

## **Houston Jewish History Archive**

Interviewee: Joe Buchanan

Interviewers: Joshua Furman

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PREFACE: This is an oral history with Joe Buchanan, a Jewish country musician who writes and performs songs about Judaism. Buchanan was born in Clear Lake, Texas and grew up in Southeast Texas. In this interview Buchanan describes his conversion to Judaism as an adult, after struggling with searching for God in Christianity since his childhood. He describes the process of conversion and his relationship with Rabbi Federow of Congregation Shaar Hashalom in Houston. Buchanan further describes his musical influences, the process of creating his musical and educational Shabbat offerings, and how he feels representing Jewish Texans. Over the course of the interview, Buchanan performs four songs. This interview was captured via Zoom due to the COVID-19 health crisis, and Buchanan describes the effect that COVID-19 has had on his plans as a traveling performer and how he has adapted to serve the Jewish community virtually.

### Interview Transcript

FURMAN: Hi, my name is Joshua Furman. I'm the curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University, and I'm so excited to be interviewing Joe Buchanan today. Joe is a rising star in the world of Jewish music and he has a unique and really fascinating story to tell, and we're gonna get to hear it today and listen to some music. So it's gonna be great. Joe, how are you doing?

BUCHANAN: You know, I'm doing as well as I think anybody can be doing during all of this. It's an honor to talk to you and it's nice to see you.

FURMAN: Yeah, it's good to see you again. I should mention today is May 11th, 2020. Actually, my birthday is coming up in a couple days. My birthday is going to be this coming Shabbat. It's gonna be the strangest birthday I've celebrated in some time.

BUCHANAN: I'll have to sing you a birthday song.

FURMAN: Yeah. So, Joe just, let's start off.

BUCHANAN: I'm also glad you said what day it is.

FURMAN: Yeah, that's interviewing 101, always give the day, always give the time. Joe, tell us about your childhood and your family growing up, and just some of your earliest memories that stick out.

BUCHANAN: Yeah, you know I had a really split childhood. It was kind of like a couple of different lives happening at the same time. I was raised by my grandparents 'til I was about six years old. Born in Clear Lake, Texas. They had a family ranch down in Spofford, Texas way, way down near the border. So I would spend, you know, a decent chunk of the year here in the Houston area and then a huge chunk down there on that ranch. So growing up in those two places, that was a pretty cool way to come up. You sort of get this, like, Texas education, a massive Texas education growing up. But you know, my grandfather really was my hero coming up and he talked a lot about God and really instilled a basic idea about God in me as a kid. You know he said that you can see God in the world, you can see God in the way that people work, and I think if anything, if God wants anything from you, it's to do good stuff with your life. That was sort of like what I understood his beliefs, kind of in a nutshell. But I lived with him 'til I was six, then we moved in with my, my mom married my dad when I was six years old. And that house, that was very different. There was no talk of religion or anything like that. I spent most of my time with my friends or staying the night with my friends. It was interesting, like I said, it was like two or three different lives. But I mention that my grandfather's my hero, to this day I still buy Skin Bracer and Old Spice because it smells like him.

FURMAN: Wow.

BUCHANAN: That's true, that's weird as can be I'm sure, but it's true.

FURMAN: Yeah, you know anything we can do to hold on to the people that we love.

BUCHANAN: Absolutely.

FURMAN: That's really nice.

BUCHANAN: Absolutely.

FURMAN: Did you grow up, you know, so much of your life now is about the connection between music and faith, did you grow up not only hearing stories from your grandfather and lessons about God but also in a very musical family?

BUCHANAN: You know my mom was always a singer, and the jukebox we had out on the ranch had a bunch of classic country music on it, you know it was like Marty Robbins. You know I was born in the late 70s so for me classic country was like George Strait, other people may think like Hank Williams you know? But it had George Strait, Marty Robbins, and Hank Williams Jr. and all that stuff on it. So that was- and my grandmother listened to country music all the time so it was a constant influence. My mom was quite a singer so it was kind of the soundtrack to everything, it just kind of ran through everything.

FURMAN: Who taught you to play guitar? When did you start playing?

BUCHANAN: You know I picked that up, I was pretty young, self taught. I like to tell people I'm about in twenty years, I can't even tell you how long I've been doing it, let me do some math here, I'm about in twenty years where someone would be in about ten years of lessons. I was self

taught and it was just more for fun. I remember my dad bought me an electric guitar at a garage sale once. I came home, I didn't have an amplifier so I plugged it into the microphone jack of my stereo speakers and I thought it was the coolest thing in the world and of course I ruined my stereo when I did it. But I was hooked, you know. I always wanted to make music, I just never felt like I had a lot of things that I needed to tell people. Probably not until really all of this happened. I mean I struggled so hard with religion as a kid, not with God. I mean God made sense to me as a kid, God made total sense. But when I left my grandfather's house and started, you know, going to churches and stuff with friends and different family members and things, I just kept hearing a lot of things that I struggled with that I had a hard time with that ran counter to what I thought God was.

FURMAN: What kinds of issues specifically felt difficult?

