Contemporary Klezmer: Music, Identity, and Meaning

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ABSTRACT

JOSHUA PARSHALL: Contemporary Klezmer: Music, Identity, and Meaning. (Under the direction of Jonathan Boyarin, Robert Cantwell, Bill Ferris, and Glenn Hinson)

Klezmer, the traditional instrumental music of Eastern European Jews, developed as the accompaniment to weddings and other communal celebrations. After an initial blossoming in the early-twentieth century United States, the style lost prominence due to a variety of historical, political, and social factors. Since the 1970s, however, Jewish and non-Jewish musicians have revived and transformed older styles of playing, both in North America and across the world. This thesis examines American discourses surrounding Jewish identity and traditional music, to demonstrate how earlier conceptions of authenticity, hipness, dissent, and difference continue to shape musicians' and fans' interpretations of klezmer. Drawing from ethnographic research, historical accounts, and theoretical work in folklore, cultural studies, and performance studies, the thesis emphasizes klezmer's role as an active site for the collective and individual negotiation and performance of Jewish identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Where is Josh?" The question, broadcast across the small park on a portable public address system, surprised me, but Susan Watts is full of surprises. I was being called forward for some reason, roused from my seat at the back of the small crowd that had gathered for the outdoor concert. Susan took a moment to spot me. "There was a guy here who is getting his degree in ethnomusicology . . . sorry, folklore. . . . Oh, where is he? There he is! Can you come here?" When I got to where the band, The Fabulous Spielkehs (pronounced *shpiel-kehs*), had set up, Susan introduced me to the crowd. She then introduced me as someone who studies klezmer and explained part of a conversation that we had before the show. I had brought up the topic of continuity in klezmer music, raising questions such as: how is contemporary klezmer connected to the musical sources from which it draws? What claims do the musicians make about these connections? What is at stake in those claims? As the product of a Philadelphia Jewish music dynasty, Susan Watts is a great person to approach about this subject.

Susan formed her band to play in front of her mother, drummer Elaine Hoffman Watts. Elaine's father, Jacob Hoffman, was a well-known Philadelphia musician who played classical and popular music, but was also a virtuosic klezmer xylophonist. The band continues to play tunes from Jacob Hoffman's songbook, which includes imported classics, local favorites, and his own compositions. The song Susan was now introducing, however, is even newer. "Rachel's Hora" was written by Jason Rosenblatt for his wife,

Rachel Lemisch. The two often play with the Fabulous Spielkehs, and tonight they performed the tune as a duet, with Lemisch on trombone and Rosenblatt (taking a break from the keyboard) on harmonica. In her introduction, Watts went beyond the argument that continuity is a product of family connections; it depends, she explained, on applying a mastery of established traditions to new material.

Rosenblatt's ability to play the diatonic harmonica (blues harp) chromatically allows him to adapt the instrument to novel settings like klezmer. Furthermore, the harmonica and trombone pairing is not a conventional one in any genre. Despite these innovations, the tune maintains the most important elements of a hora: a slow tempo and a three-beat measure with accents on the first and third downbeats. It follows established klezmer modes, and uses traditional cadences to tag the end of each melodic strain. The song has a beautiful melody, and Jason Rosenblatt's harmonica playing gives it added distinctiveness. Most importantly, as Susan Watts notes, "It works." It succeeds on its own and as an example of its genre.

A little surprised to be called up but glad that the earlier conversation had interested Watts, I returned quickly to my seat and enjoyed the piece. The moment was a memorable one for me. Whether or not the song lays to rest the issue of continuity, Susan Watt's introductory comments reflect how contemporary klezmer musicians think critically about what that their musical engagement means at the level of culture. Also, being introduced to a crowd of strangers as someone who "studies klezmer" made me ask myself again, "What is it that I do?"

Method and Aims

Since the mid-1970s, the musical style now called klezmer has become an important site for the production, consumption, performance, and negotiation of Jewish identities in the United States and Canada. In order to approach this topic, I will rely on historical analysis, ethnographic inquiry, cultural theory, and performance criticism to show that contemporary klezmer music—grounded in group practice and surrounded by (sometimes packaged in) discourses of Jewishness, authenticity, and immediacy—reflects the diverse and often divergent priorities and identities of American and Canadian Jews.

My goal in writing about klezmer is not to define the music in technical terms, catalogue its current practitioners, or identify a single interpretation of the music and its reemergence as a piece of Jewish culture. Instead, I will attempt to map the circulation of ideas about Jewishness into and out of the musical sphere known as klezmer—to point at once to a number of klezmer's potential meanings and the cultural phenomena that make those associations possible. The initial guiding questions for this inquiry are: how do broader discourses of Jewish identity make particular modes of klezmer performance possible, and how do these performances further expand those discourses? How does this process interact with historically situated understandings of culture and difference in the surrounding culture? What analysis of group-specific music's role in contemporary American and Canadian life emerges from these observations?

This introduction will preview the issues and sources at the core of each area of my investigation—historical, ethnographic, and theoretical. A more systematic outline, as well as details about observed events and likely collaborators will follow.

History

However a particular klezmer recording or performance comes to have symbolic value in a specific moment, its significance hinges at least partially on earlier discourses and narratives about Jewishness that emerged in the context of 20th century American culture. The music may evoke themes of survival, spirituality, subversion, loss, celebration, or even hipness; each association is strengthened through explicit or implicit connections to historical events, or through historically situated understandings of how these themes relate to Jewish identity.

Depending on who is telling the story, the master narrative of klezmer in America often revolves around the music's (near) death in the 1950s and '60s, and its rebirth in the mid-1970s. There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this description, but the so-called revival was at once less dramatic and more innovative than a mere resurrection. In popular representations like Seth Rogovoy's *The Essential Klezmer*, writers argue that assimilation and American popular music "all but spelled the death of klezmer." In reality, however, a number of living klezmorim (klezmer musicians) continued to play the older repertoire in Brooklyn and other traditionalist enclaves, or adapted to newer musical trends. Thirty years after the initial revival of klezmer music, musicians with deep roots in earlier eras of the music are still an active part of the newer scene. Along with the survival (albeit marginal) of klezmer music in post-war America, the face-to-face transmission that occurred between older klezmorim and revivalists in the 1970s and afterwards provides a further counterpoint to the idea of a fundamental break between old

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¹ Rogovoy, 2000: 74.

² Sokolow, 1999. Examples from the week-long 2008 KlezKanada Summer Institute include Elaine Hoffman-Watts, Danny Rubenstein, and Pete Sokolow.

and new. A leading ethnomusicologist and performer of instrumental Jewish music as it existed in Eastern Europe, Walter Zev Feldman, once characterized the "so-called 'klezmer revival'" as essentially discontinuous with earlier forms of the music in Europe and America; he has since reassessed this opinion, however, in light of both the continued interaction between new generations of klezmer musicians and older players, and the successful recuperation of European styles through archival research and ethnomusicological field work.³

While the near-death experience of certain styles of Jewish music may be exaggerated, their reconstitution in a new genre—klezmer—deserves further exploration. The term *klezmer* was at one time used to refer to musical instruments, and then to musicians themselves; it came to refer to a category of music only in the 1970s, likely with the Andy Statman and Zev Feldman album, *Jewish Klezmer Music*. Though this particular effort attempts to faithfully reconstruct the sounds of the Old World klezmer repertoire, the newly reified genre soon absorbed Yiddish theater and folk songs, as well as other Jewish and non-Jewish musical styles. As a result, "klezmer" has become an umbrella term that describes a wide variety of performers and projects that draw from or lay claim to the instrumental musical traditions of Eastern European Jews.

In the context of twentieth century American and Jewish discourses about ethnic and racial difference, music, and cultural pluralism, this process exemplifies how both identity politics and commercial considerations facilitate an understanding of culture that frees group-specific traditions from their earlier uses and meanings, and simultaneously encourages the amalgamation—in representation, if not in practice—of those traditions as

³Feldman, 1994: 1-3; Feldman, 2008.

well as the sub-groups from which they originate. Like the creation of Asian-American as a category of people or Mediterranean as a category of food, the development of American Jewishness, culminating in the years following World War II, blurred earlier distinctions between formerly discrete groupings. This internal phenomenon, combined with broader American trends that valorized (and politicized) traditional musical styles while promoting a pluralistic ideal that often flattens significant cultural divergences into consumable markers of variation, allowed the emergent genre of klezmer to take on new meanings at a historical moment when some Jewish musicians were turning away from other musical genres for a variety of political and aesthetic reasons. Describing klezmer in relation to such trends illustrates how it has become symbolically meaningful, and begins to describe what its meanings—contingent, contrasting and contested—are.

Ethnography

Tracing the factors that allowed klezmer to develop over the last thirty years leads to the question of where klezmer is now. Though the multitude of musical projects that relate to klezmer's revitalization defies coherent cataloging or description, ethnographic research by myself and others in the form of participant observation and interviews demonstrates the diversity of personal backgrounds and musical interests that lead individuals, as artists and audiences, to klezmer and klezmer-related performance.

Additionally, the same research reflects a number of tensions—aesthetic, religious, political, and personal—at play among individuals and groups that engage with klezmer, as well as within single events and organizations.

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⁴ Feldman, 2008.

These points arise primarily from in-depth descriptions of my own experiences at the winter and summer sessions of KlezKanada 2008, with reference to other sources, interviews, and events from the past two years. Among the topics that arise from these observations are the ways that participants at KlezKanada and other events form subgroups based on age, gender, religious observance, musical traditionalism, and other factors. Participants at KlezKanada's Summer Institute include children and teenagers (and their families), roughly college-aged scholarship students, paying adults (of all ages, abilities and interests), junior and senior instructors, the actual camp staff, funders from the Montreal Jewish community, and other miscellaneous attendees. I pay particular attention to the influence of private funders and the Jewish summer camp site in the actualization of KlezKanada, as their political and religious priorities differ widely from the preferences of many participants.

This description also discusses the importance of annual camps and festivals to musical transmission, professional contacts, and the creation of communities, cliques, and musical groups within the larger klezmer "world." A final point that emerges from these observations, as well as from liner notes, articles and other sources, is the consistently sophisticated and reflexive language with which many klezmer musicians speak of their own work and the larger movement. While popular representations by insiders and outsiders alike often rely on romantic imagery, simplified tropes, or essentializing claims, conversations with and between musicians show a remarkable level of nuance and self-awareness.

Performance and Cultural Theory

Both klezmer's emergence as a "revived" genre and its continued relevance to Jewishness in the United States and Canada lead to a rich set of theoretical issues, primarily surrounding the question of how musical events become meaningful sites for imagining and performing group identity. This thesis addresses conversations about shifting visions and meanings of Jewishness and difference in American culture—discourses that affect how individuals position themselves (or find themselves positioned) in relation to dominant culture and/or particular sub-cultures (ascribed, chosen, or newly created). It also addresses the ways in which music becomes meaningful/has meaning by considering the role of personal and group memory in attaching symbolic value to particular types of sounds; the effect of a musical genre's status as a semi-fungible "roots music" on internal and external discourses about authenticity and immediacy; and current scholarship that seeks to describe music as an act of communication that depends on some sort of contextually bound system of signs or associations, but that may include a more direct, potentially universal, and perhaps physiological effect on the listener.⁵

One theoretical model that helps explain the array of potential meanings in klezmer performance is Jeffrey Shandler's description of the "postvernacular mode." He uses the term primarily to describe linguistic phenomena that convey more meaning through the associational value of the language or code being employed than through the referential meaning of the words themselves—the moment when it becomes more significant that someone chooses to say "pass the salt" *in Yiddish* than it is that he or she actually *wants* the salt. Though music does not generally communicate the same sort of

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⁵ Cantwell, 2008: 7-15.

relatively stable ostensive meanings as single words, traditional musical styles do develop meaning through use. In the absence of cohesive audiences with a deep knowledge of the musical forms that make up the contemporary repertoire and—more crucially—local communities bound by a ritual-encompassing way of life, tunes and song-genres become at least partially disconnected from the dance-genres and wedding ritual that once defined their functions.

While klezmer is still part of a cultural vernacular—it holds a meaningful place in the daily lives of performers and listeners—it is no longer vernacular in the language-like sense that it retains a central place in a relatively cohesive and stable system of musical and ritual expression that is more or less pervasive among a participants in a particular way of life. Such a claim is difficult to make without resorting to naïvely romantic descriptions of the "whole culture" of the Ashkenazi past, or overstating the novelty of "voluntary association" in contemporary Jewish life; despite the qualifying statements, however, a change has occurred. Whereas the symbolic value of Jewish instrumental music was once secondary (and correlated) to its use in community events, this relationship has now largely been reversed. Removed from the specific uses and general social worlds from which the music emerged, klezmer has taken on a variety of associational meanings, ranging from nostalgia for traditional life to new visions of Jewish radicalism, that would not have emerged in other contexts.

The key performance that anchors this theoretical consideration occurred in the fall of 2007 in New York City's Lower East Side. Dubbed, "A Great Day on Eldridge Street," and organized by Yale Strom and the Eldridge Street Project (now the Eldridge Street Museum), the weekend-long program began on Friday morning with a group

photograph of more than 100 current klezmer musicians and Yiddish singers on the steps of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. The picture is an attempt to create a klezmer equivalent to "A Great Day in Harlem," the iconic photograph of 57 leading jazz musicians organized and taken by Art Kane in 1958. While the whole weekend provided exemplary cases of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a prominent scholar of culture, performance, and folklore (Jewish and general), calls "heritage making," and the photograph itself was an interesting instance of klezmer's representation as the "Jewish version" of jazz, a single moment of the subsequent procession through the streets of the Lower East Side to nearby Seward Park provided the most striking image of the morning.

After the picture, a group of at least thirty-five musicians slowly gathered for a short parade. At two points on the quarter-mile route, the stretched-out line of musicians contracted into a tight knot, naturally seeking closer proximity and eye contact in order to keep the music together. The crowd spilled into the street, slowed traffic, and surrounded parked cars. During the second stop, as we waited for a light to change, a cameraman from the documentary crew climbed on top of one of the parked cars to get an aerial view of the chaotic jam. At that moment, a police car pulled up behind the musical mass.

Over the music, the police's public address system warned the cameraman to get down from the "private property," and ominously repeated, "Return to the sidewalk. You do not have a street permit." If the musicians in the middle of the crowd could hear the police, they certainly took no notice. I had wandered across the street to get a different view of the proceedings, and while the musical performance was never particularly effective, the sight of a police car ineffectually edging up to a densely packed herd of klezmer musicians left me beaming.

Regardless of other associations, the potential confrontation between klezmer musicians and New York City Police would have amused me. In light of how contemporary klezmer has been deployed as subversive and resistant in the postvernacular context, however, the moment struck me as deeply meaningful. The fully realized, though ultimately anti-climactic, moment of tension between klezmer performers and police brought to mind the not-quite-possible but often tantalizing prospect of an organized, articulate, and sustained klezmer (or deeply klezmer-engaged) movement that could reshape contemporary (Jewish) culture. This is not to say that the musicians *meant* anything in particular by their actions, or that klezmer is fundamentally about protest or politics; instead, it suggests only that certain klezmer performances point to the "potentiality" of new forms of engagement with Jewishness—at once personal, religious, and political—through musical expression. "Potentiality," a term that José Esteban Muñoz borrows from Ernst Bloch's reading of Aristotle, refers to imagined situations that exist just beyond the boundaries of possibility. According to Muñoz, minoritarian communities create temporary spaces in which imaginable but not-yetpossible conditions exist briefly through "utopian performance." 6

Klezmer, because of its relationship to recovery and return, often operates in the postvernacular mode as a remarkably Jewish form of utopian performance. In some instances, like KlezKanada, participants use klezmer and related traditions to simulate a world in which klezmer is still a primary musical language for contemporary Jews—a world of Jewish cohesion in which (almost) everyone cares about klezmer and Yiddish. When artists explore or invoke alternative political stances through klezmer, especially

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⁶ Muñoz, 2006: 9-10. *Minoritarian*, Muñoz's term, denotes a politically conscious group that actively asserts its minority status—simply the opposite of majoritarian.

with projects that are loosely categorized as "Queer Yiddishkeit," they creatively reimagine Jewish identity and practice as a source for social and political critique.⁷ In either case, klezmer becomes a tool for recovering Jewish difference in the face of historical events and social pressures that seem to have erased Jewish otherness.

Plan of Action

Following this introduction, the thesis offers my personal history of involvement with klezmer music, acknowledging the contributions of collaborators and informants, and closing with a glossary of academic and Yiddish terminology. The next two chapters outline the historical conditions and cultural contours that set the stage for the revitalization of klezmer in the 1970s.

The first chapter touches on pertinent features of klezmer musicians and their music prior to emigration from Europe, as well as during the early years in America. It also includes a sketch of Jewish culture in general as it existed in its new environs during the first half of the twentieth century, demonstrating how different pieces of Jewish culture were sustained or neglected in particular sub-groups, including leftist groups, Zionist organizations, *landsmanshaftn*, and Hasidic communities. This paves the way for a discussion of klezmer music's underground years during the amalgamating "Americanization" of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and the rise of Zionism.

A second historical section helps frame the eventual reemergence of klezmer as an American "roots music" genre by pointing to important moments in the development

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⁷ Shandler, 2005:187.

⁸ *Landsmanshaftn* were and are community groups organized by Jewish-American immigrants with roots in the same city or region, usually but not always from Eastern Europe.

of the discourses that surround popular representations of klezmer to this day. In addition to an inherited Western sense of music's powerful connection to emotion, magic, and sex, America's left-wing folksong and folk-dance movement introduced a pluralistic political consciousness to group-specific musical styles during the 1930s and '40s. Later, the folk revival renewed the valorization of traditional musics in relation to authenticity and hipness. During the 1960s and '70s, the rise of youth counter-culture, Black Pride, and ethnic revivalism opened up a set of discourses that privilege heritage claims and multiculturalism at once as positions of dissent and difference, and as semi-fungible and commoditized sources for artistic products. With these pieces in place, I briefly describe the beginnings of klezmer's revival, its reification as a genre, and some major developments in the field, especially the creation of klezmer-oriented festivals and camps.

Shifting partially from a historical to an ethnographic mode, the thesis turns to the contemporary klezmer scene in order to consider how current practitioners and listeners engage with Jewish identities through music. Among the themes that I consider are musicians' understandings of authenticity and continuity, the use of non-Jewish sounds and styles in new klezmer projects, and the tension between klezmer as a symbol of radical versus normative Jewish culture. My own observations, recent recordings, and other print and Internet sources inform each of these sections.

To draw the strands of this thesis together, I center the thesis's final section on the fundamentally imaginative work required in making music meaningful. Whether musicians adapt the lyrics of a popular Yiddish song to "queer" King David by alluding to his relationship to Jonathan, or use klezmer as a jumping-off point for recovering (perhaps) traditionally introspective modes of Jewish prayer, they use performance to

suggest alternative visions of contemporary Jewish culture. Without ruling out the possibility of an immediate or mimetic effect of particular sounds, I invoke Shandler's postvernacular mode and Muñoz's utopian performance to illustrate how klezmer performances' meanings depend on how participants make use of discursive frames to reimagine Jewishness and community in the past, present, and future.

