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The Multiple Voices of American Klezmer

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Abstract
Since the 1970s, klezmer has undergone a revival and radical transformation. Originally a European Jewish music, klezmer is now a staple of the world music scene. Although the fusion of instrumental and vocal genres under a single musical umbrella is a significant marker of change between the Old World and revived klezmer repertories, the extension of the boundaries of the klezmer repertory to encompass vocal material has largely been overlooked by practitioners and scholars. This article reinstates song in the narrative of the klezmer revival, exploring how and why it has assumed its prominent position. In case studies of three ensembles, song gives insight into the sensibilities of individual musicians and offers a prism through which to consider contemporary klezmer as both an American Jewish heritage music and a world music genre.

Over the past three decades, klezmer music has undergone a radical transformation. From virtual obscurity, it has become a staple of the European and American world music scenes. [1] Today's klezmer music draws material from diverse Yiddish repertories: instrumental music, folk song, the songs of the Yiddish theatre, and more. A substantial literature documents the origins and historical context of today's klezmer revival.[2] Scholars, journalists, and filmmakers have chronicled the current klezmer scene, exploring why a new generation of musicians has decided to engage with a musical tradition largely rejected by their parents and by the wider American Jewish community. Klezmer musicians, in turn, have been eager to discuss their work and their motivations for embracing this tradition. However, this literature to date has focused primarily on instrumental music, sidelining vocal repertories within contemporary klezmer. Yet the klezmer revival provides the most prominent context for the performance of Yiddish song today; song has become integral to the klezmer scene, providing an important forum for musical and cultural creativity.

This article explores this creativity, looking at the roles played by Yiddish song in the contemporary klezmer revival. The entrance of song into the modern klezmer canon reflects processes of musical adaptation and change common to other revived

[1] A search for "klezmer" at Amazon.com in May 2006 yielded 994 recordings, ranging from "authentic" folk-style performances of East European klezmer repertory to klezmer-hip hop fusions.

[2] Documentary films on the klezmer revival include *A Jumpin' Night in the Garden of Eden*, dir. Michal Goldman (First Run Features, 1987); *Fiddlers on the Hoof*, dir. Simon Broughton (BBC, 1989); and *Yidishe nekht, Yidishe teg*, dir. Yvonne Andrä (3Toastbrot, 2003). Scholarly and popular writing on klezmer includes Seth Rogovoy, *The Essential Klezmer* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin, 2000); Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World* (New York: Schirmer, 1999); Mark Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, ed. Mark Slobin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

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folk repertories, but it also reflects the unique and precarious cultural position of Yiddish music. Since the East European Jewish context within which these repertories developed was so comprehensively destroyed in the Holocaust, singers face a particular challenge in communicating with their audiences, very few of whom speak Yiddish or are familiar with its rich field of cultural references. Navigating this linguistic and cultural comprehension gap becomes a core element of performance. In turn, singers are drawn into the wider politics of contemporary American Jewish culture. By choosing to reflect on Yiddish culture of the past, to express cultural continuity, or to mix Yiddish with the language of contemporary culture singers are placed within a wider quest for cultural expressions of American Jewish identity.

The music we know today as klezmer has its roots in the Jewish communities of pre-Holocaust Central and Eastern Europe. The vernacular of these communities was Yiddish, a Jewish language that synthesized vocabularies of Germanic, Slavic, and Hebrew origins within a syntax inherited from Middle High German. The Hebrew-Yiddish term klezmer, meaning "instrument" or "musician," was applied specifically to Jewish itinerant professional musicians known collectively as *klezmorim.* These professional musicians played instrumental music primarily for weddings and other community events and celebrations. This repertory included both dance and non-dance genres, and both music specific to the Jewish community and repertory shared with other co-territorial peoples. Early twentieth-century folklorists including the Soviet collector Moshe Beregovski extensively documented this genre.[3]

From 1881 to 1924, a large wave of Yiddish-speaking East European Jews, among them a number of klezmorim, immigrated to America, fleeing anti-Semitism in their native lands and seeking economic opportunities in the New World. Although their repertory was based in European klezmer traditions, these musicians, propelled by an aggressively changing market, began to develop material to fit their New World audiences, who were keen to express a modern American identity. Already in the 1910s, dance genres associated with Old World orthodox weddings were set aside in favor of the more virtuosic, upbeat *bulgar*, which became the most prevalent klezmer dance genre in America.[4] By the 1930s, musicians began to combine klezmer melodies with American swing. Jewish American popular music flowered, aided by the booming recording industry, Jewish radio shows, and an insatiable public appetite for hybrid "ethnic" popular culture. American record companies offered instrumental klezmer tunes alongside popular songs, cantorial music, and songs from the Yiddish theater.[5]

[3] See Moshe Beregovski, *Old Jewish Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*, ed. Mark Slobin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); and Moshe Beregovski, *Jewish Instrumental Folk Music: The Collection and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*, ed. Mark Slobin et al. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

[4] See Walter Zev Feldman, "Bulgaresca/Bulgarish/Bulgar: The Transformation of a Dance Genre," *Ethnomusicology* 38/1 (Winter 1994): 1–35.

[5] For a discussion of popular recorded Jewish music, see Sapoznik, *Klezmer!,* chap. 3.

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Despite this enthusiasm, klezmer—even fused with other genres—fell in popularity among American Jews during the 1940s and 1950s. The end of the mass Jewish immigration from Europe meant that audiences were no longer replenished by "greenhorns" seeking home-style entertainment; among American Jews tastes changed as the American-born generation sought to distance themselves still further from a European past seen as backward. But the greatest blow to klezmer music came with the Holocaust. In just six years, the rich European Jewish cultural milieu from which klezmer had sprung was all but destroyed, along with many of the klezmer musicians and an entire listening public. In a completely different way, the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 also contributed to the decline of Yiddish-speaking Jewish culture, as the new state aggressively promoted an alternative Hebrew-based model of Jewish culture. In America, the music of Yiddish-speaking Europe was replaced in popularity by new Hebrew songs and dances, which were widely recorded and distributed.

Following this decline in popularity, the klezmer repertory was little played in America until, during the mid-1970s, a number of American musicians—mainly Jewish—began to rediscover East European Jewish repertories that had largely fallen into disuse by the middle of the twentieth century. A few new bands were quickly joined by others, growing to become a phenomenon that became popularly known as the "klezmer revival." Scouring archives and collections for material, these revivalists drew their repertory from an eclectic variety of sources, both European and American, including popular recordings of the 1900s to 1940s, Yiddish film musicals of the 1930s, and East European material learned from elderly informants and published collections of klezmer melodies. By contrast with the purely instrumental ensembles of the Old World *klezmorim*, vocal music became a core component of the repertory of many klezmer ensembles. Today, the majority of prominent klezmer bands include a singer, or at least have worked with one.[6]

As Mark Slobin has noted, the revival invoked a new definition of klezmer. Previously limited to musicians playing a limited instrumental repertory, klezmer became an umbrella term, used by ensembles whose performances included diverse repertories from the Yiddish-speaking Jewish world, often fused with elements from modern popular musics and joined by new compositions.[7] This gathering of diverse repertories is one of the clearest markers of change between Old World and revived klezmer repertories, reflecting the journey of klezmer from a culturally embedded, primarily functional music to the modern concert stage. I discuss this transformation of the term klezmer at greater length below; in this article, the terms "klezmer revival" and "klezmer music," both of which have gained general currency, are used to describe the modern klezmer phenomenon. I use the term "klezmer scene" to refer to the community centered around the klezmer revival.

[6] For more information on the contemporary performance of Yiddish vocal music, see Abigail Wood, "Yiddish Song in Contemporary North America" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2004).

[7] Slobin, *American Klezmer,* 1.

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Following the usage of those involved in the scene, I use the term "Yiddish music" when my comments refer in general to all music of Eastern European Jewish origin and "Yiddish song" to specify vocal music.

