps which will adorn every postcard appeal sent out by PfaC. The two-by-three foot paintings are now on display at the studio.

AT THE project's inception, Wall says, he could never have anticipated the scale of PfaC. "I really didn't think it would be so big," he recalls. "I first just thought, 'Let's do a CD.'"

As a "cutting-edge" performer, who, for the most part, records on independent music labels, selling millions of records isn't usually Wall's priority or style. "I don't look at music that way," he explains. "I record it because there's something inside of me that says, 'This music has to be recorded,' and hopefully it will sell enough to enable me to make another recording."

However, as a charity fund-raiser, sales and capital are central to PfaC. His partnership with Ravin could pay dividends, literally. As a commercial music insider, her contacts and background will hopefully ensure that PfaC is on track to be a commercial triumph.

The anticipated audience makeup also transformed in scale as the project developed. At first, Wall saw their target as "committed Jews around the world, who all share this love of Israel and hate of cancer," he says. Of course the magnitude of the demographic changed when the team added the American pioneer song venture, but on launching the project, the team realized support would be exponentially more widespread. "Within 24 hours, we had donations from Australia, Canada, Israel, Europe and the US and the amount of hits [the Web site] gets was staggering," enthuses Wall.

"People pay 99 cents without thinking to go to iTunes and download a song... Now you can do that knowing you can make a donation to a cancer charity. It feels good, it's a cool way to get involved and I think because of that we're going to find that a lot of people who have no connection to Israel, who are not Jewish and just hate cancer as much as anyone else, will say they want to support it and support artists who are putting their blood, sweat and tears on the line to find a cure for cancer."