



COLLEGE
COMMONS

DAN NICHOLS: THIS IS WHY I SING

(Begin audio)

HOLO: My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. And on behalf of Joanne Tolkoﬀ, Producer of the College Commons, HUC's online learning platform, I would like to welcome you all to a special production of the Bully Pulpit podcast. A musical interview with leading Jewish musician Dan Nichols.

(Musical number)

HOLO: Tonight would not have been possible without the help and support from many people whom I'd like to name. Our friends and colleagues at the URJ have welcomed us with open arms and we have relied particularly heavily on Isaac Newel for his expertise, flexibility, and generosity at every turn. The College Commons itself, and all its programming, is possible only because of the unstinting institutional support under the leadership of our President Rabbi Aaron Panken. Because of the financial support of the Martin Cohen Fund, administered by Vice President for Program and Business Development Liz Squadron, and because of the creative leadership of our Producer Joanne Tolkoﬀ.

Finally, we owe tonight's concept to our colleague and friend Rabbi Adam Allenberg who is the Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions on the HUC Skirball campus. We're in for a great treat tonight. Some music and conversation with one of Jewish music's great personalities and talents. Dan is a singular talent in the world of Jewish music. He is one of the most dynamic influential and beloved Jewish musicians in North America. His melodies have become an integral part of the spiritual and liturgical experience of countless individuals and communities throughout North America and beyond. And, in fact, Dan is a product of the Jewish camping movement. After Dan and his entire family converted to Judaism when Dan was seven years old, he spent 10 summers at the Goldman Union Camp in Zionsville, Indiana before receiving his degree in vocal performance at the University of North Carolina. In 1995 Dan established the Jewish rock band E18teen. Since that time Dan and E18teen have released 11 full length studio albums, each one of which has received critical acclaim and has been celebrated by Jewish adults and youth alike. Please welcome Dan Nichols.

(Applause)

HOLO: Dan, thank you so much for coming and spending time with us. One of the things I learned about you which I didn't know beforehand, although I supposed I could have figured it out, was just how often you're on the road. That's a whole theme in music, popular and

otherwise. We hear musicians singing about it all the time. But it's very, very difficult for those of us who aren't traveling musicians to grasp the challenges, the opportunities. And so I wanted to ask you, simply out of curiosity on my part, what surprises you most on the road? What's happened to you that has taken you aback and, perhaps, colored your entire experience of this unique musician thing which is being on the road?

NICHOLS: I remember – well, the first thing that I think of is not very profound. But I'm just thinking about the Delta Sky Club just three days ago in San Francisco and I was going to the bathroom. It happened to be number one. I came around the corner and there's a woman, a Delta Sky Club employee who's mopping and cleaning and opening doors to stalls, and attending to the bathroom.

HOLO: And that was a surprise no doubt.

NICHOLS: As I'm zipping up and washing my hands I'm encountering a woman. It made me highly uncomfortable. So that was surprising.

HOLO: You sound like someone who's never done the opposite and walked into the ladies room.

NICHOLS: Not on purpose. I think though, on a more serious end, I do travel a lot and I am fortunate. I wonder, you know, if some of the mystique of so many songwriters writing about the road is borne out of a sense of isolation or loneliness that comes from being a stranger in a strange land. And I have the opposite of that. After 20 years, I would say probably 90 percent, maybe that's – maybe – yeah, 90 percent of my work is repeat business. So I'm visiting communities again and again over 20 years. So there are many locations around this country that feel like home. So I don't feel isolated.

HOLO: So 90 percent of your time are places you've been.

NICHOLS: Yeah, I would say that's – that's...

HOLO: That's outstanding. That speaks to...

NICHOLS: It's a blessing. It's a real blessing. I do remember though something that has surprised me in the work over the last 20 years and that is why it is that in one community I'll try something and it will work really well, and I think I'm doing very similar work - and the next community, it really doesn't work. It really is clear it doesn't work.

And a few years ago, right before High Holiday services, I was working at Noah Kushner's emerging community called The Kitchen in San Francisco and her father, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, was in the congregation. And I saw him and I gave him a big hug. And he said, "How are you Danny?" And I said, "I'm good. And I'm really fascinated about what we're doing. The more I do it the more questions I have about what it means to do right." And then he said, "Well, you know, sometimes the magic works. Sometimes it doesn't." And I said, "Where is

that from?” And he said, “It’s from a movie called *Little Big Man* starring Dustin Hoffman.” And that got my wheels turning about the nature of choices that we make from opening song to closing song, to how long we’re going to let the silent prayer be silent, to how many songs of mine do I include, how many songs of mine do I exclude from a service. How much eye contact do I make with the congregation? How little do I make with the congregation? I have begun to realize that sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn’t. This surprise, this awareness has borne a question that I’m really engaged in right now, which is what does it mean to be responsible to the congregation and not responsible for the congregation.

HOLO: Got any answers?

NICHOLS: I know that something changed within me when I was aware of the question. I started to fixate less on how the woman in the third row is not singing at all, or making any direct eye contact. And what am I doing wrong? I must be doing something wrong that is not working for her. And I should change my plan. What’s wrong with me? I started to let go of that and just do – well just do my work.

