



“Jewperstar” Mama Doni Celebrates Purim with Song and Hamantaschen

RACHEL HARKHAM

Doni Zasloff Thomas was meant to do this. She was born to get up on stage as Mama Doni, the zany yiddishe answer to Mother Goose. It's fate that her love of Judaism, her experience with children's media, a delight in all things Yiddish, her talent for constructing kid's rhymes, and an appreciation for a wide variety of musical styles all melded together resulted in the fun and whimsical tunes on “Chanukah Fever,” “I Love Herring and other Fish Shticks,” and the very apropos “I Love Purim.”

Born into a family of nice Jewish doctors, but wanting to sing, Doni was attracted to musical theater early on, performing in her Hebrew school's production of *Oklahoma!* (Aleph, Kaf, Lamed!) and studying musical theater at Brandeis and NYU. Taking a writing class at the New School resulted in a notebook full of Dr. Seuss-style couplets and rhymes with a Jewish flavor. She worked for seven years at a children's media company and, while there, built the first interactive media website for kids—which was to come in handy when constructing her own bright and easy-to-navigate website, www.mamadoni.com.

Taking time off from interactive media while living in Montclair with her husband and two young children, Doni was called in to sing songs at her daughter's Jewish preschool. The head of the school was impressed by her energy, creativity, and natural rapport with the kids and instantly hired her to be the preschool's music teacher. “That's when the play button was pushed,” says Thomas, and Mama Doni was born.

In two weeks the songs came rocking and rolling out. She revisited that notebook filled with Jewish rhymes and set some of them to the variety of musical styles that she enjoys—bluegrass (in MamaDoni's world, it's “Jewgrass”), disco, Latin, and hip-hop, to name just a few. “I took secular music styles like reggae and dipped them in a Jewish bucket.”

Before long Mama Doni had upwards of 20 songs and was wondering: what next? Like the “Jewperheroes” she sings about, she took matters into her own hands



and recorded the songs in her kitchen. Next, she sent off a demo CD to the International Jewish Music Festival and was invited to participate in Amsterdam with her band. That's where Mama Doni's “uniquely inventive, playful, and joyous songs” were awarded the Simcha prize.

She returned to the States with her band to a full concert schedule that took her from New York City to Los Angeles. A Mama Doni concert is a treat for the whole family, from bubbe right down to baby. Outfitted in her trademark sunshine yellow jeans and turquoise T-shirt, Mama Doni has the energy of a five-year-old on Pixie Stix. She jumps, she dances, she skips gleefully down the aisles, all while belting out her fun and funny songs about positive Jewish identity. Audience participation is politely demanded, and kids and grown-ups alike can't resist the hip and upbeat pace of the show.

What keeps this Mama going when she's far from home and missing her two kids is the thrill she gets when she performs in front of a live audience, and being able to feel a cross-generational connection. She gets great satisfaction from sharing yiddishisms and Jewishness through her music, “seeing a grandmother, a mom, and kid all rocking out—that's what I love!”

Purim is a big one for Mama Doni, from her hamantaschen to her songs about hamantaschen (“Kooky Cookie”) to her admiration of Queen Esther (“the total Queen of Cool, and who was the biggest Jewperhero diva star ever! ... I always end up rockin' a Queen Esther costume with major pride and loving every minute of it”). Below is her own recipe for hamantaschen.

Mama Doni's Berry Delish Hamantaschen

- 1 8oz. bar of cream cheese (reduced fat is fine), at room temperature
- ½ c. butter, at room temperature
- ½ c. sugar
- 2 c. all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 jar blueberry jam
- 1 egg yolk

In a big bowl beat cream cheese, butter, and sugar together with an electric mixer until fluffy. On low speed add flour; beat until just combined. Add vanilla and lemon zest and knead into the cookie dough by hand. Divide dough into three pieces, flatten each section into a disk, and wrap with plastic wrap. Place in refrigerator for at least 20 minutes. Preheat oven to 375°F. Working each dough portion one at a time, roll out

the dough and, with the rim of a drinking glass, cut out cookies. Spoon 1 tsp. of blueberry jam into center of circle and pinch up the sides into familiar hamantaschen shape. Mix egg yolk with a teaspoon or two of water; brush dough with egg wash. Bake until hamantaschen are golden brown, about 15 minutes. Recipe yields about 3 dozen.

Where to See Mama Doni on Purim

Mama Doni will perform on Sunday, February 28th at:

- 10:30 a.m., Bergen County YJCC, 605 Pascack Road, Washington Township, 201-666-6610. Tickets: \$12 members, \$15 non-members.
- 4 p.m., Congregation B'nai Israel, 160 Millburn Ave., Millburn. Tickets: \$10 in advance (\$40 maximum/family), \$12.50 at door (\$50 maximum/family), 973-379-3811, ext. 11. Followed by Purim festivities; dinner available for purchase.

Purim Events

Sunday, February 21

★**Purim Fest**, 12:30-3 p.m., \$20/family, \$5 each additional person, under 2 free. YM-YWHA of North Jersey, 1 Pike Drive, Wayne, 973-595-0100, ext. 228; www.ymha-nj.org. Activities here include a children's show, a costume dance party with Mr. Eli, face painting, inflatables, Shushan Salon, and more. From 1 to 2 p.m., storyteller Eva Grayzel will do a theatrical performance with spontaneous role-playing of Jewish folklore for adults and kids of all ages.

★**Purim Carnival**, for all ages, 10:30 a.m., \$15 kids (free for ages 2 and younger), \$20 adult. 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Avenue, Manhattan, 212-415-5500; www.92Y.org. Masks, games, puppet shows, and delicious treats are all part of this annual celebration. Kids can listen to the story of Purim and meet the heroes of the Megillah: Queen Esther and King Ahashverosh. Come in costume—prizes will be awarded.

Sunday, February 28

★**Purim Carnival**, 10 a.m.-noon, free (food available for a small charge).

Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley, 87 Overlook Drive, Woodcliff Lake, 201-391-0801; www.temple-emanuel.org. This carnival features games, prizes, a puppet show, a service and interactive Megillah reading for grades 3-5. Participants are encouraged to come in costume.

★**The Dirty Sock Funtime Band**, for ages 3 and up, 2 p.m., \$9 member kids, \$11 non-member kids; \$13 member adults, \$16 non-member adults.

The Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, 212-423-3200; www.thejewishmuseum.org.

This band performs infectious klezmer rock for the topsy-turvy holiday of Purim. The audience is encouraged to dance and get funky in this festive museum tradition.

★**Annual Purim Carnival**, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., admission fee. Fair Lawn Jewish Center/Cong. B'nai Israel, 10-10 Norma Ave., Fair Lawn; 201-796-5040; www.fljc.com. The focus of this event is on games, sand art & goldfish, Israeli food, cotton candy, and entertainment, including the juggling of 16-year-old phenom Lee Weisberger.

