

To Play Jewish Again: Roots, Counterculture, and the Klezmer Revival

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ABSTRACT

Klezmer, a type of Eastern European Jewish secular music brought to the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, originally functioned as accompaniment to Jewish wedding ritual celebrations. In the late 1970s, a group of primarily Jewish musicians sought inspiration for a renewal of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century American klezmer by mining 78 rpm records for influence, and also by seeking out living klezmer musicians as mentors.

Why did a group of Jewish musicians in the 1970s through 1990s want to connect with artists and recordings from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to “revive” this music? What did the music “do” for them and how did it contribute to their senses of both individual and collective identity? How did these musicians perceive the relationship between klezmer, Jewish culture, and Jewish religion? Finally, how was the genesis for the klezmer revival related to the social and cultural climate of its time? I argue that Jewish folk musicians revived klezmer music in the 1970s as a manifestation of both an existential search for authenticity, carrying over from the 1960s counterculture, and a manifestation of a 1970s trend toward ethnic cultural revival. I implicitly argue that both waves of klezmer popularity in America are reflections of the long project of Jews negotiating identities as both American and Jewish—the attempt to fit in from the margins while maintaining or being ascribed certain ethnic differences—in the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **DEDICATION**

In memory of my grandfather, Harry Potash, who spoke Yiddish as his first language, sang “Der Rebbe Elimelech” with his sisters, named his cat “Nebbish,” and is at least partly responsible for my love of folk music.

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## Introduction

The first klezmer musicians to record in New York, in the 1920s, all grew up in very religious families, even if they were not religious themselves.<sup>1</sup> Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein grew up in Hasidic families; Shloimke Beckerman grew up in what we would describe today as an ultra-orthodox Jewish household. At one of the first KlezKamps, in the mid 1980s, klezmer musician and important bridge figure, Peter Sokolow, decided to perform a set of Hasidic music. Sid Beckerman, son of Shloimke Beckerman, performed with Sokolow on these songs, because they were familiar to him. Afterward, however, Sid approached klezmer clarinetist and revivalist, Joel Rubin, and said, “I don’t know why Pete keeps calling out the names of the tunes in Hebrew. I don’t know why he keeps doing that. I don’t know a fucking word of Hebrew!” Sid knew Yiddish, and knew Yiddish music, but maintained little institutional religious involvement throughout his life. To him, the use of Hebrew signified a cultural and religious approach that was alien to his own relationship with the music. Sid and Pete were playing the same song but, quite literally, speaking different languages when describing it.

This story illustrates a cast of characters, and a style of music, that represented different ideas to different practitioners. Sokolow, though he grew up in a non-religious home, learned Hebrew as a child and became religious as he aged, seemingly through the community generated by his involvement in music. Sid Beckerman, considered one of the “old guys” by the 1980s, learned klezmer from his father and retained a thoroughgoing connection to Yiddish language and culture throughout his life. Rubin, a renowned klezmer clarinetist and scholar in his own right, maintains that the early klezmer revival was motivated by secular Jewish musicians wanting to return to their ethnic roots, though at points in his life, he has briefly become more

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 11 September 2015.

religious. Margot Leverett, when asked about the relationship between the klezmer revival and Jewish religion, also emphasized secularity in the early revival.<sup>2</sup> However, with the lack of a distinct line between religion and secularity in Judaism, and considering the importance of music in religious practice, each of these musicians sought their own “authentic” ways of being, arguably possessing elements of the spiritual.

Klezmer also represents a century-long route of negotiating both Jewish and American identity. Naftule Brandwein was known to perform in an Uncle Sam suit, and reportedly nearly electrocuted himself due to his own perspiration while donning Christmas lights on stage. However, his music hewed close to tradition. During the revival, Jewish musicians who were already relatively comfortable with their Americanness dressed in clothing that reflected their own romantic ideals of *shtetl* life.<sup>3</sup> Both instances, however, reflect a similar impulse to negotiate Jewish American identity. In the following, I discuss the Jewish American experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the broad context of immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren negotiating whiteness. More specifically, the century-long ambivalence toward white identity on the part of Jewish Americans is reflected in the ways klezmer musicians performed their status as both Americans and Jews.

Klezmer, a hybrid type of Eastern European Jewish secular music brought to the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, originally functioned as accompaniment to Jewish wedding ritual celebrations. It was further transformed by both the recording industry and jazz influence, experiencing a surge of popularity among Jewish immigrant audiences in the 1920s, then falling out of fashion after World War II.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1970s, a group of primarily Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 24 July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Shtetl* = small towns and villages where Jews historically lived in Eastern Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Baade, “Jewzak and Heavy Shtetl: Constructing Ethnic Identity and Asserting Authenticity in the New-Klezmer Movement” in *Monatshefte* Vol. 90, No. 2 (Summer 1998) 209.

musicians involved in various folk music scenes sought inspiration for a renewal of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century American klezmer by mining 78 rpm records for influence, and also by seeking out living klezmer musicians as mentors.

The story of America's relationship with klezmer prompts a further set of questions: why did a group of Jewish musicians in the 1970s through 1990s want to connect with artists and recordings from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to "revive" this music? What did the music "do" for them and how did it contribute to their senses of both individual and collective identity? How did these musicians perceive the relationship between klezmer, Jewish culture, and Jewish religion? Finally, how was the genesis for the klezmer revival related to the social and cultural climate of its time? In this thesis, I answer these questions by arguing that Jewish folk musicians revived klezmer music in the 1970s as a manifestation of both an existential search for authenticity, carrying over from the 1960s counterculture, and a manifestation of a 1970s trend toward ethnic cultural revival. Further, I implicitly argue that both waves of klezmer popularity in America are reflections of the long project of Jews negotiating identities as both American and Jewish—the attempt to fit in from the margins while maintaining or being ascribed certain ethnic differences—in the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is important to emphasize that klezmer demonstrates a particular style of Jewish ethnic identification. The renewed Eastern European Jewish identity among revivalists demonstrates a desire to connect with pre-World War II Yiddish culture in resistance to the dominance of Israeli cultural forms during the time period on one hand and non-ethnic, Anglo-American, "melting pot" culture on the other.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the genesis of this movement occurring after the popularization of Black Power and the widespread African American impulse to return to their

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).



“roots” indicates a discomfort with the full, mainstream whiteness embraced by liberal Jews in the post-World War II era.<sup>6</sup>

### A Note on Terms

Several terms in my analysis have multiple, or vague, meanings. Thus, I would like to clarify how I use them before proceeding. The first, broadest, and perhaps vaguest is “authenticity,” which I use in two different, though related ways. First, authenticity refers to the 1960s search for deeper meaning undertaken by young, largely white, middle class college students that spurred their involvement in political causes, most notably Civil Rights, and the continuation of this search in different permutations into the 1970s. As Douglas Rossinow writes, the Christian Existentialist philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard influenced this undertaking, though this influence was not confined to Christian students.<sup>7</sup> Jewish members of the 1960s

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<sup>6</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 5. Douglas Rossinow explores the influence of Christian Existentialism and the concept of “authenticity” in social activism in the 50's and 60's, focusing on mainly white college students at the University of Texas, but arguing that this school is representative of larger trends, especially in more conservative areas that did not have linkages to the old left. Rossinow writes, “The new left was a movement of white, college educated young people, few of whom had ever known poverty,” and thus, instead of relief from poverty or oppression, these students engaged in activism as a means of relief from the alienation of modern existence. In the 50's and 60's, these students who gathered for social change “viewed students and African Americans as the two groups most likely to stimulate radical social change,” since they were seen as the most alienated. In contrast, the working class were seen as “comfortable and conservative,” though the poor might stimulate social change due to their perceived shared alienated status with students and African Americans. This view that alienation could motivate people to act in the world in order to bring about social change was a departure from earlier worries about alienation eventually leading to the acceptance of political tyranny. According to Rossinow, these students, feeling that they were alienated from their true selves, embarked on an Existentialist search for authenticity, which they combined with liberal politics. The movement these students created marked “an unusually spirited dissent from the prevailing conservative trend of the 1950's.” Additionally, one of the most important factors in this movement from a historical perspective is that the students identified Christian liberalism with racial egalitarianism, producing a movement that was biracial and “increasingly racially integrated.” Rossinow writes, “the clearest political connection between Christianity and the new left was the role of Christian liberals in inspiring youth participation, black and white, in the Civil Rights Movement.” He also points out that these inclinations toward working on behalf of the oppressed were not motivated entirely by selflessness and a desire to make the world a better place, and the “old idea that African American culture was a repository of authenticity, which spiritually desiccated whites might tap for a racial 'crossover,’” also influenced them.<sup>7</sup> According to Rossinow, “marginal groups . . . seemed culturally authentic to new left radicals,” and this perception of “authenticity” was also a motivating factor in the students' alignments. Rossinow describes Existentialism as “a pathway between theological conservatism and radical humanism.” With many of these students having grown up in conservative evangelical, or even fundamentalist, families, the language of theological orthodoxy was familiar, and through

counterculture applied these ideas of social transformation and personal spiritual fulfillment to Judaism in the 1970s, inspiring the egalitarian, non-institutional Havurah movement.<sup>8</sup> Eric Goldstein similarly writes that Jewish Americans involved in the counterculture became increasingly concerned with asserting their difference from mainstream white America during this time, following the example of the Black Power movement and a larger societal inclination toward finding one's ethnic "roots."<sup>9</sup> The search for authenticity, in the 1970s, followed the trajectory of multiculturalism toward a celebration of the ethnic arts, food, and roots of one's particular group.