Chapter 2: Mix Tapes, Garage Klezmer, and the Academy: Why I Study Klezmer

"Star Mitzvah!!!" The pun was written in capital letters on the label of a mix-tape, in slanted handwriting that undoubtedly struck me as cool then, and probably affects my mix-CD labels to this day. I was 13, and the tape was a bar mitzvah gift from Phil Overeem, my seventh-grade English teacher. Overeem had already introduced his students, me among them, to Booker T and the MG's, the Meters, Big Mama Thornton, Kurtis Blow, John Coltrane, and other artists through weekly lessons on African American musicians. Before or after school (he ran a detention room for which I volunteered at least once), he would talk with students about music, providing tips and critiques on country, rap, alternative rock, and everything in between. The bar mitzvah tape, though, was just for me. One side featured an eclectic array of what he would call "cosmic Americana," tailored toward my own budding tastes and the music that I had heard at home; Gang Starr, Jonathan Richman, and John Prine are among the artists I still remember. The opposite side—a testament to this gentile music aficionado's deep knowledge, wide listening, and instincts for teaching—contained most of the Klezmatics' Jews with Horns. Did I recognize then the modal connections between that album and the cantillation I had been studying with a typical lack of discipline? Could my upbringing in the decidedly Reform-leaning Jewish community of Columbia, Missouri, have imbued me with a preconscious sense of the triangular relationship among

traditional liturgical singing, klezmer instrumental techniques, and Yiddish speaking styles? Probably not. I knew it was Jewish music, though, and I knew it was cool.

The next fall, early in my eighth-grade year, I attended my first klezmer concert. My mom's friend Sheila is a cousin of Judy Bressler, a founding member of the Klezmer Conservatory Band, and she offered us two extra tickets to the St. Louis stop of Itzhak Perlman's *In the Fiddler's House* tour. It was a school night. The show would run late. St. Louis was two hours away. We went. I was blown away. Our seats, near the front of the right-side balcony, if I remember correctly, were amazing. There were all kinds of Jews there, in tie-dye and furs, yarmulkes and baseball caps. Itzhak Perlman played with four different bands, each with its own style; then all of the musicians came onstage together for an encore or two. Afterward, I got to meet Judy Bressler and some of the other musicians at a small reception. Frank London signed my program for me, and when I told him I played trumpet he added a small drawing of a horn with the words "keep blowing" underneath. Though, I lost that piece of paper in the intervening years, I was now a klezmer fan.

Two years later, something miraculous happened. A close friend, Sam D'Agostino, had been playing saxophone for a local high school rock band. One of the leaders of that group, Jordan Wax, had been playing accordion for a few years and had also stumbled on some Yiddish records at his grandparents' house. Then he raided the public library's collection of klezmer CDs. When Sam mentioned that I played trumpet and liked klezmer, Jordan got in touch with me about starting a band. Soon, I was a member of a five-piece klezmer group, featuring accordion, clarinet, trumpet, bass, and guitar, along with incidental percussion. We played together for almost a year,

performing at talent shows, public schools, religious school events, a folk festival in southern Missouri, an international students' party at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, and a bat mitzvah party. We were not experts and certainly had not mastered the tradition, but we had fun and people enjoyed our music. For one of our last shows—three members were graduating from high school, including Jordan, who was leaving to spend a year in Ecuador—we played the Sunday morning headlining show at a small arts festival near downtown Columbia. Arlo Guthrie, who was in town for a full concert later that night, had agreed to play a solo set that morning. He opened for us!

I missed klezmer the next year. I organized a few friends who would play a song or two for our high school's multicultural assembly and who played with me in a procession for our synagogue's new Torah scrolls, but it was not a band. Then, in the fall of my senior year, Jordan returned, ready to start a new band. He found a rhythm section, two wonderful women a little older than us. I knew a pretty good clarinet player from high school who had just started college in town. We also tracked down a violinist, although she was eventually replaced by a flute player. This group was better, even if my trumpet playing was not always up to snuff. We named ourselves the People's Republic of Klezmerica and started playing, first for the local Jewish community's Simchat Torah celebration, and then on the street, at bars, and for parties. As with the earlier group, we took a do-it-yourself approach to klezmer. As members of the band worked past their formal musical training, we boasted increasingly non-classical sounds, which we combined with entertaining gimmicks, boundless energy, and an assortment of improvised hollers and whoops. We were a hit.

When I left for college, band continued, adding two trumpet players to replace me, as well as my friend Sam on alto and tenor sax. I managed to play with them a few more times, but my musical career was more or less over. Klezmer became an academic pursuit. While completing my undergraduate degree in American studies at the University of Kansas, I began reflecting on why klezmer had held such allure for me. It had been my primary Jewish activity during much of high school and by far the most public display of group identity that I undertook. Unlike Jordan, for whom klezmer offered a chance to connect with Jewish culture in the absence of even a Reform upbringing, I attended youth group functions and even went to synagogue on occasion; but klezmer maintained an edge on those activities. The music still attracted me, and it became a recurrent research subject.

At Kansas, I was free to take classes on a wide range of topics and chose to explore American culture, music, Jewish studies, and race and ethnicity. I began studying Yiddish as an intern at the National Yiddish Book Center during the summer before my senior year of college. That year, I completed an undergraduate thesis on klezmer music and contemporary Jewish identity under the guidance of a recent hire in Jewish studies, Professor Jonathan Boyarin. After a year of work, I returned to my academic pursuits, completing the NYU-YIVO Weinreich Summer Program in Yiddish Language and Culture, and beginning course work in folklore at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This thesis is the culmination of my master's program.

Since enrolling at UNC, I have traveled to a number of klezmer events as an observer and participant. In the fall of 2007, I attended several of the events surrounding the Great Day on Eldridge Street photograph, including the Sunday night concert that

brought together an enormous group of klezmer musicians in various combinations. A few months later, I attended KlezKanada's first-ever winter session, four days of workshops and classes that offered a taste of the program offerings from the annual KlezKanada Summer Institute. Held in Montreal, the events included an open-mic cabaret night and jam session, a remarkable faculty concert, and a keynote lecture by Frank London. The conversations between instructors that I recorded that weekend provide many of the quotes that appear in this thesis. During the summer, I was fortunate enough to travel to New York City for a day of Yiddish and klezmer lectures, panel discussions, and dance classes hosted by YIVO and put on by the KlezKamp roadshow, a traveling group of instructors and performers from the original klezmer immersion event, which has occurred at a Catskills resort each December since 1985. From there I briefly visited Philadelphia to speak with members of the Fabulous Spielkehs and enjoy their concert in Center City's Kahn Park.

The culmination of this fieldwork came a month or so later, in August 2008, when I attended the KlezKanada Summer Institute at Camp B'nai Brith, located about an hour north of Montreal. Since 1996, KlezKanada has offered a Canadian summer camp counterpart to KlezKamp, a yearly Christmas-time event founded in the 1980s that attracts klezmer and Yiddish culture enthusiasts to a Catskills resort for workshops, lectures, and concerts. Although the two institutions employ many of the same instructors and attract some of the same guests, there is also something of a rivalry between the two. The KlezKanada organization prides itself on its affordability and scholarship opportunities for young musicians, as well as on the high level of musical instruction. KlezKamp, which boasts more modern facilities, reportedly attracts more

older, non-musician attendees, and accordingly offers more in the way of Yiddish cultural activities and lectures.

Although my recordings of music and conversation from the various events have informed this research and provide an invaluable record of those experiences, I do not offer an extended ethnographic account of KlezKanada in this thesis. The event draws a fascinating cross-section of Jews and musicians—nearly five hundred participants attend each year—from around the world and, with repeat visits, would serve as an outstanding focus for a major research project. Like the music itself, however, the various events that inform this work are sometimes overshadowed by an analysis of the discursive frames that surround the whole range of klezmer phenomena. This problem, or cluster of problems, is not unique to this project, but haunts any endeavor to convey or explain lived experience or creative expression through the written word. Having invoked this knot of questions, I recognize that it is time to draw this part of the discussion to a close.

Before moving onto an exploration of klezmer's history, I would like to acknowledge the following consultants, who appear in my fieldwork descriptions as interviewees, instructors, and/or performers: Sam D'Agostino; Josh Dolgin; Walter Zev Feldman; Elaine Hoffman-Watts; Rachel Lemisch; Avia Moore; Cookie Segelstein; Deborah Strauss; Jeff Warschauer; and Susan Watts. This project would not be possible without the generous help of these musicians. Further thanks go to my thesis committee, Professors Jonathon Boyarin, Robert Cantwell, Bill Ferris, and Glenn Hinson. Finally, I am especially indebted to my dad, Tim Parshall, for his constant availability as a reader and copyeditor.

Chapter 3: History, Part One: Jewish Music and Identity from Eastern Europe to Postwar America

This chapter begins with a cursory description of Jewish history and culture in Eastern Europe, including a discussion of the role of klezmer music in the ritual life of a Jewish community, and the economic and social statuses that characterized most performers of that music. The chapter then considers musical changes that occurred with the arrival of significant Yiddish-speaking populations in the New World, as well as how those changes reflect immigrant Jews' attempts to negotiate Jewish identities in the new context of their adopted countries. Finally, it considers the aspects of Yiddish song and klezmer music that continued to circulate following World War II, despite the general decline in these forms associated with assimilation into the American mainstream and the realignment of Jewish identity brought about by the rise of American Zionism.

Europe

By the sixteenth century, Eastern Europe had become the center of European Jewish culture.¹ In general, the major areas of Jewish settlement stretched from modern-day Lithuania and the Baltic Sea to Ukraine and Moldova along the Black Sea. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Russian Empire expanded to the west and south, absorbing the large Jewish populations of Poland and Lithuania, and the Ottoman Empire, which had controlled parts of Ukraine, Romania and the Balkans.²

¹ Dawidowicz, 1967: 5.

Russian law generally prohibited Jews from establishing homes or businesses outside the newly annexed territories, which came to be known as the Pale of Settlement in the nineteenth century.³

Eastern European Jews lived in relatively autonomous communities, overseen by oligarchic governing bodies that resolved internal disputes, administered public services, and mediated between the Jewish population and gentile authorities. Prior to and under Russian rule, they resided in given areas only as "legal aliens who had been conditionally granted certain privileges of residence." Regional economies were based on peasant labor and agriculture, and Jews often occupied a precarious position between serfs and the nobility. They were subject to their own set of laws, which varied over time and between areas, and which determined what occupations they could pursue and what sorts of property, if any, they could own or rent.

In general, though, Eastern European Jews lived in towns, where they were involved in trade, collected taxes, dealt in local and regional finance, ran inns and taverns, distilled liquor, or worked as artisans and craftspeople. Among the more modest professions most identified with Yiddish-speaking Jews were tailoring and early modern clothing manufacturing.⁶ Within the Jewish community, a class system based on wealth and lineage (*yikhes*) determined social status, particularly in regards to marriage. Though

² Gilbert, 1993: 51, 72.

³ Ibid.: 72.

⁴ Dawidowicz, 1967: 7-8, 14.

⁵ Katz, 1993: 39.

⁶ Ibid.: 7, 28.

both high and low positions on the social ladder, as well as some occupations, were often passed down through generations, political positions and occupations were never determined by a strictly hereditary system.⁷

Within the class hierarchy of Yiddish-speaking Jews, klezmorim occupied one of the lowest rungs. Though klezmer music was a requirement for wedding celebrations and some minor festivals, rabbinic authorities were often ambivalent about the role of instrumental music. According to religious doctrine, the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. had ushered in a state of continual mourning that precluded the use of instrumental music in most Jewish rituals. As a result, non-vocal music held the status of a necessary transgression.⁸ At the same time that klezmorim faced prejudice from rabbinic authorities, local gentile elites often burdened them with restrictions on when, where, and for whom they could play. Some klezmer families were able to attain higher status by intermarrying with wedding jesters (badkhonim), who were occasionally associated with families of cantors (khazonim) and therefore had at least some access to yeshiva training and the corresponding prestige. 10 Most musicians, however, were relegated to the lowest levels of the *yihkhes* scale, not far above menial laborers and even thieves; these included both full-time professionals and semi-professionals who also eked out a living as barbers or other low-status artisans. Evidence of this position includes a variety of disparaging Yiddish sayings that comment on musicians' social standing and

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⁷ Katz, 1993: 118, 173-175.

⁸ Sapoznik, 2006: 5-6.

⁹ Ibid.: 7.

¹⁰ Feldman, 1994: 3-4.

musical abilities.¹¹ Professional musicians' use of *klezmer-loshn*, a special jargon that shared many terms with the argot of Jewish criminals, compounded their already marginal status.¹²

Though there is only scant evidence about the musical styles favored by klezmorim prior to the nineteenth century, scholars have found evidence of the size and instrumentation of klezmer bands from earlier centuries, as well as the legal restrictions that they faced. From the emergence of klezmer musicians some time before the fifteenth century C.E. through most of the nineteenth century, a typical klezmer ensemble—called a *kapelye* or *khevrisa* in Yiddish—consisted of a fiddle accompanied by other bowed stringed instruments, and sometimes a flute, along with a small drum or cymbals. ¹³ In addition, Jewish instrumentalists often played the tsimbl, "a stringed trapezoidal box strung with metal wires that were played with wooden sticks," that rested on a stand or was slung from the tsimblist's neck during processions. ¹⁴ In some parts of Europe, the tsimbl was primarily a Jewish instrument. ¹⁵ A variety of local or regional restrictions prohibited Jews from playing clarinet, brass instruments, or drums during specific historical eras; municipal authorities also sometimes limited the size of the groups to

¹¹ Strom, 2002: 96-97.

¹² Loeffler, 2002:

¹³ Sapoznik, 2006: 6.

¹⁴ Sapoznik, 2006: 8.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 8-9.

three or four instrumentalists or set curfews for musical performances. ¹⁶ Nevertheless, according to the work of Moshe Beregovski, the premier researcher of Jewish music in

Soviet Russia, late nineteenth century klezmer ensembles usually consisted of at least seven musicians, but could reach twelve or more members. ¹⁷ Because klezmer groups played for hire at weddings, or played for tips from guests, economic considerations also limited the size of their ensembles; fewer players would perform for a modest wedding, while a group might hire extra musicians for a wedding between welloff families.

Ethnomusicologist and klezmer performer Walter Zev Feldman's classification system for the klezmer repertoire in the nineteenth century provides some insight into the musical world of those musicians and reflects the wide variety of Jewish and non-Jewish tunes and dances that circulated throughout Eastern Europe. Prior to urbanization and emigration (which, compounded by cultural, religious, and political upheavals, drastically altered Jewish life in Eastern Europe by the turn of the twentieth century), klezmorim across the swath of the Russian Empire in which Jews were permitted to settle shared a "basically uniform" repertoire of dance genres, especially those forms that were secular but still identified as Jewish. 18 This common material, along with regionally distinct nondance or "display" genres that accompanied particular sections of the Eastern European Jewish wedding ritual or served as paraliturgical melodies for the festivals of

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¹⁶ Ibid.: 7.

¹⁷ Beregovski, 2000: 301.

¹⁸ Feldman, 2002: 84.

Chanukah and Purim, formed the "core repertoire" of European klezmorim. A second category of klezmer tune, the "transitional or orientalized repertoire," also included nondance and dance genres that were common across the Pale of Settlement, and consisted of musical forms—both new introductions and hybrids with the older repertoire—that resulted from interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish professional musicians in Bessarabia during the later nineteenth century. Finally, the "co-territorial" and "cosmopolitan" repertoires consisted of, respectively, regionally specific dances that were played for non-Jewish and, occasionally, Jewish audiences, and "couple dances of western and central European origin . . . played for both Jews and non-Jews."

Jewish musicians in Eastern Europe played non-Jewish repertoires in addition to their own, although the nature of their contact with gentile audiences and musicians varied. With the exception of the southern regions of Eastern Europe (now Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine), Jewish musicians were often the only professional or semi-professional musicians available, requiring them to be familiar with popular and folk styles of their non-Jewish neighbors, including local nobility. ²² In the southern regions, by contrast, klezmer musicians had extensive interaction with gentile professional musicians, especially Roma instrumentalists. ²³ Although the music of European klezmer

¹⁹ Ibid.: 93. Walter Zev Feldman's "classificatory scheme," originally published in 1994, provides the most commonly cited system for organizing the generic forms that constituted the repertoire of European klezmorim.

²⁰ Ibid.: 94.

²¹ Ibid.: 96.

²² Strom, 2002: 277.

²³ Feldman, 2002: 96-97.

musicians drew from nearby peasant traditions and the music of professional Roma musicians, especially in Moldova, the Balkans, and the Crimea, generic and stylistic distinctions continued to separate the music of professional Jewish instrumentalists from neighboring traditions.²⁴

In particular, Jewish instrumental music differed from other styles in its close relationship to the oral musical traditions of the *khazonim* (cantors), from whom klezmorim adopted modal structures and ornamentation styles. Through this interplay between liturgical singing and instrumental techniques, klezmer musicians developed stylistic tricks and melodic elements that mimic the human voice and continue to connect their music audibly to the chanting and singing that accompany Jewish religious ritual. Though some of these sounds, particularly the sighing or sobbing ornament known as the krekhts or kreykhts, also appear in Romany music, they are interpreted differently in each tradition.²⁵

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a variety of changes took place, due in part to eased restrictions on Jewish music. The clarinet, recently permitted to Russian Jews, began to challenge the fiddle as the lead instrument, although it would not supersede its predecessor until the twentieth century. ²⁶ Additionally, modern brass instruments became more common in Jewish ensembles as the instruments became more widely available. Some historians link the appearance of cornet, trombone—usually valve rather than slide trombone—and related instruments to the conscription of Jews

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²⁴ Feldman, 1994: 3-4.

²⁵ Netsky, 2002a: 14.

²⁶ Ibid.:14.

into the Russian Army, where they often joined military bands in order to increase their chances of survival. This trend provided an impetus to develop formal music skills prior to being drafted, an increase in written music literacy, and, perhaps, greater familiarity among Jewish musicians with instruments that had not previously been common among klezmer bands.²⁷

During the second of half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, social and political changes introduced new challenges to traditional religious life, including the musical repertoires of klezmorim. Earlier trends toward religious and cultural reform under the banner of the Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah), fueled in part by a desire for full legal rights as emancipated citizens, spread from Western and Central Europe. 28 In the Russian Empire, some restrictions on Jews came to an end during the nineteenth century, but several changes were enacted as much to disadvantage Jewish communities as to allow them equal status as citizens. In particular, Tsarist officials sought to lessen the autonomy of local Jewish systems of governance from the middle of the century onward, and forced rural Jews into larger towns in the 1880s.²⁹

As urbanization and mechanization drew rural Jews to growing cities toward the end of the century, they came in contact with leftist Yiddish culture and Zionist ideology, as well as modern secularism, all of which competed with traditional Jewish practice for adherents. After Russia eased its restrictions on public libraries in 1906, modern Jewish political organizations were quick to sponsor these and other voluntary cultural

²⁷ Strom. 2002: 98-100.

