

Same Song, Next Verse

YERACHMIEL BEGUN DISCUSSES HIS HALF CENTURY
IN MUSIC AND HIS NEWEST PROJECT, THE MIAMI
CHOIR EXPERIENCE OF JACKSON

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He's been in the music industry for 52 years.
He's composed 400 published songs.
His songs have appeared on 51 albums.

He's the founder, composer, choir leader, and choreographer of the most successful choir in Jewish music history.

He's led hundreds of concerts, including the largest Jewish show ever in the United States.

He has a viral online clip that got him invites from major broadcasting networks and newspapers.

And now, in many ways, Yerachmiel Begun is just getting started.

One of the most remarkable careers in Jewish music history began thanks to a little white lie.

Fifteen-year-old Yerachmiel Begun was sitting in the kitchen of his parents' Brooklyn home, listening as his friend Shloimy Mernick sang a song he had just composed. It was called "Achas Sha'alti," with a chorus of "*Shifti, Shifti, Shifti*," that would soon become so popular that he'd be known as "Shifti Mernick."

Yerachmiel was blown away at the idea of someone composing a song. He walked out of the room and asked his father, "Dad, how do you compose a song?"

"It's no big deal," responded R' Chaim Begun. "I'll compose one right now."

R' Chaim, a talented singer and impressionist who had performed at USO shows for soldiers during World War II, sat down at the piano and began composing a song.

Only he wasn't really composing it just then. He had in fact written it years earlier.

"He just said that to make me think it was easy," recalls Yerachmiel now, sitting on his couch in his Jackson home as he reflects on his career. "I was so inspired by this that I started composing songs as I took the F train home from yeshivah."

While a *bachur* in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Flatbush, Yerachmiel had his first song published on an album: *A kollel yungerman*, Yonah Weinrib of Simchatone, paid \$25 for a composition called "Roni Bas Tzion." When the album came out, Yerachmiel excitedly looked through the song list for his composition but couldn't find any track with that name—until Yonah told him he'd put the melody to different words, "Atah Echad." "I liked my words better, but that's life," he says now with a laugh.



Perhaps it's no coincidence that once his career took off, Yerachmiel preferred to keep his songs for his own groups rather than selling them to others.

By the time Yerachmiel was learning in Yeshiva Ner Yisrael in Toronto in the early '70s, he had composed some 30 songs. A friend from Brooklyn, Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum, hooked him up with Heshi Nussbaum, a Brooklynite who had worked with Rabbi Teitelbaum on the legendary *Pirchei* albums and was now living in Toronto.

Listening to Yerachmiel's songs and understanding the potential they had, Nussbaum put together a group of boys. Yerachmiel taught them the songs; Harvey Ehrlich, a choirmaster at a local shul, conducted; and thus was born the Toronto *Pirchei* Choir in 1974. That first album featured mostly Yerachmiel's songs—as well as Shifti Mernick's eponymous track—including such hits as “Vomar,” “Horeini,” “Yiru Eineinu,” “Tvidu Es Hashem,” “Modeh Ani,” “Al Tirah,” and “Ko Ribon.”

Yerachmiel subsequently sold seven songs to Baruch Chait for *Kol Salonika III* and five songs to Nussbaum for *Pirchei Toronto II*. (By then, his price had gone up to \$500 a song.)

Then, in 1976, Yerachmiel caught one of his luckiest breaks: He contracted pneumonia.

A doctor advised him to go to Miami to recuperate, and while there, people recognized his name from the Toronto choir and asked him to work with boys in their town. After he got back to the Big Apple and realized he might make a career out of running his own choir, he taught himself how to conduct, do choreography, and play piano. Other than a single 20-minute piano crash course from a friend, he

never took a lesson in any of the skills that would make his career.

In 1977, The Miami Boys Choir released its first album, *Victory Entebbe*, with hits like “Moshe,” “Bamarom,” “Sim Shalom,” “Hamapil,” and the title track, an almost entirely instrumental piece but for the words “Planes are flying, *bashamayim*” and “Victory Entebbe.” Opening with trumpets and timpani, it evoked the military operation that had concluded with the miraculous rescue of more than 100 Israeli hostages being held in that Ugandan city by Palestinian and German terrorists.

After several more albums, in 1984, the choir (now based in Brooklyn but retaining the Miami name) released the *B'siyata D'Shmayta* album (*BSD*). It would be a landmark moment in Jewish music.

While Yerachmiel had already published a host of hit songs, it was clear from the opening bars of the first track, “Keil,” that this album was on another level. Whereas the style of many of his previous songs was more youthful, *BSD* displayed a whole new maturity.

At least that's my analysis. Yerachmiel's is somewhat different.