I also discuss "authenticity" as a way that musicians articulated the perceived genuineness of a musical form or musician. Klezmer musicians and scholars consistently debate what authenticity means in klezmer music. Significantly, klezmer clarinetist Alicia Svigals of The Klezmatics cautions against the idea of authenticity as artistic reproduction by referring to it as "folk-fetishism" and stating that "the 1920s were no more 'authentic' a period than any other," while praising the act of playing klezmer music authentically in the sense of being true to oneself creatively.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, klezmer pianist Peter Sokolow continues to emphasize the importance of playing stylistically similar music to Dave Tarras, Naftule Brandwein, and other early 20<sup>th</sup> century players.<sup>11</sup>

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the marriage of evangelical Christianity and Existentialism, the group created what Rossinow called a "de-Christianized dissident evangelism," motivating political activism. The Existentialist themes invoked by the students included the ideas that "thought about life should take the experience of life as its starting point," rather than taking abstract principles as its starting point, and the affirmation that "the capacity for self-conscious revolt against authority, intellectual or social, [was] a basic component of human identity." Identifying with an authentic self, and acting in the world accordingly, would lead to a full, unalienated existence.

<sup>8</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) 76.

<sup>9</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 213.

<sup>10</sup> Alicia Svigals, "Why We Do This Anyway" in *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots* ed. Mark Slobin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 219.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 16 June 2015.

Secondly, my use of the word “klezmer” requires clarification. The term, “klezmer,” to refer to a genre, was coined around 1980 by revivalists. The 1920s musicians I discuss may have called themselves *klezmerim*, though this was seen as kind of a pejorative during that time, but they did not refer to the music they played as “klezmer.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, they called it “playing Jewish.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in my interview with Peter Sokolow, not yet knowing this information, I felt confused at his consistent references to who could and could not play Jewish authentically. While anachronistic, I use the term, “klezmer,” to refer to music played by musicians in the 1920s, as well as klezmer revivalists. I do this because this is the term my narrators use, and because using two terms to refer to the genre would be unnecessarily confusing to the reader.

I must also clarify my use of the term, “diaspora.” In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century context, I use the term, “diaspora,” to refer to Jewish dispersal from Eastern Europe, and the dispersal of Yiddish cultural forms. This differs from the traditional understanding of diaspora, wherein Jews are understood to have been dispersed from, and consistently long for, their homeland in Zion. None of my narrators had particularly Zionist inclinations, and their decisions to take up Eastern European cultural forms were, in part, protesting the dominance of Israeli cultural forms among American Jews during the time period discussed. Perhaps confusingly, my narrators sometimes use the word, “diaspora,” to talk about being in diaspora, and klezmer being of the diaspora. In these instances, diaspora is used in its traditional sense.

Finally, my discussion of diaspora as a continuous dialogue, formed by cross cultural relationships, is informed particularly by African Diaspora scholars.<sup>14</sup> While nostalgia

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 24 July 2015. I use the word “narrator” to refer to my interviewees/informants because this is the convention in Oral History.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lorand Matory, “Afro-Atlantic Culture: On the Live Dialogue Between Africa and the Americas” in *The Encyclopedia of Africa* ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

adequately describes the relationship between klezmer revivalists and the music they sought to revive, they identified with what they perceived as an authentic Jewishness in the music and musicians. This Jewishness, more authentic, in their perception, than the relatively new Israeli cultural forms they had been exposed to, and more authentic *to their own culture* than the Appalachian and Balkan folk music they had been playing, facilitated an almost spiritual connectivity across time and culture. That these musicians were largely secular Jews who did not feel comfortable in the synagogues of their parents does not undermine the spirituality of the klezmer quest. Rather, klezmer as a way to connect with ancestors, and klezmer music as “a great gift from a very high realm,” represents a non-organized spiritual practice not necessarily acknowledged by the performers themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, when I hint at a diasporic “homeland” in the klezmer revival sense, I am speaking of a diaspora from New York, and a memory of eastern European Jewish culture as practiced in New York City in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While performers may have dressed in clothing that they understood to represent the eastern European *shtetlekh* of their great-grandparents, the records and musicians they looked back to were distinctly New York creations. Additionally, the klezmer musical diaspora, now transnational, has its center in New York. This music, while inspired by its Eastern European heritage, is American.

### **On Shared Authority: The Use of Oral History, Its Benefits and Limitations**

While also relying on traditional archival sources, this thesis is largely based on a series of oral history interviews conducted with klezmer revival musicians. Because of this, the unique advantages and limitations of oral history methods ought to be addressed. According to Judith Moyer's “Step by Step Guide to Oral History,” “Oral history is the systematic collection of living

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<sup>15</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 16 September 2015.

people's testimony about their own experiences.”<sup>16</sup> While this definition is rather vague, the imprecision shows that the methodology has multiple meanings and uses. The interviews upon which this thesis is based are life history interviews with an open-ended structure.

The methodology of oral history highlights the concept of shared authority, where the interviewer and interviewee share ownership over the interview itself and the history being presented. In “Bodies of Evidence,” Horacio Roque Ramirez describes his long-time narrator, Alberta Nevaeres, as a “living archive” of queer Latino and Latina history in San Francisco.<sup>17</sup> While Ramirez was the university-trained academic in the relationship, he acknowledged that he shared authority with Nevaeres, and that Nevaeres was one from whom he, and others interested in queer history, had much to learn. Shared authority emphasizes a way of doing history where the person who lived the history and the historian, ideally, have an equal amount of power in the project.<sup>18</sup>

Similar to Ramirez’s experience, though perhaps with different power dynamics, I let my narrators guide the interview. While I critically analyzed my interviews and tried to verify my narrators’ personal timelines with other archival sources to the best of my ability, there are times when I take their truths for granted. This is not out of disregard for facts or objectivity. Rather, I do this because the focus of this project is to use narrator feelings about their own identities, and their own memories, as evidence for my claim about the unique intersection between the counterculture growing older and an inward, ethnic identity turn. The way narrators felt or remembered their experiences, then, proves more valuable to this project than the exact facts of

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Moyer, “Step by Step Guide to Oral History,” *DoHistory.org*, 1993/1999, Accessed 30 Nov 2014, [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html).

<sup>17</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, “Sharing Queer Authorities,” in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Boyd, Nan Alamilla and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 199.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) xxi.

their experiences. Oral history, then, can be considered a more democratic way of doing history than the traditional examinations of print sources and non-living historical artifacts, with the memory and the historian sharing authority over the project.