²⁸ Dawidowicz, 1967: 17.

²⁹ Kobrin, 2003: 237; Gilbert, 1993: 72.

associations, major channels for the transmission of secular knowledge and tastes.³⁰ By the outbreak of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, traditional Jewish ways of life were far from the only options available to Eastern European Jews. In regions and cities where klezmer had once flourished—what is now the Czech Republic, as well as Berlin, Bratislava, and Budapest—the increasingly acculturated Jewish population imitated its Western European co-religionists and assimilated into the dominant cultures, abandoning former musical traditions. Elsewhere, klezmer musicians maintained the older repertoire, but with the addition of new styles of popular music, including tunes from Yiddish theater and film, some of which originated in new centers of Jewish life, like New York City. 31

America

Like other aspects of Eastern European Jewish life, the instrumental music of European klezmorim underwent major changes as large numbers of Yiddish-speaking Jews sought a new home in the United States and Canada. During the first half of the twentieth century, American and Canadian Jews' musical tastes, as well as the way they described Jewish music, reflected changing ideas about and attitudes toward various modes of Jewish identity, and about how those identities related to mainstream culture. Following an initial flourishing of a particularly American take on the klezmer repertoires of Eastern Europe, a series of social and political trends, along with major historical events, led to the decline of klezmer music in American Jewish life. Aspects of the klezmer repertoire, as well as particular types of Yiddish song and other related musical

³⁰ Veidlinger, 2003: 175-177.

³¹ Strom, 2002: 131-2.

styles persisted, however, among religiously, socially, and politically distinctive Jewish sub-groups. The brief history that follows will point to aspects of this process that continue to affect the role of klezmer in American Jewish life.

Though small groups of Jews were among the earliest European arrivals to the territories that eventually became the United States, the large numbers of Eastern European Yiddish speakers that immigrated to the country between 1880 and 1924—primarily to New York City and other East Coast urban centers—imported a very different Jewish culture than their earlier arrived co-religionists. As a result of this influx, the number of Jews in America, which had grown to approximately a quarter of a million by 1880, nearly doubled in each of the next three decades. Despite the dip in new arrivals during and after World War I, American Jews numbered nearly four million when the Johnson-Reed Bill of 1924 effectively ended the era of Jewish mass-migration to America.

Just as the new arrivals brought Yiddish language, fervent religious observance, and other markers of cultural difference to their new home, they also carried forward the musical traditions of their lives in the Russian Empire and surrounding areas. The repertoires and styles that are now known as klezmer began to appear in North America during this time. In 1889, Yiddish-speaking instrumentalists founded their first union in America—Di Rusishe Progresiv Muzikal Yunyon No. 1 fun Amerike, a sub-section of a

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³² Sachar, 1993: 130-131.

³³ Jewish Virtual Library, "Jewish Population of the United States (1654-2006)."

³⁴ Ibid.; Sachar, 1993: 322-323.

labor organization called United Hebrew Trades. 35 Rushishe (Russian) euphemistically identified the group as Jewish, while the word *progresiv* (progressive) marked members as part of the broader Yiddish socialist movement. Though members of the union were undoubtedly immigrant klezmorim, they did not apply the term to themselves. In his historical account of the union, James Loeffler notes that "in the earliest references to klezmer bands at American Jewish weddings in the 1890s and early 1900s, the use of the term 'klezmer' is strikingly absent, even when other Yiddish words are used to describe the proceedings." With the exception of the Boibriker Kapelle, bands during this era referred to themselves as orchestras or ensembles. *Kapelye* and *khevrisa*, Yiddish terms for a klezmer ensemble, were no longer in use.³⁶ The word klezmer, once a marker of versatility and eclecticism, if not respectability, now commonly referred to musically illiterate musicians who could not adjust to the new American styles and standards.³⁷

As the era of mass Jewish immigration continued, the styles and repertoires of Jewish musicians continued to adapt to the new American setting. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, traditional instruments like tsimbls and rotary valve cornets gave way to xylophones and modern trumpets. 38 Additionally, banjo and slide trombone began to appear in American klezmer recordings, and a new, brassy sound took over, appealing to audiences familiar with popular American bandleaders such as John Philip Sousa. Moreover, with the rise of virtuosos like Naftule Brandwein and Dave

³⁵ Loeffler, 2002: 37-38.

³⁶ Ibid. 40.

³⁷ Sokolow, 2002: 179-180.

³⁸ Netsky, 2002a: 14.

Tarras, the clarinet overtook the fiddle as the primary klezmer instrument.³⁹ In addition to these instrumental changes, the music of Yiddish theaters, in which many wedding musicians found work, began to appear alongside older repertoires by 1910.⁴⁰

New influences on the music of Jewish musicians in American were not just limited to changes in instrumentation or the addition of tunes from the newly popular Yiddish theaters. The 1910s saw the emergence of an early American-klezmer hybrid, the oriental foxtrot. The first recorded example of this style, "Yiddish Blues," combines the mode of the liturgical Mi Shebeyrach with ragtime rhythms. Though the oriental foxtrot was only a short-lived fad, various combinations of Yiddish and popular American styles would continue to appear on record throughout the twentieth century. The Abe Schwartz Orchestra's 1929 recording of "Die Reize Nuch Amerika," for example, demonstrates the influences of popular American marches, with one melodic strain in particular ending in a cadence that sounds as if it is pulled directly from a Sousa composition. ⁴²

Peter Sokolow, an active musician in a variety of popular and Jewish musical styles, describes the network of catering halls and Jewish bands that simultaneously developed between 1890 and 1920 as the simcha "industry." ⁴³ By his account, the bands available for private events became significantly better around 1920, as a generation of

³⁹ Ibid. 15-16.

⁴⁰ Sokolow, 2002: 180.

⁴¹ Netsky, 2002a: 16.

⁴² Abe Schwartz Orchestra, 1929.

⁴³ Sokolow, 2002: 180-181.

American-born musicians with formal musical training came to the fore. These bands not only were familiar with the European repertoire, but also incorporated American popular songs of the era, as well as new tunes from the Yiddish theater. This shift coincides with what Loeffler and others call the "golden age of New York klezmer."

During these years, and continuing through the end of World War II, the older klezmer repertoires continued to develop, both in relation to non-Jewish musical forms and as a result of internal changes in America's Jewish immigrant population. First, many non-dance genres became less common as the realities of urban life and a decrease in traditional religious observance brought an end to the extended festivities that had once marked Jewish wedding celebrations in Eastern Europe. ⁴⁶ Second, the bulgar, a dance genre that had emerged out of Bessarabia as the *bulgărească* and became popular in New York by 1920, largely overshadowed other klezmer genres or incorporated them into bulgar hybrids. ⁴⁷

According to Walter Feldman, the increasing popularity of the bulgar style was due in large part to the dominance of the New York klezmer world by musicians and musical families—especially Dave Tarras—from Bessarabia, which was part of and identified with Romania during the early twentieth century. To some extent, the social, religious, and economic freedoms enjoyed by klezmorim who interacted with Roma and

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⁴⁴ Ibid.: 180.

⁴⁵ Loeffler, 2002: 37.

⁴⁶ Netsky, 2002a: 14.

⁴⁷ Feldman, 1993: 2. Bessarabia is a region now located primarily in the Republic of Moldova, between Romania and Ukraine.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 1-3.

Greek musicians in this region explain the rich musical tradition that had already affected the klezmer repertoire in other parts of Eastern Europe. Across the Atlantic, though, the region's reputation as a bastion of internal permissiveness and external liberality gave the music added cachet as it came to influence or displace older components of the klezmer repertoire. 49 As renowned fiddler Alicia Svigals suggests in her reading of Feldman's historical description, the title "Romanian," which often stood in for "Yiddish" or "klezmer" in song titles—most notably the extremely popular "Rumania, Rumania"—and ensemble names of the 1910s and 1920s, worked as a euphemism that evoked a relatively cosmopolitan mode of Jewishness that particularly appealed to first-generation American Jews as they embraced American liberalism.⁵⁰

The 78-rpm recordings from this era provide a window into the musical changes that were taking place among this generation of klezmorim and reflect the tastes of their audiences. At the same time, however, they mislead contemporary listeners, especially in terms of how the music would have sounded at live events. First of all, the limited recording length of the early commercial recordings shortens longer tunes and fails to reflect the medleys that bands played to keep their audiences dancing continuously. Second, the large studio groups that play on the early records would not have been affordable at most private events, giving an impression of larger ensembles than those that usually performed.⁵¹

Jewish Sub-Groups and the Klezmer Nadir

⁴⁹ Feldman, 2002: 180-181.

⁵⁰ Syigals, 2002: 216.

⁵¹ Netsky, 2002a: 15-16.

As has been the case for all of modern (if not recorded) history, "Jewish" did not describe a cohesive group in early twentieth-century America, even among Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their families. Along with organizations of families from the same city or region, religious, political, and occupational groups divided the American Jewish population into relatively distinct strata. In addition to other economic and social differences among these groups, as well as between them and those Jews who had entered or learned to approximate life in the American mainstream, particular groups enjoyed and preserved their own repertoires of Jewish instrumental music and Yiddish song. ⁵²

As long-time wedding musician Peter Sokolow reports from his contact with older Jewish musicians, a band's repertoire and playing style had to respond to the event for which it was playing, and correspond to the origin and purpose of the group that had hired it. Along with the usual weddings, bands played for store openings, Torah dedications, and the "annual banquets for unions, professional organizations, and *landsmanshaftn*, societies of immigrants from given towns." Each group had its own preferences for tunes, dances, and style of performance, and a successful klezmer had to anticipate and meet those desires. 54

While each Jewish subset's taste and particularity continued and was perhaps exaggerated in the years following World War II, the size and prominence of such groups declined as their members assimilated into the emerging Jewish middle class. A certain

⁵² Sokolow, 2002: 180; Feldman, 2008.

⁵³ Sokolow, 2002: 180.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 180.

style of hybridized, sometimes humorously self-deprecating Jewish instrumental music continued to appear on records and on the stages of Jewish resorts, but the traditional klezmer styles and other types of Yiddish songs (many of which would eventually play a role in the klezmer revival) were relegated to insular subsets of the American Jewish population. Specifically, certain aspects of European and earlier American klezmer repertoires continued to circulate among Jewish refugees who arrived after World War II and participated in landsmanshaftn organizations in major cities, or who belonged to one of the numerous Hasidic and otherwise Orthodox communities that took root in America following the war. 55 Musicians like Dave Tarras, Harry "Rudy" Tepel, Howie Leess, and Chizik and Willie Epstein remained in high demand by playing a European or early American repertoire for Hasidic and Orthodox events until more modern styles became popular in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁶ Other Jewish musicians simply moved on to more commercially viable musical styles, eventually regarding klezmer as a minor part of their careers.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, politically oriented Yiddish songs and a smaller set of instrumental dance tunes remained in use among the dwindling number of American Jews who remained involved in Yiddishist leftist organizations.⁵⁸

Among the majority of American Jews, however, a variety of factors led to a nadir for American klezmer, in which the music was largely forgotten. In the decades that the Nazi genocide ended Europe's role as the center of Jewish culture and erased the

⁵⁵ Sokolow, 2002: 181; Feldman, 2008.

⁵⁶ Sokolow, 2002: 181-183.

⁵⁷ Netsky, 2002b: 66-67.

⁵⁸ Feldman, 2008.

possibility of another large wave of new arrivals to the American klezmer audience, American Jews, like those in the Soviet-bloc, largely abandoned Yiddish cultural forms in their efforts toward assimilation and upward mobility. At the same time, the rise of Israel and Israeli culture further displaced klezmer and other aspects of Yiddish culture as non-religious sources of Jewish authenticity.

Because the events commonly known as the Holocaust mark a watershed in Jewish history, the topic is impossible to avoid in any discussion of klezmer. In addition to murdering between one-third and a half of the world's twelve million Yiddish speakers, the perpetrators of this genocide almost entirely destroyed "Jewish communal infrastructure in Eastern Europe." This loss was soon "compounded by . . . regulation or liquidation [of Jewish communities] at the hands of various postwar communist-bloc governments."⁵⁹ Those Jews who returned to their original homes met continuing anti-Semitism from their neighbors, as well as atheistic public policy, and they lacked the numbers to maintain traditional performances of Jewishness in private. Yiddishkeit, including klezmer, was no longer viable in its own birthplace.

World War II and its immediate aftermath also changed the face of Jewish America, by offering new avenues to assimilation. In America, the war gave many Jewish citizens an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to their new country, whether as enlisted soldiers or as supporters on the home front. The war accelerated Jewish Americans' process of assimilation by reinforcing their sense of American-ness, and the postwar years offered greater opportunities for upward mobility than ever before. Suburbanization drew Jews and other recent immigrants out of ethnic enclaves, while

⁵⁹ Shandler, 2005: 15-16.

growing fears of communism encouraged conformity and made traditionally left-leaning Yiddishism politically problematic. A number of commentators also suggest that the decline of American Yiddishkeit was related to painful memories associated with what seemed to be a way of life destroyed.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the flow of Jewish immigrants from Europe, which had been slight since the late 1920s, included only small numbers of refugees. Without the arrival of significant numbers of ethnically distinct immigrants to balance ongoing assimilation, Jewishness became less palpably different from mainstream American culture. In 1957, Sociologist Nathan Glazer noted American the shift of "Jewish" from an ethnic or even racial category to a religious preference that claimed a place for itself at the heart of mainstream American life. ⁶²

Along with genocide and assimilation, the establishment of the State of Israel led to the decline of Yiddishkeit worldwide. In Europe, linguistic choices had long corresponded to ideological affiliations. Advocates of the *Haskalah* movement generally believed that Jews should conduct their affairs in local languages and abandon Yiddish, which they commonly portrayed as a crude sub-language, or *zhargon*. Beginning toward the end of the nineteenth century, Bundists, members of a prominent Jewish socialist group, promoted Yiddish as the common language of the international Jewish

⁶⁰ Ibid.: 16.

⁶¹ Sokolow, 2002: 181.

⁶² Shandler, 2005: 17; Glazer, 1989: 108.

⁶³ *Haskalah* was the nineteenth century movement for religious reform and Jewish emancipation that began in Germany and eventually spread to Eastern Europe. It is often referred to as the Jewish Enlightenment for its emphasis on universalistic liberalism and rationalism.

proletariat and championed the cultural achievements of the Jewish Diaspora.⁶⁴ Around this time, adherents to a third ideology, Zionism, advocated for the establishment of establish a modern Jewish nation-state and believed that only Hebrew, recognized as a "classical" language, could unite the Jews as equals to the European nations.⁶⁵

World War II shattered the hopes of European Bundists and the assimilationist
Haskalah and seemed to prove the necessity of Jewish statehood. Hebraists in Britishoccupied Palestine had campaigned, sometimes violently, against Yiddish even before the
birth of Israel, and the country's establishment of Modern Hebrew as the national
language sealed their victory. While Yiddish still exists in Israel, the state has only
recently warmed to the idea of supporting Yiddish, Yiddishkeit, or the particular cultural
practices of any group of relocated Diaspora Jews. The construction of Israeli identity,
both before and after 1948, led to the juxtaposition of Yiddish, the language of the
Diaspora, "against modern Hebrew, the official national language and now the prevailing
Jewish vernacular." As a result, Yiddish has become "emblematic of a way of life
rejected and superceded by Zionism."

As identification with Israel became an increasingly important part of Diaspora Jewishness in America and elsewhere, this linguistic displacement extended to all cultural spheres, and Israeli culture supplanted many traditions of Yiddish-speaking Jews as the main inspiration for performative Jewishness. As a result, Yiddish music and dance

⁶⁴ Ibid.: 8, 130-31.

⁶⁵ Shandler, 2005: 8.

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

suffered as Hebrew songs and Israeli folk dance became the standard at Jewish summer camps and community events throughout America. To illustrate, most American Jews know the hora as an Israeli folk dance performed music with a four-beat measure. In the klezmer tradition, however, the hora is a completely unrelated dance, done in 3/4 time. ⁶⁸

The dramatic shift toward newly created Israeli culture represents an effort to embrace modes of Jewishness that better fit American values. Just as idealized portrayals of Romania had worked as specifically Jewish odes to American liberalism, the new identification with Israeli cultural forms echoed American values through "its frontier ethos, macho sabras, strong military, and statehood." Howard M. Sachar writes:

For the Jews of the United States, the success of their Israeli kinsmen in winning and defending their homeland generated an upsurge of self-esteem too profound to be described as vicarious. The image conveyed by Israeli settlers and soldiers diverged from the Jewish stereotype equally in American folklore and in American-Jewish folklore.⁷⁰

The rise of Israeli culture and its associations with a new Jewish masculinity thus emerged as the new marker of Jewishness in America, working in harmony with other assimilatory trends to push klezmer music and other aspects of Yiddish culture to the margins of American Jewish life.

⁶⁸ Rogovoy, 2000: 47.

⁶⁹ Svigals, 2002: 216. *Sabra* refers to a native Israeli, idealized as a rugged soldier.

⁷⁰ Sachar, 1993: 713.

Chapter 4: History, Part Two: Discourses of Tradition, Dissent, Difference and Jewishness in Twentieth Century America

The potential meanings of contemporary klezmer depend not only on historical trends within American Jewish culture but also on historically situated discourses surrounding traditional or otherwise marginal musical genres in the United States genres through which earlier generations of Americans, Jewish or not, negotiated their identities in relation to mainstream America. In the 1930s and 1940s, folk music's connection to leftwing politics and cultural pluralism established traditional music as an important component of American counterculture and planted the seeds for later proponents of multiculturalism. Since shortly after the appearance of African American jazz in the national consciousness, its associations with the complex and problematic ideal of hipness offered Americans of all backgrounds a badge of dissent and difference—qualities that continue to circulate, but that are now marked by different types of music. In the 1950s and 1960s, the folk revival's latently political but clearly resistant appeals to tradition and authenticity introduced a new generation of listeners to regional and ethnic musical styles, providing a template for the preservation and performance of traditional music and attracting many of the young Jewish musicians who would eventually take part in the klezmer revival. Each of these social and musical movements established or exemplifies foundational rhetorics later taken up in the klezmer revival. Furthermore, American Jews' involvement in and responses to these

social and musical movements demonstrate constant efforts to reposition themselves the shifting field of American identity politics. The chapter will end on a nonmusical note, considering 1970s radical Judaism as a response to the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and as a phenomenon that included, among its eclectic impulses toward renewing and reinventing Jewish identity, practice, and consciousness, the values and priorities that helped shape both contemporary klezmer and a resurgence in Yiddish language, culture, and scholarship.