HOLO: There’s interesting confluences and differences between your experiences, your describing it and all kinds of responsibilities to but not for, and sometimes for teachers to students, rabbis and cantors to congregants as well. At the Hebrew Union College I think we’re always trying to think about that both as teachers and as people preparing teachers. I’m moved by how sensitive you are to it. So you’re in good company. We’ll be searching together for some of those answers.

I want to shift themes a bit, talk a little bit about the artistic process. And something I’ve discovered about your mode of expression, which is unavoidable, anyone who knows your music, has encountered your music and you and I are meeting for the first time, so this is just me engaging with you as an artist and as a musician only reinforced by the small time I’ve gotten to know you, but it’s the following:

You know, those of us who are not artists or creative people we appreciate that artists are motivated by lots of really compelling things. Sometimes you can tell that an artist is expressing in the literal sense of pushing out some emotion or sense or need that’s brewing inside of them. And that feels a certain way to the person listening. And there are other times when you listen to artists and you see something different. You see a different kind of reason for producing, for composing, for singing. It feels like a mission. It feels like there’s a goal. A goal that exists outside of the artist rather than this native thing that’s pushing up and out. When I listen to you, I feel a lot of both.

I wanted to ask you if I’m reading you right. Am I understanding what makes Dan Nichols tick? Because we receive a lot from you. And that’s sort of the way I’m organizing it when I express what it is that I experience and relate to.

NICHOLS: I take that as an enormous compliment.

HOLO: It is. It is intended as such.

NICHOLS: It's interesting that you compared the two mindsets as both artistic mindsets which is perfectly fine and viable, reasonable. And as you're saying it I'm realizing that my perspective right now and has been for many years is a little – it's a little different. In that I feel like the tension I exist within is I feel and operate in two different worlds simultaneously. One is the artist space that you addressed first. And in my understanding of being a fierce artist speaking the artist truth it is incredibly self-centered. It is - I'm going to look at my navel today and I'm going to say, "What do I want to say about my world?" It is very self-centered. And a fierce artist commits to that to a large degree, and plumbs those depths and out comes the art.

The problem with that and the community in which I work, and it's probably borne because of where I grew up. Not only – especially with my own mom and dad and the way they chose to – taught my sister and I to value empathy as a profound endeavor, like that was something to be sought towards. That was a beautiful vision of how to behave in the world. And then I find myself going to Goldman Union Camp where I witnessed really great staff members, and especially really great song leaders. And I want to shift it to song leaders now, which there's artistry in great song leading. Great song leaders have kind of this other approach that you're talking about. The mission – what does the group need? How do I identify and anticipate what the group's needs are? And how do I use a song or an educational moment to synthesize, crystalize that experience that they don't even know is going to be incredible for them? And then bring it to them. And I feel as a song leader, I feel that other place that I work in that creates a tension. And it is thinking of other first, the group's needs first.

HOLO: It's an external location for this kind of inspiration.

NICHOLS: Yeah. So the tension is how to make choices in real time with those existing. Like I go to a camp, maybe I've never been to that camp before. Now, I happen to be an artist. Should I make sure that camp by the time I've left on the third day are singing all my songs or a bunch of my songs. Or should I ask the director or whoever's the head song leader, whoever's the head of education, "What does the group need? How do I best use the music?" That tension exists with me constantly. It used to drive me crazy. Especially in the studio when I would work with the band because they would push back and go just be – just create. I'm like we need to figure out how this is going to work in a community. Like it's not about the community right now, Dan. It's about you.

HOLO: This is an echo of the responsibility to and the responsibility for.

NICHOLS: Yes, it is. And I had just learned to say it's possible that I'm not going to find the answer. And that what exists in between is just working on – working in both worlds and just accepting the tension.

HOLO: It's a productive tension so it's worth it.

NICHOLS: Absolutely.

HOLO: It's not something to bother avoiding. You should dive right in.

NICHOLS: Yes.

HOLO: In observing and locating your inspiration I can't help but notice how explicit God language is in your music. And I live in a world of thinking about thinking about Judaism. Under these, you know...

(Laughter)

HOLO: And when I listen to your music I don't think about thinking about thinking Judaism. I just experience this connection. But I also know, because I can't get out of my professor head, I also know that a lot of Jews without – that if a kind of spirituality is expressed with a certain flavor, it feels un-Jewish sometimes. And it certainly can feel too emotive or touching something too. So, now I experience that in my universe. Do you see that? Do you sense that? Do you feel that?

NICHOLS: I've felt it in terms of feedback on certain songs I've written and have gotten reviews on albums and songs. And things like from one review was something about, "I don't really like songs that have English and Hebrew in them. That just doesn't work for me." Oh, they didn't go on to why. They just kind of said. And now that being said, "I'm going to review Dan's album."

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: You know, I think it gets back, in terms of the choices I make if that's a question I can answer, if that's where you're going, like well how do I – why do I or how do I make choices to just dive in there.

HOLO: And how do you respond to that vibe? If you feel it.

NICHOLS: Well I – years ago when I started there was about a time in 2001 when nobody knew who I was and then 2001 it felt to me on the inside like a lot more people I ever imagined knew who I was. And then that space that was – that I moved through was kind of terrifying for me personally. I started to realize that there's a limit to my control over how another person sees me or my work. I have a certain degree of control over it, but I don't have complete control over it. I got to just – I have to speak my truth. And I have to trust that. That's working for me.