### **Historiography: Immigration, Whiteness, and Counterculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

This thesis converses primarily with two bodies of scholarship. The first includes scholars who look at history through the lens of critical whiteness studies, particularly as the concept of whiteness relates to 20<sup>th</sup> century US immigration and the ethnic movements of the 1970s and beyond. I connect this historiography with that of the American counterculture, focusing on the late 60s through 80s, and with specific attention paid to what happened to musicians associated with the American folk revival after the 1960s ended. Additionally, with immigration and counterculture history as the larger context, I hope to add the voice of critical whiteness studies to the scholarly conversation among folklorists and ethnomusicologists regarding Jewish identity, folk revivalism, and the klezmer revival movement. While Matthew Frye Jacobson heavily problematizes the idea of white ethnic revival as a group of movements that served to deflate the civil rights movement, klezmer revivalists' continued participation in progressive politics complicates Jacobson's idea.<sup>19</sup> Eric Goldstein writes that the dissolution of

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). On the other hand, narrator Margot Leverett's story of her conversion to Judaism, and the significance of its occurrence on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, reinforces Jacobson's problematization of white ethnic revival. "I converted on Martin Luther King weekend, which was important for me, because as I was studying to convert, I read a lot about the Civil Rights Movement . . . [and reading about King helped me to] be very clear about who your people are, and not in any way does that stop you from having a world vision that includes everyone . . . so it was studying him and what he said that helped me figure that out." Not to diminish Leverett's personal connection with King, but King's speeches made it clear that his vision, while integrationist, was for the particular emancipation of African Americans from centuries of violence and subjugation. Leverett, in her statement, co-opts King's message for her own personal vision of authenticity, removing King's Civil Rights message. She also remembered, "I was not okay if I didn't get invited for Passover . . . I couldn't get through the year without Passover. I needed to escape from slavery." Again, this indicates an impulse to appropriate Civil Rights language and apply it to her own personal struggles. Rossinow demonstrates that, years earlier, white Christian students invested themselves in the Civil Rights struggle as a means of developing a more authentic life. Leverett's story demonstrates the continuation of these impulses, but divorced from the Civil Rights Movement itself.

the Jewish/African American “special relationship” related, in part, to liberalism largely working for Jews, while not improving the situation of African Americans.<sup>20</sup> However, feelings of otherness persisted for Jews in a way that perhaps differs from other white ethnics, due to continued, if greatly diminished, anti-Semitism and the efforts of Jews to make sense of the events of the Holocaust post-WWII.<sup>21</sup>

In order to historicize the genesis of the klezmer revival, two distinct bodies of scholarship must first be interrogated: the scholarly conversation among historians and sociologists interested in immigration and racialization of white ethnics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the scholarly conversation among historians regarding the folk revival and general large cultural changes ushered in by the 1960s counterculture.

Eric Goldstein argues that ambivalent feelings toward whiteness and white identity largely characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish experience, with Jews wishing to claim the benefits of white identity, but being uncomfortable with losing their minority consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Guglielmo similarly traces the trajectory of Italian women’s whitening and deradicalization, finding that these two trends occurred simultaneously and were largely embraced by an Italian American community concerned with its own survival.<sup>23</sup> In spite of this larger trend, however, she writes that working class Italian women continued to engage in radical activism on a smaller scale in the years after World War II. These works are linked largely by David Roediger’s writing on whiteness and immigration, which presents a concept of *racial inbetweenness* characterizing so-called “new immigrant” experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* 219; Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880 – 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*.

<sup>23</sup> Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*.

century.<sup>24</sup>

Roediger and Barrett argue that new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were seen as having an “in between” racial status. They were not quite white, but unlike immigrants of color and African Americans, they had the potential to become white. Even though the Europeanness of these immigrants secured their status as above African Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy, much of the discourse and legislation related to immigrants expressed their differences from mainstream Anglo American culture in racial terms.

Roediger and Barrett focus on the implications of a complicated process of racial categorization for workers. According to the authors, the courts consistently ruled in favor of the whiteness of new immigrants, but in the American national imaginary, they remained racialized. New immigrants quickly internalized white supremacist structures in the United States, and therefore asserted their status as whites by emphasizing their non-Blackness. These divisions were exploited and exacerbated by capitalists who encouraged racial divisions between African Americans and new immigrants.<sup>25</sup> Becoming white required that new immigrants, at least outwardly, adopt Anglo-American culture at the expense of their own ethnic particularities. Matthew Frye Jacobson, in *Roots, Too*, pulls Roediger and Barrett’s framework of racial inbetweenness forward to examine the white ethnic revival beginning in the 1960s and 70s. Jacobson argues that, sometime in the 1970s, Ellis Island replaced Plymouth Rock as the location of the American originary myth. He writes that this process began with the election of President Kennedy, who had a “hyphenated identity” and whose presidency created a situation where white ethnics at large could feel comfortable asserting a distinct, non-Anglo, American identity.

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<sup>24</sup> David Roediger and James R. Barrett, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the “New Immigrant” Working Class” in *The Journal of American Ethnic History* 16.3 (1997).

<sup>25</sup> Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples” 4.



According to Jacobson, the Ellis Island Whiteness myth created a cushion for white ethnics to avoid recognizing their privilege, due to claims that their ancestors were newcomers and therefore not responsible for white supremacy.<sup>26</sup> Jacobson writes that this denial of white privilege based on the innocence of ancestors reaffirmed a widespread notion that white supremacy was something that existed in the past, not the present, and through practicing colorblindness and a “bootstraps” mentality, full racial equality could be achieved.<sup>27</sup> Through a detailed cultural history, Jacobson examines how cultural production depicting white victimization, such as the *Rocky* films, rose in popularity during the 1970s and 80s. At the same time, the courts were dismantling Affirmative Action and other programs designed to further Civil Rights gains, on the grounds that they discriminated against whites. Jacobson also examines the more positive side of white ethnic revival, detailing works of literature that opened up the outwardly acculturated immigrant home to public readership, indicating an unprecedented level of comfort with ethnic difference. Using Jacobson’s assessment of the white ethnic revival phenomenon, the klezmer revival fits into this second, more progressive resultant multiculturalism. The revival represented a desire on the part of musicians to perform Jewish difference in a way that might have been considered dangerous or embarrassing twenty years earlier.

Goldstein, while focusing primarily on the period before World War II, addresses the white ethnic revivals briefly. Goldstein, like Jacobson, attributes Jewish ethnic revival during the 60s – 80s to an increased sense of comfort on the part of Jews with their status as Americans. While Jacobson sees even the ethnic revival in itself as a mark of acculturation to Anglo-

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<sup>26</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too* 9.

<sup>27</sup> In disagreeing with this bootstraps assessment of white ethnic success, Jacobson cites the fact that New Deal policies privileged whites, including white ethnics.

Americanism, because it was such a pronounced, mainstream trend in the larger culture, Goldstein cites cultural production such as *Heeb* magazine and Adam Sandler's "Chanukah Song" as evidence that Jews' ambivalent relationship with whiteness extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though Jews had been mainstream for over three decades.

Goldstein argues that the whitening of Jews in the United States cannot be fully explained by conventional narratives suggesting that Jews enthusiastically embraced their status as whites in a "powerplay from below."<sup>28</sup> Instead, the Jewish American whitening project entailed a complicated process that required the dominant culture's investment in maintaining a black-white dichotomy just as much as it required Jews wanting to become white. Goldstein also explains that Jews had much to lose in this process of whitening, and seeing themselves as a distinct racial group was historically an important marker of identity. In addition to this investment in seeing themselves in racial terms, their minority status, coming from their history as the essential other in Europe, was a key aspect of Jewish identity and not easily dismissed. A deep, complicated, thoroughgoing ambivalence marked the Jewish American experience with racial identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Goldstein writes that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the Cold War, Jewish comfort with their status as Americans waxed and waned with shifts in Anglo-American attitudes toward Jews. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German Jews in the U.S. were fairly secure in their whiteness, and this comfort persisted until the large wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, even though they were considered white in the national imaginary, German Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still saw themselves as a distinct race and discussed their Jewishness often in racial terms. Eastern European Jews, Goldstein explains, did not arrive in the

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<sup>28</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* 4.

U.S. with American-style ideas about whiteness and blackness, and Jewish merchants were accustomed to trading with diverse groups of people. Thus, white supremacy is something they learned from the dominant culture, and part of the Jewish ambivalence toward whiteness was couched in ambivalence about what their relationship with African Americans should be.

Similarly, Guglielmo describes Italian immigrants who did not arrive on American soil with a sense of white supremacy, but quickly learned this as a way of performing whiteness and therefore being accepted by Anglo-American society. She argues that Italian women immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were more radical and “more complete in their critique of power than later generations.”<sup>29</sup> Italian women came to the United States as radicals, participated in radical activity on behalf of themselves and their communities, and were deradicalized by the forces of capitalism, Americanization, and whitening.

Guglielmo, like Goldstein and Roediger, discusses whiteness as a way of asserting citizenship status in the United States and therefore gaining power and security. The state recognized Italians, like Jews, as white and accorded certain privileges because of this racial status. For Italian Americans, as well as Jews, “embracing whiteness seemed to be the most viable way to assert a patriotic American identity.”<sup>30</sup> Guglielmo and Goldstein write that both Jews and Italians sought to draw boundaries in their neighborhoods between “us” and “them” in the decades after immigration. However, Southern Italians did not have a strong sense of their own minority status in Italy and were largely unaware of the ways they were racialized by Northern Italians. In contrast, Jews had a strong sense of minority status due to their experiences of marginalization in Europe. Comparing Goldstein’s work to Guglielmo’s, it appears that Italians accepted full whiteness more easily than Jews as a group.

