

Simcha Music In The Fast Lane

From benefits to bar mitzvahs, Hank Lane calls the tune.

Martha Mendelsohn - Special to The Jewish Week (11/08/2005)



Hank Lane

Don't raise the chairs too soon.

A hora sequence should allow the guests at least a few circles' worth of nonstop dancing before they come to standstill and clap while the wedding couple (or bar or bat mitzvah) is lifted aloft.

"And after they're done with the chair ritual, it's the band's job to get them dancing again and bring them to a state of exhaustion," says bandleader Hank Lane, founder and head of Hank Lane Music and Entertainment. Upping the tempos of standards like "Tzena, Tzena" can expedite the process, he says. Bringing the crowd to state of exhaustion is not the same as bringing it to the point of collapse. "You have to know when you're peaking," Lane says, sitting in his plush Midtown office

where ringing phones attest to the fall's hectic social season.

Rumors of low-key Jewish celebrations are unfounded, says Lane, who wielded the baton at the wedding of the daughter of former Miramax co-head Bob Weinstein at Cipriani 42nd Street in October. Jewish hosts want "lots of food, lots of drinks, lots of music." More than the Cristalle or the canapes, it's the music that makes the party, Lane says. "Perhaps the major part of an evening's success depends on having the maximum amount of people dancing."

But coaxing the guests from their gilt chairs takes skill and timing. "You can have two bands playing the same song, and if you turn your back, you can't tell which is playing, but only one whips people into frenzy. The difference is, one plays it at the right time and the other doesn't." "Our psychology is, 'read the crowd,'" says Harris Lane, Hank's 33-year-old son, who leads one of the company's dozen bands, which played for 1,500 guests at Puff Daddy "P.Diddy" Combs' 35th birthday blowout last year at Cipriani Wall Street.

A Hank Lane classical trio ushered in the guests with a baroque trumpet fanfare. Then, 24 violinists in white coats and tails strummed Nat King Cole and Billie Holiday standards, followed by chorus girls bursting out of a cake to "Hey, Big Spender." The way a song was originally arranged and recorded isn't tampered with. "We don't get super creative. We specialize in playing the songs the way they were written," Hank Lane says.

The rock classic, "Wake Up Little Susie," sung and played the way the Everly Brothers recorded it, convinced a reluctant George W. Bush to kick up his boots at the first family's White House holiday party last December. Next, the president and Laura danced the polka to "The Yellow Rose of Texas." The Bush daughters boogied to Beyonce. Call it musical multitasking. A flick of the hand can direct the band to segue from Frank Sinatra's "My Way" to rap artist Usher's "My Way." In another 20 years, rap will be the new retro craze, Lane predicts. Today, "the big nostalgia music is from the '80s — Madonna and Prince," he says. Dance tastes tend to stretch back a generation. In the '70s, dancers yearned for '50s songs. In the '90s, they craved disco.