HOLO: Indeed.

NICHOLS: And the people that are closest to me, my family whose opinions I respect, my dearest closest friends and my teachers, we talk about this. They have reinforced that that's

something to believe in. And, you know, that little – that cute little, you know, Hallmark greeting card about dance like no one’s watching and sing like no one’s listening and love like you’re never going to get hurt.

HOLO: Right.

NICHOLS: Well, I guess I believe that completely. I do.

HOLO: Well, we are all the beneficiaries of it so keep on dancing.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: I’m going to tell my daughter you said that.

(Laughter)

HOLO: Just as long as your daughter doesn’t meet my daughter we’re fine. So speaking of speaking your truth, I would love to ask you to get up again and sing us a song I love that is all about your truth. The fact that I happen to resonate with it is my business, I suppose. But why don’t we share it with the world and tell us a bit about it. It’s called *Get to Work*.

NICHOLS: It’s called *Get to Work* and it was written Wednesday morning after the election last year. Alicia, my wife, Ava, my daughter, went off to school at 7:00 in the morning and I was in the house by myself. And I found myself for an hour pacing around the house just really – I was a mess. And I don’t think I said it out loud but I just – I heard something inside myself say, you know what you need to do is just sit down and sing out your feelings. And just sing. That’s what you need to do. Take care of yourself.

So that’s what I did. I sat down. I tuned up my guitar and I sat down at the kitchen table. And I just started banging away at the song. It wasn’t a song. It was only an emotion. And it really – there was a good period of 20 to 30 minutes where I was just moaning out sounds with my voice and banging on the guitar. It was like a child playing with a block. It was that rudimentary. And thoroughly satisfying too.

And then I got to a place, starting thinking about Brian Stevenson’s book called *Just Mercy*. And he has a feeling, a thought, more than a feeling, an idea about how we move forward as a country, which is that we have to get proximate. We have to get close to each other. We have to do things that make ourselves uncomfortable. We have to be willing to make ourselves uncomfortable. We have to create a new narrative in this country. And we have to be fiercely connected to this idea that we have to tether ourselves to hope. If we’re willing to do these four things, this is his way that we can get forward and grow as a country.

And as a whole people transcend the evils of what our history is with slavery, and with the eradication of an indigenous people, and to have those conversations is essential. New

narrative. Getting close. Doing things that make yourself uncomfortable. And through it all hold on to hope. And that became the backbone of the song.

And then the rest came out over the course of the day. Over the course of the summer I was reading a novel, or a book. I guess it's the history of – I think the book is called *Dylan Goes Electric*. And I'm sorry to say I don't remember the author of the book at the moment. But in reading the book, there's moments when Dylan's talking about some of his early songs and how some of the reviews of some of his songs were not favorable. And his response to those unfavorable reviews was something similar to like, "Some of my songs are no supposed to be enjoyed." And I think this song I'm about to play is one of those songs. This is not a song to be enjoyed. This is *Get to Work*.

(Playing song)

HOLO: So Dan, I'm sorry. I have to tell you your goal failed because I thoroughly enjoyed the song.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: Thank you.

HOLO: It brings me to my next question. We were speaking about the sources of inspiration, the motivation for art and for yours. That song brims over with sincerity and emotion and fullness of passion. But the genre in which you work sometimes doesn't always feel that way. I think – I want to ask you if it is unfair to say, to observe that Jewish music often runs the risk of actually feeling contrived. And that song leading style music – you articulated it's our artistry but we can come back to that. But that that style of music can often feel simplistic.

We who experience something like this, a rollicking, politicized song that gets you moving, literally and figuratively, clearly is the opposite of what I'm saying. But we also know there's other types of less compelling music out there. And I just want to touch base with you about the genre of Jewish music and give you a chance to defend it, or maybe to come clean, you know, as it were, not necessarily personally but in general. Is it an unfair critique?

NICHOLS: Well, is it an unfair statement to say that lots of Jewish music is – what did you – what was your word?

HOLO: Contrived.

NICHOLS: Contrived. I would say yes it is an unfair question. That may exist. I'm sure it does because it exists everywhere. It exists in all music. A multibillion dollar industry is built on contrivance in pop music. You listen to pop music today I would say 80 percent of those songs have these same not only formula in how the song builds and grows and ends, but also the chord progression that exists within. Like right now the one, six, four, five progression.

HOLO: I hate that progression.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: Yeah, I know. It's so contrived.

HOLO: That's right.

NICHOLS: So I – it's an interesting question. That exists everywhere in all forms of art. And while the safe answer may be to say, well there's no judging for taste. You know, that – that's not even what I'm saying here. What I would say as it relates to Jewish music is there's an incredible opportunity to fight against that because of the depth of our history. The depth of Torah. The lessons that exist within a word. Like for example, something as simple as I just learned a couple few weeks – it's been more than several weeks now that I spent a week at the HUC Jewish Institution for Religion in New York at the campus exchanging practices. It was an extraordinary week. And in that I learned something about one Hebrew word.

HOLO: Which one?

NICHOLS: Well, it is that - actually it's four Hebrew words but it's one concept. I reversed myself here. Let me get clear. There are only four – how do I say this. Let me back up. If I understood this correctly the word for face, *paniyim*, which is plural. That's fascinating and interesting.

HOLO: Yes it is.