The Folksong Movement

Beginning during the Great Depression, traditional musical styles came to be identified with American leftist movements. Although both right-wing nativists and organized labor had previously deployed American folk genres for political purposes, the association between certain American musical forms and left-wing politics persisted into the 1950s and had a lasting effect on discourses surrounding traditional American music. During the 1930s, American and international folk genres and work songs became increasingly prominent in radical circles as a part of an effort to battle fascism at home and abroad through the development of the Popular Front. By the end of the decade, groups like the Almanac Singers had established the practice of including labor-oriented performances of American folk genres for rallies, strikes and other political events. ²

Along with the outwardly political use of traditional music during the New Deal era, the WPA's Joint Committee on Folk Arts, under the leadership of Benjamin Botkin, Charles Seeger, and Herbert Halpert, emphasized traditional arts under the rubric of a

¹ Malone, 2006: 42.

² Reuss, 1975: 94

new pluralistic idea that found strength in the reality of America's "diverse national culture." This movement, rooted at once in politically liberal ideals and a non-nationalistic patriotism, looked to regionally, ethnically, racially, and otherwise distinct folkways as an antidote to the seeming rootlessness of American mass culture as it emerged in the wake of mechanization and urbanization. In the years to come, folk music supporters would continue to use the music as a symbol of resistance and self-reliance—a tool against political disenfranchisement and cultural erasure.

Though the outbreak of the Cold War forced the socialist-leaning folksong movement to the margins of American political discourse and effectively ended the viability of federally funded projects devoted to such seemingly subversive notions as American pluralism, traditional music continued to be an important component of the American left.⁵ Following the end of World War II, People's Songs Inc. began organizing song-writers and musicians to perform for and raise awareness of political issues and labor disputes. Though this organization folded in 1949, its mission was continued by the more ideologically cohesive People's Artists, the group that originally launched *Sing Out!* in 1950.⁶ Along with these developments, Moses Asch founded Folkways records in 1948, as a way to advance cultural equity by promoting traditional music from all over the world.⁷

³ Hirsch, 1988: 55-57, 62.

⁴ Ibid.: 48.

⁵ Ibid.: 63; Lieberman, 1995: 58, 73.

⁶ Reuss, 1975: 94; Lieberman, 1995: 143-144.

⁷ Seeger, 1988: 99.

Despite the obstacles that each of these organizations faced in the postwar political climate, they eventually provided important resources for the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, they exhibit the important role that the American Jewish left played in the development and maintenance of political discourses surrounding American folk music. Asch, the son of controversial Yiddish author Sholem Asch, is perhaps the most famous figure from this era. Though he did not describe himself as politically motivated, his label attracted performers and supporters at the fringes of American politics. These included significant contributors to People's Songs and People's Artists that came out of New York's communist milieu, especially the International Workers Order—itself originally a radical offshoot of the Jewish-socialist Workmen's Circle.

In relation to the history and development of Jewish identity and Jewish music in America, the involvement of American Jews—perhaps Americans of Jewish descent—in the radically oriented promotion of blues, old-time, country and western, and other traditional genres of rural America demonstrates the symbolic importance of certain marginalized musical traditions to Jewish Americans. It raises the question, however, of why Jewish music, especially klezmer, was generally disregarded in America's folk song movements, even when other ethnic and international genres received attention. ¹⁰

⁸ Asch Interview.

⁹ Reuss, 1975: 98. Examples of this trend include Jackie Gibson Alper, Ronnie Gilbert, Ernie Liebman, Irwin Silber, and Jerry Silverman. See Reuss (1975) and Lieberman (1995).

¹⁰ A look at the Smithsonian-Folkways archive of Folkways releases from the 1940s and 1950s reveals a relatively small number of Jewish releases, initially emphasizing Israeli

Though the Workmen's Circle community maintained a small repertoire of Yiddish dance music in addition to a body of Yiddish song, this was the exception to the rule.

Other styles of Jewish music usually fell beyond the scope of folk-music enthusiasts from the Jewish left by virtue of the music's association with traditional religious observance and old-fashioned insularism. ¹¹

Hipness

During the same years that radical and pluralist movements adopted the musical styles of rural America as a marker of resistance, certain white-gentile and Jewish youth also attempted to re-imagine their identities in relation to black urban music—first jazz and, later, rock and roll. For Jewish Americans involved in this sort of cross-cultural identification, black musical culture offered a symbolic means to opt out of a racially charged class structure that offered a modicum of economic and social privilege in exchange for acceptance of normative American behavior and values, and complicity in an economic and political system that failed to live up to its promises of equality according to class or race. In "Jazz-Jews, Jive, and Gender: The Ethnic Politics of Jazz Argot"—an insightful discussion of this phenomenon that takes Mezz Mezzrow, Phil Spector, and Lenny Bruce as its subjects—Maria Damon argues that these figures' diverse efforts to identify with African American culture, especially through music and speech, responded in part "to the sense that Jewish American culture, by assimilating upwards, was abdicating the special role of critique available to social outsiders." ¹²

folk song, but also including cantorial music, Yiddish folk and theater song, and recordings of North African and otherwise "exotic" Jewish communities.

¹¹ Feldman, 2008.

Whereas Ronnie Spector's *Be My Baby* provides an account of her husband's appropriation and misidentification that serves as a cautionary tale, Mezzrow's autobiography and Bruce's comedy routines reveal more nuanced, if not wholly unproblematic, approaches to questions of Jewish and black identities. ¹³ For Mezzrow, born in 1899 to a middle-class Jewish family in Chicago, black jazz was the "most original and honest music in America." ¹⁴ Damon focuses on an incident, also reported in Mezzrow's autobiography, in which the aspiring musician feels that he needs an accurate transcription of Bessie Smith's lyrics in order to capture the "secret" of her phrasing. ¹⁵ After asking his sister, trained in shorthand, to help, he is appalled to find that she has corrected Bessie's words: "I've never felt friendly towards her to this day, on account of how she laid her fancy high-school airs on the immortal Bessie Smith." ¹⁶ In Mezzrow's telling, he avenges his sister's slight by stealing her fur coat (as a symbol of middle-class materialism), pawning it to raise the money for a new saxophone, and never returning home. ¹⁷

Growing up in the 1920s, Mezzrow could not imagine a Jewish identity that offered him the cultural qualities he needed, an emotional honesty and creative individuality that he and others came to identify as hipness. The Jews of Mezzrow's

¹² Damon, 1997: 155.

¹³ Ibid.: 160.

¹⁴ Mezzrow, 1990: 53.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 53. Damon, 1997: 161-163.

¹⁶ Mezzrow, 1990: 54.

¹⁷ Damon, 1997: 161.

autobiography have either assimilated, or aspire to assimilate, into the white middle class, or they maintain an isolating orthodoxy in the "Jewish ghetto on Maxwell Street." He states explicitly that solidarity with the growing number of Jewish actors and singers commercializing jazz did not interest him and that his "real brothers" were the black artists who spoke to him with the real thing. Mezzrow immersed himself in black culture, organizing recording sessions with black jazz musicians, marrying a black woman, and, during a prison sentence for marijuana distribution, even convincing prison officials that he belonged in the black section of the segregated penitentiary. ²⁰

Though numerous Jewish musicians and singers, Al Jolson and Benny Goodman most notably, adopted African American musical forms during the 1920s and 1930s, Mezzrow differs from most Jewish performers in that he employed black speech and music in order to opt out of white identity, rather than to use the appropriated material to work toward mainstream acceptance. Mezzrow's 1946 autobiography eventually became a major inspiration for Norman Mailer's "The White Negro," the oft-cited, perennially contested, and duly criticized manifesto of white hipness. While American conceptions of hipness, like its outward markers, have changed in the intervening decades, a relatively stable constellation of qualities maintain their currency as antidotes to the

¹⁸ Mezzrow, 1990: 52.

¹⁹ Damon, 1997: 165.

²⁰ Ibid.: 160-162.

²¹ Ibid.: 157; Rogin, 1998; Damon explicitly contrasts her interpretation of Mezzrow with Michael Rogin's take on Al Jolson.

²² Mailer, 1957; Field, 2005: 118

"bleak conformity" of middle-class America. 23 Most of these traits have been romanticized since before European and American cultures' fascinations with an essentialized blackness, and though some have manifested themselves in ways that are not clearly related to blackness, Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds have attempted to lay claim to aspects of hipness that evoke longstanding stereotypes of black men: emotionality, impulsivity, individuality, misogyny, musicality, antimaterialism, disregard for authority, and a lack of sexual inhibition. At its best, hipness provides a model for escaping the problematically conformist demands of mainstream America through a sort of personal authenticity that enables social, political, and aesthetic radicalism; at its worst, it merely flattens into a hyper-masculine parody of black street culture. At any point on this spectrum, hipness provides a rubric for Americans to reimagine themselves in opposition to the standards of mainstream culture. For American Jews, according to Damon's reading, such assertions of dissent through appropriation were especially common in postwar America and reflect an anxiety that the assimilatory path out of "the traditionally in-between" status of ethnic Jewishness threatened their "integrity." 24

Whereas Mezzrow identified blackness as the exclusive source of authentic hipness, later hipsters and beats drew from a wider array of sources for their counter-cultural appropriation—occasionally Jewish motifs but, more often, esoteric religions and

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²³ Levine, 2003: 59; in addition to the ever-changing symbols that mark youth and alterity, the terms that denote the accompanying status continue to evolve; therefore, "hip" is no longer a very fashionable adjective, although discourses of hipness still circulate.

²⁴ Damon, 1997: 165.

foreign political movements. Comedian Lenny Bruce, however, presents "Jewish" as the center of hipness, rather than as a tangent. Famously dividing the world into Jewish and goyish, Bruce "reverses the terms" of standard hipness, locating icons inside or outside the category of Jewish based on their soulfulness.²⁵

I neologize Jewish and goyish. Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'nai Brith is goysih; Haddasah, Jewish. Marine Corps—heavy goyim, dangerous. . . . Koolaid is goyish Balls are goyish. Titties are Jewish. Mouths are Jewish. All Italians are Jewish. Negroes are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews Baton-twirling is very goyish. ²⁶

Bruce's routine, a reversal of the predominantly one-way flow of cross-cultural identification in which disaffected Jewish youth claim black music as a marker of hipness, works as humor because of its novelty; it dances, especially in its original historical context, on the border of the possible and impossible. In relation to the history of klezmer music, Bruce—performing in the 1950s and 1960s—anticipates the reemergence of a desire for Jewish difference and provides a fascinating precedent for later attempts to transform the category of "Jewish" by locating or incorporating symbols of dissent, immediacy, and similarly idealized qualities within its bounds.

Folk Revival

As scholars of American folk music and klezmer have noted, the 1950s and 1960s movement known as the "folk revival" set the stage for the revitalization of klezmer and other ethnic musical repertoires. Robert Cantwell dates the heyday of the postwar revival from 1958 to 1964, from the Kingston Trio's success with its version of "Tom Dooley" to

²⁵ Ibid.: 166.

²⁶ This is, with a few lines omitted, the text of the routine as offered in Damon's chapter (166); different versions of the same riff have been published elsewhere, including *The Essential Lenny Bruce*.

the British Invasion.²⁷ During this period, musical genres including blues and bluegrass, each of which had both folk and commercial dimensions, were promoted as folk traditions and came to symbolize self-sufficiency and regionalism in an era of increasing homogeneity and mechanization. Though, as Cantwell argues, the revival lacked the overtly political consciousness of the earlier folk song movement, it implicitly critiqued the materialism of postwar America and called for a return to an alternative set of national values.²⁸

The folk revival allowed participants in America's emergent youth culture to appropriate traditional, now latently radical, music in order to position themselves outside the American mainstream but inside its history. At the same time that Americans were using folk music to imaginatively reclaim a sense of national authenticity, the movement incorporated aesthetics drawn from both motorcycle and beat countercultures. ²⁹ In addition to nostalgia for an apparently disappearing "authentic" America, traditional music came to evoke emotion and spontaneity—watchwords of the beat stereotype with which folk music had been identified since the mid-1950s and qualities that bound it loosely to hipness as idealized in earlier years by white fans of African American jazz. ³⁰ Although folk music ceased to draw the mainstream attention that it had attracted during the peak of the revival, traditional musical styles remained an important aspect of

²⁷ Cantwell, 1993: 35-36.

²⁸ Ibid.: 40, 50.

²⁹ Ibid.: 54

³⁰ Ibid.: 48, 57.

counterculture and American youth movements throughout the late-1960s and into the 1970s.

Interestingly, the old-time and blues traditions that continued to attract young Jewish musicians to traditional American musical styles allowed them to play with authentic American identity and socioeconomic marginality simultaneously. As Henry Sapoznik, later an important archivist and performer of klezmer music, recalls from his early years in New York City's old-time scene, "Usually, it seemed, the deeper and twangier the drawl employed by whoever was singing, the more recently their family had come over from Eastern Europe." For budding middle-class Jewish musicians, the sounds of rural America offered security through access to the traditions of their families' adopted country, along with an invigorating sense of difference in the music's unpolished aesthetics and roots in the working-class South. These seemingly contradictory desires a common American identity and social outsiderness—are intertwined throughout American mythology, but they appealed particularly to Jewish musicians coming of age in the 1960s. Out of New York City's folk, bluegrass, and old-time scene came folklorists Ralph Rinzler and John Cohen, American folk musicians like David Bromberg and David Grisman, and eventual klezmer revivalists Hank Sapoznik and Andy Statman.³² Though Jewish musicians proved equally important to the history of postwar pop music and rock and roll, first in a behind-the-scenes role and later as actual stars,

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³¹ Sapoznik, 2006: 167.

³² "Folk" does not accurately reflect the eclecticism or inventiveness of either Bromberg or Grisman, but each has roots in bluegrass and other traditional American styles.

their involvement with traditional musical styles best serves as a compelling precedent for the so-called klezmer revival.³³

Counterculture, Jewish Radicals, and Radical Jews

Along with increasing tensions in the struggle for African American civil rights, the mid- to late-1960s saw American culture transformed by movements protesting America's military involvement in Southeast Asia and promoting the rights of students, women, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups. These developments called into question the choices of previous generations and the value of normative American ways of life. In the same years that identity politics emerged in the American left and brought about a renewed valorization of group particularity, antiwar sentiment and a growing consciousness of America's neo-colonialist ventures prompted some young Jews to reassess their attitudes toward the governments and militaries of America and the State of Israel. This combination of trends eventually paved the way for many of the young American Jews who reinvigorated Yiddishism and klezmer music during the 1970s.

Years before the reemergence of young musicians working in the klezmer tradition, some young American Jews began looking for modes of Jewishness that took into account various aspects of the American counterculture's social and political consciousness. Whereas Jewish students and activists had long been a part of the civil rights, antiwar, and student movements, they increasingly began to search for ways to voice their social and political concerns as Jews and in relation to Jewish problems

³³ A key issue in this history is the tension between appropriation of black musical styles in the service of upward mobility, as described by Michael Rogin in *Black Face*, *White Noise*, and, as Maria Damon argues, the use of black music to opt out of the assimilatory process. Potential subjects for such work would include Lieber and Stoller, numerous songwriters in the Brill Building and nearby offices, New York musicians like Al Kooper and Steve Katz, and Chicago blues rockers such as Mike Bloomfield and Paul Butterfield.

beginning in the late 1960s. These activists saw Jewishness as invisible not only in suburbia, but also within the contemporary left. When the first issue of the radical Jewish newspaper *Brooklyn Bridge* came out in 1971, it addressed this impulse toward visibility in ways that explicitly drew from and reflected the various movements and events that preceded it. The front cover features a collage that combines Hebrew text, subway maps, Egyptian wall paintings, a small map of the Pale of Settlement, and a subtle skull, all surrounding a ruined bank that resembles a temple, itself framing what appears to be an ominous looking solar eclipse. Beneath this collection of images the paper announces:

We are coming home. To Brooklyn. Those of us who have moved away and forgotten our birthplace, and those of us who still live here and always dreamed of getting out. We have been running away too long, cutting ourselves off from out roots too long, and it has stunted us. We are coming home to Brooklyn to live, to love, to begin building a new world, and to be Jewish.

From the first words, the paper's manifesto offers a dramatic counterpoint to the most prominent—and not, for the most part, mutually exclusive—developments in postwar American Jewishness. First, the paper calls into question upwardly mobile and typically suburban Jews' abandonment of former markers of ethnic Jewish identity—symbolized by Brooklyn itself—and working-class Jews' desire to do the same. It urges Jews to live as "full human beings," and not as "assimilated non-entities." This interpretation of assimilated life in white, middle-class America, in which the once desirable status of unmarked is recast as soulless and empty, takes its cues from the black pride, women's, and gay rights movements and their rejection of, respectively, politics of respectability, impossible standards of femininity, and heteronormativity.

³⁴ Brooklyn Bridge, 1971: 1.

The call to resist assimilation, however, was not sounded in the spirit of Jewish chauvinism or mere group preservation. Instead, the founders of *Brooklyn Bridge* invited Jews to take their place among other minoritarian groups, specifically "women, and blacks, and gay people," that would claim status and rights in a re-imagined, recreated, and redeemed American society, in which individuals could realize their full potential through involvement with autonomous identity groups. This vision expresses a desire to recuperate a sense of Jewish otherness through which to maintain a critical stance outside the bounds of mainstream American culture.

The activities of radical Jewish culture were politically, religiously, and ethnically oriented, and involved internal and cross-cultural work. As Michael Staub writes in Torn at the Roots: Jewish Liberalism in Crisis:

The late sixties turn among many American Jews toward deepened religious commitment and ethnic affiliation was in part initiated and nurtured by young leftist Jews who, far from withdrawing from black justice concerns, actually reinvented their Jewish identities in the context of ongoing cross-racial activism. The point for these young radical Jews was neither to advance yet again the liberal impulse toward universalism nor only turn toward particularist concerns but, rather, precisely to refuse such choices and instead dedicate themselves as Jews to the project of "multi-particularism."³⁵

This characterization relates specifically to Staub's history of the Washington, D.C., area's Jews for Urban Justice in the late 1960s, but it encapsulates equally well the goals of *Brooklyn Bridge*, which began publishing just a few years later.

Just as *Brooklyn Bridge* called for Jews to reassess their relationship to mainstream America, it raised questions about the State of Israel. By claiming Brooklyn as their rightful home, the paper's founders reject the Zionist identification of Israel as the natural and permanent homeland of a Jewish nation and the only authentic source of

³⁵ Staub, 2002: 155.

Jewish culture and custom. By asserting the legitimacy and continued relevance of Jewish ways of life developed in Diaspora—even in America and even after the foundation of the State of Israel—the *Brooklyn Bridge* manifesto responded to antiwar and anticolonialist sentiments that addressed America's interference in Vietnam as well as a growing sense of unease over violence toward and marginalization of Palestinians and other Arabs in Israel and the newly occupied territories.