In this article I will first consider the place of song in the modern klezmer canon, discussing the relationship of the klezmer revival to other forms of contemporary Yiddish culture, and exploring how and why song has assumed its prominent position in contemporary klezmer. The main body of the article presents case studies of singers active in three prominent North American professional klezmer ensembles, illustrating how each has approached the dual challenges of creativity and communication in Yiddish. I suggest that song lyrics, melody, vocal style, and packaging are key elements in a critical evaluation of the narratives and cultural politics employed by these musicians as they negotiate between cultural conservatism and radical alterity.

Finally, I return to the broader role of song in the klezmer revival, arguing that song not only gives insight into the sensibilities of individual musicians but also offers a particularly clear prism through which to consider the dual construction of contemporary klezmer as an American Jewish heritage music and as a world genre. As a texted medium, song has presented today's musicians with the challenge to communicate with audiences across linguistic boundaries, yet it has also offered an important forum for creativity in contemporary klezmer, enabling bands to link their music to a wider worldview. As such, reinstating song into the discussion of contemporary klezmer helps to provide a more nuanced account of the global klezmer phenomenon.

"Klezmer" and "Revival": Interrogating a Label

The focus on instrumental music in discourse surrounding the klezmer revival is perhaps rooted in the initial choice of the term klezmer to label the revived music. The consistent characterization of song as marginal to the instrumental klezmer canon is accurate if today's musicians are primarily considered heirs of the repertory of the Old World *klezmorim*. As noted above, however, this label glosses over the fact that from its inception the klezmer revival was concerned not merely with presenting this material but with a broad-based revival of Yiddish music. This is not to detract from those bands that did focus—and continue to focus today—on purely instrumental music, but rather acknowledges that many of the most prominent ensembles, both early in the revival (including the Klezmorim and Kapelye) and in latter years (including the Klezmer Conservatory Band, The Klezmatics, and Brave Old World) have featured vocalists from their inception, and have performed both vocal and instrumental numbers.

Indeed, early in the revival, some musicians were concerned about whether the music they were playing could accurately be termed klezmer: this material was certainly broader than the repertory of any single Old World musician. Others objected to the term *revival*: as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has observed, some argued that klezmer music had never fully disappeared; others asserted that what they were doing was "utterly contemporary," not a continuation of a historical

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genre.[8] The choice of the term klezmer, however, was not only convenient but also fit the cultural politics of the revival. First, many of the revivalists tended initially to avoid making explicit statements of Jewishness. In a message to Mendele, an online Yiddish literature and language discussion list, Michael Alpert, one of the first singers to become involved in the klezmer scene as part of the Chutzpah Yiddish Orchestra and then Kapelye, suggested that "the current use of the term 'klezmer music,' to denote a musical genre that is today actually much broader than the instrumental klezmer tradition (strictly defined), probably reflects more than a drop of avoidance of the J-word, or the Y-word, for that matter."[9]

Second, the use of the label klezmer (as opposed to Yiddish) also helped to locate the klezmer revival as something new, distinct from other contemporary approaches to the Yiddish cultural heritage. Although it has received less press than the klezmer revival, a sizable Yiddishist community continues to exist in North America.[10] This thriving subculture coalesces around a network of institutions involved in the teaching and promotion of Yiddish culture, many of which are the legacy of the rich Yiddish-language cultural life that thrived among Jews who came from Europe to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most prominent among the institutions remaining active today is YIVO—*Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut,* Jewish Research Institute—an institution dedicated to the preservation and study of Jewish, especially Yiddish cultural material, headquartered in New York. Other cultural institutions include Yiddish-language publications, among them the weekly *Forverts* (*Forward*) newspaper and the *Tsukunft* (*Future*) journal, a number of Yiddish radio programs, cultural organizations such as the Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre and the Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle), and newer organizations including Yugntruf (Call to Youth), an organization of Yiddish-speaking young adults, founded in 1964.

The relationship between the North American Yiddishist community and the klezmer revival has been a close one: many contemporary klezmer musicians have been heavily involved in Yiddish cultural life. In acting as a nexus for Yiddish researchers and in housing invaluable resources, YIVO itself helped to create the circumstances that enabled the klezmer revival to take place. Nevertheless, the majority of Yiddish cultural institutions focus on preservation and continuity, promoting a vision of enduring vitality of Yiddish culture in North America from the immigrant era to the present day. By contrast, the notion of rupture and revival has been central to the discourse of the klezmer revival.[11] "Revival" was not just a process but a concept that was consciously embraced by musicians. Unlike

[8] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Sounds of Sensibility," in Slobin, *American Klezmer*, 129–73.

[9] E-mail from Meyshe [Michael] Alpert, Mendele 3/249, 27 February 1994, http://shakti.trincoll.edu/~mendele/vol03/vol03.249. See also comments by Lev Liberman, a founding member of The Klezmorim, "Memories of the Klez Revival and 'The Klezmorim,'" http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/klezmorim.hist.html.

[10] Here I use "Yiddishist" to indicate activity primarily focused on the Yiddish language and culture; within this context, song frequently forms a component of wider linguistic or cultural activities. For a historical outline of the Yiddishist movement, see Emanuel Goldsmith, "Yiddishism and Judaism," in *The Politics of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Literature and Society,* ed. Dov-Ber Kerler (London: Altamira Press, 1998).

[11] For a discussion, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Sounds of Sensibility."

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the Yiddishist community, then, which continued to identify itself as part of an unbroken linguistic and cultural tradition, highlighting continuity over disjuncture, the klezmer revival put emphasis on disjuncture and revival, reinterpreting cultural texts to suit a modern audience. In seeking musical sources, this new movement didn't just glance over its shoulder to the American klezmer repertory, which had fallen out of favor during the 1940s and 1950s, rather it tended to look to the European Old World as the location of musical authenticity.[12]

This ethos is not unique to the klezmer revival but instead links this movement to a wider aesthetic of revival common to other folk musics. Indeed, many of the klezmer pioneers of the 1970s and 1980s initially arrived at klezmer via their involvement in the Balkan folk music scene or in American "roots" musics, including bluegrass, than via the Yiddish cultural world. Mark Slobin has observed that "as foundational klezmer figures have always admitted, the folk revival sensibility and professional background of performers was key to the emergence of klezmer on the American scene in the 1970s."[13]

In seeking to define a general theory of music revivals, Tamara Livingston comments:

> Music revivals can be defined as social movements which strive to "restore" a musical system believed to be disappearing or completely relegated to the past for the benefit of contemporary society. The common thread between these seemingly diverse phenomena is the overt cultural and political agenda expressed by the revivalists themselves. Through the re-creation of a past music "system," . . . revivalists position themselves in *opposition* to aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in reference to authenticity and historical fidelity.[14]

The klezmer revival is a close-to-paradigmatic illustration of the model of revival Livingston describes (indeed, Livingston illustrates her comments with reference to, among others, klezmer pioneers Zev Feldman and Andy Statman). The revived klezmer music was not a Jewish musical mainstream but became a musical alternative to those dissatisfied with mainstream American and Israeli forms of Jewish musical expression.[15]

In turn, this revivalist sentiment paved the way for the entrance of song into the klezmer canon. If stylistic authenticity was considered by many of the new klezmer musicians to be located in the Old World or the America of early Jewish immigrants, the context for the performance of the revived klezmer music was entirely New World, modeled not specifically on Yiddish cultural traditions but on the wider "roots" or, later, world music scene. Song entered the klezmer repertory as part of a wider pattern of change common to many modernized folk repertories,

[12] See Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move*, 134–35.

[13] Ibid., 32.

[14] Tamara Livingston, "Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory," *Ethnomusicology* 43/1 (Winter 1999): 66.

[15] See Frank London, "An Insider's View: How We Traveled from Obscurity to the Klezmer Establishment in Twenty Years," in Slobin, *American Klezmer,* 206–10.