BUCHANAN: Yeah, so, I can get into it, right? We can do that? That's the real deal. Um so I was always taught that God was a loving God and had made this world and made us and do good stuff with your life and all that, but that wasn't in an organized religion sense. I mean my grandparents that I remember never took me to church or had a Bible in the house that I remember, but when I started going to churches to try to find out more because I was interested in God and stuff I started hearing a lot of things that were tough, like concepts of original sin like you got this weight on you and you're gonna pay for this crime that somebody else did that there's no way you could know or were really involved with, but you carry the weight of it and then afterwards you're going to this horrible place of eternal torment, and it was always like well wait a minute, what if I live a great life? What if I do good stuff with my life? What if I help people and commit to just being a good person? And they were like, well that's great but that's not what matters, what matters is that you accept this person. And that made no sense to me because if that was the case then my life really doesn't have any value and I felt like life had a lot of value and it should matter. It also didn't strike the idea of a loving God with me. I don't mean to get all- what was the show *Les Mis[erables]* where he steals a loaf of bread? If my dad steals a loaf of bread I don't go to jail for it. Why do I carry the guilt of something someone else did? There maybe, if your dad steals something and goes to jail you're going to be connected with that because that's your father, so there will be some consequences as a result of their actions but you don't carry the guilt of what they've done, you don't carry the crime, and so it just, it didn't make any sense to me and I felt like the more questions I asked the more you start hearing things like, well, "Your faith isn't strong enough" or "You are a doubter" and I'm like no, I don't doubt at all, that's why I'm asking a million questions. I need to know. I kind of made the decision as a young person that there's this phrase that says "50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong." And you hear it from enough people and then you hear it in your own life growing up, you hear people saying things like, "What's wrong with you? Why are you like this?" and it starts becoming this self-fulfilling prophecy, you know. I started doing bad stuff and then the more you do that, the more you go there's the validation for it, I'm a terrible person and it was horrible. I went into just tremendous self-loathing growing up and it was tied up and all the things that happen to you as

you're growing up and also just you know this relationship with God, it was just a hot mess. And I'm not saying that's anybody's fault, that's just how I interpreted the world and growing up that's what we do. They say kids think the world revolves around them because it does. It's all they know. It's how things interact with them and how they interact with those things, they don't have a greater sense of the world yet. So that is their world. Anyway, it wasn't anybody's fault but it's definitely what happened, and religion was a key part of it, a real key part of it.

FURMAN: That's your journey. So take us on the next step or the next sort of turning point in the evolution of who Joe Buchanan is today.

BUCHANAN: Again, well again we were talking about different lives in different places, this has been a completely different life and I will definitely take you back to the beginning of sort of how this happened because I think that's the key of it. I was working in a gaming store where we sold board games and *Dungeons and Dragons*.

FURMAN: Where was it and when?

BUCHANAN: This was in Clear Lake, and a long time ago. Many moons ago.

FURMAN: When dinosaurs roamed the earth.

BUCHANAN: Right. Welcome to Jurassic Park. I was working in this gaming store, board games, *Dungeons and Dragons*, miniatures, all that stuff. We didn't get a lot of customers because that's what we sold, but I brought my guitar to work a lot because I had a lot of time on my hands.

FURMAN: Business was slow?

BUCHANAN: What's that?

FURMAN: Business was slow?

BUCHANAN: Yeah, quite. It wouldn't be slow today. Today it's crazy popular but it was slow back then.

FURMAN: True.

BUCHANAN: So this lady walks in with a mutual friend and you know, I, it was, I mean- she stopped the clock the second she walked in. I couldn't have told you what day of the week it was, I couldn't have told you what my name was, I just knew that I had to know exactly who she was as soon as possible. A mutual friend introduced us and she was like "Joe, this is April, April, this is Joe, Joe plays guitar" and I was like "Yes, yes I do."

FURMAN: Yes I do.

BUCHANAN: So corny right. And I was like "Can I play you a tune?" and she was like "Fine." Shortly after, we were married, so music totally works.

FURMAN: A love at first sight story and all that.

BUCHANAN: I would tell you that love at first sight exists, it did for me. My wife will probably tell you it took her a little while.

FURMAN: Well we're not interviewing her today.

BUCHANAN: That's true. So when we moved in together you know and I told her, I said "Look I want to get religion back in my life, I want to understand God, I want to understand what that

relationship is with God and what's out there," and she was like, "I'll go with you, I'm not really into all that but if you want to explore it, let's do it."

FURMAN: Can you tell us a little bit about April's background?

BUCHANAN: Yeah, I don't want to tell you too much because I don't want to give it away.

FURMAN: Don't give it away.

BUCHANAN: She was part of a military family and they moved around a lot when she was young, and she was studying theatre or doing theatre at community colleges and stuff when I met her and at local theatre companies. So we did a few shows together early on and stuff. That was what I knew sort of when I met her. It was interesting to me that April would sing all the time around the house, but she would go with me to these churches and she didn't want to sing anything. She wouldn't say the prayers, she wouldn't do anything like that. I asked her, "You don't wanna sing anything?" I mean she's a Disney princess, I mean she sings, the birds come out and do stuff and she didn't want to do anything and she's like "I'm just here for you." Well okay, that's fine. I went up for communion once and I asked her I said, "Do you want me to bring you anything back?" and she said, "No, that's not how it works." And then this lady had told me on my way up there, she goes, "We don't do take-out" and I said "No, that's true." So anyway, in a relationship you decide whether or not you're doing something together or if it's just you and they're just coming along. And after a while that doesn't hold water, you know, it's very easy for compromise to turn into resentment. And although that didn't happen I kind of put a stop to it because, you know we're not doing this together, I can study on my own you know we don't need to go spend our time together doing this.