Though no single piece of the cultural processes described in this chapter *made* the klezmer revitalization happen, and the efforts and choices of the earlier contributors should not be overshadowed by the historical and social contexts in which they worked, klezmer's most recent chapters have certainly been influenced by these developments. Along with the continued symbolic value of traditional, folk, or roots musical styles, and a political shift away from the perceived militarism of Israel and mainstream America, the passage of time lessened the pain immediately associated with Yiddish cultural forms. With the rise of traditional musical styles as a marker of both dissent and authenticity in American society, their eventual connection to notions of hipness and counterculture during the 1960s, and the political shifts in Jewish self-presentation among the post-war generation, klezmer appears to have been perfectly primed for a comeback by the mid-

Chapter 5: The So-called Revival

While commentators often frame the various efforts at reconstructing and repopularizing Yiddish dance music in the late 1970s in terms of social, political, and historical trends, the success of the revival also resulted from the enterprising work of several independent groups. More detailed accounts of these years are available elsewhere (see, for instance, Henry Sapoznik's *Klezmer*; Mark Slobin's edited volume, *American Klezmer: Roots and Offshoots*; or the variety of written and multimedia materials that can be accessed through Ari Davidow's indispensable website, *The Klezmer Shack*); what follows is an overview of the major figures and developments, including Andy Statman and Walter Zev Feldmans' works with Dave Tarras, Henry Sapoznik's turn from American folk music to klezmer, the influence of Balkan arts and earlier folk movements on the klezmer revival, and the rise of klezmer- and Yiddish-oriented camps and educational programming.¹

The young musicians who helped sparked a new interest in klezmer music came from a variety of Jewish and musical backgrounds. For both Andy Statman (mandolin and clarinet) and Henry Sapoznik (primarily banjo), the rediscovery of klezmer music followed serious forays into old time and bluegrass. Statman, raised in Queens, had

¹ Davidow, Ari. Davidow's *The Klezmer Shack* has been, for years, the major online resource for klezmer musicians and fans. It features album and concert reviews, essays on a variety of topics, website and other contact information for klezmer bands all over the world, a klezmer classified section, and links to a variety of other online materials

relating to klezmer, Yiddish song, and other genres of Jewish music.

heard *nigunim* during his afternoons in an Orthodox religious school (though he himself was not from a devout family).² By his teens, however, he was hooked on bluegrass mandolin, and played his first professional shows when he was fifteen.³ Although his musical and personal lives have recently immersed him in Jewish music and orthodox observance, Statman is widely credited as an early influence on the newgrass movement—a term that describes efforts to explore fusions between bluegrass and jazz, as well as other genres. In the early 1970s, Statman was in high demand as a Nashville session man, playing with folk, country, and bluegrass acts, and founding his own bluegrass group, Breakfast Special; even at that time, however, he was gravitating towards Jewish music.⁴ After learning a few Jewish dance tunes while studying Armenian and Greek music with Walter Zev Feldman, he devoted himself seriously to klezmer music and pursued the mentorship of Dave Tarras around 1973, which resulting in a late resurgence in Tarras's performing career, as well as the emergence of Statman and Feldman as pivotal figures in the klezmer revival.⁵

Unlike Statman, Henry Sapoznik did grow up in an Orthodox home. His father came from a family of *khazonim* (cantors), and worked in this capacity and as a choir director for Catskills resorts. In his historical chronicle, *Klezmer!: Jewish Music from Old World to Our World*, Sapoznik tells the story of Yiddish music in America, including

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² Rogovoy, 2000: 83. *Nigunim* are wordless vocal tunes usually associated with Hasidic prayer, now popular among many Jews for liturgical and secular use.

³ Statman, 2008.

⁴ Rogovoy, 2000: 86; Feldman, 2002: 188.

⁵ Feldman, 2002: 188.

⁶ Sapoznik, 2006: 151-153, 161.

his own journey to klezmer through American roots musics. Before describing his introduction to old-time and bluegrass, he recounts his 1966 bar mitzvah, for which his mother hired the clarinetist Rudy Tepel. Though Sapoznik would later recognize Tepel as a one of the great repositories of the American klezmer repertoire, he was mortified by the music at the time. "He was playing klezmer music; I wanted rock 'n' roll. My assessment of the entertainment was that round men were playing square music." These words suggest that, for Sapoznik at least, Jewish music lacked the excitement and freedom of contemporary American music.

Within a few years, Sapoznik had become enthralled with American "traditional music." His accounts of New York's late-1960s folk scene never fail to emphasize the centrality of first- and second-generation American Jews. Though Sapoznik's account may reflect his rhetorical goals as much as the actual predominance of Jewish musicians in the New York folk scene, he certainly had company: mandolin virtuoso David Grisman, folklorist and mandolin player Ralph Rinzler, and fellow revivalist Andy Statman, along with many others, all got their starts in Greenwich Village and Washington Square Park, and all came from Jewish families. For Sapoznik, the skills he developed later as a student of old-time musicians Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham and as a collector of 78-rpm records were soon being applied to his ethnomusicological work with surviving klezmorim. In addition to playing with bands like Kapelye and the Youngers of Zion, he founded KlezKamp, wrote one of the first books on klezmer history,

⁷ Ibid.: 2006: 166.

⁸ Ibid.: 167.

⁹ Ibid. 170-174.

and produced several compilations of klezmer and other traditional musical styles. His story, like Statman's, reflects the extent to which various musicians' interest in American musical traditions fed into the klezmer revitalization of the 1970s and '80s.

During the same period that these New York musicians were investigating the klezmer tradition, a San Francisco Bay area group called The Klezmorim took shape. Inspired by local professor Martin Schwartz's collection of classic klezmer recordings, the band's 1976 and 1978 recordings announced a renewed interest in klezmer music around the same time that Statman and Feldman's *Jewish Klezmer Music* came out. An excellent marker of the group's integration into the larger West Coast roots music and counterculture scene, the cover of The Klezmorim's first album, *Streets of Gold*, features a Robert Crumb cartoon of a klezmer band performing on a dock across the water from the Statue of Liberty. Crumb, who is also Jewish, was at the time himself pursuing a career in old-time music.¹⁰

While many klezmer revivalists came to the music through old-time and bluegrass, a number of others—including Michael Alpert, who has played with Kapelye, Brave Old World, and various other groups—came to klezmer through the Balkan music and dance movement. Indeed, many early klezmer revival performances were supported in part through New York City's Balkan Arts Association, now the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. Though participants in the Balkan music revival became receptive to klezmer as a specifically Jewish genre, klezmer artist and scholar Walter Zev Feldman

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¹⁰ The Klezmorim, 1989; Liberman and Gray, 1996-1999.

¹¹ The Klezmorim, 1989: liner notes; Feldman, 2002: 189.

reports that when he first became interested in klezmer music, friends with interests in Balkan music did not even recognize Jewish music as a distinct category. ¹²

Additional resources and methods for the revival work of the 1970s and 1980s drew from the legacy of the American folk revival. Henry Sapoznik, for instance, was able to take advantage of the federal government's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), which allowed him to archive early recordings and recorded radio programs and to conduct interviews with surviving Jewish musicians. (In a way, this legislation worked much like the earlier folklore infrastructure that enabled important work done during and after the New Deal.) While Statman and Feldman developed their mentorship with Dave Tarras, Sapoznik worked to get golden-age 78-rpm records rereleased and studied with klezmer musician Leon Schwartz. (14)

In 1979, Hankus Netsky, himself from a klezmer family, was beginning a group at the New England Conservatory of Music that would come to be known as the Klezmer Conservatory Band and that would eventually launch the careers of Don Byron, Frank London, and a host of other major klezmer and jazz musicians. Frank London, a founding member of the Klezmer Conservatory Band and current trumpet player for the Klezmatics, recalls learning the music by ear from tapes and records. For London, "the focus was on trying to play the music, trying to play it well, trying to get better on the

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¹² Feldman, 2008.

¹³ Ibid.: 174

¹⁴ Sapoznik, 2006: 176-178

¹⁵ Netsky, 2002a: 21; London, 2002: 206-208.

nuances." ¹⁶ Though other people often interpreted this early work as an effort to recuperate a deep musical legacy, London points out that many of the musicians were not Jewish, and learned the music for the sake of its technical challenges and aesthetic complexities. He recognizes, however, the timeliness of the klezmer revival. "There seemed to be an unquenchable thirst for Yiddish music, as if it could fill the void created when American Jews divested themselves of their ethnicity in order to assimilate into the mass culture."¹⁷ This desire for a non-Israeli Jewish music, not to mention a post-1960s consciousness that equated assimilation into middle-class white culture with emptiness, was the result of decades of cultural priming.

Throughout the 1980s, klezmer continued to spread. In addition to the emergence of more klezmer ensembles, new contemporary albums, compilations of classic recordings, and the rediscovery of older musicians with roots in klezmer and Jewish music, programs devoted to klezmer and Yiddishkeit offered new resources for cultural and musical literacy. Meeting every December since 1985, KlezKamp attracts young musicians interested in learning to play the music from experts in the genre and older participants excited for a week of immersion in their native language and music. In order to accommodate both groups of campers, the event offers musical instruction as well as more general classes on history, music, and folklore. 18 KlezKamp also served as an incubator for the growing community of gay and lesbian klezmer musicians, who found the event welcoming, in part because of the leadership of Lorin Sklamburg—lead singer

¹⁶ London, 2002: 207.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sapoznik, 2002: 185

of the Klezmatics and an openly gay man—but also because the emerging klezmer scene harbored neither the political left's anti-Zionism (occasionally a front for anti-Semitic sentiments) nor mainstream Jewish organizations' often uninviting stance towards homosexuality. 19

By the 1990s, new crops of young bands and reconfigurations of personnel from the early revival groups yielded klezmer supergroups like Brave Old World, projects and ensembles devoted to replicating pre-immigration European klezmer, and an array of groups using jazz and other musical styles to test the boundaries of klezmer. Itzhak Perlman's mid-1990s tours with Brave Old World, The Klezmatics, The Klezmer Conservatory Band, and Andy Statman further raised the profile of klezmer in North America and around the world. Furthermore, festivals and camps like KlezFest in St. Petersburg, Russia, Toronto's Ashkenaz music festival, the heavily klezmer-oriented Cracow Jewish Culture Festival, and KlezKanada, the Canadian summertime counterpart to KlezKamp, established a glocal circuit of annual klezmer events. 20 Emerging out of a small movement of interested musicians in the early 1970s, and responding to a historically situated set of desires and discourses, klezmer came to be a visible and viable realm of Jewish culture by the turn of the twenty-first century.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 185.

²⁰ Ibid.: 185-186.

Chapter 6: Tradition, Innovation, and Continuity or: Issues Around Authenticity

In the klezmer world, as in any discourse surrounding group-specific styles of aesthetic or expressive practice, questions of authenticity abound. Furthermore, various conceptions about and attitudes toward tradition and innovation—all enmeshed in overarching conversations around the authentic—are equally crucial to understanding klezmer's role in contemporary Jewish identity and American music more generally. This chapter will first address klezmer's status as a heritage product and the popular understandings that cast the music as a point of access to Jewishness, both past and present. Next, the attitudes and words of professional musicians, all oriented toward the "traditionalist" end of the klezmer spectrum, will demonstrate how contemporary performers typically articulate more nuanced understandings of authenticity and tradition, approaching their work with an attitude of reflexive authenticity—a stance that acknowledges the contingent nature of their aesthetic priorities without abandoning the commitment to reconstruct older repertoires. From there, the examination of authenticity will point to the possibility that aspects of group-specific communication, though never static in form or meaning, may reflect relatively stable and continuous stylistic features that are unconsciously transmitted as a result of human beings' instinctive desire for imitation and repetition. Finally, the chapter will address the relationship between tradition, innovation (the counterpoint to conceptions of static tradition and a necessity for the continued relevance of klezmer to twenty-first century listeners), and continuity (a

claim through which innovators frame their work in order to give it powerful and sometimes surprising meanings).

Klezmer as a Heritage Production

The front cover of Seth Rogovoy's *The Essential Klezmer* includes the following subtitle: "A Music Lover's Guide to Jewish Roots and Soul Music, from the Old World to the Jazz Age to the Downtown Avant-Garde." This prominently placed phrase identifies klezmer as a "roots music," equates it with an unrelated African American genre, and foreshadows a narrative of the music's history that links European klezmer repertoires to Jewish-American hybrid styles of the inter- and poswar periods, as well as to more recent fusions of klezmer with experimental jazz and other styles. Putting aside the question of how klezmer is or is not Jewish "soul music," the idea of "roots" and the invocation of the "Old World" immediately mark klezmer as an artifact of European Jewish life. This seemingly unavoidable reference to klezmer's origins is not incorrect; it merely demonstrates how the music is inescapably framed by its historical origins. From oversimplified newspaper articles that reflect journalists' usual shock at discovering "old" and "new" coexisting in any context to the more nuanced take exhibited by KlezKanada, which explicitly avoids treating klezmer and Yiddish culture as a "symbol of a lost world, or as a 'duty' to perpetuate," the music remains tied to historical understandings of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe.

This is not surprising, given that, to some extent, klezmer only achieved generic status during an era of conscious retrieval and recuperation. As a result, klezmer's connections to shared memory and past ways of life not only inform contemporary

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¹ Rogovoy, 2000.

interpretations of the music, but also influence its market value. Of course, the music has rich aesthetic value as well; amateur, semi-professional, and non-Jewish musicians would not devote themselves to learning and playing klezmer if it did not invite both technical virtuosity and emotional expressiveness. Part of the music's cultural and economic viability, however, relies on what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a prominent scholar of culture, performance, and folklore (Jewish and general), calls a "heritage claim," the process through which heritage productions legitimate themselves through "recourse to the past."² A heritage production, whether an American Civil War reenactment or a klezmer concert, partially depends upon, but also produces and potentially transforms, the ways in which past events have been fixed in popular representation and collective memory. This "fixing" is what makes past occurrences useable for the present, and it determines the potential meanings/meaningfulness of the subsequent heritage production. Thus, the supposed traditionality of a piece of music is never an objective statement, but a subjective claim that holds certain eras, regions, and events as standards, and privileges those aspects of former performances that continue to be relevant in the present and have, as a result, been foregrounded through discourse and reproduction.

In addition to the essentialist assumption—usually implicit in the production, marketing, and consumption of heritage—that particular objects or practices naturally and neatly embody aspects of group-specific beliefs, experiences, and ways of life, American discourses about multiculturalism generally take for granted the proposition that consuming an ethnic, racial, or religious group's reified pieces of culture provides

² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988: 149-150.

access to its perspectives and experiences.³ As a result of this type of discourse, the value of klezmer comes to rest in its supposed ability to contain some kernel of genuine Jewishness that audiences can receive through listening. Subsequently, performers and promoters of the music have a vested interest in demonstrating contemporary klezmer's authentic reproduction of and continuity with past repertoires.

Reflexive Authenticity

Though this admittedly skeptical read on the commoditizing tendencies of American multiculturalism seems either to dismantle the notion of authenticity altogether or render it heavily context-dependent, contemporary klezmer performers, as well as current scholars of music and folklore, present alternative understandings of authenticity that take a reflexive view while continuing to defend the value of shared practice and repeated performance. Within the umbrella genre of klezmer, performers and groups vary as much in the importance they place on literally replicating past repertoires and styles as in the historical and geographical sources to which they look for their standards. Even among performers whose personal tastes lean toward studiously cultivated traditionality, this preference is explained in sophisticated terms. Walter Zev Feldman, who has been described as practicing "a rather austere philosophy of authenticity," articulates the position as well as anyone: 4

There is an element in me that values literal repetition as an important part of authenticity. That is to say, knowing a corpus, knowing a repertoire. It is a bit

³ Goldschmidt, 2004: 164-165. These pieces of culture include both repeated actions and types of objects that are "reified" in the sense that producers and consumers of heritage come to think of them as 'of a type' and as phenomena or artifacts that, removed from their original context, continue to point back to and offer tangible evidence of their cultural sources.

⁴ Slobin, 2003: 121.

different with music and dance. In dance, it is not just a repertoire; it is an understanding of the body. With music it is a repertoire, sure. And it is also an understanding of ornaments and techniques on an instrument. Below that, though, on a deeper level, it is a kind of expressive attitude . . . that you find both in the music and in the dance.⁵

Feldman clearly recognizes that his own tastes do not reflect an absolute or unchanging sense of Jewish aesthetics, but that they developed from his early exposure to Yiddish music and dance as it appeared in the Bessarabian landsmanshaft culture of his father, and from his relationship with Dave Tarras, who was from a nearby area. What he values in modeling his performances after his memories of these two figures are the ways in which their aesthetic choices relayed to him styles of movement and sound that are authentic in that they begin with the unconscious but creative "choices of the people," especially in contrast to ideologically driven or formally defined "packages" of culture. Putting aside for a moment the nature of this supposedly unconscious creativity, it will be instructive to consider another conversation that revolved around reflexive takes on authenticity in klezmer.

During a program called "Ask Drs. Klez" at the Winter 2008 KlezKanada weekend in Montreal, instructors Josh Horowitz, Cookie Segelstein, Deborah Strauss, and Jeff Warschauer—all accomplished performers interested in pre-immigration klezmer music—fielded questions from a group of participants. The instructors, sitting

⁵ Feldman, 2008.

⁶ Ibid.; Feldman, 2002: 189.

⁷ Feldman, 2008.

⁸ Along with other projects and collaborations, Horowitz and Segelstein perform with the bands Veretski Pass and Budowitz, and Strauss and Warschauer constitute the Strauss-Warschauer duo.

on one side of a circle of chairs arranged in a sparsely decorated performance space, addressed a group of around twenty students from age twelve to late middle-age. The conversation wound its way from logistical questions about using eye contact to communicate during a performance and how to move from reading to memorizing music toward questions of technique and musicological theory. Responding to a question about how to play outside of standard musical modes while maintaining a Jewish sound, Segelstein and Horowitz pointed out that none of the modes common to klezmer music are exclusively Jewish and that they all tend to be open rather than rigid systems. From there, the conversation moved toward a more general discussion of what sounds "Jewish" and how that standard varies across eras and regions. According to Horowitz, the standards for musical Jewishness in Eastern Europe were contingent on local traditions. "As far as making something sound Jewish, it's a very interesting thing, because, as you know, people can be from thirty-five kilometers apart and say, 'that's not Jewish. That's not how we did it. That's not what I hear.'"

Segelstein and Deborah Strauss raised similar points shortly thereafter, addressing differences between the traditional leanings of revival-oriented klezmer musicians and older generations of musicians and listeners, who were often accustomed to the smoother styles of Jewish music that were predominant from the 1950s until the revival. Segelstein recounted returning from her first KlezKamp to play for her father: "I'm putting *kreykhtsn* everywhere, and he goes, 'Oy Gott. What is that?' It didn't sound Jewish to him. Because I put so much reapplied tradition in it, that he didn't recognize it." ⁹

⁹Krekhtsn is plural for krekhts, which refers to a basic ornamental feature of klezmer variously interpreted as imitating a moan, sob, or sigh.