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which included the juxtaposition of material that was formerly geographically, temporally, functionally, and stylistically diverse.[16]

Yiddish, the vernacular language of East European Jewry from the Middle Ages until its destruction in the Holocaust, boasted a variety of song traditions. By the early twentieth century these included folk song and pseudo-folk song, *badkhones* (the improvised rhymes of a wedding jester), political and workers' songs by popular folk-poets, songs from the Yiddish theater, which had flourished in both Europe and America since the late nineteenth century, and popular songs sold as sheet music in America, together with parallel religious vocal traditions including cantorial music, liturgical chant, and Hasidic song (all primarily using Hebrew texts but musically related to other co-territorial Jewish musics). Many of these were collected and published by folklorists during the early and mid-twentieth century.[17] Klezmer revivalists have drawn upon all these genres, but the Yiddish songs incorporated into today's klezmer music have primarily been secular, reflecting the primarily secular Jewish identity of the musicians involved.[18]

The musical repertories brought under the klezmer rubric reflected different areas of Yiddish cultural life. Traditionally, most forms of Yiddish folk song were unaccompanied, domestic repertories; Yiddish theater music represented commercial popular entertainment. Klezmer music, by contrast, was the music of communal Jewish celebrations: largely music for dancing, together with non-dance genres including music for listening and pieces associated with particular parts of the Jewish wedding ritual.

This said, the combination of instrumental and vocal music within the Yiddish musical sphere was not entirely an innovation of the klezmer revival. At Old World weddings, klezmer musicians were joined by the *badkhn*, a wedding jester who acted as emcee and sang improvised rhymes in between musical numbers. The Yiddish theater, itself dominated by musical numbers, and American popular Yiddish music offered models for songs with band accompaniment. Mickey Katz, a popular Jewish comedian who recorded Yiddish-accented parodies of American songs during the 1950s and 1960s also included a klezmer-style instrumental "break" in each of his songs.[19]

Nevertheless, if those klezmer revivalists who included vocal material in their repertories drew upon all the above models, their innovation lay in their generally eclectic approach to musical material. Music from the entire Yiddish cultural sphere became fair game for inclusion in the new genre labeled "klezmer music." Some ensembles specialized in performing particular styles: the Klezmer Conservatory band, for example, re-created the sound of a prewar American klezmer orchestra. Singer Judy Bressler, herself from a family of Yiddish theater performers, included

[16] For a discussion, see Philip V. Bohlman, "Folk Music in the Modern World," in *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), chap. 8.

[17] A substantial bibliography of published sources of Yiddish vocal traditions appears in Wood, "Yiddish Song in Contemporary North America."

[18] See Alicia Svigals, "Why We Do This Anyway: Klezmer as Youth Subculture," in Slobin, *American Klezmer*, 212.

[19] See Josh Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming; Mickey Katz, Anti-Semitism and the Sound of Jewish Difference," *American Jewish History* 87/4 (1999): 350.

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a number of Yiddish theater songs and popular Yiddish hits in the band's repertory. Others made more eclectic use of musical materials: recordings and concert repertories placed music from vastly different backgrounds side by side. The repertory of the New York–based band Metropolitan Klezmer, for example, includes Yiddish folk, workers', and popular songs placed alongside a diverse instrumental klezmer repertory.

Musically, drawing upon vocal repertories in additional to instrumental material gave performers greater scope to create varied concert programs. Further, this musical reason for including song in klezmer performance was backed by an equally strong extramusical impetus. If musicians were not overtly keen to label this new genre as "Jewish," this omission in terminology was more than made up for in performance and imagery. At the core of the ideology of the revival lay the proud, self-conscious articulation of the very East European Jewish roots that had embarrassed those keen to assimilate during earlier decades. As a textual medium, song served to strengthen the cultural references of the klezmer canon, thereby reinforcing the articulation of this identity. Singing in Yiddish positioned klezmer as a self-consciously Jewish repertory, and, as a texted medium, allowed ensembles to engage directly with extramusical issues.

The vernacular of the American klezmer revival is English, albeit seasoned with loan words drawn from Jewish, European, and Slavic languages.[20] The majority of today's klezmer musicians are American, and relatively few speak Yiddish fluently. Yiddish has nevertheless remained the principal language of song within the klezmer revival. This poses challenges for both communication and creativity. Since the vast majority of the audience for klezmer music does not understand Yiddish, communication through Yiddish song is inevitably linked to a self-conscious awareness of difference on the part of both musicians and audience. Negotiating this gap in understanding is an integral part of the establishment of a contemporary role for Yiddish music. Frank London of The Klezmatics describes using Yiddish "as a distancing [device], like in a Brechtian sense . . . because for most people, they blank out a little bit, they don't understand," and by contrast, "using the vernacular to force them not to blank out . . . and that can make people uncomfortable—they're often comfortable . . . in that space."[21]

This language gap, however, also poses a problem for many singers: by no means all of those who perform with klezmer bands are fluent in Yiddish, and of those who are, still fewer have sufficient grasp of the language to write their own songs. While some have chosen to write new Yiddish songs from scratch, then, other musicians have explored alternative techniques of creativity, including the use of arrangement to create new vocal material, or to infuse older material with new meaning.

The following discussion explores the recent work of three singers and their bands: Michael Alpert and Brave Old World; Adrienne Cooper and Mikveh; and Lorin Sklamberg and The Klezmatics. These three singers are unquestionably

[20] See David L. Gold, "Jewish English," in *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. Joshua Fishman (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 280–98. For examples of language use, see discussions on Shamash: The Jewish Network, http://listserv.shamash.org/cgi-bin/wa?A0=jewish-music.

[21] Frank London, interview with the author, New York, 3 April 2003.

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among the most influential and most recorded vocal artists of the klezmer revival, and all three ensembles fall towards the innovative, experimental end of the klezmer spectrum, explicitly using song to express what Slobin has called an "aesthetic, sometimes communal, vision" of a past-rooted contemporary Yiddish culture.[22] The careers of Alpert, Cooper, and Sklamberg have frequently overlapped: they have performed together, and all have been involved in the New York Yiddish cultural scene. Nevertheless, as in any dynamic folk tradition, individual singers approaching Yiddish repertories act not as part of a homogenized tradition but as "agents of change and creativity."[23] These three case studies illustrate different approaches to the combination of vocal and instrumental material within an overall klezmer sensibility, reflecting not only aesthetic choices but also the singers' own musical—and Yiddish cultural—backgrounds and their different inroads into the Yiddish musical and cultural sphere.

Michael Alpert and Brave Old World

Opening from Brave Old World, "Welcome," *Blood Oranges* (1997)[24]

> *Ay ay ay ay ay ay ay ay . . .*
> *A hartsikn gut helf aykh un a heymishn borekh-habo*
> *In di naye klangen fun Brave Old World af dem kompakt disk,*
> *Un a gerus gants Idishland,*
> *Fun San Francisco bizkl Brisk . . .*
> Ay ay ay ay ay ay ay ay . . .
> Greetings to all and welcome
> To the new sounds of Brave Old World on this CD,
> And greetings to all Yiddishland,
> From San Francisco to Brest-Litovsk . . .

A member of the early revival ensemble Kapelye, and a founding member of his current ensemble Brave Old World, Michael Alpert is one of the most highly regarded Yiddish singers on the klezmer scene today. As a native Yiddish speaker, he is—at the time of writing—also the only singer with a prominent klezmer band regularly to write and perform his own Yiddish songs.

Alpert models his approach to performance on elements of pre-Holocaust East European Yiddish vocal style, learned from extensive work with elderly informants, whom he frequently cites on recordings, performances, and while teaching. His concert repertory includes Old World folk songs, and his own compositions use musical elements drawn from this repertory. Nevertheless, the traditional and the contemporary are frequently juxtaposed or collide in his work, as in the song text cited above. Sung in the style of a traditional Old World *badkhn* (wedding jester), his text flits between Old and New World, counterpoising "*a heymishn borekh-habo*" (a home-style welcome), a phrase with a resonance of traditional Yiddish culture, with "*dem kompakt disk*" (this CD), clearly a term recently imported into the Yiddish

[22] Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move*, 3.
[23] Bohlman, *Study of Folk Music*, xix.
[24] Lyrics and melody by Michael Alpert and Alan Bern; translation from liner notes.