NICHOLS: Because it's one face but it's *paniyim* which is plural. There are only four words in the Hebrew language that are plural for singular things. One of them is face, *paniyim* One is water, *mayim*. One is *shamayim*, the heavens or the sky. And the last one is *chayim*, life. There's a song in there. I mean I'm immediately – I want to work with the group and get out a big piece of butcher paper and a bunch of sharpies and start to like sketch. Like in this quadrant it's *chayim*. In this quadrant it's *shamayim*. And that quadrant is *mayim*. That quadrant is *paniyim*.

And let's start to talk about the intersection and the relationship. There's a very simple idea. It's ripe with the thread of contrivance everywhere. But what can we do? What can we create? I would say that that's a simple idea. My point is there are opportunities all the time. And it takes time to go there. And if there is music that is contrived in Jewish music, and in, you know, our world, it's probably there's a relationship between the amount of time that we spent on creating that idea and the outcome.

I am an advocate for spending lots of time with things. And that was borne out of actually my own failure as a kid, as a student. I did not do school well. I mastered in C-s throughout. And then the feedback I got, I found some old report cards from elementary school and the report cards were really reflective on how much time I wanted to spend doing something else

instead of what was in front of us with the teacher trying to lead us. And what I've learned is I enjoy taking time with something. I think probably what was happening was the teacher brought something up and it sparked an interest and I wanted to hang out there longer. Not that I was a bad student or dumb, or yeah, stupid.

HOLO: Or not – it's not even borne out of lack of interest. It may have been actual interest in something that in the course of the class may have been a detour for the class but for you was the focus.

NICHOLS: Yeah. And my work going forward with people of all – whether it's song leaders or song writers I'm an advocate for us, let's spend – let's spend a lot of time digging into your truth there.

HOLO: It sounds like the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion was the right place for you to articulate that. I'm pleased.

NICHOLS: Thank you.

(Break)

HOLO: So President Trump has just visited China. It's a long time coming, I think, in the American news cycle. I think we know this about our relationship with China that there are many, many trade issues and all kinds of tensions that we know about. And one of them is about copyright infringement. It turns out that because of the nature of CDs and digital content and what have you that China pirating in China is of major consequence. And it sparked in me a particular curiosity about frankly your business model. The reason I ask this is because I had to negotiate a contract with Debbie Friedman when she became an instructor at the Hebrew Union College. It awoke in me an appreciation of all of these dynamics. And I never thought about how any musician, but specifically a Jewish musician, and you succeed when your music is being used royalty free all the time. That's one measure of success for you. And that's not going to cut it if you've got to make a living. So it seems to me there must be all kinds of issues both theoretical and ethical about ownership of an idea, in this case music, and practical about how copyright, how royalties work for Jewish musicians. So if you could share some of that with me I would feel enlightened. It's such a curious thing.

NICHOLS: I'd like to start with the practical and then move to the theoretical. Practically speaking I realized a long time ago, right when I was coming out, really in 2000. I started my first group, this band E18teen in 1996. But when things started to happen for us was around the year 2000. Meaning that people were calling to have us come. We weren't calling them. I just – I created a business model which was we're not going to be dependent on sale of product to be able to make a living. Let's do it some other way. And that's been through touring. And the reason that I'm out 190 days a year as a result. I think if I could find a way that worked for me that made me comfortable that had integrity with what I'm wanting in this work, where I could make more from sale of CDs, from royalties of use so that I could

travel 120 days a year, I would do that. And I haven't figured out how to do that yet that it doesn't kind of steal something from my sense of how I want to do this work, which is really rooted in relationship.

HOLO: And the live performance, evidently.

NICHOLS: Yeah. Well, even the word performance is a crude way of expressing what I'm going for which is to build relationships with other people and through song. That's what Jewish camp did for me. It reached right into my heart and said this is how we exist in this world, and this is how we're Jewish. And I want that. I wanted that since I was nine years old at the back of the Ulam for (inaudible) service with Lee Friedman and Dawn Cincinnatus and Ian Silver and Jim Bennett singing and playing guitar. I was transported. And I was wrapped up in a sense of safety and belonging that I'd never felt before. And I had an emotional decision way back then, I want to do that. I want to be connected to that. And so the live aspect of touring, of being out 190 days a year gives me that opportunity more times than not to connect with other human beings in song.

HOLO: To create some of that space.

NICHOLS: Yeah.

HOLO: To do that.

NICHOLS: Yeah. Theoretically now about ownership and concepts. And this is my idea what happens when another person takes a song and does it completely differently. There are a lot of Jewish artists that feel very connected to the idea this is how I wrote it. This is how you should sing it. Will even stop in the middle of a performance if they hear a group singing it differently and say, "No, that's not what we're doing. We're doing it this way." That's not my taste. My opinion is simply borne down to this. If you decide you want to do one of my songs in this way, it ceases entirely to be mine. You have showed me that you want to make it yours. That's a gift to me. So to me, the graceful thing to do is to say, "Well, (Hebrew). Enjoy it. Make it yours." I'm not interested – I just don't have the energy, quite honestly, to get involved with managing how you're going to sing my song.

HOLO: Right. Right. Have you been present when someone's covered you and blown you away, just made you feel like they actually didn't just own the song the way you're so generously encouraging people to do but they actually made it something even better?