Strauss brought up a similar relationship between Peter Sokolow and younger musicians who began reconstructing an early-twentieth century klezmer sound in the 1980s and '90s.

Pete Sokolow, do you all know who he is? Wonderful, brilliant pianist, arranger, New York club date Jewish player. Played with Tarras. But coming out of the '50s and '60s playing the bar mitzvahs, playing the weddings, [he] has a very particular idea of what Jewish . . . I don't know if he would call it klezmer—what Jewish music is. [When] we got onto the scene and were learning from recordings from the 1910s and 1920s, and playing in this kind of older style, he took issue with it.

After describing Sokolow's former tendency to contradict what she taught her violin students at KlezKanada, Strauss acknowledged that these conflicts have subsided and even turned into a joke.

He has basically reached a point, that—it's extraordinary—where he has now started to say, "well this was *my* context, and you guys are looking into this context" [the other musicians remark here on how he calls their style "European"], and he speaks about what we're doing with respect. At the same time, I'm listening to him and speaking about that milieu and that context with great respect.

In other words, and as Jeff Warschauer pointed out, more recent musicians have paradoxically used archival recordings and fieldwork to reconstruct a klezmer aesthetic that sounds archaic to some of the older players that are still around. Additionally, klezmer now has a secure enough position in contemporary Jewish culture that these differences in taste are no longer matters of such serious contention, and that practitioners of the music can acknowledge the contingency of their own preferences.

The above conversation suggests that many contemporary klezmer musicians approach the music with a sense of reflexive authenticity, an understanding of Jewishness that avoids the untenable stance of essentialism without reducing Jewish cultural choices to mere arbitrariness. Stuart Z. Charmé characterizes the goal of such a project as

"maintaining an honest view of the process by which we construct the identities and traditions we need to survive." By invoking usefulness, even necessity, this model attempts to ground the potentially arbitrary preferences of a group in the imaginative work that shared behaviors perform. 11

Beyond Reflexivity: The Possibilities of Ethnomimesis

As a performer and instructor of klezmer music and Yiddish dance, Walter Zev Feldman takes very seriously the detailed cultivation and transmission of earlier styles of performance. He speaks proudly of moments in which older audience members recognize nuances of their own parents' or grandparents' dance styles in his work, and frames such moments as testaments to the perseverance of minute and unarticulated—though still familiar—aesthetic preferences within group culture. Additionally, his accounts of meeting older dancers who witnessed as children, but were not trained in, Yiddish dance and who have recently been able to "reactivate" their "latent" knowledge of particular styles of movement attest to the power of the human drive toward imitation.

I have a very good dancer in Israel, who is my age, who had seen . . . this [sort of] movement at a kibbutz with . . . women from Eastern Europe, and she had done nothing with it for the next forty-something years of her life, but somehow, seeing me, there was a creative response. She is doing things that are very authentic, not just imitating me, but somehow, seeing me made her remember things she had seen when she was young, which she did not actually do. Now, she is a good dancer; she is a trained dancer, so she very quickly understood what that movement was, and she's musical. I've even seen this in the states too. ¹²

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¹⁰ Charmé, 2000: 150.

¹¹ According to this formulation, function is a primary determinant of what practices and viewpoints a group adopts and maintains. A self-conscious account of those choices, however, raises problems of its own for anyone wishing to transmit those traditions into the future. In particular, the notion of survival assumes first that group identification is desirable; it also begs the question of what survival even means.

¹² Feldman, 2008.

Among scholars of klezmer, Walter Zev Feldman's professed interest in the "unconscious choices of the people" points to a level of culture (sometimes described as habit) at which a group transmits elements of its behavioral repertoire—often danced or para-linguistic movement—without explicitly identifying the aesthetic value, let alone associational meaning, of these shared tendencies.

Feldman's professed interest in the "unconscious choices of the people" exemplifies a broader impulse to locate elements of expressive culture—deployed unknowingly and recognized instantaneously in the flow of human interaction—that appear to be performed and transmitted at a level below the ideologically driven and explicitly codified do's and don'ts of shared behavior.

Because reflexive approaches to authenticity—at least as articulated by Charmé—would seem to emphasize the functional nature of repeated group practice, they neither account for the subtlety and perseverance of group-specific patterns in arenas of aesthetics, behavior, or experience, nor justify the widespread sense that traditions—one's own, at least—should be carried on, even when their practicality or efficacy has come into question. Furthermore, by foregrounding the symbolic value of shared behavior, this stance risks calling attention to the historically contingent and perhaps arbitrary links between traditional practice and interpreted meaning. By contrast, if not in reaction to, efforts to address the more immediate aspects of shared behavior ground discussions of tradition and authenticity by demonstrating the human tendency toward unconscious imitation, even in the absence of recognition or explicit framing.

Scholars of African-diasporic communities have written extensively on stylistic commonalities that result both from the continued reemergence of apparently submerged

or inactive repertoires of movement, sound, and visual art, and also in reaction to parallel histories of exploitation, violence, and resistance. Although diasporic groups provide excellent test cases for examining the possibility of such phenomena, as well as other issues of identity, narrative, and continuity, such attempts face myriad political and methodological pitfalls. Writing on the difficulties of locating and articulating "any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling" among African diasporic communities, Paul Gilroy acknowledges the general suspicion that anti-essentialist scholars hold toward such an aim. Furthermore,

the situation is rendered even more complex by the fact that the fragile psychological, emotional, and cultural correspondences which connect diaspora populations in spite of their manifest differences are often apprehended only fleetingly and in ways that persistently confound the protocols of academic orthodoxy. ¹³

Gilroy's objective is not to isolate the source of African diasporic commonalities to a single essence, but to acknowledge the continued relevance of certain shared cultural patterns. In spite of the elusive nature of these connections, Gilroy notes that "a great body of work" supports "the proposition that some cultural, religious and linguistic affiliations can be identified even if their contemporary political significance remains disputed."¹⁴

While Gilroy and other writers have established the importance of often unarticulated but recurrent microbehavioral repertoires that mark expressive culture throughout the African diaspora, other scholars have sought to address the foundational nature of human beings' mimetic drive within all cultures. According to this argument,

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¹³ Gilroy, 1993: 81.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 81.

our innate capacity for and appreciation of imitation serve as the engines that drive all manner of cooperative and collective endeavors. Robert Cantwell, in his work on folklore and folklife in the United States, has used the term "ethnomimesis" to describe a "social form" of imitation "that shapes us as social beings and as personalities." Like Walter Feldman's privileging of shared but unarticulated aesthetic choices over "packages of culture," Cantwell's ethnomimesis occurs at the level of "human social interaction itself," which, though still constrained by social context, eludes the absolute determinism posited by "the social-constructionist framework."

It transpires at a level well below formal and informal practices, prevailing authority, and powerful institutions through, if you will, a God-given sensory and imaginative capability by which we perceive, imitate, interpret, fashion, and figure-forth and reproduce our social selves by means of sensory cues mostly inaccessible to empirical observation but unceasingly at work in social interactions of all sorts. ¹⁸

In addition to citing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and finding evidence in musical performance, team sports, and the chance meeting of two strangers at a party, Cantwell supports his theory with recent neurobiological research into the importance of "mirror neurons," brain cells that "specialize in carrying out and understanding not just the actions of others but their intentions, the social meaning of their behavior and their emotions."

¹⁵ Cantwell, 2008: xi.

¹⁶ Feldman, 2008.

¹⁷ Cantwell, 2008: xi.

¹⁸ Ibid.: xi-xii.

¹⁹ Cantwell quotes Bourdieu, explaining *habitus* as "the 'durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (xii); Blakeslee, 2006.

Though Cantwell focuses less on the nuances of shared microbehaviors than on the general tendency toward and socio-political power of ethnomimetic phenomena, he describes a process similar to that identified by other scholars interested in the unconscious transmission of aesthetic preference and microbehavioral imitation. For cultural theorists investigating the role of music, this line of inquiry opens up new possibilities for the difficult task of describing how music becomes meaningful. Cantwell and Gilroy, among others, want to assert that something 'real' happens in the transmission of in-group commonalities and the persistence of inter-group similarities, and that this mysterious happening precedes or is otherwise independent of the discursive structures through which the resultant preferences or practices will later be deployed. What results is a culture-studies grail quest for "the immediate"—that interpersonal event, irreducible to mere association or "the tyranny of meaning," in which an expressive act does something, prior to or beyond the contingent and contested level of representation.²⁰ As Gilroy suggests in his acknowledgment that the "contemporary political significance" of any such phenomena remains "disputed," even if some manner of unmediated expression were definitively locatable, its existence, like the expressive patterns it makes possible, could not remain free from political contestation. That is, even operating under the assumption that an unconscious drive toward coordinated action and direct imitation makes possible the whole range of shared expressive behaviors through which humanity's biological and material conditions and actions come to have symbolic value,

²⁰ Barthes, 1977. Roland Barthes attempts to identify the physically derived aspect of vocal music that is experienced without semiotic mediation in order to speak of music's materiality, that aspect that escapes the "tyranny of meaning." Fred Moten expands on this idea in the chapter "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream" (Moten, 2003). Although I cannot claim to think or write in the same vein as these authors, their efforts to interrogate music and its effects bear some relation to this investigation.

those behaviors *and any theory of their non-ideological origins* can never entirely escape interpretation within the very systems of meaning they allow to occur in the first place.

This digression into the mimetic aspects of common aesthetic values, though admittedly esoteric, serves as a useful ingress to the slippery topic of meaning and meaningfulness. Furthermore, as an attempt to perceive an element of immediacy in the performance and enjoyment of music and dance, this discussion grows out of an impulse, both artistically and academically manifested, to portray traditions—or the transmission of those shared preferences and practices commonly referred to as such—as in some sense autonomous of the associational values that they accrete in their real-world deployment. Though the notion of an unconscious mimetic quality of klezmer and Yiddish dance pushes certain boundaries of accessibility, it provides fruitful counterpoints to other understandings of klezmer, whether critical or radicalizing, that may overemphasize the music's associational meanings.

<u>Tradition</u>

Moving away from theoretical questions of authenticity to the more manageable task of describing contemporary klezmer musicians' attitudes toward tradition, it is interesting to note that while students and instructors at KlezKanada generally acknowledge the contingency and contestability of claims to authenticity, they continue to emphasize mastery of earlier styles and repertoires. Students gain recognition from teachers and acceptance from one another not only for virtuosity, but for an ability to display their talent in ways that others recognize as within pre-existing stylistic frameworks. This being said, students and their bands do have choices in terms of what models to follow. When an ensemble of young musicians brought in a song to workshop

in a master class with Josh Horowitz and Cookie Segelstein, for example, the instructors listened to the piece but did not begin offering suggestions until after they had asked the band what era and region of klezmer performance they thought of as their source. Based on the response—late nineteenth-century Europe—Horowitz and Segelstein tailored their advice toward replicating that style.

Among professional musicians, even those whose work pushes (or breaks) the boundaries of what earlier generations would recognize as klezmer music, familiarity with traditional ways of playing are seen as a prerequisite for innovation. Deborah Strauss, a regular teacher at KlezKanada who has been playing klezmer since 1985, problematizes the term "traditionalist," but still makes a clear distinction between klezmer—whether traditional or boundary-pushing—that is "honest, deep, and well-grounded" and "noodling in a *freygish* mode." According to Bob Cohen, a fiddle player who spends most of the year in Hungary performing and pursuing research on European klezmer music,

The Klezmatics and a few other bands have good reason to [mix jazz elements into their klezmer performances], but most do it because they really don't do the cultural homework that you need if you want to call your music 'Jewish music.' They want the audience to listen to them. I want the audience to listen to the music of my people.²²

These musicians, like many of their peers, react to the explosion of bands playing klezmer or klezmer-influenced music who may take tunes from older repertoires, but that have not developed a nuanced understanding of klezmer music's stylistic details.

According to a rigidly traditionalist view, this phenomenon threatens more informed

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²¹ Strom, 2002: 259.

²² Ibid.: 255.

musicians' livelihood by introducing extra competition and miseducating audiences, and weakens the musical tradition by neglecting historically grounded particularities of the music. Though few contemporary musicians would fully endorse such a stance, the emphasis on familiarity with the tradition may demonstrate this sort of anxiety.

Innovation

Though familiarity with the stylistic details of historical klezmer continues to be an important value among most klezmer performers, contemporary klezmer musicians and those musicians who draw from klezmer and Yiddish song without counting themselves within the genre per se produce much more than an approximation of earlier sounds. The diverse innovations occurring in and around the genre of klezmer respond to necessity, combining aspects of traditional forms and techniques with novel elements of other musical styles in order to make klezmer more accessible to contemporary audiences. Musicians also push the boundaries of klezmer in order to continue the types of change that happened in every other period of the music's history, often as a conscious reaction to what Cookie Segelstein described as "an unnatural sleep." Finally, it is important to note that, although a number of performers consistently emphasize some level of traditionality or innovation, they differ as to what aspects of the music should be open to tinkering, sometimes in surprising ways.

Among the major changes that have occurred since the reemergence of klezmer as an important Jewish musical genre are general trends toward faster tempos and more pronounced rhythms. In the context of concert performances and with the absence of large numbers of experienced dancers, klezmer bands have sped up faster songs in order

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²³ This phrase came from the "Ask Drs. Klez" workshop at the KlezKanada's 2008 winter session in Montreal.

to demonstrate their virtuosity without fear of exhausting their audiences. This tendency has been reversed, somewhat, through the efforts of tradition-oriented researchers and committed dancers and dance instructors. A Nonetheless, in some current professional playing, and certainly in the early recordings of the klezmer revival, this acceleration adds to a frenetic energy that makes sense to audiences accustomed to bebop, bluegrass, and rock and roll. S

In addition to acceleration, contemporary klezmer tends toward a heavier emphasis on rhythmic elements than during earlier eras. This change occurred across the twentieth century and reflects changing priorities in the popular music of America and the rest of the world. As the Moldavian bulgar style overtook other forms of freylakh from the 1920s to the 1950s, part of its appeal to Jewish audiences newly acquainted with jazz likely resulted from the prominent rhythm, which emphasizes the downbeat of one, the upbeat of two, and the downbeat of four in each measure (think of the first three notes of the "Bo Diddley beat" in early rock and roll). Beginning in this era and continuing into the 1960s, the popularity of Latin musical styles encouraged a variety of Latin-Jewish hybrids, the most famous of which may be Irving Fields' *Bagels and Bongos*. ²⁶

²⁴ Among others, Avia Moore has attempted to intervene on behalf of slower tempos, offering a dance class specifically tailored to instrumentalists at the 2008 winter session of KlezKanada.

²⁵ The Klezmorim, 1989. Cartoon soundtracks, which contemporary listeners not uncommonly associate with klezmer, play a small role in this process. In the liner notes to the reissue of the Klezmorim's earliest recordings, woodwind player and founding member Lev Lieberman invokes klezmer as a missing link between Eastern European folk music, "Depression-era cartoon soundtracks, early jazz, and the music of Gershwin, Weil, and Prokofiev."

Like more recent attempts to assimilate elements of klezmer into tunes with rhythms drawn from reggae and hip-hop, these projects have all aimed to produce music that is at once identifiably Jewish, musically effective, and accessible to audiences whose tastes and expectations are based in non-Jewish forms of popular music.

Musicians also incorporate outside elements into klezmer in order to simulate what klezmer might sound like if it had continued developing in conversation with contemporaneous styles during the 1960s and 1970s. Alicia Svigals, founding member of the Klezmatics, has characterized their innovations as a way of imagining continuity into Jewish music by creating the kinds of Jewish music hybrids that might have emerged if there had been no Nazi genocide. If that were the case, "there would be Yiddish rock bands today, playing the kind of music we play."

Among the most novel creators of klezmer hybrid music, Montreal DJ and multi-instrumentialist Josh Dolgin, who creates music under the moniker SoCalled, maintains a surprisingly traditionalist stance toward many aspects of Jewish music. His albums include *HipHopKhasene*, a joint project for which he reproduced and remixed the full musical sequence of an Eastern European Jewish wedding with violinist Sophie Solomon, and *The SoCalled Seder*, which is structured around the longstanding structure of a ritual Passover dinner and masterfully combines Passover narration from mid-twentieth century LP's, newly recorded vocals and instrumentals, verses by underground rappers, samples from classic klezmer and cantorial sources, and other miscellaneous sounds. In a 2006

²⁶ Temkin, 2009. Matt Temkin's master's thesis, available online, considers midtwentieth century Jewish musical hybrids and provides in-depth explorations of this and other contemporaneous records.

²⁷ Alicia Svigals, quoted in Shandler, 2006: 144.

interview, Dolgin maintained that, despite his novel approach to the music, his favorite recordings for listening and source material remain 78-rpm records. At the 2008 KlezKanada Summer Institute, he again asserted a traditionalist stance during a singing class on Friday night, emphasizing that *nigunim*, the wordless melodies popularized by Hasidic Jews, should be sung with their original syllabic patterns intact. For Dolgin, like other current klezmer musicians, innovation is a necessary aspect of the music, but the value of traditional source materials to new projects lies as much in the stylistic details of klezmer performance as in the melody, mode, or general feel.

Continuity

In part, the seeming tension between traditionalism and innovation is resolved through an emphasis on continuity. Though the issue of continuity was subject to academic debate in the early years of klezmer scholarship, experts generally agree that current practitioners' efforts to document and revive earlier styles have successfully reestablished klezmer's stylistic roots in the past and its viability into the future. Musicians and others invoke continuity to legitimate contemporary klezmer commercially and culturally—both as a heritage production and an authentic marker of Jewish identity, if any distinction can be made between these modes of legitimacy. Rhetorics of continuity also acknowledge, implicitly or explicitly, that earlier klezmer music was never static, thus encouraging a more sophisticated view of the musical past and further legitimating current innovation in and around the genre of klezmer.

²⁸ Dolgin, 2006.

²⁹ *Nigunim* use a variety of vocal sounds—bai buh-bai, dai duh-dai, lai luh-lai, etc.—depending mostly on location of origin.

The personal histories and musical creations of Elaine Hoffman-Watts and her daughter, Susan Watts, provide particularly interesting examples of this discourse. Hoffman-Watts grew up with all sorts of musicians in her family. Her father played a wide repertoire of specifically Jewish tunes—including original compositions—for weddings and other events; he also played in orchestras and accompanied silent films. One of his brothers, in turn, was a successful jazz musician. Elaine Hoffman-Watts grew up with Philadelphia's unique style of klezmer, and became a professional percussionist, but never had an opportunity to play with one of the all-male wedding bands. Instead, she worked in classical music for most of her performing career. In the 1990s, when her daughter Susan Watts came into her own as a trumpet player and singer, Hoffman-Watts made her return to klezmer when the two attended KlezKamp together.