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language. It is perhaps no coincidence that Alpert chooses to mark the boundaries of "Yiddishland" in San Francisco and Brest-Litovsk, locations representing his native California and Lithuania, from where his father's family came. For Alpert, the constant negotiation between Old and New World is a personal one, reflected strongly in his creative work.

Alpert attributes his involvement and standpoint in Yiddish music today to a combination of Old and New World cultural experiences: his experience of growing up among older East European Jews and his response to the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. As a child, Alpert was also exposed to an unusually broad range of Yiddish cultural forms, growing up "with one foot in the *frum* [religious] world and one foot in the lefty world": he spent time among religious cousins but also attended a Yiddish secular school where pupils learned Yiddish through songs. Further, the substantial age gap between him (b. 1954) and his father (b. 1906) gave him a stronger connection to an older Yiddish culture than was possible for most of his contemporaries—he describes himself as a "historical anomaly."[25] For Alpert, this sense of difference and marginality fed into his identification with the American counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and eventually was to become central to his Yiddish performance persona.

Alpert's Yiddish musical career began when, having been involved in the Balkan music scene, including some time living in Yugoslavia as a teenager, he moved from Los Angeles to New York in 1979. There he found himself in a new Yiddish cultural milieu, from which sprang the ensemble Kapelye. Kapelye's choice of repertory was strongly influenced by the Yiddish-speaking backgrounds of band members: unlike many of those involved in the klezmer revival, three members of Kapelye had grown up speaking Yiddish at home. These band members brought knowledge of diverse repertories of Yiddish song to the band's repertory, which ranged from folk songs to Charles Cohan's "Levine and his Flying Machine," a Yiddish popular song celebrating Charles Levine's 1927 transatlantic flight.

If Kapelye performed mainly precomposed material, it was with the formation of Brave Old World in 1989 that Alpert's voice as a singer-songwriter came to the fore. A quartet of musicians with considerable prior experience in Yiddish music and related genres, Brave Old World articulated "the goal of developing a new Yiddish music, whose language and forms would be consciously created for the concert stage and a listening audience, but still deeply rooted in Yiddish folk materials."[26] Although the Old World features in the band's name, they label their music "New Jewish Music" rather than "klezmer." These statements serve to situate Brave Old World's output in a self-defined culturally paradoxical situation. Rather than placing themselves within a continuing klezmer tradition, the disjunction between past and present is highlighted by placing their creations as "new music." That this is music primarily for the concert stage invokes a conscious remove from the East European folk tradition. Nevertheless, music "deeply rooted" in folk

[25] Michael Alpert, interview with the author, Weimar, 31 July 2002.

[26] Alan Bern, "From Klezmer to New Jewish Music: The Musical Evolution of Brave Old World," http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/bern.new.html (originally published in *Mensh & Musik*, 1998).

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materials suggests recourse to a cultural fluency difficult to achieve in a musical tradition in which these roots were so comprehensively destroyed by Nazism.

This sense of cultural paradox drives Brave Old World's musical creativity. In both instrumental and vocal material, the band juxtaposes precomposed material with compositions by each of the four musicians. Within the framework of the band, however, Alpert speaks in a personal voice. His lyrics are almost always in the first person and are frequently introspective. In keeping with his comments above, the sense of Jewishness he conveys is not one of mainstream Jewish American affiliation. Rather, in locating his authorial voice firmly within a traditionally oriented Yiddish cultural setting disjointed from current reality, he reinforces the sense of marginality described earlier.

In "Klaybt zikh tsunoyf" ("Gather Together"), from Brave Old World's first album (*Klezmer Music*, 1990), Alpert celebrates companionship in a Yiddish cultural setting—the "Yiddishland" of the song quoted earlier. Even within the intimate setting he portrays—a gathering of friends—Alpert, speaking in the first person, positions himself as an outsider ("I have come to you from far away"). Nevertheless, he stresses the strength of bonds formed via cultural companionship, addressing the song's audience as "sisters and brothers . . . bound together like family." This sense of companionship is reinforced by the melody: each phrase of text is answered by an untexted vocal phrase, the call-and-response pattern encouraging audience participation.

Brave Old World, "Klaybt zikh tsunoyf" ("Gather Together"), *Klezmer Music*[27]

Klaybt zikh tsunoyf, mayne shvester un briderlekh,
Un lomir zikh freyen vos mir zaynen yidelekh.
Genug shoyn tsu veynen mit hertser farvundete
Vayl mir zaynen ale vi kroyvim farbundete.
Khotsh ikh bin gekumen tsu aykh fun der vayter velt
Ir zent mir alemen tayere nokh fun gelt
To lomir zikh freyen biz in vaysn tog arayn
Makhn a lekhayim un trinkn a glezl vayn.

Gather together, my sisters and brothers,
And let's be glad that we're Jews.
Enough crying already with wounded hearts
Because we're all bound together like family.
Although I have come to you from far away,
All of you are dearer to me than money.
So let's rejoice until the early hours
Make a toast and drink a glass of wine.

This articulation of shared conviviality builds a picture of Yiddish culture strongly based on ethnic and community ties; music becomes a place in which this community may, however briefly, be instantiated.

In other songs, however, Alpert makes different use of Yiddish cultural vocabulary. "A shpay in Yam" ("Spitting into the Sea," *Bless the Fire*, 2003) is modeled

[27] Brave Old World, *Klezmer Music* (Flying Fish FF 70560, 1990); lyrics and melody by Michael Alpert, translation mine.

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as an East European Yiddish folk ballad.[28] This model is reflected in its subject matter—like many Old World ballads it is a song of unfulfilled love—and in its structure. The nine verses of the song form a narrative, and its melodic form is strophic; the verse melody forms an arch shape, and the last two lines of each stanza are frequently repeated (compare, for example, recordings of the repertory of Lifshe Schaechter-Widman, released in 1986 by Global Village).

Alpert's use of language again taps into an Old World Yiddish cultural vocabulary. He describes the beloved with the attributes "charm, wisdom, and graciousness" (*kheyn, khokhme, edelkayt*), character traits highly valued in traditional Yiddish culture.[29] Further, Alpert sings the final verse of the song wholly in Ukrainian, alluding to the way Yiddish speakers in Eastern Europe were also speakers of other co-territorial languages and incorporated words from these languages into their Yiddish. This aspect of the Yiddish language was largely lost as its speakers moved to America and instead began to incorporate English words into their Yiddish—hence Alpert's use of Ukrainian is another marker of alterity, identifying himself with a past, rather than present, Yiddish-speaking community.

Alpert's own voice acts as an equally strong cultural marker. He sings in the regional accent of the Yiddish he learned from his European-born parents, again identifying himself with the sound of Old World, rather than New World, Yiddish. His vocal style, likewise, uses the metric flexibility and ornamentation typical of Old World Yiddish folk song. The traditional unaccompanied rendition of Yiddish folk song is also preserved in the musical arrangement: the song is accompanied by cimbalom and accordion, but the opening and the end of the song are left unaccompanied. Within the context of this arrangement, even the sound of unaccompanied folk song becomes a musical trope, a compositional device of contemporary music: the listener is reminded that this is a piece designed for the concert stage, not an Old World folk song.

"A shpay in Yam" makes a strong statement of cultural identity. By alluding to elements typical of older Yiddish folk songs with a contemporary setting, Alpert resituates these elements as markers of his personal voice and worldview. Despite the gradual disappearance of the generation born in Yiddish-speaking Europe, Alpert continues to reach out to the Yiddish world that attracted him when he was younger. Rather than adapting his cultural voice to speak to a contemporary audience, by choosing this mode of expression Alpert maintains his self-conscious position of difference and marginality. The Yiddishland he describes, where folk creation continues, is attractive to those hungry for "authenticity," yet today is an imagined landscape, its cultural references inaccessible to all but a small proportion of his audiences. Translation is not a substitute for comprehension: the illusion of a fully continuing Yiddish cultural tradition is broken by the need for liner notes, explanations and translations to convey this music to a modern audience.

