

Jewish South

Lucky Number

Nashville-based band Eighteen blends modern rock and Judaism

By DON COHEN



Eighteen is where rock meets the Jewish soul and that's just the way Dan Nichols wants it.

"I want to take something ancient and beautiful, and make it important, relevant and completely cool to a young person," Nichols says. "I want to reinforce our past with new sounds and songs and attitudes to live Jewishly."

Nichols, the 33-year-old co-founder of the rock band Eighteen, tours constantly — more than 200 concerts a year — bringing his Jewish rock to teen-agers across the nation. And the teens are buying it.

"Frankly, we have been unprepared for the degree of success and popularity we have had," Nichols says sincerely, almost embarrassed by the band's accomplishments.

"We have the three most popular Jewish songs among Jewish teen-agers," he says, rattling off "*B'tselem Elohim*" ("In the Image of God"), "*Chazak*" ("Strength") and

"*L'takein*" ("To Repair"), fondly known as "the Na Na song."

Nichols, a 33-year-old Indianapolis native who moved to Nashville to learn the music business and hone his songwriting, is passionate about his music and his mission.

He has a classical background, including a bachelor's degree in music from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Like others of his generation, he cut his musical teeth on rock.

When Nichols found himself teaching religious school and fronting the rock band Olskies, he believed he could combine rock and Judaism for Jewish teens. So, together with co-founder Mason Cooper, he formed Eighteen.

The band came out with its first album, "Life," in 1995, and has issued two additional albums, "Be Strong" and "*Kol HaShabbat*" (The Voice of Shabbat), whose treatments

of Sabbath liturgy now are used by congregations across the nation. A fourth album is in the works.

Today, the Nashville-based band has become the No. 1 musical attraction at Jewish camps across the nation as well as campus Hillels and conventions of the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY).

Eighteen performs as a trio, which includes Nichols on guitar, Mark Niemiec on drums and Aaron Hatmaker on bass. All of them sing.

"The other guys are non-Jewish, but they love what we're bringing and how we're bringing it," Nichols says.

"We want to present Jewish ideas and values through where [our listeners] are at in pop culture. We're promoting Jewish identity and the pride of being a human being, and trying to make Judaism cool."

To this end, the band considers itself on the cutting edge of the music scene, melding prayer and English and Hebrew lyrics with a sound similar to bands such as Third Eye Blind and Barenaked Ladies.

Rabbi Michale Moskowitz of Temple Shir Shalom in Detroit says Nichols would make an incredible cantor.

"He's as genuine as can be, warm, welcoming, inviting; what you see is what you get," Moskowitz says. "And he gives a great 'sermon in song.'"

Moskowitz should know. He's known Nichols since 1985, when they were both counselors at Goldman Union camps in Zionsville, Ind.

"A lot of what we are doing is completely new," Nichols says. "Those who come to hear us . . . expect a high-energy experience, a participatory rock show that makes no apologies that it is a rock concert and no apologies that it is Jewish."

That makes sense to Moskowitz.

"As a rabbi, any way you can get people to connect Jewishly is worthwhile. Teens get it. But there have been 70-year-olds in the congregation who come forward to buy the CDs." □

You can learn more about Eighteen and hear the band's music at www.jewishrock.com.