Hoffman-Watts's 2005 album, *I Remember Klezmer: The Art of Klezmer*Drumming announces Elaine's—and Susan's, by extension—inherited stake in klezmer music right in its title. Furthermore, the first song, the "I'll Just Keep Going Rhumba," uses sampling technology to incorporate one of Jacob Hoffman's virtuosic xylophone doinas into his daughter's and granddaughter's performance, along with snippets of sound from live performances and interviews. The track begins with an announcer's voice speaking over crowd noise: "Ladies and gentlemen, please, Elaine Hoffman-Watts on the drums." A rhumba beat commences, performed by Elaine and a collection of top percussionists from the more recent klezmer scene. This is soon fleshed out by the sample from her father and a trumpet line by her daughter. After a minute or so, another sample from a live event cuts in, again from an announcer. "Attention please, will you give your undivided attention to Mister Jake Hoffman and his daughter, who are going to

give you a little medley." Among the samples that close the song is Elaine's voice repeating, "I'll just keep going." For the most part, the rest of the album features catchy arrangements developed around melodies from Jacob Hoffman's notebook of klezmer sheet music and performed by Elaine, Susan, and a group of young musicians that includes trombonist Rachel Lemisch, a fellow heiress to the Philadelphia klezmer legacy.

In popular representations and more sophisticated discussions, musicians and other commentators constantly frame klezmer in terms of authenticity, tradition, and continuity. Because klezmer's general value and the value of any particular performance emerge partially through perceived connections to a sense of common heritage, much is at stake in these acts of framing. Contemporary klezmer musicians, especially within the KlezKanada community, attempt to strike a balance between traditionalism and innovation by emphasizing deep familiarity with older ways of playing as a necessary compliment to the music's natural growth.

Though the music known as klezmer constitutes a distinct genre by virtue of musicological features and repertoire, conversations about klezmer are more likely to emphasize a historical understanding of its role in Jewish communal life; narratives of its transmission, marginalization, and reemergence; and commentary on its contemporary relevance and popularity in Jewish culture. Regardless of theoretical issues that arise from these ways of speaking, most people for whom klezmer is important continue to think of the music as a point of access for Jewish history and identity. Which version of history and what kind of Jewish identity klezmer evokes, however, depend on other areas of discourse and further questions of how klezmer is framed.

Chapter 7: Normative Versus Subversive Rhetorics

At my first klezmer concert, the St. Louis stop on one of Itzhak Perlman's tours with the top klezmer bands of the day, I saw upper-class women in furs dancing with bearded Jewish hippies sporting yarmulkes and tie-dye. Outside of, perhaps, Hasidim, every segment of the American Jewish community seemed to be represented. At twelve, I was hardly aware of the religious and political fissures that run through American Jewish culture, but I could still recognize an astounding level of diversity. Naturally, Perlman's superstar status accounts for some of the concert's appeal, but the music's potential as both a normative and a subversive element of American Jewish culture also contributed to the array of Jewish cultures that were on display that night.

Klezmer as Normative

Since the so-called "revival," klezmer has emerged as a primary signifier of Jewishness. The reinsertion of klezmer and klezmer-influenced styles into the American Jewish soundscape has been facilitated by the standard narrative of its supposed death and rebirth, its pervasiveness in media representations of Jewishness, and the financial involvement of (more or less) mainstream Jewish organizations in the revitalization and preservation of both klezmer and Yiddish language and culture. Though identification with and support of the State of Israel remains a dominant uniting force for American Jews, klezmer music and dance compete for attention and resources, and have certainly, to some degree, displaced other diasporic musical traditions.

In any narrative of European Jewish culture, Nazi genocide is an impossible topic to avoid. When popular representations of klezmer frame its story as one of violent death and a miraculous survival or even rebirth, they depend on a structure that dominates contemporary Jewish identity. Along with religious observance, Holocaust remembrance and support of Israel serve as the two predominant means of Jewish identification; when discourses surrounding klezmer follow these cues, the music becomes meaningful in a way that is determined by this morphology even as it strengthens and disseminates the rhetoric of the controlling narrative. This observation is not meant as an indictment of klezmer or mainstream Jewish identity; rather, it underscores the ways in which klezmer music becomes potentially meaningful for a broad cross-section of North American Jews through the frame of a survival narrative.

In the Fiddler's House, the documentary film that follows Itzhak Perlman's first forays into klezmer, begins in Kazimierz, a formerly Jewish neighborhood of Krakow.

The title credits are shown against the backdrop of a brick street, the camera scanning forward. The following shots constitute the opening montage: a panoramic view of old Krakow; weather-worn gravestones in the old Jewish cemetery; a brick building, presumably in the Jewish ghetto; a view from the street, including an overgrown empty lot or former yard; another building, smoke or fog drifting across the foreground; metal courtyard gates ornamented with stars of David; a pan upward, with the shot settling on a tree, still framed by metal bars; back to the initial view of the street's bricks. Now Perlman appears, filmed from behind as he walks on his crutches along the empty road, up to the fence of the courtyard. His voice, in overdubbed narration, introduces the

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¹ In the Fiddler's House, 1995.

setting. "Our adventure begins in a courtyard in Poland, in Krakow, in the Jewish quarter." As he speaks, a group of musicians comes into view. A new shot reverses the view. Perlman faces the camera, which is now inside the courtyard. He watches the band through the fence, a star of David adorning the bars to the left of his head.²

To elaborate on the effects of this sequence, even to name the events that it evokes, is unnecessary. Krakow, left architecturally intact after World War II and located only a short day-trip away from Auschwitz, is a primary site for historical and heritage tourism focused on Nazi genocide. Indeed, Krakow is a major location for the phenomenon of Jewish heritage being reproduced for tourism purposes in former centers of European Jewish life that are now nearly empty of Jews. Perlman's father came from Krakow, and the city now boasts one of the largest annual klezmer festivals in the world. However, the film's attempts to naturalize the musicians' return to the city, crystallized in Michael Alpert's reference to Krakow as "where the music comes from," give the false impression that Poland is the point of origin for the tunes that play throughout the film, the majority of which derive from the Bessarabian styles that gained popularity throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

² Ibid.

³ Slobin, 2006. Ruth Ellen Gruber (2002) uses the term "virtual Jewishness," to explore the rise of such phenomena across Europe.

⁴ Slobin, 2006; *In the Fiddler's House*, 1995; Feldman, 2002: 85. Although it should be noted that Alpert's statement was made without the knowledge that the final product would use a Bessarabian *doina* as the soundtrack the scene, the remainder of this conversation between Alpert and Perlman relies on tropes of klezmer as a proof of survival, and ignores the complexity of being served "real Jewish chicken soup" in a Jewish-oriented but presumably gentile-owned restaurant (Slobin 2006).

The point of raising this quibble is to emphasize that the trajectory of the story—from Perlman gazing in (read: he is alienated from his roots in Jewish music) at the musicians from an empty (read: Jew-less) Krakow street to his joyous integration into the top klezmer bands of the 1990s, with whom he entertained sell-out crowds across the world—infuses the film with a particular set of already available meanings while further naturalizing the survival narratives that saturate discourses of Jewishness, Judaism, and Zionism.⁵

Klezmer also feeds into and is framed by a common narrative structure that identifies assimilation, rather than violence, as the threat to Jewish survival. This sort of representation, often found in mainstream press treatments of the music, tends to conflate the renewed creative life of a particular musical style with a broader viability of American Jewish identity. For approximately ten years, klezmer and other products of Jewish creative culture—usually more youth-oriented ventures like *Heeb* and *Zeek* magazines, JDub Records, or the Jewish environmental non-profit *Hazon*—have attracted increasing support from mainstream Jewish organizations and private donors who see such projects as an opportunity to increase affiliation and self-identification among young Jews. To the extent that this strategy is effective, projects oriented toward creative youth culture may act as a conduit toward participation in mainstream Jewish life, a point that masterminds of such ventures use to attract donors.⁶ At issue here is the type of Jewishness that funding bodies wish to promote. Klezmer and Yiddish programming do receive some money from sources whose priorities align with mainstream North

⁵ Although Mark Slobin raises slightly different issues in regard to this film, I am indebted to him for opening it up to analysis in the 2006 lecture "Fiddler on the Move."

⁶ Koenig, 2005.

American Judaism, but those sources tend not to see klezmer or Yiddishism as smart investments for encouraging Jewish practice and identification that will be sustained over multiple generations. Whereas thirty years have passed since the beginning of the klezmer revival—meaning that there are young adults who associate the music with their parents—more strictly youth-oriented undertakings are viewed as better vehicles for marketing "Jewish" as "cool."

In addition to narratives of destruction and survival or rebirth, klezmer performances offer occasions for reinforcing other historical tropes. The weekend of events that accompanied the Great Day on Eldridge Street photograph provided a number of examples. First, as the photographer organized the crowd of musicians and singers, Yale Strom—who worked with members of the Eldridge Street Project to plan the event—addressed the crowd. He encouraged them to reflect on "the space you're in, and the meaning of that space . . . for *all* the klezmer musicians" (emphasis added). In this statement he invoked the Lower East Side as *the* central site, not only of Jewish immigration in the United States, but also of early twentieth-century klezmer. As in the grand narrative of Jewish American immigration, the Lower East Side eclipses other locations and experiences despite multiple exceptions, in this case marked by the presence of several descendants of Philadelphia klezmer dynasties, as well as Israeli and European musicians.

Later in the weekend, at the beginning of what became a marathon concert at

Symphony Space on the Upper West Side, the president of the Eldridge Street Project

commented on the appropriateness of beginning the weekend celebration on the Lower

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⁷ Ibid. The National Yiddish Book Center, which has enjoyed enormous success in fundraising, is the major exception to this rule.

East Side and ending it in on the Upper West. Of course, this observation makes sense as an acknowledgement of Jewish Americans' upward mobility in general and the geographic shift that has taken place in Manhattan specifically. At the same time, however, it misses two crucial ironies: the relationship between socioeconomic advancement and the decline of Yiddish culture in America, and the sterilizing force of subsequent efforts to encapsulate that past through certain types of preservation. In the context of a concert that drew together most of the major klezmer figures from the past thirty years, the allusion to New York Jewish culture's shifting epicenter suggested, perhaps, that not so much has been lost in the move from one neighborhood to the other. The evening's performance, however, took place in a concert setting that I found overly formal and uninspiring, consisted of a four-hour parade of musicians playing four-minute sets in various combinations, and elicited almost no dancing from the crowd. The natural continuity between Jewish life on the Lower East Side and the Upper West is further belied by the Eldridge Street Project's restoration project, which turned a dilapidated but formerly grand synagogue into a strictly secular museum on the former epicenter of Jewish American life. At least some of the discourse surrounding the Great Day on Eldridge Street events was aimed at smoothing over problematic relationships between the past and present of New York and America's Jewish population. In this sense, the event aligned klezmer with normative understandings of American Jewish history rather than using the music to work against or problematize standard narratives.

Although klezmer and Yiddish programming by Jewish cultural organizations have by no means overtaken events oriented toward Israel or religious observance, they have become more common since the 1970s, and often take place in or receive support

from more mainstream Jewish settings and organizations. KlezKanada, for example, takes place at Quebec's Camp B'nai B'rith. As a result, KlezKanada's setting reflects the Zionistic, and subsequently Hebraist, leanings of contemporary Jewish camp culture, most notably in the name of each group of bunks, some of which reflect a specifically Israeli Hebrew pronunciation or refer to Hebrew names for geographical locations within the State of Israel: *chaverim*, *Beersheva*, *Kinneret*, *tzofim*, *shalom*, and so on. Additionally, the religious standards of the camp mandate that all meals be kosher; prohibit electronics, musical instruments, and exchanging money during official programming on Shabbos; and ostensibly determine other KlezKanada policies, including a prohibition on consuming outside food or wine. As during summer camp sessions, the rules for Shabbos apply to public behavior, particularly in the vicinity of the main recreation hall. Attendees use personal electronic devices in the central area, although the internet was shut off to encourage observance. Away from the center of camp, small groups met to rehearse for the Saturday night student concert. (From my perspective as a first-time attendee, the Shabbos policy does not elicit strong dissent from non-Jewish or nonobservant participants and actually provides a nice lull in the hectic week before Saturday night's final push. It also illustrates nicely the broader norm in Jewish institutional life to default to an approximation of Orthodox observance even in "ecumenical" settings.)

In addition to issues surrounding observance and KlezKanada policy, the topic of funding points to the event's ties to mainstream Jewish life. The organization, which hosts events in Montreal and elsewhere throughout the year, receives about half its budget from student fees and most of the remainder from private donations, largely from

members of Montreal's generally affluent Jewish community. While many scholarship students and instructors identify with non-observant or politically radical modes of Jewishness, the private individuals and families that fund the event tend to hold different priorities. ⁸ Avia Moore, director of KlezKanada's scholarship program, identifies the "scholarship body" and the "funding body" as two ends of a continuum. ⁹ Though there are members of each group whose priorities reflect the opposite side's typical positions, and the various participants at KlezKanada represent a full spectrum of political, social, and religious opinions, the student contingent tends to concern itself with musical practice and, often, the historically leftist political concerns of secular Yiddishism. At the same time, many of the donors, including members of the board of directors, are more attuned to maintaining Jewish observance at KlezKanada and may see the role of the organization as promoting Jewish identity among participants. In part, this issue centers on questions of whether klezmer and other specifically Jewish artistic subcultures have an obligation to promote religious observance and mainstream affiliation, and whether they can be separated from religious observance and other traditional practice at all. Ultimately, the answers to such questions hinge on what models participants and commentators accept as authentically Jewish. Although klezmer music is not often a primary concern of organizations that promote religious observance, Holocaust

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⁸ This contrast is not uncommon in the world of Jewish non-profits, especially those that deal with Yiddish and klezmer. I personally witnessed this in a 2006 meeting between summer interns at the National Yiddish Book Center and program benefactor David S. Steiner. Mr. Steiner and his wife were markedly interested in the intern's biographies and personal connections to Jewish identity, and gave the impression of having intended their generous gift more for the continuance of Jewish cultural life than for academic endeavors related to Yiddish literature. This was slightly awkward for the twelve interns, five of whom did not actively identify as Jewish.

⁹ Moore, 2009.

remembrance, or other more normative modes of Jewish identity, the music and its history may serve the purposes of groups and individuals within the Jewish mainstream.

Klezmer as Subversive

Though klezmer has established itself as a visible and now permanent piece of the American Jewish landscape, it still retains elements of outsider-status and outright subversiveness. Musicians and commentators alike promote the music's alterity, relying on its roots as the romanticized music of the Yiddish-speaking world's lowly caste of professional musicians and its role as a viable non-Zionist alternative to Israeli culture to frame klezmer as authentic in its particularities and transcendent in its immediacy. As much as the music—according to certain political interpretations—asserts a positive Jewish identity, it also invokes a sense of otherness that contrasts with the American mainstream, the political status-quo, and even normative (hetero)sexuality. In many cases, these perceived qualities of immediacy and dissidence enable portrayals of klezmer as the Jewish version of some other traditional, ethnic, or racially specific music. Though this chapter does not deal explicitly with the continuities between these subversive takes on contemporary klezmer and earlier political and social uses of other folk-styles, all of the following phenomena are enabled by earlier discourses surrounding the resistant potentials of traditional music.

Current klezmer histories tend to focus on the outsider status of European klezmorim. Yizkor bikher, the community memorial books created by survivors of Nazi genocide, and oral histories provide most of the information about the lives of European klezmorim in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although some of these sources portray klezmer musicians as having bad reputations, most focus more on their

economic troubles.¹⁰ The vocabulary shared between klezmer-loshn, the professional jargon of Yiddish-speaking musicians, and the argot of Europe's international criminals points to the common interactions between the lowest strata of Eastern European society and klezmorim as they traveled between towns to eke out a living in taverns and at weddings.¹¹

Along with other sources, these accounts often draw their evidence from works of Yiddish fiction, especially Sholem Aleykhem's novella *Stempeniu*, one of the most famous pieces by the "father" of modern Yiddish literature. ¹² In the story, a renowned fiddler named Stempeniu—as well known for his many affairs and presumed association with black magic as for his musical prowess—falls in love with the beautiful, but already married, Rachel. Though his attempts to lure her away from her passionless marriage are nearly successful, he ultimately fails. Rachel, her sexual instincts now awakened, manages to find the physical promise of Stempeniu's advances in her own husband, after they move away from her in-laws' house. ¹³ With its references to long-circulating beliefs in the connections between music and magic, extended passages on the sensual power of Stempeniu's virtuosic performances, and its use—a glossary accompanied the original—of a Yiddish argot unique to musicians and criminals, Sholem Aleykhem's story remains a key text for reading subversive politics into klezmer performance. ¹⁴

¹⁰ Strom, 2002: 267-326. Strom's *The Book of Klezmer* provides klezmer-related excerpts from a number of memorial books.

¹¹ Strom, 2002: 327-329; Rothstein, 2002: 26-30.

¹² Rogovoy, 2000: 18-19.

¹³ Sholem Aleykhem, 1994 (trans., Neugroschel): 101-180

Joachim Neugroschel's 1979 English translation of *Stempeniu* reflects a unique take on the story by transforming the klezmer-loshn of the original into jazz hipster speech of earlier decades. In this version, one of Stempeniu's apprentices, having been ordered to inquire about the identity of the beautiful young Rachel, reports, "That's no chick, man, she's already hitched. Dig, she's Isaak-Naphtali's daughter-in-law, and she comes from Skvirre. That's her ol' man over there. The one with the velvet cap!" In this translation, as well as in Seth Rogovoy's *The Essential Klezmer*, Sholem Aleykhem's novella provides a lens through which to view klezmer as at once Jewish and subversive—a ready-made antidote to the assimilatory demands made by American Jewish culture's mid-twentieth century rhetorics of respectability. ¹⁶

In the twentieth century, clarinetist Naftule Brandwein, who was born into a Galician klezmer dynasty in 1889 and immigrated to America around 1910, provides a similar model. Typically introduced in contrast to Dave Tarras, a reserved and highly professional musician by reputation, Brandwein's clarinet playing mirrors his legendarily wild lifestyle. As Rogovoy writes,

He supposedly once performed dressed as Uncle Sam, strung with Christmas tree lights that nearly electrocuted him when he perspired. Foreshadowing another moody, paranoid musical genius with an affinity for mood-altering substances, he is said to have often performed with his back to the audience, Miles Davis-style, the better to hide his fingering techniques to studious onlookers.¹⁸

¹⁴ Rothstein, 2002: 24.

¹⁵ Sholem Aleykhem, 1994 (trans., Neogroschel): 107

¹⁶ Rogovoy, 2006: 18. According to Rogovoy, "The same combination of spirituality and sensuality that powers contemporary African American soul music appears throughout the pages of [Sholem] Aleichem's *Stempenyu*."

¹⁷ Ibid.: 59-60.