FURMAN: Something didn't feel quite right to her, but you couldn't put your finger on what it was.

BUCHANAN: Yeah, and she wouldn't tell me. All she would say is this is not for me and whenever we would talk about things like God it was in a very general sense and she would just kind of let me talk and "Oh that's interesting" and wouldn't say a lot about what she believed, if she believed anything at that time. So fast forward 13 years, and this is kind of really where it all sort of happened. We are outside the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and she, we're trying to make sense of what we just saw, which you can't. It defies all logic; it makes no sense. And we're just shaken to the core and she looks at me and she goes, "I think I want to get in touch with my people's faith." I was like, "Well who, who are your people? Who is that?" Because nobody says that, and you should be concerned if someone says "my people," that's not a great phrase and I said well, "Who are your people?" and she goes, "I'm Jewish." Like I'm supposed to know, right? And I was like "What? What do you mean? How'd you get Jewish?" She was like, "I was born Jewish." and I said, "That's not a thing." I start man-splaining to my wife and I'm like, "That's not a thing, you can't be born Jewish." And she's like "Joe, that's how it works," and I'm like "How am I supposed to know that? Who knows that?" and she's like, "Everybody knows that." And she goes, "My mom's Jewish," and I said "Yeah, I know your mom's Jewish I didn't know that just made you Jewish," and she's like "Oh my God. Our son's

Jewish.” And I’m like “He is? Does he know that?” and she’s like “I don’t know if he does, we should probably tell him.” I’m like “Yeah, I think so.” I told her, I said “Look, the only thing I know is there’s something about pork, but we will figure it out.”

FURMAN: We’ll figure this out. So literally right there outside the Holocaust Museum, you’re discovering things about April, a woman you’ve been married to for 13 years?

BUCHANAN: Right.

FURMAN: And there was never any you know, hint or discussion of this before?

BUCHANAN: You know knowing now what I know, there were hints everywhere. She never said, like, “I’m Jewish,” right? But she said that her mom was, I knew her mom was.

FURMAN: Okay.

BUCHANAN: But I didn’t understand about the passing of the covenant and all that kind of stuff. She had a Star of David necklace in her jewelry box, and I thought she was just very supportive of her mother. She had- because, and I’ll get to that. Then one of the first dates we went on was her cousin’s Jewish wedding. Which was a fabulous wedding, the AC went out, it was like a free open bar for several hours, it was great. Best wedding I’ve ever been to. Yeah, it was awesome. But I didn’t understand that you could just be Jewish because my experience with religion was always like, you accept this and therefore you are this.

FURMAN: That’s not the model of organized religion that you grew up with.

BUCHANAN: I had no exposure to it and the truth is I never met anyone growing up that I knew was Jewish. I never saw a synagogue, ever. Houston has what, the largest Conservative synagogue in the country? I never saw anyone that wore any of the obvious things, a *kippah* or a Star of David out in the open. I never saw a Star of David except for about two weeks in history class, which was a terrible way to learn everything you know about a people. I knew nothing, and I thought I knew stuff. So we uh, we went to this synagogue in Houston after a little bit and we walked in, Rabbi Stuart Federow was the rabbi there, and he looked at us and I said “Hi, my name’s Joe, this is my wife April, and our son Nathan. They’re Jewish, I’m not, and none of us really know what that means” and he goes, “Well, do you want me to sum up Judaism for you?” And I was like “Yes, that would be great.” I didn’t realize what an ask that is, right? What a thing to ask of somebody. We’ve got a million books.

FURMAN: Right.

BUCHANAN: That’d be great. He goes, “Here’s the deal.” Right, it’s a lot to do, I didn’t realize at the time, someone recently told me, this is like the “on one foot” story, tell me the whole Torah while standing on one foot.

FURMAN: There is that “standing on one foot” story.

BUCHANAN: He said “I’ll summarize Judaism for you.” That’s right, he goes, “Look, there’s one God and there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re amazing the way you are and loved by God exactly as you are. You don’t have to be Jewish or anything else to be loved by God.” He goes, “You don’t have any weight on your soul, you’re not carrying guilt from anything anyone else did, and you’re not damaged goods, you’re not a broken person.” He said, “You’re great, just

like this.” He said, “You do good because it brings more good in the world, that’s the reward. Whatever happens next we don’t know but this is the gift and you’ve gotta live the gift and take care of it.” And I was like, I mean it completely rocked my world and made total sense and I told him, I said “Let’s do it, I wanna do this.” And he’s like “You wanna do what?” and I said “I wanna be Jewish,” and he’s like, “You know you don’t have to?” and I’m like, “I know but I want to do this.” It was like talking to my grandfather again, it made so much sense and it was like 30 years of therapy at the same time.

FURMAN: Wow.

BUCHANAN: I didn’t realize, my wife loved me so much and hard enough that I started to see that I had value and started to be okay with the idea that I had value as a person, and then Judaism came along and just the world suddenly made sense and I felt like I had a place in that, not just where I was.

FURMAN: Do you ever wonder, I mean it’s so interesting to think about you know, these moments in our lives and the people that we just happen to meet and that have an impact on us. I mean if you hadn’t gone to the Holocaust Museum or if you hadn’t had that interaction with that rabbi, things could have flipped in any number of directions. You know? It’s really interesting to think about. So tell me about learning to be Jewish, tell me about the conversion process, what was that like for you?