He believes that with *BSD* as well as earlier Miami and Toronto albums, “there's maturity in the slow songs, but with the fast songs, you have an aspect of ‘bubblegum’”—his colorful term for adolescent music. He says some of the faster hit songs he would soon release, like “Lo Yisa Goy” and “Adon Olam,” were far more advanced than *BSD* hits like “Kol Yisrael” and “Es Tzemach.”

“But those were great songs for the times,” he says, “because the truth is that the times were much more pure.”

To the extent that he agrees *BSD* augured a noteworthy difference in the

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direction of his music, he says that was the first album that was in the genre he would operate in for the rest of his career, which he calls “American *yeshivish*.”

The hit albums continued, as over the next decade, he would release *Klal Yisroel Together*, *Shabbos*

Yerushalayim, *It's Min Hashomayim*, *One by One*, and *The Simcha Song*, with songs that were the soundtracks for generations of Jewish families, like “Meheirah,” “Adon Olam,” “Lo Yisa Goy”...and the list goes on and on.

MBC lore is built not only upon its popular songs and studio albums, but on its live shows featuring choreography and colorful costumes. In addition to the hundreds of regular concerts, the choir held five mega “Miami Experience” shows complete with special segments, storylines, and acting as well as singing.

The last one, in 1995, drew 15,000 people to Nassau Coliseum, and there were another 3,000 ticket requests that couldn't be accommodated. According to Yerachmiel, this was the largest Jewish concert held in the United States to date.

As the '90s turned into the new millennium and the hits continued with albums like *Revach*, *Yavo*, and *Ut Ut*, Yerachmiel, like all great artists, adapted to the changing times, with more contemporary beats and musical arrangements. Yet, he says, he remained true to his values.

“What changed over the years for me was basically the rhythms, not the melodies,” he says. “Music got more sophisticated, but the *ruchniyus* of the melody and where the sources are from could match up against the earlier songs. Though the beats were more contemporary, the melodies were still as authentic.”

Earlier this decade, Yerachmiel's tech-savvy son Chananya began posting clips of MBC performances online. In the summer of 2022, he posted a snippet of a performance of the song

“Yerushalayim” from a 2008 concert video with the tagline “Four Miami soloists in 40 seconds.” The clip went viral, at one point garnering a million views a day.

Nobody considers “Yerushalayim” one of Yerachmiel's best songs. Asked why he believes this video became so popular, he admits it's a “bomb *kasha*” and is speechless for the only time during our interview as he ponders a question he's been unable to answer for nearly three years.

But the man who always strove, in the words of the MBC song, “to live a life of Torah,” wasn't about to compromise his values now that opportunities presented themselves.

He received interview requests from just about every major secular outlet in the world. To this day, he has not spoken to a single one.

“I was concerned,” he says, “that they would take what I say and twist it, making it sound secular, and they wouldn't insert the Torah or *neshamah* aspect.”

He had “big-time *nisyonos*” when he was invited to perform with the choir on major network shows and was offered to have documentaries made about the choir, but he turned them all down.

The “Yerushalayim” phenomenon did get MBC a gig at the next HASC concert (where they'd performed a number of times already), and of course, that song was part of the setlist (as it has been at every MBC concert since).

“Before we did ‘Yerushalayim’ at that HASC show, I spoke to the crowd,” he recounts. “I told them, ‘It has nothing to do with me. Hakadosh Baruch Hu pressed the button, and that was it.’”

It was just the latest of many honors Yerachmiel had received for his career's work.

At one of his HASC appearances, Yerachmiel was cited for his contributions to Jewish music; at another he was awarded a spot on the “top 10 composers” list. And at the 2022 Jewish Music Hall of Fame concert, he had a 15-minute medley retrospective of his career.

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Superstar ballplayers make the

Hall of Fame only after they retire, but Yerachmiel Begun is nowhere near hanging it up. In fact, he's embarking on new phases of his career, as active and energetic as ever. Perhaps even more so, thanks to his relationship with his new town.

Three years ago, the lifelong Brooklynite moved to Jackson. It's a well-trodden path, but few who have taken it are as enthusiastic and passionate about it.

When I first bring up the subject of Jackson, a broad smile comes over Yerachmiel's face. He leaps off the couch, runs to his front door, and, opening it, says, "Listen to that. What do you hear?"

I (another New Yorker who recently made the move to Central Jersey) am puzzled by the question, and answer, "Crickets. Literally."

"Exactly!" he says. "In Brooklyn it would be, 'Honk, honk, honk.'"

He closes the door with satisfaction and sits back down.

Then, like a true traitor, he starts ripping on his lifelong home.

"Nobody in Brooklyn wants to live in Brooklyn anymore," he says, citing what he sees as the Big Apple's decline due to the "covid restrictions and lower speed limits."

"I never thought I would want to be anywhere else, but it turned dark. The only reason anyone is still there is that they're stuck because of family or kids in school or their job. But nobody loves Brooklyn. Even if they're not moving yet, everybody's at least talking about moving.