[28] Brave Old World, *Bless the Fire* (Pinorrekk PRCD 3405039, 2003). An excerpt from this song is posted at http://www.braveoldworld.com.

[29] Translation from CD liner notes. See Rachel Rosmarin, *Mamma Used to Say: Pearls of Wisdom from the World of Yiddish* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2000), 170, 274. *Eydl*, lit. "delicate, refined," is a common Yiddish girl's name.

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Although the disjuncture between Old and New World is uneasily foregrounded in Brave Old World's work, the comments of one reviewer suggest that the appeal of the band's music also lies precisely in this expression of cultural tension and the creative reimagining of past Yiddish culture: "The music and the words evoke a bucolic shtetl that never was, and in doing so, create a vision of Jewish life that transcends time and place to speak to us now."[30] Alpert's songs embody a distinctive approach to bridging the gap between Old World Yiddish culture and contemporary America, grounded in his individual frame of reference and experiences of cultural community and marginality, which in turn resonate with Brave Old World's broader artistic approach.

Adrienne Cooper and Mikveh

The eponymous debut album (2001) of the all-female klezmer band Mikveh uses Yiddish song as a medium to evoke a multifaceted picture of women in Yiddish culture, reinterpreting Old World materials to resonate with a contemporary American Jewish women's sensibility.[31]

Mikveh—named after the ritual bath in which observant Jewish women must immerse after menstruation before reuniting with their husbands—was founded in 1998 for a performance as part of a feminist campaign to stop violence against women and girls. The band, which brings together five of the most prominent female musicians of the klezmer scene, focuses on repertory by and about women. The principal singer on the album, Adrienne Cooper, is a prominent performer and teacher in the Yiddish cultural scene. Her grandfather was a *bal-tfile* (a lay synagogue cantor) and her mother a classically trained singer. Cooper's early background was in classical music, and as a young adult she studied singing, performing as a soloist and in ensembles. She began to perform Yiddish song as a graduate student in Chicago during the early 1970s and then moved to New York to study Yiddish in a summer language program; she continued her study at YIVO, where she met many individuals involved in Yiddish song, including klezmer revivalists Michael Alpert and Henry Sapoznik; folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; the late Lazar Weiner, an important composer of Yiddish art song; and the late Wolf Younin, a Yiddish poet. In New York, she also met Zalmen Mlotek, a pianist and musical director prominently involved in Yiddish theater and choral music, with whom she has collaborated frequently.

Cooper continued to sing in Yiddish and performed around the Yiddishist community in New York. Her association with YIVO—where she studied for five years and worked for ten years, eventually becoming assistant director of the organization—gave her a broad exposure to Yiddish culture, language, and song and had an impact on her subsequent choice of repertory. Although it is not

[30] Ari Davidow, review of Brave Old World, *Bless the Fire*, http://www.klezmershack.com/bands/bow/fire/bow.fire.html.

[31] A grassroots Jewish feminist movement, particularly that interrogating issues of identity and gender enactment, has existed for several decades; see, for example, the Jewish feminist journals *Lilith* and *Bridges*.

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uncommon for singers involved in the klezmer scene to perform a variety of Yiddish repertories, Cooper has had a particularly diverse career, recording in both art and folk idioms and working in several music theater productions. She was a member of Kapelye after Alpert's departure from the band, and has appeared as a guest artist on recordings by The Klezmatics and the Flying Bulgar Klezmer band.

Of *Mikveh*'s fourteen tracks, twelve are songs; these songs draw upon traditional folk, literary, and religious sources in addition to presenting newly composed material. Together, they present a range of different perspectives on women's lives and experiences within the Yiddish cultural sphere, including love, fertility, miscarriage, and domestic violence. Images of womanhood associated with traditional Yiddish culture are set alongside the contemporary world of the band and of the wider creative circle of women of which they form part.

The album opens with a folk song of Hasidic origin, "Royz royz" ("Rose, Rose"), sung by Adrienne Cooper with solo clarinet accompaniment. The song juxtaposes the image of a rose lost far away in a large wood with the image of the divine presence distanced during the Jewish exile.[32]

Mikveh, "Royz royz" ("Rose, Rose"), *Mikveh*[33]

Royz royz vi vayt bistu
Vald vald vi groys bistu
Volt di royz nisht azoy vayt geven
Volt der vald nisht azoy groys geven

Shkhine shkhine vi vayt bistu
Goles goles vi lang bistu
Volt di shkhine nisht azoy vayt geven
Volt der goles nisht azoy lang geven

Rose, how far away you are
Forest, how vast you are
If the rose were not out of reach,
The forest wouldn't seem so vast.

Divine spirit, how far away you are
Exile, how long you last
If the divine spirit were not out of reach,
Our exile would not endure so long.

The text serves to situate *Mikveh* within the framework of traditional Jewish thought. The exile—*goles*—refers to the period after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the subsequent dispersal of the Jewish population, a period of exile that led to today's Jewish diaspora. Despite the distance of two millennia, the destruction of the Temple continues to be commemorated in religious Judaism, both within the liturgy and by an annual fast day (the ninth of the Hebrew month Av). Here, however, this lamenting of the exilic condition also, ironically, stands

[32] The song, adapted by a Hasidic rabbi, is said to have originated in the song of a Hungarian shepherd boy calling out for his beloved Rose.

[33] Mikveh, *Mikveh* (Traditional Crossroads 80702-4305-2, 2001). Traditional lyrics and melody; translation in liner notes.

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as a salute to diasporic Jewish culture: Yiddish is quintessentially a language of the exile, and this song is by no means alone in reflecting the contribution made to Jewish music by the diverse cultures with which the Jewish population has come into contact during the exilic period.

"Royz royz" also emphasizes the theme of the feminine in Yiddish culture. The divine spirit—*shkhine*—to which the song refers is commonly held to represent the feminine aspect of God. This notion appears in the Zohar, the principal text of mystical Judaism (kabbalah), but has also been taken up by contemporary Jews seeking to address perceived gender imbalances in traditional Judaism. Mikvah's recording juxtaposes this feminine topos with another: the female folksinger. Whereas Yiddish folk songs are sung by both women and men, in the popular imagination women are more strongly associated with the performance and the transmission of Yiddish songs.[34] Many stories and personal reminiscences place Yiddish songs in the mouths of a beloved mother, aunt, or grandmother.[35]

Cooper places her own voice alongside the voices of generations of Yiddish-speaking women. The minimal accompaniment and the free rhythm of the song suggest a folk idiom and focus the listener's attention on the voice, yet the unusual pairing with solo clarinet immediately places the song in a contemporary performance context—like Alpert's "A shpay in Yam," "Royz royz" is explicitly arranged for concert performance. Cooper sings softly in a low register, producing a warm tone more reminiscent of a popular American "folk" sound than an "authentic" East European Jewish vocal style, again making her performance accessible to a contemporary American listener.

This performance style resonates with her overall approach to Yiddish repertory, and she herself contrasts her style with that of Alpert. For Cooper, approaching song material from a contemporary perspective forms a vital element of communication with her audiences. Rather than trying to re-create a historically "authentic" performance style rooted in the past, she wants her audience to "encounter this material where we are, which to me is not at a remove, it's not at a distance from the material."[36] Like Alpert's, her performance persona is self-consciously created, though unlike his projected marginality, Cooper actively bridges the distance between her repertory and her audience.

[34] Perhaps the most familiar example of this association can be found in the text of the Yiddish theater song "Rozhinkes mit mandeln." Written by Abraham Goldfaden in 1880, the song entered the folk tradition and remains one of the best-known Yiddish songs today. The verse describes a widow singing to her only son; the refrain is the song she is pictured singing. Other Yiddish songs referring to this topos include Aaron Litvin's satiric "Zhamele"—for a summary in English, see Eleanor and Joseph Mlotek, *Pearls of Yiddish Song* (New York: Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1988), 88.