BUCHANAN: It was great. It was truly great. Stuart’s an amazing- Rabbi Stuart’s an amazing teacher. You know, we had classes every week and you had to go to services and take in and bring a lot of questions. It was a lot of debate and open discussion and it was amazing. It was the best way, I think, to learn about not just what Judaism is at its core and learn about the Jewish people and how all this works and what you’re going to be agreeing to do, you know, by accepting this but, also how it’s different. I mean a big part of what Rabbi Federow does is, he is a, I’m trying to think of the, he’s a comparative religion scholar. Because if you’re gonna understand what Judaism is, it’s important also to understand what it isn’t, and he knew what mindset I came from and what my experience was, and so kind of the whole first part of it was, here are the actual differences, you know? And it was an amazing class. It really opened up my eyes. I still like to pop in from time to time to that class and April will go with me and we’ll just sit in there with the folks who are learning and you know and the rabbi is great with it, and it’s been great. It kicked off everything with our- with the way our new family dynamic is, it brought us much closer as a family. It brought me more into my own life I didn’t realize I was outside of. So I can talk about what if something didn’t happen I don’t know where I would be or where we would be if we hadn’t of found this. I think we would be okay but it wouldn’t be this and this is amazing. This is amazing. And yeah, it kicked off songwriting too. I picked up my guitar that I had set down for years because I didn’t feel like it was anything- that I had any value as a songwriter.

FURMAN: What were you doing professionally at that time? What were you doing to make money at that- Your previous-?

BUCHANAN: So at the time I was- yeah by that time I was working in Human Resources, working with folks out in the field, you know the oil field, the energy sector you know all up and down the Texas Gulf Coast. I was on the road in plants, refineries, pulp, paper, steel, all that stuff the vast majority of the time. So, that was my job then.

FURMAN: That was then.

BUCHANAN: Very different now.

FURMAN: Yeah, a little bit, right? Well in normal times still on the road a lot, but-

BUCHANAN: I mean, still on the road. I mean now as a touring artist I mean I'm on the road about three weekends a month except for obviously right now. But a lot of those things I did in Human Resources were around, you know, helping people come back together. Kind of repairing damage that was done, you know, when you start losing employees you've gotta figure out well, what did we do? Because we might have done something, you know, and I would go investigate that stuff and it's actually served me quite well in this role.

FURMAN: Makes sense. So you're learning Hebrew.

BUCHANAN: Right, Rabbi Federow in those classes-

FURMAN: -Getting a crash course in Jewish holidays and Jewish history and-

BUCHANAN: Yeah. All the stuff.

FURMAN: All the stuff. By the way, just as an aside, do you have a favorite Jewish holiday?

BUCHANAN: Is it corny if I say Shabbat?

FURMAN: No, it's not corny at all.

BUCHANAN: I would definitely say- It really is my favorite. I mean, okay there's two, I'll tell you the two and this is one of my answers I gave too. The fact that Shabbat rolls around every week and we have the opportunity to keep working to get it right, you know? To keep working to find a way to rest better, to lay down our loads more effectively and to kind of reconnect with ourselves, and we're not always going to get it right and we're not always going to be there and Shabbat is gonna keep moving whether we're ready or not. But it comes back. It comes back, and I love that. That we keep having those opportunities. And then I would definitely say, big holidays, *Rosh Hashanah*, hands down. The fact that you can stop what you're doing, and start doing things differently and you can really do that at any time but we have this time of the year that we do it as a community and as a people; I think it's just absolutely beautiful. Really beautiful. I'm a fan.

FURMAN: That's really interesting because so much of your autobiography is about, your life is going in one direction and then it goes in another direction. You sort of hit the reset button. And you just named two holidays that are also kind of about hitting, you know pausing, and you hit the reset button and that's just a really interesting reflection, you know, that's great. So now tell me how and why-

BUCHANAN: I hadn't thought about that.

FURMAN: Tell me how this-

BUCHANAN: Why Jewish music?

FURMAN: -How this turned to songwriting for you. Because there are many people who find Judaism and, you know, embrace it, but it seemed to inspire this creative spark in you that I guess had been dormant for a long time.

BUCHANAN: Yeah, it was really wild. It was right after I had finished the conversion classes, I felt like I had a million things I wanted people to know. Judaism healed such a big hole that I didn't realize that I had about my own place in the world and all of this and there's so many great lessons and also so many misconceptions about what Jewish is and what it isn't and what Judaism's about and I thought, man, this did so much incredible healing for me and it might do some really just great good for other people and just those core ideas you know, about the fact that you're living an incredible gift right now and yeah, we're all gonna struggle but we're made of the stuff of stars. We come from divinity. We can stand back up and that's what we do and that you're okay just like this. That you're not damaged goods, there's not a thing wrong with you, you're okay and you can start right now. Whatever that's gonna be you can start right now. There was just so much that was coming in hard and fast. I wanted to find new ways to connect to prayer and so I started writing prayer melodies. I wanted to find new ways to share some of these stories and ideas about values and I started writing those things and it just really took off fast. I put a service together, this Americana Shabbat service, and have for the last almost six years now been touring all over the country doing that service. And we put an album out called "Unbroken" which was really about the conversion process and what it's like to join a people, what's it like when you find your home after years of searching. And it's almost like it found you. You know, it's kind of all around that. There's just a lot to say, a lot to tell people and a lot of good I thought it would do.