"Here, it's more real living."

He's still active with Miami Boys Choir, which is based in Brooklyn and draws members from Brooklyn, Long Island, and North Jersey. But upon seeing the most famous Jewish choir leader in the world in their town, Jackson and Lakewood residents repeatedly asked him, "Yerachmiel, why don't you also do something for our kids?"

He didn't feel the Jackson/Lakewood/Toms River area was interested in a full MBC-type choir, which requires of its members a serious time commitment and public performances.

Instead, enter the Miami Choir Experience of Jackson.

MCE is a 12-week program from late fall to early spring, with practices for one hour each Sunday. It completed its first season last year, and auditions are already underway for the second season. (Parents whose sons aged 8–13 wish to apply may email shirainuevents@gmail.com.)

Each season, the boys learn a new song, record it, and film a music video. The inaugural song, released in March, was a brand-new "Kah Ribon."

At the end of the MCE season, the choir performed at a recital for their families in Lakewood High School. It featured a full setlist of MBC songs, culminating in their "Kah Ribon." Then

there was an encore performance of that song, with the boys joined onstage and in song by their fathers and grandfathers.

MCE dovetailed with another undertaking of Yerachmiel's, called The Shabbos Project: A Shirainu Initiative, to help release new Shabbos *zemiros*.

"My feeling always was that

I wish we would have new songs for kids and families to sing and inspire the Shabbos table," he says.

Of the 400 compositions he had released prior to this year, only one is a Shabbos song, a popular tune from the first Toronto Pirchei record, also to the words of *Kah Ribon*. (The only other Shabbos song he has published is MBC's "Menuchah," but that, in fact, is the one melody in the entire MBC oeuvre that was not composed by Yerachmiel. It was an old tune his father had taught him that he'd once heard in a Russian shul.)

Now, Yerachmiel's goal is to compose and publish 10 fresh Shabbos *zemiros* with contemporary melodies and beats to excite the kids while "retaining the *Yiddishe ta'am*." He hopes to release at least some of these songs with MCE; he's also open to publishing some with adult soloists.

Putting out new music today often comes at a financial loss. To that end, he established The

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Shabbos Project as a nonprofit so that he could fundraise to support the initiative.

The first Shabbos Project song, MCE's "Kah Ribon," is a jaunty gem that has become a popular tune not only on music platforms, but more importantly, at Shabbos tables.

And the song's five solos and one duet make clear that the vocal talent in Central Jersey is as good as anything New York has to offer.

One noteworthy aspect of the new song is that significant portions of it include rhythmic clapping in place of some vocal lines—a concept that Yerachmiel borrowed from the way the Pirchei classic "Shebshifleinu" was sung in Camp Agudah nearly 60 years ago.

"I'd always said, 'Maybe I'll do a song one day that'll bring that back,'" he recalls. "This song caters to a more *Torah'dige ta'am* that brought up the feelings of that song from those days."

Yerachmiel had brief singing parts on many MBC songs, which, he says, was "to give it a little bit more of a mature sound." But later this summer, more than 50 years after he entered the Jewish music scene, he's about to do one of the only things he hasn't yet tried in the industry: release his own solo singing album. He has already put out one single, called "Torah U'mitzvos."

He's doing this because at times over the years, he composed a song, taught it to the choir, and then realized the song doesn't lend itself to children's voices, so the song would go unpublished. But he never wanted to sell his music to others, because "I wanted to be able to have something that would be my thing. I wanted my own entity and to have the control to help it turn out right." He therefore has a sizable collection of songs he's composed that only work with the adult voice and remain unreleased.

Also, he says, musical tastes have changed, and people identify more with solo singers than choirs. And he has some personal songs he'd prefer to sing himself, such as one he composed for his daughter's wedding.

Add this all up and what you get is an upcoming debut solo album.

One can listen to Yerachmiel Begun's entire

career catalogue without hearing any songs that could be categorized as sad.

There are slow songs, and there are songs in minor scale, which is stereotypically considered the "sad scale." But it's hard to think of a single Yerachmiel Begun song that you'd call sad. Nobody cries around a *kumzitz* to a Miami song.

"I think it's just the way I am," he says. "I'm a very optimistic person; even my slow songs have an optimistic message. The only song I ever made in my life that had a tinge of sadness is "Chalilah," which I made when my father was *niftar*."

He says that when he was growing up in the first couple of decades after the Holocaust, there was no such thing as happy Jewish music.

"The first happy song, in my opinion, that ever came out was 'Shmelke's Niggun.' There was no song like that previously. And the second happy song was "Ko Amar" from Yigal Calek with London Pirchei. My "Vomar" with Toronto was an outgrowth of that happier post-Holocaust generation."