NICHOLS: Yes. That happens to me all the time when I visit summer camps around the country. You know, it does. And it's humbling and beautiful and holy. It gives me a sense of place, a sense of purpose.

HOLO: That must be terribly gratifying.

NICHOLS: It is. It's extraordinary. I mean when those moments happen when I come home and I sit with Alicia, my wife, late at night and talk about what just happened these are the kinds of things that I say. And you won't believe what happened. This is how I get to work in the world. And my mom and dad taught me to value that somebody else paying attention to you is something really important. I suppose to some that might sound a little sappy as I'm saying it. I don't know. I'm easily - you know, on one hand I'm very hopeful, and on the other hand, you know, I'm very cynical at the same time. I choose to believe that that is, you know, this idea of who is the one who's wealthier? The one who's happy with what they have. This is enough for me. This is absolutely (inaudible). This is good. I am rich and full. And that's enough.

HOLO: I'm going to ask you a double question now. You're a person who evidently is so generous spirited it comes through in your music. You're sharing with me now. The fact that you've joined us and given us the gift of your time and your music is really just a (Hebrew) as we say. It's a wonderful enlivening of our experience. So thank you for that.

NICHOLS: You're welcome.

HOLO: And that willingness also wants us to get to know you better. And part of getting to know someone is knowing their pain. Would you be willing to share with us a low point in your career? Something that reveals a trouble, a difficulty, that tells us about you.

NICHOLS: Oh sure. It was probably eight years ago now. I was visiting one of the Union camps and I had had a wonderful three day, four day visit. I mean it was good. It was great. We culminated the experience with a concert. They asked me to give a concert. It was a solo concert. I was not in with my band. But I spent the days leading up to the concert inviting folks, campers and staff alike to join me and we'll be the band together. We'll create the set together. And so that was the concert that night for the entire camp. It went great. It went so great that when it was done the camp screamed encore. Now that doesn't happen to me so often. And so that was thrilling. And I checked in with the camp director and it was affirmed yes we want you to do one more.

And so I made this decision based on a story I'd told that summer at previous other camps I had been. So I tried out this story. It was deeply personal to me, and real, and had purpose and meaning. I decided they asked for encore. And I made a decision in that moment I'm going to do that story. And it's a story in song. It's an experience. And it's based on an experience I had when I was nine years old at Goldman Union Camp. Brand new to Judaism. And this man comes into camp to do a program for the camp. It was a weird one. We were standing in a room holding onto a rope. And this man had a little...

(Laughter)

HOLO: So someone has been there before.

NICHOLS: And there's a woman with him in the middle of the circle. And she's very tall and slender and she's dancing interpretative dance with scarves. Bright colored scarves. She's dancing. We're all standing in a circle holding onto a rope. And he's singing a song walking, pacing around the circle singing to us. Getting very close and saying, "Repeat after me." And it was – it would have been terrifying had it not been for I'm looking at the counselors next to me and they're just following along with it. So I figure this is what it means to be Jewish in this moment. It was a bizarre, bizarre moment in my Jewish childhood.

HOLO: I'm glad you recovered.

NICHOLS: I forgot all about it. I like – I mean I suppressed the memory for years. And then I was getting ready for that summer's tours to camps and Alicia and Ava were off and away. I was at the house by myself and I was getting anxious about going away for the summer. And I was – then I was doing mind games, like why are you getting anxious? You loved summer camp. You should be happy. You should be singing songs. And then I started singing the song that this man sang for me 30 years earlier out of the clear, blue sky I started singing, "I will do what I can. I will do what I can. Everything is connected. Everything is connected. It will work out. Ohhhhh." That's the song.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: The man was Bonya Shore(*ph*), and his wife was Fanshan Shore(*ph*). And their kids went to Gucci and they were coming to do an experiential program of singing with our camp when I was nine years old. So I'm now 30 years later singing the song to myself and it's lifting then me out of my anxiety. It's bringing me joy. And I'm realizing as I'm singing that some songs take 30 years to get. Like this is a great story. I'm packing that one in my back pocket. If I get a chance to tell that story I'm telling it. So over the course of that summer I told that story with a harmonium. I had a harmonium I traveled with that summer. And I made it as weird as I possibly could. I tried to recreate the sense of confusion that I had as a nine year old. And the goal was to be weird and to share the story all along. So I, at this camp, now coming back to this moment. It's encore. And I'm like, I made the call. I'm going to do that story. They're saying they want one more. I'm going to give them one more because I love this story and it's a doozy. So I told the story. It's a 12 minute story. And as, clearly, this one is right now.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: Point of it is, I did it. It felt great. It felt like the front of the room was with me. I couldn't see the back of the room. I was satisfied. I felt like I was on target. Speaking my truth. The point of it is sometimes – this is one of the reasons we sing, sometimes we don't even know why we're singing a song. Sometimes it takes 30 years for the message to get in. And song can still bring us out of darkness and sadness. And here we are. And thank you. A year later, I got a call from someone who worked at the camp saying, "We want to have you back. But I don't know how to tell you this, but yeah, um, please don't ever do that story again at our camp." I went, "What?" "Yeah, it was too weird for us. Too weird. Made us really

uncomfortable.” “Why didn’t you tell me then?” “Didn’t really know how to tell you. But we’re telling you now. We’d like to have you back but we want to make sure you don’t tell that story because it was too weird.” I went okay. That really unnerved me. A year later, the director of the camp called me and said, “I’m a supporter of you. Love to have you back to camp. But I have to tell you, that thing was so weird that you did that night. It’s made me question everything that you do.”