FURMAN: Alright, would you like to play a song for us here?

BUCHANAN: Yeah, man, I would absolutely love to. I'mma play you a tune, actually it's the title track off the first album, it's a song called "Unbroken." I met a guy named Saul Kaye, I was a huge fan of his music and he came to Houston, we talked and we spent some time together and he said, "Hey, I understand you write some songs, play me some stuff." And I did, and he goes, "I wanna do an album." I said, "Great, let's do an album," and he says, "I'm gonna produce an album for you. We need to get this story out." He said, "How many tracks you got?" and I said "Like a lot, like 20 something" he said, "Look, we're not doing a Time/Life double album, you need to pick," he's like, "Narrow it down. But where's the song about your conversion?" and I said "Well, I don't wanna say all that specific stuff, it's all about the journey home." and he goes "No, no, no, man. I'm a Blues artist," he goes, "I like to swim in the deep end and if you're not gonna go swimming in the deep end we're not gonna do it." and I was like, "Alright, that's fair." He said "As long as you're honest. You gotta be honest. Honesty is different from cruelty. Don't be cruel but be honest." I said, "Yeah, absolutely." So that's really where this song came from. I'mma pop this ear piece out right here so I can hear myself while I do this.

FURMAN: Sure, good deal.

BUCHANAN: Alright.

[BUCHANAN plays “Unbroken” on guitar and sings.]

This is for you/ this is for me/ there’s a truth/ within reach/  
 and it’s beautiful oh, and bright/ it’s holy and right  
 And there’s a home/ you can reach/ and it’s built from love/ for you and me  
 There’s plenty of room for us/ under that tree  
 And I was looking for God all my life/ being told God was good/ but I wasn’t right/  
 Being told I was born with a weight/ from someone else’s mistake  
 And you are told that unless you say yes/ you will pay for some ancient and old failed test/  
 And no matter how good your life/ it’ll never add up/ in God’s eyes  
 And your seeking leads to questions/ and your questions lead to truth/  
 And those lies dissolve/ and it’s just God and you/ and you realize you are whole and you know  
 there’s no sin on your soul/ from ages ago  
 You’re unchained/ you’re unbroken oh you’re unbound/  
 So lift your head up high you can smile/ and show God your face even if it’s been a while/  
 Oh and raise your glass and stand tall/ cause you are made of love after all/  
 You can choose to be chosen/ you can stand up right off your knees/  
 And the reward for doing good/ well it’s the good in the world that you see  
 So I walked away from all I feared/ chose a brand new path that was waiting for years/ and there  
 was plenty of room under that tree/ for the whole wide world/ even you and me  
 We’re unchained/ we’re unbroken oh we’re unbound  
 We’re unchained/ we’re unbroken oh we’re unbound  
 And where you go/ I will go/ where you stay/ well I will stay  
 There’s no veil on our eyes/ there’s just truth/ yeah there’s One God/ for me and you  
 Cause we are loved/ by unending love/ *ahavat olam*

FURMAN: Thanks, Joe. That was great. That was really great. So, tell me, when did this click for you?

BUCHANAN: Let me grab my ear piece here.

FURMAN: Yeah. I’ll give you a second. When did you know that you could do this as a-

BUCHANAN: Say that one more time.

FURMAN: When did you know you could do this as a career, I mean, when was that “aha” moment when you realized that you had a gift like this you could share with other people?

BUCHANAN: So, I kept getting invited to places and you know one of the things that’s really important to me is I want to be a benefit. Like anybody who brings me out to anything I want to be of service, I want to be a benefit and I got hired by a community down in McAllen, Texas. They said well, “We want you to come out and do that *shabbat* service that you do,” and they were gonna have me for a whole weekend. I’d written a bunch of music and I remember talking

to my wife and going “I need to figure out what this is.” You know? It’s more than just the music, there’s the lessons in the music, there’s *Torah* study that can be done, there’s *Shabbat* services that can be done, there’s so much that can be there and we sat down trying to figure out well, what do you have to offer? You know? Because that was the biggest thing, I didn’t want to come out to a place and just play some music; I wanted to be a real service to any community that brought me out and I had to figure out what is it I have as an artist, as a person, as a you know, as someone exploring all of this, what do I have to offer communities? That was really what we built it out of.

FURMAN: Is there a playbook for that? Are there people that you turn to in the world of Jewish music and you say, “Hi my name’s Joe and I’m, you know, this is what I do, and the kind of music I write, how do I go about, you know, making a career out of this?”

BUCHANAN: Yeah. I mean there are a lot of people who, of course now that I know right? A lot of the things I started doing I did before I had any context for what it was, I mean, I started writing Jewish music before I knew any Jewish music. The only music I knew was stuff that I heard on Friday nights and Saturdays, that was it. I remember somebody asked me at one point, they were like, “Oh, do you know any Debbie Friedman?” I made the horrible mistake of saying, “Who?” They were like, color drained from their face, you know.

FURMAN: Yeah, right.

