

BELIEF

FAITH

Country singer uses music to share values of the Jewish people

By Lindsay Peyton  
CORRESPONDENT

Maybe you’ve heard of “a little country, a little rock ’n’ roll.” What about a little Texas singer-songwriter, a little Torah? Imagine Robert Earl Keen meets “Shema Yisrael.” Joe Buchanan might wear a cowboy hat instead of a yarmulke, but make no mistake: This Houstonian uses music to share the values and history of the Jewish people.

He takes the stage in synagogues across the nation — and during the pandemic created an online “Tableside Shabbat.” Regardless of the venue, Buchanan wants his tunes to both entertain and inform.

“The world at large still does not really know what being Jewish is,” he said.

And he wants to change that through song. After all, that’s how he learned about the faith himself. Buchanan converted to Judaism nine years ago.

It’s really a love story, he said, starting when his bride-to-be April happened upon the game store where he worked in his 20s.

It was a slow day at the shop. “We didn’t have a lot of customers,” Buchanan said. “So I played her a song on my guitar.

“We ended up getting married pretty fast.”

Religion was not a topic of concern. April was not religious, and while Buchanan grew up Christian, he had never found a church that seemed like a fit. He was always searching for a congregation that matched what he learned as a child from his grandfather.

“He taught me when I was young that God is simple, that you can see God all around you, and that your purpose is to live a great life,” Buchanan said. “That made sense.”

But he had a hard time finding a church that preached the same message. He tried various denominations, going to churches with his friends on Sundays.

“I couldn’t understand what I heard — that I was broken, that I wasn’t good enough for God, that I wasn’t born a good person,” Buchanan said. “I ended up walking away from all of that.”

It wasn’t until years later, as a married man, that he decided to give it another go. He asked April to strike out with him and search for a church home.

Buchanan couldn’t help but notice, however, that she did not sing any of the hymns or really participate during services. When he asked why, she replied, “It’s not my thing.”

It wasn’t until about 13 years into the marriage that Buchanan would truly understand.

The couple visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and were both shaken by what they saw.

April turned to him and said, “I want to get in touch with my people’s faith. I’m Jewish — and our son is Jewish.”

Buchanan explained that he did not know because April was not practicing and did not know much about her own faith. But she wanted to change all of that, and this time, Buchanan would be the one going along for the ride. He told April, “If you want to explore this together, let’s do it.”

The couple searched for a synagogue near their home and found Congregation Shaar Hashalom in Clear Lake. On their first trip to check it out with their 11-year-old son Nathan, they met Rabbi Stuart Federow.

“We introduced ourselves,” Buchanan recalled. “I said, ‘They’re Jewish, and I’m not, and none of us know what it means.’”

Federow welcomed them, explaining, “There’s one God, and there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re loved by God exactly as you are.” Then, he added, “We don’t know what’s coming next, but what matters is now. You do good not because of fear of punishment. You do it to put more good into the world.”

The words resonated with Buchanan immediately.

“It took me back, like I was hearing my grandfather again,” he said. “I dove into it.”

Buchanan decided to convert to Judaism and started writing songs on his guitar about the process to help him better understand the concepts and stories of his new religion.

When Federow discovered that Buchanan was playing music about Jewish prayers and his Torah stud-



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

During the pandemic, country singer Joe Buchanan started a “Tableside Shabbat” program online.

ies, he encouraged him. Eventually, he invited him to perform during Shabbat service.

Word spread, and other synagogues asked the singer-songwriter for an appearance.

“I started getting asked to go to communities and different congregations,” Buchanan said. “April and I sat down. I knew this was something important, but I didn’t know what to do. What do I have to offer?”

Around that time, Federow sent him to a Jewish songwriting conference. At first, Buchanan was a wallflower, but then he was asked to join a song circle. Everyone was playing music and singing.

“It just lit me on fire,” Buchanan said. “I had a sense of being home.”

Then, Buchanan met Jewish blues musician Saul Kaye from California.

Kaye liked his music and offered to help Buchanan make his first album, “Unbroken,” which was released in 2015.

With the recording, everything took shape. Buchanan started to envision a program where he would share his story on the road.

He developed a whole weekend at a synagogue — providing music for Friday night Shabbat services, a concert and workshops.

“I never wanted to learn on the bimah, play the tunes and then roll,” he said. “I wanted to get to know people.” (The bimah is the raised platform in the front of a synagogue where the Torah is read.)

Buchanan built an artist-in-residence program and launched a workshop called “Choosing to be Chosen.”

“It took off,” he said.

*“The world at large still does not really know what being Jewish is.”*

Joe Buchanan

Before the pandemic, Buchanan was on road for three weekends a month, touring full time as a Jewish country artist. He describes his music as “feel-good, toe-tapping Americana with a Jewish soul.”

He also released a second album, “Back to Babylon,” at the end of 2019. “I was staying really busy,” he said.

Then, the pandemic struck.

“I thought, ‘I can hang lights and play on my laptop. Let’s start leading services on Facebook.’ I had no idea if anyone would show up.”

He called the session “Tableside Shabbat.”

There were prayers and songs, Buchanan said. He also made sure to respond to chats with the audience and keep the session interactive.

“Now we have people from all over the country and across the pond who stream it into their living rooms,” he said. “The same people started coming every week — and then more and more people showed up.”

Michael Burger, a resident of Missouri City, first saw Buchanan play at Congregation Beth Yeshurun. “It’s not your normal Jewish music,” he said. “It was something new — and I just connected with it.”

When Burger heard about “Tableside Shabbat,” he marked his calendar. “It grew into something we did every Friday night,” he said. “A little community formed out of it.”

The sessions became a source of comfort during the pandemic, he said.

Dr. Elaine Ducharme attends the “Tableside Shabbat” from her home in Connecticut.

“I found his services to be this oasis in the middle of COVID,” she said. “It was this incredibly comforting place where you could go at the end of the week.”

Ducharme discovered Buchanan after her daughter Greta Bolton suffered a stroke and was quickly rushed to the hospital.

Buchanan rewrote a song just for Bolton and called it “Greta’s Song.”

“We were all in tears,” Ducharme said.

Now, even as COVID restrictions are lifting, Buchanan continues to offer “Tableside Shabbat” whenever possible — and Ducharme still tunes in.

Touring gigs are making a comeback: “2023 is already pretty booked,” Buchanan said.

Judaism has offered him a lifeline, one that has brought him greater meaning and purpose.

All religions should work together as a positive force, he said.

“Music should be a bridge, never a wall.”

The Hebrew word “Kavanah,” described as the mindset for Jewish prayer, literally means “intention” or following the “direction of the heart.”

And that’s what Buchanan said he wants to do, perform Jewish music from his heart — with a Texas twang.

Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.