



Photo courtesy of Sir Ivan Wilzig

SIR IVAN WILZIG

words to live by

BY ALI DAVID

As he walks down the streets of the world with his long cape flapping and flowing behind him, he provokes many a reaction. With peace-symbol appliqué emblazoned on his train, people cannot help but wonder who he is and why he is attired so. Some smile and bid him well, others hurl insults and caustic remarks. But it is those offensive remarks, and other more threatening ones, that reinforce the hard work Ivan Wilzig, *aka* Sir Ivan, has ahead of him in his fight against intolerance and ignorant hatred. He is called Peaceman. He is a singer/songwriter bearing a message of brotherly love, so why shoot the messenger?

If Sir Ivan is dedicated to spreading love, it is because he will not permit himself to forget the dangers of hate. His father's oft repeated words have accompanied Sir Ivan throughout his life: "Free men who forget their bitter past do not deserve a bright future." But it was not merely repetition and rote that endowed those paternal words with meaning for Sir Ivan, but the brutal murder of 59 members of the Wilzig family at the hands of the Nazis. His father, Siggie B. Wilzig, was the sole survivor of the 1500 students who attended his Jewish middle school in Germany.

Sir Ivan, the eldest of three siblings, was born in 1956 in Clifton, New Jersey, a world away from the brutality that marked his father's life. His own life was one of luxury and wealth. Although his father had come to America penniless and began his days in the "land of opportunity" shoveling snow and working in a Brooklyn sweatshop, he eventually became chairman of the board of a multibillion dollar banking business, creating "the bank with heart"—The Trust Company of New Jersey. Wilzig thus also learned from his father that surviving was not only about escaping death, but also about seizing life and living dreams.

Wilzig has always had a dream of his own. Although he went to an Orthodox Hebrew school as a young man, has a degree in European intellectual history from the University of Pennsylvania and a law degree from The Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, all he ever really wanted to do was sing. Since he was 5 years old, he has studied voice with some of New York's best coaches. His talent and training were not lost on the guests at his bar mitzvah, or on the world-famous cantor who was hired to entertain at his *simcha*. At age 13, at his own party, Wilzig was

discovered by the cantorial celebrity and he himself was hired to sing at Kutshers Country Club on Passover in front of 1,000 guests. "Why was that night different from all other nights?" Because for Wilzig, it was the beginning of a dream come true, almost.

Wilzig's father felt that singing should just be a hobby. "He'd say, 'How you going to support a wife and kids singing?'" Wilzig tells. "My father had no wish to have an unemployed singing, dancing son."

Seeing that his father's common "cents" would translate into dollars, Wilzig pursued his academic studies, practiced law for a year and then stepped into the family banking business, where he remained for 25 years. He was the consummate briefcase-bearing banker, wearing the right ties and suits—smart, handsome, creative, dedicated and very hardworking.

But it was never all work and no play for Wilzig. After all, he's a hot-looking billionaire bachelor who can get a gal faster than Muhammed Ali could dodge a jab. As a perfect setting for his partying side, he and his brother built a multimillion-dollar castle in the Hamptons, where he hosts very memorable and oft-talked about soirees. He has also been the subject of reality TV shows such as *Single in the Hamptons* and VH1's *Hopelessly Rich*. It was only after building that castle that his father began to call him Sir Ivan as a joke, but the name stuck. "I didn't mind that it wasn't the Queen who knighted me," Wilzig laughs.

As he balanced playing hard and working hard, he never truly abandoned his singing ambitions. "Even when my father thought I had given it up altogether, I was still going on casting calls or in the studio making demos," he confesses. In 1998, at one of his famous parties, one of the guests happened to be an executive from the

Dance Music Division at Columbia Records. There the two had an opportunity to speak in depth about their mutual passion for music. The execu-



Photo courtesy of Sir Ivan Wilzig

*I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one."*

Not long after he recorded the remake, Tom Silverman, owner of Tommy Boy Records and founder of the Winter Music Conference, heard it and signed it on the spot. Almost 10,000 DJs bought the vinyl in its first four months and "Imagine" went on to become a top-40 hit on the Billboard Club play chart. Wilzig's father at first could not understand the big deal about being in *Billboard* magazine until someone explained to him that it was the *Wall Street Journal* of the music world. With that new light shed on his son's accomplishment, his father wished him a hearty *mazal tov* and said he'd double whatever advance royalties his son was earning.

Wilzig had always maintained

**"Free men who forget their bitter past
do not deserve a bright future."**

tive was so impressed with Wilzig that he promised to help him establish a serious singing career.

But it was not until 2000, when Wilzig heard John Lennon's "Imagine" on the radio, as if for the first time ever, that something clicked in his mind and he instantly knew that was the track he was going to record. At the age of 44, this son of a Holocaust survivor understood that Lennon's words were ones to live by, and words that he had indeed lived by all his life.