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<sup>29</sup> Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution* 8.

<sup>30</sup> Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution* 239.

Goldstein writes that, for Jews, embracing whiteness meant losing important elements of group cohesion, such as a shared racial identity and minority status. Both Jews and Italians gained social status, political power, and protection through embracing whiteness. Additionally, Guglielmo responds indirectly to Goldstein's criticism that most historians of whiteness consider ethnic whitening to be an enthusiastically embraced "powerplay from below" by detailing the cultural and political losses Italians experienced by embracing Anglo Americanism.

This general discussion could be improved through a more thorough interrogation of religion and how religious practice relates to concepts of whiteness and Americanness in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Goldstein carefully interrogates the race versus religion tension within 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American Judaism, and Jacobson addresses the role of religion in ethnic revivalism, Guglielmo does not discuss the role of religion in maintaining or contesting whiteness. However, discussing Italian American whitening in the context of this thesis serves to demonstrate that, while I am writing about Jews as a group, tensions between ethnic particularity and acculturation characterized the experiences of many groups whose ancestors immigrated to the U.S. during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Goldstein presents a more nuanced analysis of whitening, however, by detailing not how Jews *became* white, but how they *negotiated* white identity in the United States, experiencing both gains and losses in this contested and non-linear process.<sup>31</sup> However, both works detail the swift Americanization of white ethnic immigrants who were helped along by social and government institutions invested in their whiteness. Similarly, Jacobson demonstrates the efforts of white ethnics to embrace their own ethnic difference from a position of comfort, and the long-term implications of early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrant whitening.

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<sup>31</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* 4.

In Goldstein's work, we see the difficult process of Jewish American whitening, characterized by ongoing ambivalence. In Guglielmo's, we see how the decline of radical political activity among Italian women related to the Italian American whitening project. Finally, in Jacobson's work, we see how white ethnic revival influenced American culture after white ethnics became mainstream. All three of these works provide context for the klezmer revival and the decision on the part of musicians to perform Jewish difference in this particular way. The persistence and evolution of klezmer as an ethnic art form both complicates and reinforces the narrative of Jewish American whitening, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music has reflected a specifically ethnic and cultural type of Jewish identification. It is this association with difference from Anglo-American culture that caused klezmer to largely fall out of fashion after World War II, and then experience a resurgence of popularity starting in the 1970s. Additionally, including Italians and other white ethnics in this discussion globalizes the subject, opening doors for further inquiry into the genesis of other ethnic folk revival phenomena.

In *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*, Riv-Ellen Prell presents an ethnographic study on the Jewish countercultural havurah movement in the 1970s, and contextualizes the members' countercultural background by explaining that many members of the havurah community were involved in the New Left and Civil Rights movements.<sup>32</sup> This work examines an aspect of the bridge from counterculture to cultural revival that characterized the klezmer revival. According to Prell, the egalitarian, community-oriented, countercultural havurah embodied a desire among educated American Jews in their twenties to practice a more "authentic," traditional Judaism that still reflected their American, liberal, individualistic values. Narrator David Shneyer's band, the Fabbrangen Fiddlers, were active in the havurah movement

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<sup>32</sup> Prell, *Prayer and Community*, 76.

and began as a sort of havurah house band.<sup>33</sup> Other klezmer players, such as Andy Statman and Peter Sokolow, reimagined their Jewish faith over the course of their careers as klezmer musicians.<sup>34</sup>

Taking a broader view of the late 1960s – 1970s counterculture, Jeremi Suri examines the context for the eruption of counterculture activity in the 1960s, citing the Cold War as the main cause, along with counterculture activists being in a relatively comfortable position compared to their parents, giving them the confidence to speak out. This lends additional context to the rise of the counterculture outlined by Rossinow and Prell. For Suri, the relative materialism of the cold war era was the primary factor motivating youth to seek deeper, more “authentic” life paths and activities. While Rossinow points to Christian Existentialism as the primary philosophical motivator for countercultural activity, Suri, examining a longer, later time period, points to the work of Herbert Marcuse, who exalted Guerilla fighters in the global south as a model for authentic activity.<sup>35</sup>

According to Suri, though members of the Bohemian subculture in Europe and North America had long been speaking out against traditional values, one major difference in the 1960s was that large groups of relatively privileged young people were starting to do the same. Suri writes,

These were not the dispossessed demanding more access to resources, or the cultural fringe searching for freedom, but the empowered questioning their own power. The international counterculture had an intensely self-critical quality that its proponents defined as “authenticity;” its detractors viewed it as suicide.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 16 September 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*, 11 September 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremi Suri, “The Rise and Fall of an International Counterculture” in *The American Historical Review* 114.1 (2009) 57.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

This is similar to Rossinow's analysis of student activists. Suri, however, considers these activists in an international context, highlighting the fact that similar pushes for protest and meaning were occurring in Western Europe and even the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup>

I intervene in this historiographical conversation by presenting a case study through which to analyze the ethnic revivals of the 1970s and their specific effect on counterculture movements emerging out of the 1960s. While historians, such as Jacobson and Gerstle, tend to focus on mass culture in analyzing renewed interest in one's own heritage among white ethnics, paying specific attention to ethnic folk revival movements shows the intersection between ethnic revival and the counterculture emerging from the 1960s into the 1970s and 80s. Additionally, much scholarly attention has been paid to the folk revivals and New Left of the 1960s, but relatively little work contextualizes the shift in these movements toward the ascendant multiculturalism and simultaneous push toward conservatism in the 1970s and 80s United States.

### **On Klezmer**

Klezmer is dance music. While klezmer revivalists heavily integrated Yiddish song and other singing styles, (including the odd Leonard Cohen cover), into their music, in its early 20<sup>th</sup> century form, klezmer was instrumental music, and one hears no singing on the 1920s records of Naftule Brandwein or Dave Tarras. Klezmer pianist Peter Sokolow, using jazz terminology, described "authentic" klezmer as "tunes," not "songs."<sup>38</sup> Naftule Brandwein's band consisted of Brandwein on clarinet, backed by brass instruments and a sparser rhythm section. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer song styles were named for the dances that accompanied them, for instance *freilachs* or *bulgars*. Peter Sokolow remembered that, before the klezmer revival, he never

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

thought that people would be interested in sitting down and listening to dance music in a concert hall.<sup>39</sup>

In the revival, klezmer diversified. From the very beginning, it included Yiddish song. On the landmark 1981 recording by the Klezmer Conservatory Band, *Yiddishe Renaissance*, some tracks included vocals. Additionally, the Klezmer Conservatory Band always included non-Jewish musicians.<sup>40</sup> Yiddish songs such as “Der Rebbe Elimelech” and “Ali Brider” were widely recorded by klezmer revival bands, under the genre name of klezmer, but as a departure from the klezmer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup>

## Overview

In the following work, I begin by outlining background information on klezmer as a genre, and introducing early 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer figures. Then, I introduce bridge figures who maintained klezmer, and other Yiddish cultural forms, during the period while they were least fashionable, the 1950s. Finally, I introduce our revivalists. I analyze the revival as a two-pronged historical force: one that grew out of the “roots,” or ethnic revival, movements of the 1970s, and also one that grew out of the 1960s counterculture, and especially the folk revival. The counterculture, with its focus on “authenticity,” looked inward as it grew older. As klezmer revivalist Joel Rubin humorously remembered, “we appropriated our own culture.”<sup>42</sup> Beginning with Brandwein performing in Christmas lights and an Uncle Sam suit, and ending with Joel Rubin and Lisa Rose performing in romanticized *shtetl* garb, 20<sup>th</sup> century American klezmer represented an impulse to negotiate identity as both Americans and Jews. Moreover, the

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>40</sup> Of these early members, one of the more famous is African American clarinetist Don Byron, subject of the 1998 *Sonneck Society for American Music Bulletin* essay “Can Blacks Play Klezmer?” a play on the famous question of whether white men can play the blues. Byron recorded an album of Mickey Katz records, describing Katz’s music as “pro-ethnicity.”

<sup>41</sup> See: Klezematics, Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band.

<sup>42</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.



intergenerational links present in the klezmer revival demonstrated a particular, revivalist way of connecting with an “authentic” past, as the folk revival turned inward, and as the universalism of the 1960s turned toward the particularism of the 1970s and 80s.