BUCHANAN: I had no idea, I had people saying you can’t- I had folks telling me like Jewish country music isn’t a thing, and I’m like, “Well, but that’s what I write, and I’m Jewish.” So I had no sense of what was there. I ended up going to a conference called “Song Leader Bootcamp.” I remember my rabbi sent me up there and he was like “Learn as much as you can” and I saw people making *havdalah* in these huge song groups and I saw the way a lot of things about leadership can be done with music. So I took some of those lessons and then took what I thought I could offer and provide and kind of bundled it all up together and said, “This is what I wanna do.” And it’s grown. It’s really grown in surprising ways. I stay on the road about three weekends every month. I do the services, concerts, *Torah* study, I do workshops around converting to Judaism and some of the struggles that people find in that. What it’s like to separate from one thing to another and through that I have also connected with huge groups of converts all over the country, people who are going through this. It’s been incredible. It’s been really incredible and I feel like through this I feel like I’m still trying to earn it, you know? Trying to earn getting to be here and I think this music and this service is one of the ways that I can do that.

FURMAN: Do you- I- you might be the greatest ambassador for Texas Jewry today [Buchanan laughs] and you hear a lot, you hear a lot, “There’s Jews in Texas?” You know, still, there’s in the minds of I think of some people who are used to Jewish identity that’s very New York-centric, this idea that you don’t have Jews in Texas, or if you do you know they fit a certain stereotype. Have you found in your travels and in your work, people are kind of shocked or surprised that there is vibrant Jewish life in Texas?

BUCHANAN: Constantly. Constantly.

FURMAN: Yeah.

BUCHANAN: And it's absolutely surprising but at the same time what a delight to be able to say, "You bet there is."

FURMAN: And here it is.

BUCHANAN: You know and here's like- you know it's funny. You mention what you did about, you know, representing Texas and Judaism and stuff and I'm sitting here realizing that my room looks like a bar. (Laughs) But yeah it's, I get that a lot, I get that an awful lot.

FURMAN: Right and Jewish country-

BUCHANAN: It's an honor to be able to represent Jewish Texans on the road.

FURMAN: -It's not like you stepped into a genre that has a lot of voices that we're used to hearing, right. I'm interested, I know I asked you about influences early on but can you talk about as you've matured as a performer of Jewish music, and obviously in terms of country music, who do you listen to now for inspiration? Who do you enjoy playing with?

BUCHANAN: Yeah, I mean, it's changed right? I still have all of my secular music influences that I listen to on a regular basis. I still listen to country music all the time, I've got a- in fact I've got this record player back here that I'll put on, I'll start Mondays off with some Willie Nelson and we just carry through the day. So I still listen to a lot of country music but I also listen to a lot of Jewish music as well now. And I'm in the very fortunate place musically as a touring artist that I've gotten to play with people who are big inspirations for me. You know, folks like Saul Kaye and I have toured together, Elana Jagoda has recorded her voice on both of my albums. Rick Recht and I are close and have done some touring together. You know, people like Abby Strauss and Naomi Less and you know it's- and I just got accepted, interestingly enough, to Hadar's Rising Song Institute as one of their fellows-

FURMAN: *Mazel tov.*

BUCHANAN: For the next two years, so that will be a whole new Jewish-, yeah that will be a whole thing and I'm excited. But I listen to those folks and I've had the chance to play with them too, which is huge. It's been real huge.

FURMAN: That's really great. You want to play another song for us?

BUCHANAN: Thank you. Yeah, I would sure love to, in fact, So I'm gonna play another song, this is off the first album. Stuart, or Rabbi Federow, we've gotten so close I find myself sometimes just calling him Stuart. Rabbi Federow had asked me early on, well why don't you write a song about the High Holy Days. So I started writing what was originally a kids song, I didn't realize it was a song I needed to hear so much. So I'm going to play that one first and then I gotta follow up tune for you.

FURMAN: Sounds great.

[BUCHANAN plays guitar and sings "Return"]

Well I will take a long look at me/ and think about what it is that I see  
 Have I been good woah to you/ Did I do all that I said I'd do?  
 Remembering the words that I've used/ Thinking about the times that I was rude  
 Well if I am thankful for this gift/ Let me say it with deeds not just lips  
 It's gonna be a brave new year/ I'm starting right now right here  
 I will be strong and stand up tall/ Reach out for others when they fall  
 And I will rejoice in my faith/ and remember that love is why we're made  
 And be the very best that I can be/ for the world and oh for me  
 Cause everyday we live our lives/ but some days we let ourselves slide  
 Well then we forget our way/ but thankfully it's not too late  
*Avinu malkeinu / honeinu v'aneinu*

I may have done wrong at times I know/ but through my actions I will show  
 It's gonna be a brave new year/ and it's starting right now right here  
 Well I will be strong and stand up tall/ Reach out for others oh when they fall  
 And I will rejoice in my faith/ and remember that love is why we're made  
 And be the very best that I can be/ for the world and oh for me  
 Yeah, *teshuvah/ teshuvah/ return/ woah return*  
*Teshuvah/ woah teshuvah/ woah return/ woah return*  
 It's gonna be a brave new year/ And it's starting right now right here  
 Well I will be strong and stand up tall/ Reach out for others when they fall  
 Well I will rejoice in my faith/ and remember that love is why we're made  
 Oh and be the very best that I can be/ for the world and oh for me  
 Yeah, *teshuvah/ teshuvah/ return/ woah, return*  
*Teshuvah/ woah teshuvah/ woah return/ woah return*

BUCHANAN: And if it's okay with you I could play one more tune. This is-

FURMAN: I'd love that.