Rogovoy continues the list of Brandwein's supposed eccentricities: "serenading" passengers in his car while "speeding" through the Catskills; dropping his pants during a performance; and wearing a neon sign around his neck that advertised his band. The very archetype of the stereotypically illiterate and alcoholic European klezmer, Brandwein's antics now fuel romanticized comparisons between klezmer and other musical styles. ¹⁹

Like efforts in translation and history to fit past musicians into more current models of hipness and rebellion, more recent klezmer projects invoke political and social boundary-pushing, positioning the music outside of mainstream Jewish American mores. The Klezmatics exemplify this trend with their use of songs from the Jewish radical movement, including the anti-fascist anthem "In Kamf" and "Dzankhoye," the lyrics of which urge the listener to "spit in the antiSemites' faces." Furthermore, their intriguing work with previously tuneless Woody Guthrie lyrics, and repeated references to queer identities, align them with American counterculture, as does their reggae-influenced ode to marijuana, "Mizmor Shir Lehanif (Reefer Song)." The Yiddish lyrics, written by Michael Wex, boast that smoking a "splifele" invites a daily Shabbos, instead of the only weekly sense of holy rest experienced by observant Jews. ²¹

Perhaps as important in shaping the potentially subversive impact of contemporary klezmer as the romanticized view of Old World klezmorim is the revived

¹⁸ Ibid.: 60-61.

¹⁹ Spaoznik, 2006: 107-108.

 $^{^{20}}$ Klezmatics, 1988; Klezmatics, 1995; Svigals, 2002: 216. The Klezmatic's first album, Shvaygn = Toyt is a Yiddish translation of the radical Queer organization ACT-UP's slogan, "silence equals death."

²¹ The Klezmatics, 1997.

genre's role as a creative alternative to Israeli music and dance. Like other aspects of the more general Yiddishist movement since the 1960s, klezmer re-emerged as an alternative mode of Jewish expression that is more appropriate to new generation(s) than previous militant/masculine identifications with the state of Israel. Violinist Alicia Svigals, formerly of the Klezmatics, has written that "fashioning a new Jewish culture in the seventies, eighties, and nineties that was in harmony with hip and progressive young America can perhaps be seen as" a collective attempt by to create a new American Jewishness "complete with a traditional music scene—klezmer—to mirror its American folk music counterpart."

Though both Yiddish language and klezmer have achieved greater visibility in the last thirty years, they retain a marginal position compared to Israel-centered programming. As Avia Moore—scholarship coordinator, administrative director, and dance instructor at KlezKanada—relates, it is very difficult to compete for private funding with Israel-centered programs and events. She recalls sharing her poster for the 2008 KlezKanada Scholarship with a representative of another Jewish nonprofit:

This was somebody representing another fairly prominent Jewish organization, and they said, "you cannot"—and I quote—"you can't use the words Yiddish or klezmer in your publicity, because they aren't cool. Nobody thinks it's cool." And I said, "I beg your pardon?" And that's the attitude I came up against over and over again, and that's the attitude we face when we're looking for funders for this culture. It's the attitude any Yiddish organization in North America faces when looking for funding. ²³

This is particularly true on college campuses, where the majority of Jewish programming—whether coordinated through Hillel, Chabad, or other organizations—is

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²² Svigals, 2002: 216.

²³ Moore, 2009.

oriented toward religious observance, pro-Israel political events, or social functions that emphasize one or both of these themes as the primary reason for gathering.

For many musicians and commentators who advocate or examine subversive readings of contemporary klezmer, the music signals an attempt to recover Jewish difference. Just as the publishers of *Brooklyn Bridge* wished to renew and redeem Jewish particularities through a physical return, contemporary klezmer musicians attempt to locate a musical home in past practices and recognizably Jewish sounds. In light of recent scholarship which has explored American racial politics and Jewish identities by tracing the historical negotiation of Jewishness as a racial, national, ethnic, and religious category, klezmer has become a powerful symbol of Jews' formerly marked, often nonwhite status.²⁴ In the revivalist context, the music simultaneously exemplifies recent attempts to reassert an in-between or outsider attitude in order to recover the politically and socially dissident stance, but with a renewed Jewish inflection. ²⁵

To some extent, recent projects that have incorporated techniques, aesthetics, and technologies from non-Jewish musical traditions play with the idea of Jewish difference by implicitly suggesting commonalities between the music of Jews and other marginalized groups. 26 Josh Dolgin's use of sampling technologies and collaboration with hip-hop artists point to interesting commonalities between the Jewish music of Eastern Europe and the African diasporic features of hip-hop: a two-way imitation between instrumental and vocal tonality and style; the adoption and subsequent altering

²⁴Brodkin, 2000; Goldstein, 2006; Rogin, 1998.

²⁵ This positioning echoes the Jewish hipster identity as discussed by Maria Damon.

²⁶ This statement is qualified to avoid the assumption that ideology precedes or determines the artists' musical decisions.

of tunes, styles, instruments, and technologies from more powerful surrounding cultures that characterizes, among other phenomena, both hip-hop sampling and Hasidic appropriation of gentile tunes for nigunim; and the use of extended medleys intended to encourage continuous dancing. Similar acts of allusion or appropriation, including Frank London's use of a large Latin American percussion group for a 2007 performance in Brooklyn's Prospect Park or The New Orleans Klezmer All Stars' insertion of a dead-on Chuck Berry style guitar solo in their song "Moroccan Roller," mirror Lenny Bruce's tactic of enhancing and valorizing Jewishness by incorporating symbols of non-Jewish, but still non-mainstream, otherness into its bounds. 28

In addition to arguments that focused on Jews' ambiguous racial status, European and American discourses of gender and sexuality portrayed Jewish men at once as lacking in masculinity and predisposed to sexual deviancy. This former arena of Jewish difference has also been re-deployed in contemporary klezmer and constitutes a major area of activity in the "cluster of discrete cultural phenomena" known as Queer Yiddishkeit. This term describes a variety of projects through which "Jews, most of them Americans born after World War II who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, explore links between queer and Yiddish cultures." Within contemporary klezmer, the

²⁷ Dolgin, 2006. Dolgin, to the best of my knowledge, does not emphasize these potential links in framing his work, but responded positively to a similar reading during our 2006 interview.

²⁸ New Orleans Klezmer All Stars, 1999.

²⁹ Goldstein, 2006: 42-43, 48-49; Freedman, 2008: 25-26.

³⁰ Shandler, 2006: 187.

³¹ Ibid.: 187.

appearance of the all-woman ensemble The Isle of Klezbos, The Klezmatics' addition of a lyric insinuating the Biblical King David's homosexuality into the song "Ale Brider," and a tongue-in-cheek line by Josh Dolgin (rapping as SoCalled on his collaborative wedding-themed album with Queer Yiddishkeit advocate Sophie Solomon) advocating listeners to "hype the hetero-norms" all exemplify this trend. 32

Currently, klezmer performers regularly use elements of Yiddish culture as source materials in ways that contradict the dominant modes of American and Canadian Jewish identity, recall and revive Jewish political radicalism of the early twentieth-century, reassert former ambiguities about Jewish racial status, and recast past stereotypes of Jews' sexual and gender aberrations as potentially enlightening and liberating examples for the present. In each case, klezmer acts as a powerful symbol that subverts the values of mainstream institutions and ways of life, Jewish and gentile alike. Though klezmer remains, in other ways, visibly attached to more normative modes of Jewish identification, the tension between its various readings increases and enriches its potential applications and meanings.

³² Shandler, 2006: 187; The Klezmatics, 1988; Solomon and SoCalled, 2003.

Chapter 8: Final Considerations

Klezmer music and the conversations surrounding it have reflected and continue to reflect broader trends in American and Canadian Jewish cultures, as well as the discourses through which the wider society comes to understand folk and roots musical styles in general. Contemporary klezmer's role as a site for imaginatively acting out Jewish identity is not ultimately distinguishable from the music's use in earlier eras. Early twentieth-century recordings' use of "Romanian" as a euphemism for "Yiddish" or "klezmer," for example, reflect an effort to align the music with a historically situated set of values as intentional as any recent recording or performance. There are, however, theoretical models that highlight interesting developments in klezmer's current position as a marker of Jewishness in American and Canadian cultures. Jeffrey Shandler's Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture considers the "postvernacular mode" in order to explore how the associational meanings attached to Yiddish as a linguistic code have equaled or overtaken its directly referential uses in twenty-first century America. Though music operates in very different ways than language, the postvernacular model helps to illustrate how klezmer has come to evoke newly articulated Jewish sensibilities as its role in communal life has changed. Additionally, José Esteban Muñoz's writing on utopian performance provides a useful opening for thinking about klezmer events as temporary spaces in which participants can

collectively re-imagine Jewishness in ways that contradict the experiences of everyday life.

Klezmer in the Postvernacular

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Yiddish is no longer the default language for conversation between Jews of Eastern European descent. It remains, however, a powerful symbol of the Jewish culture of Central and Eastern Europe and of the experience of the immigrants from those regions, whose descendants now constitute the majority of American and Canadian Jews. Shandler's "postervernacular" describes the current state of the language—the intriguing but not uncommon condition of circulating in the present as an amorphous symbol used in various tones to recall competing versions of the past. Shandler writes,

What most distinguishes postvernacular Yiddish is its semiotic hierarchy; unlike vernacular language use, in the postvernacular mode the language's secondary, symbolic level of meaning is always privileged over its primary level. In other words, in postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered—if not more so. ¹

The t-shirt that proudly announces "yingl" or the tote bag with "shlepn" on the side are not primarily meant to identify the wearer as a boy or young man or to name the carrier's act of pulling or dragging; the Hebrew characters mark the item and its owner (probably) as Jewish, and, for those who can distinguish the words from Hebrew, the use of Yiddish evokes a set of potential meanings, most commonly some combination of loss, sorrow, quaintness, and humor.

Whereas linguistic expression generally includes a referential function in addition to the other sorts of communication that it accomplishes, European instrumental music

¹ Shandler, 2006: 22.

has no such system. There is no note or series of notes that can reliably be taken to indicate "table," for example. Elements of music—general styles, entire tunes, or recurring motifs—do, however, come to have meaning through their use in specific settings. Like linguistic expression, these elements circulate within a specific group for whom they act as cues, either framing a situation for interpretation or eliciting action from participants. Historically, the music of klezmorim provided the primary instrumental accompaniment to Jewish communal and ritual life and was intimately linked to community-grounded practices of vocal music, language, and dance. While the music could not be used to negotiate a business transaction or to call a doctor, many parts of the repertoire corresponded neatly with aspects of the wedding ritual or a particular dance. When the band played a broyges tanz, for instance, the mothers-in-law performed a dance meant to dispel any animosity between them.² Depending on the location, a particular medley of tunes matched the audience's preferred sher.³ To the extent that most permanent Jewish communities no longer share a set of tunes that serve such specific purposes, and that klezmer bears little relation to the primary systems of music, language, or movement in which most North American Jews currently live, its current status can be described as postvernacular.

As Shandler notes, the "post" of the postvernacular does not entail the end of the vernacular, but a conscious building on Yiddish's vernacular use in the past and present.

² A *broyges tanz* was a ritualized dance meant to neutralize disagreements between new mothers-in-law at Eastern European Jewish weddings. The two potential rivals would act out disdain for one another until the musicians broke into an upbeat number, at which point they would resolve the conflict with a joyous dance.

³ Shers designate a variety of couple dances that often featured mixed-gender couples. Variations of this dance genre are done to medleys of tunes in 2/4 time that are not musically distinct from the bulk of medium to fast tempo klezmer dance music.

"Not only" is "postvernacular Yiddish . . . dependent on vernacular Yiddish, past and present, but . . . contemporary vernacular Yiddish is itself shaped in response to postvernacular phenomena." In the case of klezmer, the music's past role in Jewish life—both its uses in celebration and performers' historically disreputable position in local communities—continues to determine contemporary interpretations. At the same time, the deterioration of specific links between music and historical practice—between tunes and dances, sub-genres and their regional origins, klezmer music and traditional models of Jewish religiosity—has allowed contemporary klezmer to take on symbolic meanings that could never have occurred in earlier eras.

As the extensive knowledge and musical fluency of instructors and students at KlezKanada and similar events demonstrate, klezmer continues to be a daily musical language for some practitioners and enthusiasts. Many dancers, in turn, still have the expertise to match their movements to a tune. It's important to remember that the emergence of the music's symbolic value through the discursive and imaginative work of community building was not initiated with the transition into the postvernacular; rather, this has been a feature of its meaningfulness since the inception or recognition of uniquely Jewish instrumental music in Europe. In these ways, the postvernacular label appears overstated. Just as Shandler argues in the case of Yiddish language, however, the vernacular instances of klezmer that persist into the present cannot help but draw from and react to other contemporary developments.

Klezmer, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, continues because it is chosen. It is chosen for its virtuosic possibilities and its continued functionality as a

⁴ Shandler, 2006: 23.

markedly Jewish music of celebration. But it is also chosen because of the memories, values, and identities it represents in Jewish and non-Jewish societies, and these contingent associations depend heavily on the broader discourses of politics, difference, immediacy, rootedness, transgression, radicalism, and authenticity that allow contemporary performers and audiences to find meaning in all varieties of traditional music.

Klezmer as Utopian Performance

Every year, KlezKanada begins on a Sunday and continues for a full week, ending on the following Sunday. Veteran campers hit their stride fairly quickly, reuniting with friends and taking in the abundance of programs and activities, while first-timers may take a few days to get their bearings in camp and with the schedule, and to find a social and musical niche. For nearly everyone involved, but especially for the scholarship recipients and junior faculty in and around their twenties, social and creative energy builds through the week, with formal and informal performances and jam sessions lasting late into the night.

On Friday, day-time programming ends earlier than usual, allowing campers to get ready to welcome the beginning of Shabbos with the now-yearly ritual known as the backward-marching *nigun*. The tradition comes from an Eastern Romanian town called Sanisesti, in which the Jewish community would gather at a body of water, and, facing east, walk backwards to home or synagogue while playing and singing the same tune. This practice was reported to Itzik Gottesman by a native of that town, Arye Leish, who now lives in Israel, and later introduced to KlezKanada by instructor Jenny Romaine. Though the tune of the *nigun* has changed somewhat, the basic ritual has been adapted

and repeated at KlezKanada since 2002.⁵ Campers gather around the lake with their instruments. A group of senior staff begin the tune and start walking backward up the road that leads from the beach to the dining hall. Everyone joins in, repeating the simple melody as the crowd inches toward dinner, but looking, still, toward the lake.

During the event, divisions of age, politics, musical proficiency, and religiosity fade away. Moreover, the backward march, by involving each participant equally in the ritual, dissolves distinctions between performer and audience. The annual enactment of this inclusive and egalitarian ritual brings together the full spectrum of participants in a visible and audible display of unity. For me, a first-time attendee, the moment offered a sense of cohesion that I had not experienced during the rest of the week. Aware that the oncoming day of downtime would precede my final night at KlezKanada, the moment in which it became easiest to imagine myself as part of a community took on an increased poignancy.

In the moment, it was possible to conceive of a weekly klezmer ritual that could unify whole communities in readying themselves for week's end, the beginning of Shabbos. At the same time, however, I recognized that outside KlezKanada, in the "real world," klezmer and Yiddishkeit are not the principal modes in which most Jews act out their Jewishness. This paradox of inspiring possibility and real-world impracticality characterizes what Muñoz calls "utopian performance." The link that Muñoz makes between this paradox and the emotional power of hope illustrates perfectly the utility of

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⁵ Alpert, 2006.

⁶ Moore, 2009. This analysis of the backward-marching nigun was developed in conversation with Avia Moore, who also provided background information on the ritual.

utopian ideals for Yiddish culture, so often denied a future by those who describe it as dead or dying.

Utopia is not prescriptive, it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be.⁷

It is this sense that pervades the innovative projects seeking to repair the chasms created by genocide by updating Yiddish traditions in conversations with more recent vernaculars, as well as radical efforts to reframe Yiddish culture in terms of progressive political ideals. In the emotional, creative, and physical engagement of contemporary performers and audiences with practices traced to a seemingly more cohesive past, a group becomes, at least temporarily, a community. Klezmer becomes music, not only of the past, but also of the present and future.

Back to Klezmer

Throughout this project, I have turned over and over in my head the question of how klezmer does what it does in its current context. Klezmer, like all music, allows musicians, dancers, and listeners to come together in common experience. Framed by narratives of Jewish history and discourses of tradition and identity, the music becomes a vehicle through which individuals and groups affirm, even temporarily, their unity with a physically present set of co-performers, as well as fellow players, dancers, and listeners across time and space. Because this imaginative work invokes particular historical, political, and religious understandings, the music remains available for multiple, often divergent, interpretations. While klezmer has developed new meanings in recent historical and cultural contexts, its role as a site for the enactment and negotiation of

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⁷ Muñoz. 2006: 9.

identity has not fundamentally changed; it continues to offer experiences of embodied belonging that are shaped, in each instance, by always-emergent sets of associational values. I feel confident, not that these observations lay the topic to rest, but that I have located some of the major issues and opened them up for further discussion. I worry, though, that I have missed something in all this analysis: klezmer itself.

Maybe the way to close this thesis, then, is to point back to the music. In 1908, a group called Orchestra Goldberg made two recordings for the Istanbul branch of the Odeon record company. One of these pieces, "Kleftico Vlachiko," begins with an unusual doina, a rhapsodic and semi-improvisatory solo played over a drone-like accompaniment. This solo, unlike those featured in more familiar clarinet or fiddle tunes, is performed by an anonymous cornet player. The piece also reflects a different melodic structure than other recordings of klezmer doinas. The tune begins with a sustained chord, soft and low, played by the accompanying instruments. The cornet enters with a quick run, landing on its own held note, which swells and fades before dropping off into an acrobatic set of runs and turns. They catch and repeat, moving on as the player flies up and down the scales. I can almost imagine myself into that place, until I think of the blur that must be his fingers. All the while, the hiss and swish of the original record float above the other sounds. The drone shifts beneath the solo, sometimes in loose connection with its phrases, three times resolving in a warm and full chord. The quick complex turns and repeated licks give way to longer notes, ornamented by simpler trills but still bookended by those stunning runs. The accompaniment begins harmonizing its long held notes, and the soloist seems to be taking his time. After a few more flurries, he pauses

and strikes a high note; suddenly, the ensemble finds its tempo and launches into a dance tune.

How the beat got there is unclear; the cornet offers one pulse, perhaps not even that, before the ensemble joins in, steadying itself by the third beat. Now all the elements are clearer: a clarinet, tuba or trombone, a fiddle, and perhaps more. It is surely a klezmer ensemble, but the music is not strictly Jewish, being drawn from Bessarabian repertoires, recorded in Istanbul, and marketed to a Greek audience. It's odd that such an outlier of Old World klezmer should captivate me so much. Yet I listen to this tune constantly, put it on CDs for friends, broadcast it during shows at the university's student-run radio station, and pause in wonder, each time I hear the recording, to mark and celebrate its century of existence.

⁸ Orchestra Goldberg, 1908. Rereleased on *Klezmer Music, Early Yiddish Instrumental Music, the First Recordings: 1908-1927*. Historical details of the song come from pages 9-11 of the liner notes, written by the collector and curator of the compilation, Dr. Martin Schwartz.

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