## **Chapter 1: American Klezmer in Jewish New York**

### **Introduction**

When klezmer clarinetist Dave Tarras immigrated to the United States in 1921, he had no illusions about what immigration meant.<sup>1</sup> Tarras was fully prepared to leave his previous occupation as a music maker behind in the Ukraine. Indeed, he first found work in in a New York garment factory. Yet Tarras ultimately abandoned his position upon discovering that he could have a lucrative, stable career in music. Tarras, along with Naftule Brandwein, would become one of the most recorded clarinetists of the 1920s klezmer heyday.

Born in Brooklyn in 1940 to Jewish parents, Peter Sokolow grew up with very little exposure to the traditional Yiddish culture of his immigrant grandparents. He described his mother as “An armchair Communist” with little interest in Jewish religion or culture.<sup>2</sup> It was Sokolow’s interest in music and his relationships with Jewish musicians in New York that facilitated his introduction to Yiddish culture and music. Carrying forward the “authentic klezmer” of immigrant musicians like Dave Tarras was, for Sokolow, of primary importance in his musical practice. Sokolow’s prioritization of authenticity as playing “real, pure” klezmer music, as gleaned from those musicians, informed his contribution to the early revival and continues until the present day.

### **Klezmer History in Brief**

Klezmer, a hybrid type of Eastern European Jewish secular music brought to the United States and transformed by both the recording industry and jazz, experienced a surge of commercial popularity in the 1920s. In Eastern Europe, the word, *klezmer*, referred to an inherited musical occupation, but Sokolow relayed that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term was

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<sup>1</sup> Yale Strom, *Dave Tarras: The King of Klezmer* (Kfar Sva: Or Tav Music Publications, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interviewed by Claire Gogan*.

considered somewhat derogatory among Jewish musicians in New York. The music fell out of fashion after World War II, though it did not disappear.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s, Jewish musicians involved in the folk music scene who desired a renewal of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern European Jewish American music, used the term, “klezmer,” to refer to the genre. These musicians found inspiration in the old 78 rpm records, and in the old klezmer musicians themselves. This chapter traces klezmer’s arrival in the United States, the primary players who recorded during the 1920s, and those musicians who carried the style forward through the 1950s and 60s.

In the early klezmer revival, there was much discussion surrounding the idea of musical authenticity, and what counted as authentic klezmer music. For some, notably Peter Sokolow, playing authentically entailed playing in the style of Jewish American musicians who recorded during the 1920s, and to some extent, the children of these musicians who carried klezmer forward. However, while 1920s recordings drew directly on Eastern European klezmer, they were also fundamentally shaped by the recording process and industry. The music shifted as soon as it converged with the recording industry in the United States, so few claims can be made that the music the early revivalists used for inspiration represented a “pure,” direct connection to Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> However, the importance of authenticity discourse in the revival, and the representation of the 1920s as origin point and a window into Eastern European Jewish traditional life, played a fundamental role in the idea of klezmer performance as a way of returning to one’s roots.

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<sup>3</sup> Christina Baade, “Jewzak and Heavy Shtetl” 209.

<sup>4</sup> This music was also commercial and hybrid in Europe. Hankus Netsky writes that, in Eastern Europe, the music incorporated Roma, Greek, and Romanian styles. Musicians traveled between communities for work, creating a constant dialogue where stylistic influences could be exchanged. Hankus Netsky, “American Klezmer: A Brief History” in *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots* 15.

Major record labels in New York, capitalizing on a market for ethnic records among Eastern European Jewish immigrants, produced a significant number of klezmer recordings in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> New York also presented immigrant musicians with new opportunities to record their music. Prior to this, klezmer had been played in community social spaces and was strongly associated with Jewish weddings. The recording of klezmer performance notably changed klezmer composition, as the contemporary technology recorded clarinets and brass much more clearly than strings, so clarinet became the preferred lead instrument due to its dynamic range. The shift from live, community music to recorded music also changed the ways musicians and audiences conceived of this music, producing klezmer luminaries whose recorded music could be consumed by future generations, and producing records as portable, physical commodities. Ultimately, the preservation of this music on 78 records led to its rediscovery in the 1970s and the klezmer revival.

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<sup>5</sup> By “ethnic records,” I mean records marketed towards specific immigrant ethnic groups.

## Klezmer in the Eastern European Context



“Klezmer musicians, Russia,” ca. 1912. (YIVO).

According to ethnomusicologist and klezmer musician Joel Rubin, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern European context, the *klezmer* was an inherited occupation, and *klezmerim* generally came from families of musicians who passed down the musical tradition from one generation to the next.<sup>6</sup> According to Mark Slobin, prior to 1939, Eastern European Jewish immigrants moved relatively freely back and forth between the towns of their births and the United States, exchanging songs and ideas in the process.<sup>7</sup> This activity, along with successive waves of immigration prior to the 1924 passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, which imposed strict quotas on immigration from southern and eastern Europe, worked to continually transform Jewish American identity.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. klezmer performers Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras both came from klezmer families. In Eastern Europe, the role of the klezmer was generally considered low-caste and *klezmerim* were subject to stereotyping as violent, drunken womanizers who associated with gentiles, and Roma musicians in particular.<sup>9</sup> Despite their impious reputation, *klezmerim* played an important role in traditional Eastern European Jewish social and ritual life, and particularly Jewish wedding festivities.<sup>10</sup> In New York, *klezmerim* carried these roles forward, connecting immigrants with the traditions of their homelands.

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Rubin, "The Art of the Klezmer: Improvisation and Ornamentation in the Commercial Recordings of New York Clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras 1922-1929" (PhD diss., City University of London, 2001) 8061.

<sup>7</sup> Joel Rubin, "The Art of the Klezmer" 80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Zev Feldman, "Bulgaresca/Bulgarish/Bulgar" in *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots* 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. The emergent "Jewish musical nationalists" of this time, according to Rubin, saw the music of the *klezmerim* as commercial and impure because *klezmerim* also learned popular songs, in addition to Jewish songs, and exchanged ideas and repertoire with Roma musicians.



“Klezmer musicians at a wedding, playing an accompaniment to the arrival of the groom,” Ukraine, ca. 1925. (YIVO).

Klezmer was just one way that Eastern European Jewish immigrants maintained diasporic ties with their homelands in Eastern Europe, however. Rebecca Kobrin examines the ways that Eastern European Jewish immigrants maintained these ties through newspapers that connected immigrants in New York with the events and culture of the old-country.<sup>11</sup> She argues

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Kobrin, “Rewriting the Diaspora: Images of Eastern Europe in the Bialystok Landsmanshaft Press, 1921-45” in *Jewish Social Studies* Vol. 12, Issue 3 (2006) 1. *Landsmanshaft* organizations consisted of a network of Jewish social, cultural, and charitable organizations connecting Jewish immigrants with their hometowns in Eastern Europe. From the Center for Jewish History: “The landsmanshaft became a dominant form of Jewish social organization in the late 1800s. The many types of landsmanshaftn include religious and socialist organizations, as well as American-style fraternal orders. Landsmanshaftn provided immigrants with formal and informal social networks, and members helped one another with financial needs such as medical care and burial plots. In 1938, a

that newspapers published by *landsmanshaft* organizations in New York show that many Eastern European Jewish immigrants during the inter-war period saw their situation in the U.S. as a “new exile” and pined for a homeland in the Eastern European towns from which they had immigrated. According to Kobrin, these images of Eastern Europe complicate a prevailing historical narrative of relatively easy acculturation in the United States. The persistence of klezmer through the twenties, tapering off only after the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, can similarly be viewed as representing a desire to maintain ties with a romanticized Eastern Europe.

At this point convergence, where the rise of the recording industry met this wave of immigration, Columbia Records and Victor Talking Machine Company capitalized from the desire of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, as well as other immigrant groups, to purchase ethnic music. Slobin writes that traditional instrumental music remained restricted to weddings and other festivities due to its status as a luxury commodity, even in Europe. However, “ethnic band music,” not just for Jews, but also for many different ethnic groups, was recorded by Columbia and Victor and sold relatively well through the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup>

Klezmer, while overlooked by early Jewish folklorists due to its commercial status and hybridity, represented an art form that Eastern European Jewish immigrants carried with them as an important part of Jewish life. The popularity of klezmer records in the 1920s indicates that the demand for klezmer extended beyond live performance and traditional ritual contexts. If we accept Kobrin’s argument that Eastern European Jewish immigrants pined for a homeland in Eastern Europe, rather than striving for easy acculturation, the proliferation of ethnic records

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Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) project identified 2,468 *landsmanshaftn* in New York City (see references below). The number of *landsmanshaftn* began to decline in the 1950s, though some societies continue to exist today.