BUCHANAN: This is actually off the new album. This is a song called "Better Together" and it just feels wildly appropriate in the time that we're in where we're told we can't be together, but we have found amazing ways to do so.

FURMAN: Yeah.

BUCHANAN: I got invited by the same community down in McAllen, Texas one of the last few times they brought me out they said, "Why don't you come out and do a song about social justice?" I was like alright, sure. I start looking up all these social justice songs and there's a million great songs. I was like, "Wow, I've got a big library to pick from." So I did the thing I tend to do when there's a lot of options that I could take, I tend to just do my own thing, so I wrote my own song and that's what this was. This is called "Better Together."

[BUCHANAN plays guitar and sings "Better Together."]

Well we're better together/ and we choose where we stand/ and we'll hold each other/ we're hand in hand  
 We hold the line/ that we drew in the sand/ and we'll make it home safe/ where it all began  
 We're better together/ and we choose where we'll stand/ and we'll hold each other/ we're hand in hand/ we're hand in hand/ hey  
 We've been living so long in the shade of a life/ we wanna live/  
 We're thinking about how much we take/ and how much we give  
 This heart we're feeding is starving for something real/ it's about the good you do/ not just the good you feel  
 Well we're better together/ we choose where we stand/ and we'll hold each other/ we're hand in hand  
 We hold the line/ that we drew in the sand/ and we'll make it home safe/ where it all began  
 We're better together/ and we choose where we'll stand/ and we'll hold each other/ we're hand in hand/ we're hand in hand/ hey  
 Every day is a choice/ every life is a voice/ and it rises each day with the sun  
 We picked the verse and the chorus and the words/ we sing it with everyone  
 We won't stop reaching no matter how high we climb/ so many more are not free  
 It's about the good you do/ not just the good you see  
 Well the mountain it smiles on you and me/ yeah the mountain it smiles on you and me  
 I said the mountain it smiles on you and me/ cause the world was made for you and me  
 Yeah we're better together/ and we choose where we stand  
 And we hold each other/ we're hand in hand  
 We hold the line that we drew in the sand/ and we'll make it home safe/ where it all began  
 We're better together/ and we choose where we'll stand  
 And we'll hold each other/ hand in hand/ hand in hand  
 Better together/ and we choose where we stand/ and we'll hold each other/ hand in hand  
 We hold the line that we drew in the sand/ and we'll make it home safe

**[JF start here at 50:00]**

FURMAN: Thanks Joe. That was great. That was great. This is such a treat.

BUCHANAN: My pleasure, thanks so much.

FURMAN: So normal times, you're on the road three weeks out of four, or three weekends out of four. It's May 2020 and we've all been home since March. What was the last gig that you did before things shut down?

BUCHANAN: Oh, wow, what was the last gig?

FURMAN: It was two months ago but it feels like a lifetime ago.

BUCHANAN: It was two months ago. I was with good people. I was up near the Chattanooga area and Dothan, Alabama. Up in there. I say up in there, everything's up in there from Texas.

FURMAN: Everything's up in there. Down from here is, you're in the Gulf. It's good to be up. I mean, did you have any idea that that would be your last in-person gig for a while?

BUCHANAN: Oh, not in the slightest. I mention that we have this new album, *Back from Babylon*, and we had a tour planned out for the vast majority of the year, I'm like talking like three weekends every month in a different community, all around the U.S. We were gonna promote the album, the tour was like all wrapped around it. We were gonna shoot videos and release them based on songs on the album. I mean, we had a whole thing and you know like anyone who does any kind of work like this at all, that's all been completely stopped. So it's, yeah. Well I had no clue that was gonna be the last thing. It was a surprise like it was to everybody.

FURMAN: Yeah. So how have you been adapting, what do you do to not only stay busy but continue to promote the album, share music?

BUCHANAN: That's a great question. You know like anyone we had to retool everything. So it sort of delayed a lot that we wanted to do but now we're kind of getting the ball rolling. But from a live performance standpoint you know we were doing these *Shabbat* services all over the place and since we couldn't do that I was like "Well, we've built up quite a community around our Facebook page" and I thought, "Well, let me just get great at going live on there" and so we started putting these weekly services together and we're finding all these folks who, they don't have a service they go to or maybe they used to go to services and they don't anymore and whatnot and so we've built this community around that, and that wouldn't have happened if not for this. Of course I'm still doing gigs for communities and doing a lot of Zoom concerts and things like that but it's not only the changed the nature of how we do this for the time being, I think it's forced a lot of artists to find new ways to connect with folks that they can help and that they can do this for. You know, new ways to connect with people through their music. If they weren't on Facebook before they sure are now, if they didn't have a Zoom account or anything like that before they've sure got one now. They've had to change the way that they've-

FURMAN: I didn't know what Zoom was in February.

BUCHANAN: (Laughs) Right.

FURMAN: Didn't know what it was. "*Zum Gali-Gali*" was about as close as I got. That was a music joke, that was for you, Joe.

BUCHANAN: Yeah, and I appreciate that. I was doing the dancing for you.

FURMAN: I saw.

