

The Marimba Man of Munich

For Alex Jacobowitz, playing music in the streets of Europe is a way of making a living — and a little more

Robby Berman

HOW DOES AN ORTHODOX Jew, head covered with yarmulke, *tzitzit* sticking out from under his shirt, feel about making his living playing music and telling jokes on the streets of the capital of Bavaria? Alex Jacobowitz isn't exactly sure, but he's been doing it for seven years.

"Can you imagine what it's like to play music in Munich when Dachau is 30 minutes down the road?" asks the 37-year-old Jacobowitz rhetorically. "My uncle was in Dachau. If I had been there then, I would have been incinerated by the grandparents of the people applauding me now." So why does the bearded marimba player do it? For one, he an-

two meters long, waist-high, weighing 100 kgs. The marimba is traditionally used to play Latin and African music, but, Jacobowitz says, he was fortunate "to realize its potential to be played like a piano" — albeit with four rubber-headed mallets, rather than 10 fingers. For the marimba, widening the repertoire meant adapting Bach, Beethoven and Vivaldi. Though he has also written original music, he says he sticks to the classics in performance, "because I want to share a language that people are already familiar with. I'm like Rashi" — the 11th-century Bible interpreter — "commenting on the existing musical corpus."

After studying at the Eastman School of Music, in Rochester, Jacobowitz came to Israel in 1983 as a kibbutz volunteer, and stayed on to learn about his heritage. He became Orthodox, got married and settled in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, adjacent to Hebron. "I found employment with the Jerusalem Symphony as a percussionist, but only lasted a year," he recalls with a smirk, "because I wasn't interested in standing up once every 10 minutes with a triangle and going bang."

So he took to the streets. "For me, playing in the gutter is a step up from the orchestra. I bring art to the people." But clearly another purpose is served as well: satisfying his intense need for attention. "On the street, the stage is mine. I am the producer, I am the conductor... I am the whole orchestra." When it became clear the Israeli streets couldn't sustain him, he decided to try passing the hat in tourist-packed Europe. "I've played in most European countries but I gravitated to Germany, because the crowds are cultured and well-mannered. They appreciate classical music more

than in other places." Still, sometimes Jacobowitz feels "the Germans are more enthusiastic about my being an Orthodox Jew than about my music. They want to prove they can have Jewish friends."

During his act, he talks about music as much as he plays it. At one point, he'll invite an audience member to grab a mallet. The German joins the Jew, and under the supervision of the latter, the two play Bach. "I love the electricity when you have good contact with the crowd, the timing of the joke as well as the note."

Driving a car that pulls a trailer — loaded down with kosher food and religious paraphernalia such as *tefillin* and sacred books — Jacobowitz tools around the Continent, sleeping and praying in parking lots.

As an Orthodox Jew who looks like one, Jacobowitz often has his photo featured in European papers. "I don't dress like this to be provocative," he says. "It's just who I am." But some people don't like who he is. On his first day in Munich, six years ago, walking around the Marienplatz, he was jumped by four "Hitler youth. An American marine came to my defense because he didn't like the odds, and three American Christian missionaries joined the fray to save me. Not spiritually — physically."

SO, IS IT A LIVING, BEING AN itinerant musician? "Everybody wants to know how much I take in. Some I tell. Some I don't. You," he says, pausing, "I will. Between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a day." Most of that comes not from passing the hat, but from peddling his CD. "People assume street musicians are beggars, but they can earn more money than some Western leaders."

Alex Jacobowitz sees himself as the heir to a tradition established 160 years ago by the hasidic xylophone virtuoso Joseph Gusikow. Byelorussian by birth, Gusikow traveled the shtetls and big cities of Europe playing his Holz und Strohfiedel, a wood-and-straw pre-



PALMA FIACCO FOTOGRAFIN

▲ PASSING THE YARMULKE:
'People assume street musicians are beggars, but they can earn more money than some Western leaders'

swers, it's his livelihood. But it's also "*kiddush hashem* [sanctification of God's name]. I demonstrate to the Germans that Jewish life has survived."

Growing up in upstate New York in the 70s, Jacobowitz discovered the marimba, a gigantic 52-bar xylophone

decessor to the xylophone. Though his traditional garb was not remarkable in cloistered Jewish villages, in Paris, Berlin and Rome, it caused something of a stir. "But people began to take to it," explains Gusikow's unofficial biographer. "In fact, in France, sidelocks became something of a fashion among upper-class Parisian women — *coiffure à la Guzikow*. Now, if Guzikow wasn't afraid during the early 1800s to haul his little xylophone around Europe dressed as a traditional Jew, why should I be?"

JACOBOWITZ DESCRIBES THE time his trailer was stolen in Frankfurt — on Rosh Hashanah. "My trailer is... my life. I was depressed." Then suddenly, he saw it coming down the street. "My house was passing before my eyes."

So Jacobowitz broke Jewish law, and jumped into his car on the New Year. "I'm weak," he admits. He also placed a call by cell-phone to the police, who caught the thieves as they tried to enter the on ramp of the Autobahn.

The musician pulled up a few minutes later and ran toward the cab of the trailer, his phone in hand. "I felt I had these guys by the *gozotzkas*, so I yelled a curse at the first guy to come out. He turned, pulled a gun and pointed it at my head. I thought, This is it. I'm receiving my reward and punishment on the Jewish New Year."

But the gunman was a plain-clothes cop who had already boarded the trailer, and thought that Jacobowitz's phone was a gun. As the thieves were handcuffed and led away, they looked at their victim, and one asked him, "Hey, aren't you the guy who plays the marimba?"

Playing the marimba the past 16 years has given Jacobowitz great satisfaction, as well as grotesque walnut-sized and shaped calluses on each of his index fingers. But how long can a 37-year-old keep spicing on the *Strasse*? "As long as I'm having fun and people are receiving good from me, then that's what the Creator expects." ●