HOLO: Oh my gosh.

NICHOLS: “I felt like you hijacked the entire camp for 12 minutes that night. And I felt you made it all about you and not about us. And the whole week was so great. The concert was great. And then you just totally made it horrible. And it makes me question what you value in this work. And I don’t know if I can have you back to camp.”

HOLO: Wow!

NICHOLS: I know what my target was. And I missed my target for enough people in the room for them to think that I was taking advantage of them. And I can’t change that impression. That’s their truth. And it’s heartbreaking because that’s their reality. Best I can think was that my sound system wasn’t strong enough and the back of the room heard for 12 minutes (muffled sounds). They never got the joke because they were in the back of the room, I guess. But that still sticks in me as profound professional failure that I don’t know how to redeem.

HOLO: Well, we can’t end on that note.

NICHOLS: We could. I did.

(Laughter and clapping)

HOLO: So I’m going to ask you – we’re not. And I’m going to ask you the flip side now. And tell me one of your soaring heights.

NICHOLS: When I was in high school, senior year, my dad said, “Hey, there’s this school that trains rabbis and cantors in New York. I’m going to New York for work. Why don’t you come with me? I called them. They’ve got to sing on Wednesday or Thursday where we can come and go to services and they have like bagels and cream cheese afterwards. And you can hang out and meet some of these rabbis and cantors. How about you come? You want to come with me?” “Of course!” So my dad and I went to New York. And we sat in on services and we had the bagels and cream cheese. And it was great. And I’m with my dad. I remember the tie I wore. It was just like it was a great moment for my dad and I.

And after that was over, one of the cantorial students said, “Can I give you a tour of the school?” “I’m like that’s fantastic. I’d love it.” So we’re walking around the building, and she’s showing me the library. It’s this beautiful, massive library. She’s walking me up and down through the whole building. And at some point she said, “Well, what are you – like how are

you into Hebrew – Jewish music? What’s going on? You’re a senior in high school. What do you want? Where do you come from?” So I said, “Well, I’m hoping to get into the University of North Carolina to study music. And I’m a camp kid. I grew up at Goldman Union Camp. And I love camping and I’m an aspiring song leader.” I must have delayed at some point and she interrupted. She said, “Listen. You should understand that this is a serious music school. We do serious music here. And the song leading thing, you’re not – we’re not doing that here. That’s not what we do here. Okay, you need to understand that.” I was 18, maybe 17 – no 17 years old. So I was like, “Okay. That’s what we do here. Okay.” I didn’t know anything. Five years later I’m finishing up at Carolina. At this point I’m singing opera professionally a little bit. I’m teaching voice to non-majors at Carolina. I’m fronting with my band, the rock band, the Olskies. I haven’t yet started writing Jewish music but I’m doing some song leading on the bimah at Temple Beth Or in Raleigh, North Carolina. Jim Bleiberg was the rabbi at the time. He’s the one that brought me up there to start song leading with synagogue, with our synagogue. I thought, you know, it’s been five years. Maybe I should go back up there and check it out.

So I called on my own. And went up there on my own. And went to the Thursday service. I think it’s Thursday. And then had the bagels and cream cheese, and just checking out the vibe. Another cantorial student said, “Hey, would you like to go on a tour?” “I’d love it.” So she takes me on a tour. We walk around the building. She asked me the question. This is another person five years later. “What brings you here?” So I tell her my story. I tell her about studying with Stafford Wing at Carolina. I talk about singing opera professionally. I’m exploring that. I’m teaching voice. And I go to camp and I song lead at camp. And she interrupts and says, “Listen, this you need to understand...”

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: “This is a conservatory. We do serious music here. We’re not playing guitar here. You’re not singing camp songs here. This is serious. Do you understand?” And at this point I had a little information and I said, “Yeah, I understand. I just think there’s a really cool relationship between the cantorial voice and the congregational voice. And I think there’s really wonderful dynamic to be explored there.” And she said, “That’s not what we’re going to do here. And you need to know that before you come here. That’s not what we’re going to do.” And I went, “Huh. Alright.”

Twenty years later cantor Richard Cohen calls me and says, “I want you to come to our school and share with us your practice. How you do your work.” And so this last fall I spent a week at HUC in New York attending class, trying to repeat back to a (*Hebrew*) that teaches there how to do a line. I got a chance to share my practice, lead services, talk about the nature of congregational voice and the relationship with guitar and song leading in terms of prayer and practice. And for me, that feels like it’s not success particularly but profound and meaningful shift in our Jewish world, in the Reform movement, in HUC. It feels – I guess it does feel like an accomplishment that I have been able to work for 20 years to develop something that HUC finds of value and wants to share in is – well let me just say, the first person I called was my mom and dad. Said, “You will not believe what just happened.”

I am at a place in my life right now, I'm 48 years old and I'm 20 years into a career and I'm just feeling like I have so much connect- so many connections to so many people in so many communities, congregations all over North America, and camps. And to be asked by the school that I visited twice and didn't quite understand that they wanted me to be there to share my philosophy and my experience is deep and humbling, and incredibly satisfying. And that feels like a story – I guess that feels like a story of success for me.