*"Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
and no religion too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace.*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one*

that if George Forman could become a heavyweight champion at age 45, it was certainly not too late for him to have a music career. Inspired by the success of "Imagine" and a new project he was working on—a cover of Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind"—Wilzig soon found that he most wanted to work with the Woodstock "hippie" music of the '60s that had messages of optimism and peace. Surrounding himself with the best producers and remixers, he reinvented classic songs by coupling them with cutting-edge techno beats and sounds. Delighted with the result, Wilzig coined his new sound, Technippy.

His next single, in keeping with Technippy, was a remake of the 1967 Scott McKenzie hit "San Francisco." When Grammy-winning producer and songwriter Jellybean Benitez heard the remake, he loved it and released it on his namesake label, Jellybean Recordings.

The single reached #7 on the Billboard Singles sales chart. Wilzig's first original song, "Peace on Earth" was released in 2004, the first single of a multialbum deal with Artemis Records. He has dedicated it to the 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered by the Nazis and to all the victims of hate crimes.

Wilzig's music is played in clubs around the world and is extremely popular with club goers and DJs. As for his family, they have been extremely supportive and even helped organize every detail of his launch party to ensure that his very important night was a great success. And it was.

But for Sir Ivan, it is not just about making music but also about making a difference. He truly believes that music can make a difference in people's lives and affect the way they treat each other. He was inspired to remake "Imagine" because he was becoming increasingly disturbed by the hate crimes he had been seeing in the news, such as the Oklahoma bombing, the killing of James Byrd—a black man who was lynched by three young whites and whose body was then dragged behind a car—and the increasing emergence of suicide bombers victimizing innocent Israelis. His single, which chanted for peace, was released Sept 4, 2001, one week prior to the most massive hate crime ever perpetrated on American soil. Today, he is in the process of creating a reality TV show that will raise funds to fight terrorism.



If Wilzig has learned to fear hate from his father, he says that he learned the importance of loving all mankind from his mother. And though he was brought up in an observant Jewish home and kept kosher until he was in his 20s, today he says that he does not believe in God per se, but rather in good. "My God has two 'o's in it," he says.

In his continual effort to do good, he created the Peaceman Foundation, a

private charity which donates money, including his own recording-artist royalties, to an array of organizations and charities, including the Steven Spielberg Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. In each CD jacket, his father's words are quoted, "Free men who forget their bitter past do not deserve a bright future." To further advance his message of peace and mutual respect, Wilzig decided to adopt the Peaceman character, an irreverent superhero persona expounding the philosophy of peace and social responsibility.

Peaceman's persona is also a symbol for every Jew, black, homosexual and anyone who doesn't fall into society's cookie-cutter norm. Peaceman dares to be different, to be bold, to have fun, to be himself and to walk the streets of the world and demand the respect each human being deserves without being met with invectives. He hopes for the day when parents will buy their kids Peaceman

dolls instead of action figures wielding guns and machetes. "If we want to change tomorrow, we have to change kids today," he philosophizes.

On a lighter note, Wilzig points out that just as it's been proven that the sight of clowns lowers people's blood pressure and makes them smile and laugh, he feels his Peaceman costumes can do the same. "The Peaceman costume is good fun," he says. "It's a way of saying 'Lighten up, have some fun,' and reminding everyone just to be nice to each other." And if the Jewish belief is indeed true that a person's Hebrew name foretells their mission in life, then Wilzig is on the right track. His namesake, Yitchak Leb, means "laughing heart."

Wilzig, however, also had good reason to cry when his beloved father succumbed to cancer one year ago. He

truly idolized his father and says that he thinks about him every single day, and calls him a *mensch* in the truest sense of the word.

"The third tower has fallen," Wilzig said, eulogizing his father. "Yet just like the original towers will never be forgotten, so, too, Siggie B. Wilzig will never be forgotten."

(Siggie Wilzig, a great philanthropist, was indeed a tower in the Jewish community and to humanity at large. During his life, he received many honors and accolades for his accomplishments.)

Wilzig took his father's funeral as an opportunity to raise money for the Shoah Foundation, "so generations never forget what so few lived to tell." With a commitment to match all donations made in his father's memory, Wilzig concluded by saying, "Your donations will prove that you truly are my father's friends and my doing good deeds will prove that I truly am my

"My doing good deeds will prove that I truly am my father's son."

father's son."

In regards to having sons of his own, Wilzig says that he is simply not the marrying type. His will be a castle with no queen. "Having a wife and kids was more my father's dream than mine," Wilzig says. "But I never wanted to hurt my dad because he suffered enough in his life, so if I dated gentile girls, I'd do it behind his back." Nonetheless, Wilzig is a terrific uncle to his sister's two boys and a great role model for all of humanity's children.

Wilzig is not a simple man and he can be defined by many terms. He's a singer, he's rich, he's single, he's eccentric, he's handsome, he's Peaceman, and he's Sir Ivan. But when Ivan Wilzig truly reflects on himself, he says that he is, most of all, an Auschwitz survivor's son. mesbyes