Continuing to reflect, he says, "I've never made heavy-duty right-wing songs, and I don't write very modern songs. I've always been in a certain *derech emtza'i*—a middle road. I'm proud to have been the standard bearer of that, with a *Torah'dige* background and with *simchah*."

Asked if he has any final thoughts before we go, he says, "The future is bright, *im yirtzeh Hashem*."

And then, he adds simply, "Everything *b'zmano*."

He smiles. He could be referring to trying to convince his Brooklyn friends to finally join him in Jackson, or finally releasing a solo album, or finally creating a new choir, or finally composing one "Kah Ribon" more than half a century after the other, or finally borrowing a clapping concept from a Pirchei song nearly six decades after he first had the idea, or accepting a rapidly changing world and musical tastes in which a song used to be popular for 30 years but now is considered old before its first birthday, or just that I've gone an hour over my interview slot.

"Everything in its right time."

Many thanks to Yaakov Brown, the king of Jewish musicology, for his generous assistance with this article.

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Finding Their Voice

Many MBC soloists were stars in their own right, as Jewish boys across the world looked up to Oded Kariti, Nochum Stark, and Eric Stern as much as they did to MBD, Fried, and Dedi.

And the choir proved a childhood training ground for countless successful adult singers and composers, from Mordechai Shapiro to Ari Goldwag and Yaakov Shwekey.

MBC alums who recalled their experiences for *The Voice* said they cherished their time in the choir, and the skills and experiences they learned proved invaluable to their careers.

Eliezer Rabinowitz, who now works as a vocal coach, says he was “always amazed at how Yerachmiel was able to pull off a performance in six months with practice just once a week. He was efficient about it. There were no jokes. But it was definitely a *gesh-mak* experience.

“He knew how high you could go better than you did. He asked you to do it, and you did it. It was amazing, the way he taught. I remember before I joined the choir, watching videos of performances and wondering how these kids remembered everything. But he taught it in a way that by the time you got on stage, it was like muscle memory.”

Dovid Pearlman, now a successful adult singer, says, “My love of performing and the reason I’ve continued to sing as a solo artist is because my talent was nurtured and coached by Yerachmiel. He inspired me to sing for as many people as I could, and I got my whole idea of learning stage presence from him.

“And it wasn’t just performing; my love of songwriting came from being in MBC and getting to know his writing process. That inspired me to write original compositions as well.”

Shloime Dachs, who went on to star as an adult singer and bandleader, said his experience with MBC “helped me develop such confidence to *lein* and say my *pshetl* at my bar mitzvah with energy and poise, without being nervous or afraid of an audience. Being in the choir matured you.”

Dachs says Yerachmiel’s songs are still regularly requested at weddings. Yet, he believes that just as impressive as Yerachmiel’s composing prowess is his insistence on sticking to his values.

“He is a true living legend in music, as well as a *ben Torah* and a *talmid chacham* who never faltered and moved his music to the left to keep up with the crazy trends in music.

“I always say Yerachmiel and Avraham Fried were able to keep their *tzurah*, where their songs didn’t have to become *goyish* and give in to society. Everybody had to adjust a little to the times, but a song still has to have a *Yiddishe ta’am*, and that’s what Yerachmiel has been able to maintain all these years.”

And just as he inspired and excited boys from the New York area for decades, he’s now having a similar effect on the youth of Central Jersey.

Mrs. Nechuma Globerman, whose son Noah is in MCE, said Yerachmiel “involves all the boys, brings out the best in each one, and creates a *Torah’dig* atmosphere.” She said, “My son gained strength and confidence, and it boosted his self-esteem. To watch the boys perform, the pride the children had, and how Yerachmiel conducts the choir, is to admire it.”

Mrs. Tzipporah Guggenheim’s son Asher was in MCE in its inaugural year; he will be returning for its sophomore season joined by his brother Ezra.

Tzipporah says she “grew up with Miami Boys Choir, attending many of their concerts, singing their songs, and of course, following all the talented members of the choir. So I was excited when this opportunity opened here in Jackson for my son Asher, who loves to sing.

“And I was simply blown away by all that he gained in a few short weeks. I didn’t dream that so much could be taught—from voice and singing training and performance to something I hadn’t expected: character development. In those 12 weeks, I felt that my son matured five years. Yerachmiel has an amazing ability to turn young boys into aspiring adults. They learn to take responsibility and to ‘be a *mentsch*.’ I also noticed a huge boost of confidence and pride—another element of Yerachmiel’s character that he gives over to the boys.”

Mrs. Nechuma Gobioff says her son Moshe joined MCE despite having no friends there, because “all he wanted to do was sing in Yerachmiel Begun’s choir. Well, he loved it and made so many friends. He walked out with a huge sense of accomplishment and confidence, and the boys felt so good after the performance.

“It was adorable.” ●