[35] See, for example, Roslyn Bresnick-Perry's recollections of her aunts and grandmother singing during the festival of Sukkot in "*Sukkot* Is for Sauerkraut," in *Holiday Memories of a Shtetl Childhood* (Global Village Music CD144, 1990); Bernard Homa's recollections of his mother, B'racha Leah, in *Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Gloucester: Beaver Press, 1990), 24; and Richard Fein's recollections of hearing folksinger/folklorist Ruth Rubin, in *The Dance of Leah: Discovering Yiddish in America* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 109.

[36] Adrienne Cooper, interview with the author, 2001. This contrast in approach is clearly audible when comparing Cooper's recording of "Royz royz" to the version of this song recently recorded by Michael Alpert as "Gules gules" (Brave Old World, *Bless the Fire*, 2003).

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The use of recently composed material reinforces Cooper's contemporary encounter with Yiddish song. The album's third song, "Soreles bas mitsveh" (Sorele's Bat Mitzvah) is an adaptation of a song by the contemporary New York Yiddish poet Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman. It was originally written for the bar mitzvah of Schaechter-Gottesman's nephew; here, Cooper adapts the song to celebrate the coming of age of her daughter Sarah.

In contrast with the enduring pictures of femininity painted by "Royz royz," "Soreles Bas Mitzveh" employs a specific contemporary community of creative Jewish women who pass down culture to a new generation. This community includes the band members and other people: Cooper's daughter reappears later on the album as coauthor of a song, and the liner notes of *Mikveh* credit, alongside Schaechter-Gottesman, the late Yiddish folksinger Bronya Sakina as a source of musical material. The latter women represent an older generation of Yiddish culturalists, thus enhancing the impression that this band forms part of an ongoing, evolving Yiddish culture. The vocal arrangements on *Mikveh* additionally contribute to this sense of community. Cooper is the principal singer, but hers is not the only voice featured. Accordionist Lauren Brody sings a substantial amount of solo material, and frequently Cooper and Brody sing in duet or in close harmony with other members of the band. This simultaneous sounding of a number of voices again tends to locate the individual musicians within a communal view of Yiddish culture, and highlights the roles of women in the process of cultural transmission and change.[37]

The remainder of the songs on the album engage some of the varied experiences of women during the encounter between Yiddish culture and modernity, expressed in traditional and contemporary Yiddish song, from tales of romance and a celebration of sexuality and fertility to a folk song about domestic violence and a newly composed song about miscarriage. These songs mediate the experiences of the band as contemporary American women and the wider experiences of women within Yiddish culture. Additionally, they draw attention to subjects that have customarily been marginalized within contemporary American discourse, which has frequently painted a rosy, idealized picture of Yiddish cultural life (such as that portrayed in the 1971 film *Fiddler on the Roof*).[38] The women Mikveh portrays resist essentialization, moving beyond the female roles canonized in the Yiddish musical tradition.

Mikveh still leaves open questions pertaining to women's roles in contemporary Yiddish music and culture, however. One is illustrated in the track "Eyshes khayil" ("A Woman of Substance"). This Hebrew text, an alphabetic acrostic from the Book of Proverbs, is "traditionally recited [by religious Jews] in the home on Friday night, the eve of the Sabbath in honour of women's work and worth."[39] The end of the text is particularly well known, and seems to reflect a contemporary feminist sensibility:

[37] For discussion of similar processes of cultural transmission in the parallel case of Judeo-Spanish repertory, see Judith Cohen, "Women's Roles in Judeo-Spanish Song Traditions," in *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*, ed. Maurie Sacks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 182–202.

[38] *Fiddler on the Roof*, dir. Norman Jewison (MGM, 1971).

[39] Mikveh, *Mikveh,* liner notes.

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> *Sheker hakheyn vehevel hayofi, isho yiras hashem, hi sishalol*
> *T'nu lo mipri yodeyho, Viyhaleluho bash'orim ma'aseho.*
>
> Grace is false and beauty is vain; a woman who fears God, she shall be praised.
> Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her own deeds praise her in the gates.[40]

When considered in its entirety, however, the text of "Eyshes khayil" (Proverbs 31:10–31) is deemed problematic by many Jewish feminists today. Kolot, the Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies, notes that it "presents an old-fashioned and restrictive idealization of women."[41] The portrait it paints of a "woman of substance" centers around her domestic achievements, and it is her husband who "sits among the elders of the land." The translation given in the liner notes attempts to circumvent some problematic elements by abridging and paraphrasing the text. Cooper's choice to sing this text using an Ashkenazic accent (which was used in the Yiddish-speaking world, but today has been largely abandoned outside the strictly Orthodox community in favor of Israeli pronunciation) immediately calls to mind today's strictly Orthodox communities where contemporary feminist values hold little sway and where women are not permitted, by Jewish law, to sing in front of men other than their husbands and close relatives, yet where Yiddish is still spoken on a daily basis and where many musical traditions of the Yiddish world are preserved.

Mikveh's rendition of this song casts it as a celebration. At the opening, Cooper's voice is joined by the other musicians singing harmonies that create a sound evoking a Bulgarian women's choir. Later, instrumental interludes are added; the song gradually speeds up to a climax on the final two lines cited above. The song also tacitly acknowledges a sentiment voiced by band member Alicia Svigals:

> There are many people who wish they could be culturally Jewish, spiritual, and progressive all at once. They secretly long for a congregation that would be a cross between a B'nai Jeshurun—a synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side that boasts progressive politics, religious tradition, a big youthful crowd, and sappy liturgical tunes of the Israeli Europop variety—and one of those shuls [synagogues] deep in the heart of Brooklyn that features great *khazones* (cantorial singing) but most decidedly doesn't marry gay couples.[42]

In recasting "Eyshes khayil" as a concert piece, the members of Mikveh attempt to "reclaim" a problematic element of traditional Jewish liturgy for women's voices but at the same time distance themselves from the model of contemporary Jewish liturgical music associated with popular progressive female cantor-songwriters such as Debbie Friedman, whose musical roots are closer to American light pop than to the Yiddish musical tradition. In Mikveh's arrangement, nevertheless, the song loses its religious or spiritual context: this is music for listening, not a Friday night ritual. Likewise, the remainder of the album avoids making a strong statement—feminist or otherwise—about women's roles in Yiddish culture. Even the title,

[40] Proverbs 31:30–31 (my translation).

[41] See http://www.kolot.org/resources.asp. This website suggests an alternative formulation of the text for use by contemporary women.

[42] Alicia Svigals, "Why We Do This Anyway: Klezmer as Jewish Youth Subculture," in Slobin, *American Klezmer*, 214.

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Mikveh, adopted here as a positive symbol of Jewish femininity, is linked to a religious requirement that many women, even Orthodox feminists, find particularly challenging.[43] Further, the experiences of contemporary women musicians in what largely continues (with a few notable exceptions) to be a male-dominated music scene remain to be addressed.

Mikveh does, however, bring to the fore the active role played by women as cultural transmitters within the Yiddish song tradition, echoing Judith Cohen's comments on the Judeo-Spanish song tradition: "Women express themselves not only through song but also by developing new strategies and contexts for transmitting traditional materials."[44] In helping to define a present-day North American Yiddishist women's sensibility and presenting a variety of perspectives on women's experiences in Yiddish culture past and present, the band enables its audiences to engage with traditional material while remaining firmly within a contemporary musical and cultural aesthetic.

Lorin Sklamberg and The Klezmatics

The Klezmatics present a third approach to klezmer's interpretation of contemporary Jewish culture. One of the longest-established and most prolific of today's klezmer bands, The Klezmatics are part of a second wave of revival bands that formed in the late 1980s. Known for their characteristic countercultural aesthetic and rock style, The Klezmatics have recorded ten albums over a twenty-one-year history. In 2007, The Klezmatics won a Grammy in the category of Best Contemporary World Music Album for *Wonder Wheel* (with lyrics by Woody Guthrie).