<http://www.cjh.org/pdfs/Landsmanschaftn.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Slobin, “The Neo-Klezmer Movement and Euro-American Musical Revivalism” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1984).



provides another example of the ways Eastern European Jewish immigrants maintained diasporic connections. The movement of immigrants between homeland and hostland, and the influx of immigrants until the 1920s, facilitated a vibrant Jewish American immigrant culture in New York. However, the recording industry shaped which musicians had the most influence over later revivalists. Of the klezmer heyday artists, Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras shaped what we now think of as klezmer the most.

### **Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras: Ushering in American Klezmer**



“Naftule Brandwein Playing a Solo in a New York Catering Hall, ca. late 1930s” Dorothea Goldys-Bass via Joel Rubin.

Klezmer clarinetist Naftule Brandwein settled in New York in 1909, having arrived at Ellis Island from his home in Przemyslany, Galicia (now Ukraine) via Hamburg.<sup>13</sup> During Brandwein's tenure in the Yiddish Theater District, bandleader and Columbia Records recruiting agent Abe Schwartz noticed his virtuosic and stylistically unique clarinet playing. In 1922, Schwartz signed Brandwein to Columbia records, but the next year Brandwein left Schwartz's band for competitor label, Victor, to lead his own ensemble.<sup>14</sup> Schwartz then replaced Brandwein with klezmer clarinetist Dave Tarras.

According to klezmer revivalist and scholar Henry Sapoznik, drawing from interviews he conducted with klezmer musicians who played with Brandwein, "If any one musician epitomizes the klezmer scene in early twentieth century-America, it is Brandwein."<sup>15</sup> Stories about Brandwein's behavior circulate widely within the klezmer community. Sapoznik writes,

[Klezmer musicians] still talk of the time he appeared onstage wearing an Uncle Sam costume adorned with Christmas tree lights and nearly electrocuted himself due to excessive perspiration; of his penchant for performing with his back to the audience so other clarinetists would not steal his fingerings; of how he would spontaneously drop his pants while playing at parties; the neon NAFTULE BRANDWEIN ORCHESTRA sign he wore around his neck as he played; how he was summoned by the Brooklyn headquarters of the notorious Murder Inc. mob to entertain the bosses; the sight of him drunkenly weaving up and down the median line of a busy Catskill mountain highway while playing Brahms' "Lullaby."<sup>16</sup>

These stories show the collective memory of Brandwein as a larger-than-life personality within the Jewish musician community in New York. Additionally, the neon sign, the Christmas lights, and the Uncle Sam costume all serve as symbols of the changing landscapes and perceptions of klezmer music. In contrast to the *klezmerim* of Eastern Europe, the klezmer revivalists remember

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<sup>13</sup> Ancestry.com. *New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Sapoznik, *Naftule Brandwein – King of the Klezmer Clarinet*, Rounder Records-CD 1997, compact disc (liner notes).

<sup>15</sup> Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from the Old World to Our World* (Schirmer Trade Books: New York, 1999) 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

Brandwein as having performed Americanness in a specific, extravagant kind of way. Donning Christmas lights, performing in an Uncle Sam costume, and wearing an electrified neon sign around his neck all represent a whimsical, commercial presentation suggesting American showmanship.<sup>17</sup> While these stories place Brandwein within the realm of klezmer and Jewish performance, they also suggest something uniquely American, capitalist, and far flashier than musicians performing a similar role in the Eastern European context.

While he adopted show business clothing and performance styles, Brandwein adhered to a more traditional context in terms of his repertoire. 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer musician Julius Epstein stated of Brandwein in an interview, “He thought [the Uncle Sam suit] was modern, because what could you do modern with the music? He played the same music all the time!”<sup>18</sup> Existing recordings of Brandwein demonstrate a catalogue consisting of Eastern European Jewish dance styles.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, his band retained the military-style brass sound of Eastern European bands, but lost the flute and violin of 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern European klezmer.<sup>20</sup> Considering all of these characteristics, Brandwein’s band, in the recorded peak of klezmer, represented a hybrid type of music, fusing Eastern European elements with American, and particularly New York, entertainment industry designs.

The same can be said about klezmer clarinetist Dave Tarras. Born Dovid Tarraschuk in 1897 in Southern Ukraine, Tarras was already known as a gifted musician before immigrating to

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<sup>17</sup> Brandwein wearing Christmas lights and an Uncle Sam suit could also be read as parodying American culture and lifestyles. See Josh Kun’s chapter on Mickey Katz, “The Yiddish are Coming,” in *Audiotopia*. Kun contends that Katz performed exaggeratedly Yiddish versions of American popular songs as a way of resisting the Jewish American assimilationist-whitening project of the 1950s. These memories of Brandwein could be read as something similar. However, I think that they most likely reflect a specific desire to embrace commercialism and American commercial performance, because the Jewish American context during Brandwein’s time did not yet entail Jews losing the Yiddish language or Yiddish culture as it did during the 1950s. According to Joel Rubin, these showmanship antics represent the influence specifically of Vaudeville and Yiddish Theater. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Joel Rubin, “The Art of the Klezmer” 113.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Sapoznik, *Naftule Brandwein – King of the Klezmer Clarinet*, Rounder Records-CD 1997, compact disc.

<sup>20</sup> This was likely a function of the contemporary recording technology.

the United States in 1921.<sup>21</sup> While Tarras had a sixth grade education, his position as a successful musician both in the Ukraine and the United States led to some degree of financial comfort, and Tarras lived in the middle-class Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn for most of his life.<sup>22</sup> The community memory of Dave Tarras also reflects his choice of a peaceful life in the outer boroughs. While Brandwein was known for his drinking, socializing with underworld characters, and stage antics, those who knew Tarras remember him as a family man who was serious about his music and serious in disposition.<sup>23</sup>



“Dave Tarras Plays a Solo.” Center for Traditional Music and Dance Archive via Joel Rubin.

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<sup>21</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “NEA National Heritage Fellowships, Bio: Dave Tarras.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Yale Strom, *Dave Tarras: The King of Klezmer*.

## The Catskills: Preserving the Form in Place

As Jewish immigrants and their children began vacationing in the Catskill Mountains, klezmer musicians traveled to these hotels and resorts, following Jewish performance circuits.

Peter Sokolow stated in an oral history interview with the Catskills Institute,

In the early years going back to the 20s and things, klezmer was the Catskills. When they first started using musicians in the hotels, who were the people who were going to the hotels? Immigrants. Even though most of them were not religious, I mean when most of them got to this country they shaved off their beards, we know that. In that time, Jewish dance music was what today we call klezmer. In those years it wasn't always called klezmer. When I broke into the business in the 50s, we called it the freilachs and the bulgars. That means the old tunes from the Dave Tarras/Naftule Brandwein repertoire. Back in the 20s none of us [the klezmer revivalists] existed; I wasn't a gleam in my father's eye. Essentially the bands played that stuff. I would say about toward 1930 the American music began to come in because the children of the first generation Americans changed their names from Schwartz to Shaw, from Greenberg to Green. They didn't want to know. Everything that was grine was out, it was outré, unhip. In any case, the bands had to start playing foxtrots and American music.<sup>24</sup>

As immigrants traveled to the mountains to escape the summer heat and be with other Eastern European Jewish immigrants during their leisure time, klezmer musicians and music-making similarly shifted from the city to upstate. Much of the mythology surrounding early 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer players Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras takes place in the Catskills as well. For instance, Sokolow tells the same story of Brandwein that Sapoznik tells, describing Brandwein as “drunk as a lord,” playing his clarinet while walking on the double yellow line in the middle of a mountain road near one of the Borscht Belt hotels.<sup>25</sup>

While Sokolow presents his insights second-hand, as a musician who performed with Dave Tarras and The Epstein Brothers late in their careers, the collective memory of the Catskills

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Sokolow, interviewed by Phil Brown. Brown University, *The Catskills Institute*.

While Sokolow repeats a conventional narrative of American assimilation, that Jewish immigrants “shaved off their beards,” these musicians likely did not have beards to begin with, and their experience in Europe was relatively cosmopolitan.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

as a place where Jewish immigrants could relax and be entertained by Jewish musicians indicates a gradual narrowing of performance space for this music. Sokolow's observation that most of these immigrants were not religious and "shaved off their beards," indicating acculturation, demonstrates a shift in the idea of what it meant to be Jewish and a changing relationship with Jewish identity. As klezmer became progressively more "unhip," while still retaining a nostalgic character for first generation immigrants, musicians had to increasingly expand their repertoire beyond klezmer to earn a living. This dilution of material and diminishing audiences ultimately caused klezmer to nearly go dormant, though it never disappeared.