HOLO: Well that we should be, the Hebrew Union College, should be part of your story of success is pretty satisfying for me. And if you should apply, I know a guy.

(Laughter)

HOLO: So now, we're going to open it up for questions. I think I'd like the questions first and then we're going to close out with a song of yours. But let's get some questions from the audience. We're arranging for the microphone to come up. So I'm going to ask you to make sure you use the microphone because this is all being recorded for the podcast. You can come up. It's like a revival. You come up and you... So who would like to come up? Please come up and ask a question. There we go. And tell us your name please.

FEMALE: Hi, I'm Samara Leader. One thing that's always struck me in my interactions with you that I found so admirable is your commitment to authenticity, and your ability to really be present in whatever moment you're in, which comes through in your music but also comes through in one on one interactions. How do you stay so authentic, and strive to stay so present when I think in today's society those are two characteristics that are really challenging for a lot of people?

NICHOLS: Thank you for asking that question. The thing that first comes up for me is around 2000 when it felt for me emotional, like it was an overnight, all of a sudden people are interested in what I'm offering with Jewish music. And there was a swell of popularity that scared me and I was struggling with how to manage that. I was recommended a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner called *Living a Life that Matters*. And there's a chapter in there on greatness that caught my attention. And it was this concept – what do you do if you're not going to be able to find the cure for cancer. How do you balance your life with having meaning and purpose? And he uses – I think in the book he quotes Mother Theresa as having said it. I since heard that maybe she's not the one who first said it. But at that moment when I read this it turned things for me.

Not all of us are capable of doing great things. But all of us are capable of doing little things with great love. And I remember speaking out to the book out loud at home saying, "I can do that. I want to do that. I'm doing that." So this idea about paying attention to people, being attentive to people to me is that act – that behavior of little thing with big love. I have learned over the course of the years how much it matters to a person that I remember their name or really lock in on their eyes. So now it's foundational to all of what I do. Thank you.

MALE: Aaron Bochts. I want to make a statement. I just want to hear you respond to it. When I was growing up as a kid everyone knew Debbi Friedman. She was the Dean of camp music and Jewish music, and everyone sang her songs. I now have an almost 12-year-old daughter and when I ask her, obviously she has no idea who Debbi Friedman is, that's partially my fault. I say, "Debbi Friedman Jewish music." She says, "No, Dan Nichols Jewish music." So as the mantle of sort of the Dean of Jewish rock/camp music has passed from people that were important in my childhood to now people like you who are important in my children's childhood, how does that feel or sit with you?

NICHOLS: I don't care to think about that at all. For me personally, that is a – I haven't thought this through Aaron. I'll just take a risk at being totally vulnerable and sincere with you in the moment of what I'm reacting to. It's not – I don't want to spend any time thinking about that. I would much rather think about learning somebody's name, being present in this moment. Not thinking about what I mean to the movement. To me that feels dangerous. And a poor use of my resources emotionally. That's how I feel.

MALE: Thank you.

NICHOLS: Yeah.

MALE: Ben Maiser. Dan, you spoke a little bit about you wanted people to take your music and make it their own. I want to ask you a little bit about the use of shtick in music. I've seen you through the years react differently. You've welcomed it in some moments and kind of even – not verbally, sometimes with your face have said, "Now's not the time for that," kind of moments as well. And I think about a camp NFTY events, you know, when we try to do especially more softer flowing things and kids really wanted to shout that back and drive it. Where is the line between trying to set a tone and letting the crowd make it what they want it to be?

NICHOLS: Thank you for the question Ben. I think that's a choice for every leader of the community. Every song leader has to come to their own terms with what their thresholds or what their desires are in terms of those things. I would say – I would back up and say I have a philosophy of where shtick comes from. And this doesn't make it right. It's just my idea. I think shtick comes from the moments that we do the most. And it's borne out of human – the natural human desire to create. For example, if we remove the religious construct of prayer from a singing moment that lots of camps have, it's called the (*Hebrew*) the blessing after the meal. It's about eight minutes long, maybe it's five minutes long and it just feels like eight.

(Laughter)

NICHOLS: But it's a long sung blessing thanking God for the fullness that we are enjoying at this table. And even references the holiness and sacredness of Israel, and the troubles that our Jewish people have had over centuries. So there's this arc. Now we sing it at most camps three times a day at every meal. To me, the singing moment on the camp that has the most shtick is the (*Hebrew*). And I believe it's because we do it three times a day. I'm not saying we

shouldn't do it three times a day. What I'm saying is there is an inherent desire by human beings to create to fill in the space in between. You know, nature knows no vacuum. Is that the saying? We want to put something in there of our own. And so the things that we sing the most, those songs get to have – put the most in there. I have experienced it with my own songs. It all depends on the moment you're trying to create. I don't think the shtick is inherently bad. It depends on the moment, the mood that you're trying to create. Sometimes the shtick is great depending on the moment that you're trying to create. I used to drive shtick hard as a way – when I was a younger song leader as a way to get the group's attention and bring them in. And as I became more skilled at my craft, I came up with other methods to draw them in. It's a tool, just like anything, that can be used to bring joy and also to get in the way of a beautiful moment. That's my feeling about shtick.