These recordings illustrate multiple approaches to the arrangement and creation of new Yiddish vocal material. In contrast to *Mikveh*, which combines songs from a wide range of sources in a single album in order to build up a many-layered Yiddish women's voice, The Klezmatics combine multiple strands of musical and textual material in individual songs. Their distinctive approach to repertory and arrangement allow contemporary musicians to comment on preexisting material, producing songs with a fully integrated musical texture. This juxtaposition of materials, reflecting the gamut of the musical experiences of band members, moves back towards the kind of expression of individual musical personalities exemplified earlier by Alpert and Brave Old World; nevertheless, here, rather than reflecting a sense of marginality, this individuality is strongly rooted within a contemporary Jewish identity, which resonates with other present-day trends within the American Jewish community.

Vocalist Lorin Sklamberg recalls that songs became part of the band's repertory from the very beginning. Although he had experience in other Jewish vocal styles, including working as cantor of the gay synagogue Beth Chayim in Los Angeles, Sklamberg came to klezmer with little experience of Yiddish song. Sklamberg's work with elderly informants and historical research formed, like Cooper's, an inroad to

[43] See, for example, Miriam Udel-Lambert, "Immersion in Reality," *Forward*, 23 June 2006, http://forward.com/articles/7992.

[44] Cohen, "Women's Roles," 182.

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Yiddish repertories. When The Klezmatics formed, Sklamberg was working for the design department of YIVO, through which he could access an important collection of both commercial and field recordings.[45] The band began to draw this material into its repertory. Sklamberg used a similar combination of research and listening experience to develop his vocal style and was especially influenced by Yiddish theater singer Aaron Lebedeff and by Hasidic recordings.[46]

Released in 1988, The Klezmatics' first album includes five vocal numbers among its twelve tracks.[47] The opening number, "Ershter Vals" ("First Waltz") is a sentimental Russian waltz tune with Yiddish text and is perhaps atypical of the band's later choice of repertory; "Dzankoye" and "Ale Brider" ("All Brothers"), among the most popular songs of the klezmer revival, share two features that have undoubtedly contributed to their popularity. First, each has a sing-along refrain with little or no text. In enabling audience participation, such songs help to create an illusion of familiarity and shared cultural fluency and to bridge the gap between the performance of revived music and contemporary cultural expression. Second, the subject matter of these songs, both of which derive from the Jewish socialist tradition, resonates with the very nature of the klezmer revival. From the revival's earliest years, several klezmer bands identifying with leftist "progressive" secular politics have included songs of socialist origin in their repertories. "Dzankoye"—the name of a town in the Crimea—hails from "the short period in the 1920s when the Soviet Socialist revolution allowed Jews to own land for the first time."[48] The lyrics brim with confidence in the Jewish socialist future mirrored half a century later in the klezmer revival, which explicitly promoted in its lyrics a proud, contemporary Jewish identity based on European roots rather than Israeli or assimilated American culture: "Jews, answer my question: where's Abrasha? He drives that tractor like a train! . . . Who says Jews can only be traders who eat greasy soup with mandlen [croutons] and can't be workers? Only our enemies would say that."[49]

Like "Dzankoye," "Ale Brider" is a socialist song conveying a universal message of community. Here, though, The Klezmatics expand the text to include material reflecting their gender politics, an important facet of the band's identity. Written by Yiddish poet Morris Winchewsky in 1890, the original song begins: "We are all brothers and sing happy songs. We stick together like nobody else."[50] Popular among Jewish socialists, the song became widely known, incorporating numerous new stanzas. The Klezmatics continued in this pattern, adding stanzas reflecting contemporary progressive politics. Their liner notes explain: "[The] original poem included the lines: 'We are all brothers . . . Religious and leftists united, like bride and groom, like kugl and kashe [potato pudding and buckwheat]. . . .' In true

[45] Sklamberg is currently YIVO's sound archivist.

[46] Sklamberg, interview with the author, New York, 9 August 2001. With Uri Caine, Sklamberg and London explore the Hasidic musical tradition in more depth in their recordings *Nigunim* (Tzadik TZ 7129, 1998) and, with Rob Schwimmer, *Zmiros: Songs for Shabbat and Jewish Celebration*, the CD accompanying *Ain Sof: There Is No End*, ed. Sarah Gershman (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV Press, 2001).

[47] Klezmatics, *Shvaygn=Toyt: Heimatklänge of the Lower East Side* (Piranha PIR20-2, 1988).

[48] Liner notes to Klezmatics, *Shvaygn=Toyt*.

[49] Translation from CD liner notes.

[50] Ibid.

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Klezmatics tradition, we all sing, 'We're all sisters, like Rachel, Ruth and Esther,' and 'We're all gay, like Jonathan and King David.'"[51]

This recording marks only the beginning of the development of The Klezmatics' musical persona. The real impetus for this development came not only from the band itself, but also from market forces. In describing klezmer as a "subcommodified" genre, Slobin acknowledges the importance of the "heritage music infrastructure" to klezmer music.[52] Within this wider commercial sphere, klezmer bands must compete with other ensembles championed by the world music industry. Sklamberg recalls that early in the band's career they took part in a Berlin music festival where the presenter wanted "a hip klezmer band that somehow was going to go take the music somewhere else," an Ashkenazi equivalent of popular Israeli-Yemenite singer Ofra Haza, then a major artist on the "world music" scene.[53] The Klezmatics rose to this challenge, grounding their approach within an aesthetic based on the fusion of traditional Yiddish musical materials with other strands of the musical identities of band members, all of whom also perform in genres outside klezmer.[54]

In pursuing this goal of musical innovation, The Klezmatics began to incorporate new compositions, both vocal and instrumental, into their repertory. Whereas their original instrumental numbers may be written from scratch, their new songs are often formed via a process of bricolage, using existing texts and combining them with "found" musical materials derived from instrumental music as well as with newly composed materials. Trumpeter Frank London, credited with many of the band's original arrangements and compositions, identifies this reciprocal, creative relationship between vocal and instrumental genres as typical of Yiddish music: "The vocal songs become instrumental tunes, and instrumental melodies get words put on them."[55]

Some new songs are simply new melodies to older Yiddish texts: "Hevl iz havolim" ("Vanity Is Vanities") on *Rise Up!* (2003) uses a combination of two folk song texts, "Hevl iz havolim," originally published, according to London, by Soviet Jewish folklorist Moshe Beregovski, and "A redl iz di gore velt," published by Canadian folklorist Ruth Rubin in her collection *Voices of a People*, setting them to a new melody. Other compositions take texts from a wider range of sources, several of which are particularly provocative, from "Honiksaft" ("Honeyjuice") from *Rhythm + Jews* (1992), which transforms a Yiddish translation of the biblical Song of Songs into a homoerotic love song, to Yiddish eroticist poet Celia Dropkin's "Es vilt zikh mir zen" ("I want to see you") from *Jews with Horns* (1994). The latter contains

[51] Liner notes, Klezmatics, *Shvaygn=Toyt*. The use of gay markers by The Klezmatics is discussed in detail in David Kaminsky, "'And We Sing Gay Songs': The Klezmatics: Negotiating the Boundaries of Jewish Identity," in *Studies in Jewish Musical Traditions: Insights from the Harvard Collection of Judaica Sound Recordings*, ed. Kay Kaufman Shelemay (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard College Library, 2001), 51–87.

[52] Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move*, 32.

[53] Sklamberg, interview with the author, 2001.

[54] Other genres performed by band members include jazz, Balkan and Celtic musics. The band's website, http://www.klezmatics.com, contains individual biographies.

[55] London, interview with the author, New York, 3 April 2003.