### **Pete Sokolow, "The Youngest Old Guy"**

The post-World War II era presented two major challenges to the survival of American klezmer music. Peter Sokolow referred to the first challenge in his interview with the Catskills Institute: second generation Jewish Americans felt that the music of their immigrant parents was intolerably uncool. This generation had little interest in invoking a homeland in Eastern Europe, for multiple reasons, including a post-Holocaust desire to avoid remembering the tragic destruction of Eastern European Jewish life.<sup>26</sup> On the surface, this suggests an uncomplicated expression of Hansen's Law in action: the second generation, uncomfortable with their status as Americans, and embarrassed by their foreign-seeming parents, tried to acculturate into "Yankeeedom" as much as they could.<sup>27</sup> However, Sokolow, born in 1940, tells of his introduction to klezmer in the 1950s. Sokolow started out as a jazz and rock musician, but was later exposed to Yiddish culture in the Catskills through playing with The Epstein Brothers and others.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Bender, Hansen's Law of "'Third-Generation Return' and the Study of American Religio-Ethnic Groups" in *Phylon* 29.4 (1968) 361.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Sokolow, interviewed by Claire Gogan. 2015.

While the popularity of Yiddish music faded among Jewish American audiences, the popularity of new Jewish musical forms, associated with Israel, flourished. According to Sokolow, Israel represented “the hope of the world,” while Yiddish arts dredged up tragic memories of a lost culture.<sup>29</sup> James Loeffler writes that Jewish folklorist and musicologist Abraham Idelsohn’s mission was to collect Jewish folk music from around the world, but also to create modern Jewish songs inspired by the styles he encountered.<sup>30</sup> A passionate Zionist, Idelsohn sought to unite the diaspora through a new, modern style of music as they returned to Palestine.<sup>31</sup> These new Hebrew songs, sung to traditional melodies, and Hava Nagila in particular, became popular as folk songs mid-century.<sup>32</sup>

While Sokolow was much closer in age to the klezmer revivalists than the first generation klezmer players, he identified with the older players and referred to himself as “the youngest old guy.”<sup>33</sup> Sokolow’s first instrument was piano, but he learned clarinet and saxophone during his youth as well. He was not exposed to much Yiddish culture growing up and his parents were secular. According to Sokolow,

My grandfather on my mother’s side used to go to baseball games on Yom Kippur. And my father was also [secular]. We didn’t have [religion] in my house. Now, I remember the first seders I had as a child, my father reading the things in Hebrew. He could do it. He was my first Hebrew teacher. And he taught me well enough that I was able to enter Hebrew school in the second grade instead of the first grade, because he gave me the whole—my father was a very good teacher in the old style, review review, practice practice.

I basically taught myself the piano. And the clarinet and the sax, I had private teachers for a while, and I was my own teacher. And I learned a little Jewish, the first Jewish music that I learned, I was about fourteen or fifteen years old, up in the country.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> James Loeffler, “Hava Nagila’s Long, Strange Trip” *My Jewish Learning*  
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hava-nagilas-long-strange-trip/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Sokolow, interviewed by Claire Gogan. 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Sokolow recalls learning Israeli folk songs, particularly Idelsohn composition Hava Nagila, at a bungalow colony that his mother and her friends frequented “because the folks, those lefties loved [Israeli] folk dancing.”<sup>35</sup>

So the first Jewish dance tunes I learned were not klezmer music at all, they weren't European in basis. I may have heard one of the first klezmer tunes that I probably heard was . . . It's called . . . “The Bride and Groom Congratulations” . . . Today that would be considered kindergarten stuff compared to the stuff that I know now.

Despite learning a few Jewish tunes, Sokolow played primarily jazz and rock music before meeting Chisek Epstein and other klezmer musicians in the Catskills as a teenager.

Sokolow's words describing his early musical career evocatively demonstrate how he almost accidentally fell into playing klezmer in the 1950s.

So I get the job, I go up to the Catskill Mountains. So here's this Ralph Kahn, who was born about 1910, 1911, he was almost as old as my mother! And I was 18. So I'm playing with this band—in those days, if you played a show, you had an alto saxophone because the part was written for first alto, second tenor, you know. But the alto sax was necessary for the show. So I had an alto and I had a tenor, I brought it up with me, and he introduced me to this accordion player. Big, heavy-set guy, constantly laughing . . . was a lot of fun. He was a terrible accordion player. He starts playing, and we're playing some songs, and I say, you know you're playing some wrong ones there, some of the chords, you're playing it wrong. And he looked at me and says “you young punk!” Young punk. “You mean to say I'm thirty years in the business and I'm playing wrong?” I said, suit yourself.

The next day he takes me to meet one of the more important people in my Jewish music career. There was a family called Epstein. Four brothers: Max, a genius if there ever was one, Max Epstein was it. Played clarinet and violin, and saxophone. But wonderful clarinet. He played so expressively, so—he was just as good as anybody, including the famous, Naftule and all these guys. Maxie was as good as all of them. And this guy was named Isadore, but everyone called him Chi. Chisek. So Chisek—Harry, the accordion player was going to introduce me to Chisek, he takes me over there, to another hotel in Woodridge. We were in Martindale, and the next town over is Woodridge. So we got to Woodridge, and he's driving a tractor, mowing the lawn. He's making extra money by doing this, right, Chi. With his big belly sticking out like this—he was a man in his 40s. When I was in my forties, I didn't have a stomach like that. [Laughter]

“Hey, Chi!” Harry yells out. “Come here and meet the new kid saxophone player.” Chi comes down, takes a look at me, looks me up and down, says, “How do you do? How do

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



you like his chords?” And I looked at him to say . . . don’t even ask . . . Chi Epstein became my friend. So, it was Harry Berman, Ralph Kahn, Chi Epstein, me and a young drummer. Polish kid, Eddie Bolanski. He was a nice kid, but he didn’t know his tuchas from his elbow. He couldn’t read music at all. Me, I got by, at that point. So he played one summer, and then they started using me on their parties, and they started playing some different kind of klezmer tunes. So I learned all of those, and we of course played the Hava Nagilas and the . . . Shalom Alechem and all that stuff. We played that stuff.

That was—normal Jewish music in the late 1950s wasn’t klezmer anymore. It was these Israeli songs. Israeli. Why? Because klezmer music was the music of the old Europe, and that was the Holocaust and all that stuff. People didn’t want to remember this stuff. But the new music, the hope of the world, was this new Israeli stuff, so everybody wanted to hear Hava Nagila and all that stuff. And so we played Hava Nagila. We didn’t play the other stuff. We did play a bunch of Yiddish things and Ralph Kahn did sing a lot of this material in Yiddish. I was lucky. I went to high school in a place at Brooklyn Tech, which only had two languages to offer. Three years I took of German. Either French or German. These were the two technical languages. My father had studied German, I figured I would try it, too. When I went to the Catskills, I discovered that Yiddish was nothing more than a dialect of German! I understood everything these people were saying! [Speaks Yiddish] So, like a Jew, I learned how to speak Yiddish, and I learned some of the fabulous Yiddish show tunes.<sup>36</sup>

Sokolow’s experience reflects the dominance of Israeli culture among Ashkenazi Jewish Americans during the 1950s, and his statement that Israeli culture, and Israeli music, represented “the hope of the world” for many Jews, in contrast to Yiddish culture reminding Jewish Americans of the Holocaust presents a reason for klezmer music being ignored by Jewish Americans. This goes deeper than his previous statement that Old World culture was simply “unhip.” Sokolow states, “My parents and their friends, they made absolutely, they didn’t want to know from [Yiddish].” Sokolow, obviously, disagrees with the reading of Israeli culture that he associates with mainstream Jewish music during that time. Seeking a more authentic way to do things “like a Jew,” Sokolow learned Yiddish, and played Yiddish music.

