

## Artists put their stamps on Israeli folk tradition

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On the second floor of a large private home in Livingston, a sound engineer named Dave Richards sits in front of a computer and racks of high-tech audio gear.

Standing over his shoulder, producer Greg Wall joins him in listening to a piece of folk music written by Jewish immigrants to Palestine's yishuv early in the 20th century and recorded by 21st-century musicians with electric instruments and voices blending in harmony.

This mix of old and new is at the heart of Pioneers for a Cure, a project that aims to conquer cancer through the sale of Israeli and Zionist folk songs over the Internet.

For the past two years, Wall and Richards have been inviting musician friends to record classic and sometimes little-known music of the halutzim, Israel's pioneers. The collaborations are available on a website, [www.pioneersforacure.org](http://www.pioneersforacure.org), where the cost of each download will benefit a cancer charity.

The anonymous benefactor who owns their studio "wanted to do something about the scourge of cancer," said Wall, a saxophonist who lives in West Orange. "He said, 'Let's record the songs of the pioneers of Israel and raise money.'"

The project arose from the friendship between Wall and Richards, a relationship forged as fellow jazz musicians and dating back nearly 30 years. Although their project is aimed primarily at a Jewish audience, Richards is not Jewish while his partner is an Orthodox rabbi and, as a musician, a major force in the klezmer revival. But their spiritual connections are deep ones.

"This work is so much about the music and about the cause," Richards said. "Music is the universal language, and any of us — like Greg — could fit into a gospel situation as easily as I can fit into this."



Rabbi Greg Wall, left, and engineer Dave Richards listen to an Israeli folk song at the Pioneers for a Cure studio in Livingston.

Photo by Robert Wiener

Launched last month, the project has attracted a range of heavyweights in the world of Jewish music, including Neshama Carlebach, David Broza, Pharaoh's Daughter, Rashanim, Hasidic New Wave, Adrienne Cooper, Noah Solomon, Lorin Sklamberg, and Frank London.

Some 40 years before Israel won its statehood in 1948, songs like "El Yivneh HaGalil" ("God will rebuild the Galilee") and "Kumah Echah" ("Rise, Brethren") were musical accompaniment to the pioneers' arduous work of building communities and cultivating the harsh landscape. They were also at the center of a project to forge a unified nation out of disparate immigrant groups. 'Sky's the limit'

The words to the songs were often culled from liturgical and biblical sources, "and they prevented Hebrew from going the way of Latin," said Wall. Yet the folk songs also reflected the backgrounds of the immigrants, and sometimes their divisions.

"If you came from Kiev, and I came from Prague, you didn't know my songs," Wall said.

In the 1920s, the Jewish National Fund commissioned composers to write musical accompaniments to be taught to schoolchildren.

"Of course, there was no Internet," said Wall. "So somebody had the brilliant idea of putting the words and music on postcards."

The backs of the five-inch-by-seven-inch cards were inscribed with music notes, lyrics in transliterated Hebrew, and Hebrew script below.

Hundreds of songs on hundreds of thousands of postcards were sent to Jewish communities all over the world "so kids in places like Newark would be learning the songs in Hebrew school," said Wall.

Inspired by that effort, Wall e-mailed invitations to Jewish musicians and composers to create their own versions of those folk songs. "It's not hard to get artists to do something to support curing cancer, and they all embraced it," he said.

The musicians in turn contributed personalized arrangements in a range of instrumental styles that run from bluegrass to Latino to Middle Eastern music.

The groups recorded one song apiece — mostly in Hebrew, but a few in English. There are now more than 30 songs ready to be downloaded. The website takes its visual cue from the original postcard project, with each artist's image appearing as a postage stamp.

Each group has designated a specific cancer charity to receive the money — \$1.99 and up — that listeners pay for each song they download.

The songs will be available strictly on-line and will not be issued on CD. "Who needs more plastic in the world?" said Wall.

"At the end of the day, we got songs that may have never been recorded before — and all of them came out of prestate Israel."

It is Phase One of a project that Wall intends to broaden.

Phase Two will be American folk music. "You can imagine the appeal when we go beyond the Jewish community," he said.

Among those who have already signed on are guitarist G.E. Smith, once the leader of the Saturday Night Live Band, a "teen heartthrob" named Matt White, and "others I am not yet at liberty to mention."

“We look forward to a lot more artists wanting to participate,” said Wall. “The sky’s the limit.

For more information visit the [Pioneers for a Cure](#) website.

### Breaking musical ground

Greg Wall grew up as a Reform Jew in a Boston suburb, where he “was not into Judaism beyond surviving my bar mitzva.”

His musical career began as a keyboard player in a high school rock band. But when his tastes expanded beyond the Rolling Stones and Procol Harum, he enrolled in the New England Conservatory of Music, then set off for New York to become a jazz saxophonist in the early 1980s.

“On off nights, I ended up in Brooklyn, playing loud raucous saxophone at hasidic weddings. Through my exposure to the Orthodox world, I found something very appealing about it. Everybody had this working knowledge of Judaism and Jewish texts and how they were able to integrate that with their lives. I’m a fanatic — I think all serious musicians are....”

“I was always a spiritual person,” said Wall, “and what did it for me was hearing John Coltrane’s A Love Supreme.” The 1965 recording is considered the noted tenor saxophonist’s homage to a “higher power.”

Wall decided to become a rabbi and was ordained in Israel in 2006. “My ministry is my audience and other musicians,” he said. “I don’t have a synagogue. I’m a full-time composer and player and producer.”

A leader in the revival of klezmer, Wall performs and records with a number of ensembles, including Hasidic New Wave, The Greg Wall Trio, and Greg Wall’s Unity Orchestra.

Regarding his Pioneers for a Cure project, Wall calls his rabbinic mission “a method of artist-driven philanthropy. To be able to tape a performance and use that as a catalyst for raising money, that is a great thing. And we are coming up with new work. We are breaking new ground for the artists. It is a chance for them to add their gifts to the world.”

— ROBERT WIENER

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