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the lines "*Es vilt zikh mir zen vi du shlofst, ven du farlirst dayn makht iber zikh, iber mir . . . Es vilt zikh mir zen dikh a toytn*" ("I'd like to see you sleeping, when you lose your hold on yourself and on me . . . I'd like to see you dead").[56]

Other original songs set new texts: among them is "Mizmor shir lehanef" (Reefer Song, subtitled "A Psalm, a Song of Hemp"), a tongue-in-cheek song about marijuana intended to expand the more "traditional" repertory of Yiddish drinking songs. The text, by Canadian Yiddishist Michael Wex, is written in idiomatic English, using traditional religious Jewish imagery to compare smoking cannabis to Sabbath rest and religious enlightenment. The title of the song is itself a parody: "Mizmor shir" is the Hebrew appellation with which many of biblical psalms begin. The liner notes to The Klezmatics' recording not only translate the Yiddish text into English but also gloss the idiomatic language used by Wex, shedding light on the in-jokes otherwise liable to be understood only by that segment of the audience with a traditional religious upbringing, and by outlining an appropriate Yiddish translation for "good shit."

Klezmatics, "Mizmor shir lehanef" ("Reefer Song"), *Possessed*[57]

Dem yidn brengt der shabes ri
Menukhe, glaykh-gevikht.
S'i'mir shabes yedn in der fri—
Aza frumyak bin ikh?
Aza frumyak bin ikh,
Aza frumyak bin ikh.
Az ikh tsind mir on a splifele
Un ver mikh oyfgerikht.

Shabbos [the Sabbath] brings Jews rest,
Repose, equilibrium.
Every morning is Shabbos for me—
Am I really so religious?
I'm really so religious,
Really so religious.
When I light up a spliff
And start to do all right, feel real good.

Although only the textual in-jokes are explained in the notes, London's music uses a combination of elements to reflect the references of the text. The opening of the verse melody refers to a shape commonly found in East European Jewish liturgical music: an upward leap of a fifth, repeated notes on the fifth scale degree, and a return to this scale degree at the end of the phrase, as shown in Example 1.[58]

[56] Text and translation from liner notes.

[57] Klezmatics, "Mizmor shir lehanef" ("Reefer Song"), *Possessed* (Piranha PIR1148, 1997); lyrics by Michael Wex, melody by Frank London, translation in liner notes.

[58] For examples of this phrase structure in liturgical music, see Avraham Zwi Idelsohn, *Der Synagogengesang der Osteuropäischen Juden* (Leipzig: Friedrich Hofmeister, 1932), excerpts 29, 41, 55, 93ff.

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Example 1. Klezmatics, "Mizmor shir lehanef" ("Reefer Song"), opening of verse melody.

Bouzouki:

Bouzouki:

Example 2. Klezmatics, "Mizmor shir lehanef" ("Reefer Song"), linking passage.

Reykht a splif Ka-na-bis

Example 3. Klezmatics, "Mizmor shir lehanef" ("Reefer Song"), "Ot Azoy" melody.

This is connected to the chorus by a linking passage that creates an exotic, "oriental" atmosphere by the use of slow-moving melodic lines overlaid with improvisatory bouzouki motives shown in Example 2. The three verses are punctuated first by a polytonal instrumental improvisation, and then by a chorus, which is set to part of the well-known klezmer melody "Ot Azoy" ("Like This"), shown in Example 3. At a point in the "Ot Azoy" melody where the audience would usually call out "*Ot azoy! Gut azoy!*" ("Do it like this! It's good this way!"), Wex's text instead calls out "*Reykht a splif—kanabis*" ("Smoke a spliff—cannabis"). This musical in-joke forms a counterpart to the many textual references of the lyrics.

If The Klezmatics' creative process centers around the fusion of eclectic Old World and contemporary musical elements to create a hip, up-to-date sound, the band is equally interested in exploring the contribution of Yiddish to contemporary alternative forms of Jewish cultural expression. In addressing the challenge of communicating with a contemporary audience through Yiddish music, The Klezmatics have explored the visual and textual expressive space of the CD as a means to link their work with wider realms of Jewish culture. Their CDs typically include an essay by a writer outside the band; these essays frequently explore a social or political issue.[59] For example, Ellen Kushner's reflections on the post-9/11 world in *Rise Up!* mirror those of the band, who translated and recorded singer-songwriter Holly Near's "I Ain't Afraid" in Yiddish and English in the wake of the terrorist attacks:

[59] These essays were written by Allolo Trehorn for *Shvaygn=Toyt*; Michael Wex and Irena Klepfisz for *Rhythm + Jews* (Flying Fish FF70591, 1992); Michael Wex for *Jews with Horns* (Piranha PIR35-2, 1994); Tony Kushner for *Possessed*; and Ellen Kushner with Delia Sherman for *Rise Up!* (Piranha PIR1686, 2003).

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"I ain't afraid of your Yahweh/I ain't afraid of your Allah/I ain't afraid of your Jesus/I'm afraid of what you do in the name of your God."[60]

To explain the presence of these essays, Sklamberg notes:

> I think it's about connecting what we do to a larger world or a worldview. So we've asked people to write material who somehow are connected to us, either culturally or politically. . . . I guess that we want people to see what the band does in a larger context.[61]

This appeal to a "larger worldview" is embedded in a wider trend in contemporary American Jewish life. From the 1970s onward, a number of sites for "alternative" Jewish expression have emerged, many of which seek to reclaim and find new meaning in elements of traditional Jewish ritual and culture with a contemporary sensibility.[62] These include the political magazine *Tikkun* and, more recently, countercultural *Heeb* magazine, not to mention many Internet-based discussion venues such as Jewschool and Jewlicious.[63] These magazines and websites frequently promote and review "progressive" klezmer recordings, helping to draw voices like The Klezmatics into Jewish American discourse well beyond the klezmer scene.

Conclusion

These three case studies foreground the establishment of song as a medium that allows the exploration of both communal and individual identities within the klezmer scene. Song texts play a particularly important role in helping to create and develop the ontological frame within which each ensemble presents its music. Together with other discursive material, including liner notes (in which song lyrics usually appear in translation), album iconography, and onstage patter, songs offer a space for the explicit development of extramusical ideas surrounding each band and its music.

As the "voice" of a band, singers are invested with cultural authority: Deborah Karpel, singer with New York band Metropolitan Klezmer, observed that "it's just confusing sometimes . . . because I'm being put forth as some kind of an expert, which is something I'm not, because I'm the singer."[64] Nevertheless, voluntarily or involuntarily, in providing the means to draw in audiences, or to reinscribe marginality, singers have played a prominent role in the identity politics of the klezmer revival. As a medium where discursive and musical practices coincide, and where different paradigms for bridging the gap between Old and New world have been modeled, song has been vital in connecting American klezmer music to wider discourses of Jewish identity.

If the klezmer revival began by distancing itself from the "J-word," song has provided, for many American musicians, a means to situate klezmer music within contemporary Jewish culture. Unlike much of the contemporary European klezmer

[60] Holly Near, translated to Yiddish in liner notes for Klezmatics, *Rise Up!*

[61] Sklamberg, interview with the author, 2001.

[62] For a discussion, see Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1998), chap. 4.

[63] See http://www.jewschool.com and http://www.jewlicious.com.

[64] Deborah Karpel, interview with the author, New York, 14 August 2001.

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scene, the American revival has been closely connected with wider Jewish life. Synagogues and Jewish community centers have been major venues for the performance of klezmer music; new klezmer albums are regularly discussed in the mainstream Jewish press. Unlike the European scene, the vast majority of prominent revival musicians in America have been Jewish. Klezmer has not, however, merely affixed itself to existing strands of American Jewish culture. By offering a space for a contemporary engagement with these roots, the klezmer revival has shaped a new means of engagement with this cultural heritage, which have in turn contributed to wider American Jewish cultural processes.

Klezmer is now part of a Jewish American mainstream; however, in focusing attention on the different ways in which artists have responded to the challenges of creating contemporary meaning through Yiddish culture, the songs of the klezmer revival continue to challenge any construction of a normative "voice" of the klezmer scene. Rather, reinstating song into the discourses of the klezmer revival helps to tease apart the multiple strands of this movement, forming a picture of a continually developing scene. The collision of influences—individual and communal, and musical and extramusical—is itself central to the continued vitality of American klezmer.

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