BUCHANAN: You know, as terrible as this is, and it's been a horrible thing, and you know as musicians we've found new ways to cope. But there are people who are genuinely out of work and it's not a great time, it's a horrible time, and as weird as it is to say this I think if there has been any plus for people who do things creatively, it's forced us to come out of our comfort zones more and find new ways to communicate and new ways to reach out and do this and new ways to be of service. For us, one of the things that we've done is we've created a lot of video content for communities. Because, you know, instead of people coming to synagogue, the

synagogues are going, “Well, how do we get information out to our folks?” and so they need content, so that’s another thing we’ve found an opportunity to be of service we’ve been creating a lot of content for communities to use and share. *Torah* lessons and music and all this, so. It’s been a different time. It’s been a different time, but it’s been good to connect with people differently, too.

FURMAN: Yeah, I’m sure you miss, speaking as somebody who enjoys giving lectures, I’m sure you miss that in-person reaction that you get from a live audience, from fans. But like you said it’s gotta feel rewarding to know that there are people out there who are alone, you know not only living alone but who don’t have a Jewish community that they can tap into and to have found you on Facebook and to be able to watch your services each week. You know, hopefully that brings you a sense of fulfillment.

BUCHANAN: It really does, in a huge way. It kind of gets back to what we were talking about before of, what do we have to offer, right? What are we doing for folks? That’s kind of at the forefront of all of this, what does this serve? Being able to do that and being able to help guide folks and be a support for them and help provide opportunities for all of them and all of that is just, it’s been incredibly rewarding. It’s been incredible. To the point where we’ve made a commitment to everyone who comes to all those things that look, we’re gonna get back on the road, we’re gonna go back to touring and back to doing all of that, but *this* won’t stop, and we’re gonna constantly find ways to do *this* better for those folks so this is an offering that we’ve got for people who can’t make it to services or can’t do stuff we’re gonna have something there for them every single week. I think it’s too important to not do, once this changes. That’s the other thing is I think people have found services can be offered that need to be filled that maybe they didn’t know about before, you know. But because of all of this we’re finding those. The important thing is we don’t lose all the good that we’ve found ways to do during this time we have to hang on to. So that when we go back to any sense of what things were like before that we keep *that* strong, because it existed then too and we have to continue to take care of each other.

FURMAN: So we can find you on Facebook, you have a Facebook page and you have a website as well, right?

BUCHANAN: I do, yes sir, thank you that’s very kind. We have a Facebook page it’s just Joe Buchanan Music, @JoeBuchananMusic, just look up Joe Buchanan you’ll see I’ve got a hat, and it’s the same thing as our Instagram but our website is [joebuchananmusic.com](http://joebuchananmusic.com) and links to all that stuff are right on there, you can go check it out.

FURMAN: That’s great, thank you so much for doing this, Joe. I really appreciate it. Can we get one more song?

BUCHANAN: Oh, yeah. You want to hear something kind of funny, is that alright?

FURMAN: Yeah.

BUCHANAN: Alright, a little upbeat. I’m gonna play you a song about Texas, is that okay, since we talked about it?

FURMAN: This couldn’t be more perfect.

BUCHANAN: Okay, good. So in addition to Jewish communities and all that I also play, you know, bars and regular venues and I've got a little six-piece band and I do the same music in bars as I do in communities on the road so the message is the same. But I've never been to Israel, it's something people ask me all the time. I've never been to Israel, I'm sure someday I'll go. I'm just eight years old this year so I'm still young. But I have been to Texas, and I do believe that the holiest place you can be in, not just that we have a holy land, but your life and where you're standing is holy ground because that's where your choices have led you, that's where your life's happening at, it's a holy thing. So, I met God in Texas so this song is sort of about that. I'm gonna take this earpiece out again. Alright, here we go.

[BUCHANAN plays guitar and sings "Texas."]

Yeah well I've never been to *Israel*/ but I've floated the Frio River  
 They don't make hummus at Neil's/ they make a mean chicken dinner  
 The mesquite trees and them singin' leaves/ always remind me of God  
 Floating back in tubes feels so darn good that it might get outlawed  
 Yeah now Texas/ Texas is like a holy land to me  
 It's a place where the heavens feel close/ where God taught me to see  
 Yeah and if I don't make my way/ don't make my way across that sea someday  
 Well I'll be glad I lived in Texas/ where I first found the reason to pray  
 Pick it up  
 Well when I was a kid I was trouble born/ trouble bit/ No one thought I'd make it to fifteen  
 I was such a mess/ at struggling, I did my best/and the gettin' good was gettin' pretty lean  
 I believe God's where you are/ we met under that Lonestar  
 Between you and God there ain't no one between  
 So if you're feeling down my friend/ just come on down to the state where the name means  
 anything but mean  
 Hey now Texas/ is like a holy land to me/ aw yeah  
 It's a place where the heavens feel close/ yeah where God taught me to see  
 Yeah and if I don't make my way/ don't make my way across that sea some day  
 I'm glad I lived in Texas/ where I first found a reason to pray  
 I'll be glad I lived in Texas where I first found a reason to pray  
 I'll be glad I lived in Texas where I first found a reason  
 Yeah nanana to pray/ Ay!

FURMAN: Wow. Amazing. Joe Buchanan, thank you so much for taking the time to do this. What a treat, what a pleasure, this has been great. I want you to stay well, stay safe and I'll see you on Facebook.

BUCHANAN: Thanks so much, looking forward to seeing you and thanks so much for doing this, you're amazing, you're an absolute delight to spend time with, brother.

FURMAN: My pleasure Joe, be well.

BUCHANAN: Thank you, you too.