MALE: Joel (inaudible). I think a lot about the song writing process with different artists. I think of Malcolm Gladwell and his podcast talked about Leonard Cohen writing Hallelujah and taking years and year and years and never feeling that he got the song right. So I'm curious for you with 11 studio albums and a sound that is Dan Nichols today versus Dan Nichols 1996 are not the same in any way, I think you would say. But specifically, lyrically, tonally, the chord structure you use if you could now take any song from your catalogue and take another crack at it, what song would you pick?

NICHOLS: Oh man. It is a great question. And the thing is there's such a huge collection of songs that come to my mind. Wow!

MALE: Top five would be okay.

NICHOLS: There's a song on an album called *My Heart is in the East* and the song (inaudible). I was in love with the concept of what I wanted to do with the song, and I let go of it before it really – it achieved what I thought it could. And the way I let go is with the way I fashioned the lyric. I gave up. So I talk about earlier about spending time with something. I gave up and just let certain phrases rhyme that really weren't speaking a truth. They just were neat and tidy and rhymed. And I love the concept of that song still. And I have regret looking back on it because I feel like I took a swing at that and I got close but I didn't really hit at the center of what I was trying to say because I got enamored with making the lines rhyme, neat and tidy. That's one that comes to my mind right off the bat. That's a cool question. Thank you.

FEMALE: Hi. Cheryl Cohen. I don't have a question but I have a comment. I just want to say thank you for being such an incredible role model for all the song leaders who attend camp, and as a teacher for all my students who come back and say my favorite thing at camp was when Dan was there. So thank you.

NICHOLS: Thank you, Cheryl.

FEMALE: Julie Bressler. So Dan, when I've seen you perform at camp or any other program something I always am impressed by is that a group of particularly teenagers who will be totally unengaged before you get up on stage will all of a sudden be singing their hearts out at

the top of their lungs. And so in an era where we are constantly trying to find new ways to engage that generation I'd love to hear some of the things you do that are so effective with that age group.

NICHOLS: Oh well, I appreciate that. To me it's the work that happens not at the microphone and the concert, and not with the B chord, and not arranging the set list but what happens – actually it's not with the guitar. And it's not with the song. It happens when I'm walking down the hill from the boys' area, boys row down to the (*Hebrew*) the dining hall and me seeing a boy that I don't know and saying, "Hey, what's your name?" And saying, "I'm Reuben." And then talking with Reuben on the way down there, and then finding him the next day and saying, "You're named Reuben, right?" "Yeah. How'd you remember that?" "Well, I wrote it down." "You did? That's weird." "I know. But I want to remember you. I know people like being remembered." And one by one over the course – I mean in the case of some camps I'm there for two weeks so I have time to work that, to really get to know people. And so I'm building a relationship. And so that when I stand up on that stage or that bimah and we start singing he's not just that guy. We've started to know each other. And that guy knows my name. And we played Ultimate Frisbee together. Or that counselor who is there, he helped me cover at the pool when I was on a night off and he helped me.

Now that's not my job description. I'm a song leader. What am I doing covering at the pool? Because that's community. That's being in relationship with other human beings. It's like being present, being available. And my mom and dad taught me to do that. And Ron Klatts, the Director of Goldman Union Camp taught me to do that. And then in working that out I saw very clearly how much that mattered to people. And how I enjoyed giving that. And how really, for me, it just feels so easy to do. So fundamental. So now I'm hungry for it. And now I pursue it. And I – that's my reason why those – when it does happen and the magic doesn't always work. Those teens don't always spontaneously sing with me. Sometimes, like this guy makes me uncomfortable. I get that a lot. When they do I think it's because I've done the work with the guitar down and built relationships one person at a time. Thank you.

HOLO: I think we're going to wrap up and ask you to take us out with a song. And since you've been speaking so eloquently about the way relationships are really at the heart of what you're doing, I think it's apt that the song we're going to say goodbye with is called *Love is Love*.

NICHOLS: Thank you. I was in Cincinnati, Ohio last spring at the Valley Temple in Wyoming, Ohio. And I was doing a little coffeehouse on Saturday night for adults. And afterwards a woman walked up to me. She must have heard me sing the Harry Chapin song that night called *Flowers are Red* and there's a line in there about so many colors in a rainbow, so many colors in the morning sun. And she came up to me after the coffeehouse and said – came right up to me. I did not know this woman. And she said, "I want you to know that I have rainbows in my eyes." So I repeated it back to her because it kind of freaked me out. "It sounded like you said you have rainbows in your eyes." She said, "Yeah." I said – I must have had a look that I didn't understand what she was talking about. And she said, "You see I had surgery on

my eyes. And after the surgery now when any bright light comes into my eyes I see rainbows. Wouldn't that be great if we all had rainbows in our eyes?"

I couldn't get that woman's comment out of my head. And I thought there could be a song there. And I was thinking about the Hebrew blessing for seeing a rainbow. And I was thinking I identify as hetero male. Could I as hetero male write a song in solidarity with those in the LGBTQ community? Could I do that? How would I do that? And this is that. This is me trying to bring those things together that – I just believe every word of this song. This is I am laying out there how I feel about the world and about love and about people.

(Singing song)

HOLO: Dan Nichols.

(Applause)

NICHOLS: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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