While Sokolow’s words suggest that Yiddish culture was completely unfashionable, his elder musical associates in the Catskills absolutely preserved Yiddish music and culture in their

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

playing, even though they were also required to play what audiences wanted to hear, which was Israeli music. In the klezmer revival, Sokolow played a catalytic role. While the revival was by no means his idea, and he was not even of the same generation as most of the revivalists, Sokolow was the person who introduced revivalists to aging musicians who kept the tradition alive through their playing. According to Joel Rubin, being able to meet living elder musicians inspired him to continue playing when the novelty of playing the repertoire preserved on 78 records wore off, because it demonstrated that klezmer was a dynamic tradition that lent itself to individual artistic expression.<sup>37</sup>

### **Mickey Katz: “Unabashed Yidditude” In a Time of Forgetting**

Another musician who joined Sokolow’s elder associates in maintaining ties to Yiddish culture through the 1950s was Mickey Katz.<sup>38</sup> Katz played klezmer clarinet and reached his musical zenith in the 1950s with “Yinglish,” klezmerfied parodies of popular songs.<sup>39</sup> These songs were specifically directed toward Yiddish-speaking, Jewish audiences. Katz’s parody of “The Ballad of Davey Crockett,” “Duvid Crockett,” transforms Davey Crockett into a Lower East Side Jewish character, “Born in the wilds of Delancey Street, home of gifilte fish and kosher meat.”<sup>40</sup> In his autobiography, Katz wrote of the song’s reception,

“Duvid Crocket...” was a tremendous hit—No. 2 on “the charts” all over the country. There was a two-page complimentary article in *Time* magazine about the recording. But the frightened Jewish editor of *Weekly Variety* took me to task for making a record that “defiled” the legend of Davy Crockett. The original Davy Crockett was itself a parody!<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Joel Rubin, interviewed by Claire Gogan, *To Play Jewish Again: Roots, Counterculture, and the Klezmer Revival*. Virginia Tech, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Sokolow describes the first time he heard “Duvid Crocket” in 1955 in an interview with The Mickey Katz Project.

<sup>39</sup> Josh Kun, “The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference” in *American Jewish History* 87.4 (1999).

“Yinglish” = Yiddish/English hybrid speech.

<sup>40</sup> Mickey Katz, *Papa, Play for Me: The Autobiography of Mickey Katz* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Katz outlines a similar story with a station manager in Philadelphia, who told him that “Yiddish is the language of the ghetto” and he would not play anything Yiddish on his station.<sup>42</sup>



Cover of Katz’s instrumental album, “Simcha Time: Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and Brisses” (recorded 1950 – 1956)

However, as Josh Kun discusses in his article on Katz, “The Yiddish Are Coming,” the second major challenge to the survival of klezmer was a genuine discomfort on the part of many Jewish Americans with performed Jewish difference in a post-Holocaust world. According to Kun,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 98.

In order to fully appreciate just how anomalous Katz's records sounded when they were originally released between 1947 and 1957, we must remember the type of pop cultural climate he was working against. In the wake of the Holocaust, the majority of American Jews working in film, TV, and music wanted nothing more than to become part of what David Marc and Robert Cantwell have respectively called the "emerging altrightnik culture" and the "strange detergent culture" promoted by the postwar institutionalization of mass culture and mass media.<sup>43</sup>

Klezmer, and Yiddish culture in general, endured assaults from multiple directions. In addition to this, most of the klezmers in Eastern Europe were murdered in the Holocaust or suffered cultural loss under the Soviet Union's anti-Jewish campaigns.<sup>44</sup> Klezmer did not disappear, but likely could not have been fully "revived" on a large, commercial scale without preserved 78 rpm records from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and living Jewish American musicians.

### **Conclusion: Klezmer Preservation and Revival Facilitation**

The landscape of New York, and the Lower East side in particular, with its proximity to entertainment districts, and the burgeoning recording industry in New York, created a situation where klezmer could be easily preserved and recorded. While very little is known about the lives of klezmer musicians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century aside from what is preserved in community memory, musicians who recorded during klezmer's 1920s heyday preserved their art for third and fourth generation Jewish American revivalists in the 1970s. Nineteen twenties New York, as a diasporic, commercial space uniquely positioned as both a center for entertainment and *the center* of the Jewish American world, facilitated a burst of recorded klezmer. The revival of klezmer in the 1970s was contingent on this specific New York commercial context. The rise of the entertainment industry in New York occurring simultaneously with the largest wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration facilitated the preservation of a particular moment in the history of klezmer music. Though klezmer transformed and nearly went dormant with the

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<sup>43</sup> Josh Kun, "The Yiddish are Coming" 357.

<sup>44</sup> Joel Rubin, "The Art of the Klezmer".

changing landscapes of Jewish American culture between klezmer's first and second "waves," the entertainment industry in New York facilitated the preservation of 1920s American klezmer in time for later revisiting and further development.

Additionally, bridge figures such as Peter Sokolow, his elder associates, and Mickey Katz, who continued to perform klezmer throughout the period when it was least fashionable, the 1950s, carried the music forward and influenced a younger generation of musicians who were interested in the music of their grandparents. These contexts shaped what would be thought of as authentic klezmer during the revival.

## Chapter 2: “My Parents Didn’t know from this Stuff” Klezmer and Ethnic Revival

Born in Los Angeles in 1955, clarinet virtuoso Joel Rubin grew up listening to his brother’s folk records, but playing exclusively classical music. Though his parents did not play, Rubin was raised in a musical family, and his grandfathers on both sides were musicians. According to Rubin, his paternal grandfather was “sort of a klezmer,” though Rubin did not realize this until adulthood and after his grandfather had already died. Rubin remembered hearing stories about relatives he never knew playing music, and also working as barbers. In Rubin’s research, he determined that most of the Jewish barbers in Eastern Europe had also been klezmer musicians. Playing klezmer, then, provided an intergenerational link to an imagined past in Eastern Europe.

[My grandfather] was sort of a klezmer. I didn’t realize that at the time, but he was a barber, and his father and grandfather had been barbers in Ukraine, and when I got heavily into my klezmer research, I realized that all the Jewish barbers were klezmer musicians. And that my great-grandfather had probably played the violin, and probably played weddings and things like that. We just don’t know anything about him. He was dead before my father was born. My father’s grandfather was dead before he was born. So, anyway, I grew up with that on the one side, and on that same side of the family, my grandmother’s family, so his wife’s—I never met her because she died in the forties, but my grandmother had like seven siblings and they all had children, so we had several professional musicians in the family, my dad’s first cousin was a famous clarinetist, Mitchell Lurie<sup>1</sup>

While Rubin maintained that his interest in klezmer hinged on its musical qualities, through klezmer, Rubin connected with the Yiddish roots of his grandparents. Rubin grew up in a nonreligious family and did not have a bar mitzvah or much institutional religious education. However, he discovered a new Jewish identification in the late 70s and 80s as a result of his exposure to klezmer.

Klezmer musicians sought out this particular type of music for multiple reasons. Some,

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

like Margot Leverett, came from a non-Jewish background and fell into playing the music through their social circles. However, in the early years of the revival, the vast majority of players were Jewish. Rubin, after working as a classical musician in New York, nearly abandoned the clarinet due to his disillusionment with the industry, moving back to the west coast in the meantime. He discovered Balkan folk music through friends in Portland, and klezmer through his partner, Lisa Rose, who, according to Rubin, had a stronger Jewish identity than himself. Old-time banjoist and fiddler, Tommy Jarrell, famously asked his student, klezmer revival pioneer Henry Sapoznik, if his people had “any of their own music,” prompting Sapoznik to examine klezmer. For all musicians involved, klezmer represented a cross-generational identification with Jewish culture. The ethnic revivals of the 1970s formed the larger context for these renewed identities. These broader revivals occurred as a result of renewed ethnic consciousness and trends toward multiculturalism in the United States.

### **“Feeling Diaspora” in the 60s and 70s**

The persistence and evolution of klezmer as an ethnic art form both complicates and reinforces the narrative of Jewish American whitening outlined by Eric Goldstein, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music has reflected a specifically ethnic and cultural type of Jewish identification. It is klezmer’s association with eastern European culture that caused it to largely fall out of fashion after World War II, and then experience a resurgence of popularity starting in the 1970s. While Mickey Katz was an outlier, performing Jewish difference when it would have been unusual for someone his age to do so, his case demonstrates the role of art and cultural production in asserting ethnic identity. In the late 1960s, members of the Jewish counterculture became more generally concerned with asserting these identities, leading to the klezmer revival and other forms of ethnic identification.

The performance of Jewish ethnic difference, in the klezmer revival context, also demonstrates a particular diasporic identification.<sup>2</sup> William Safran describes the Jewish diaspora as the “archetypal diaspora,” stating that “being in diaspora implies a tension between being in one place physically—the place where one lives and works—and thinking regularly of another place far away.”<sup>3</sup> While conceding that whether the place for which a diasporic subject pines needs to be the “original” homeland is controversial, for Safran, thinking regularly of another physical land is integral to being in the condition.<sup>4</sup>

As interpreted by James Clifford, Safran defines diasporas as having these main features: “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship”<sup>5</sup> However, Clifford argues that working from the position of envisioning an “ideal type,” typically the conventional, Biblical Jewish diaspora, marginalizes some diasporic experiences. Additionally, Clifford correctly states that “large segments of Jewish historical experience do not meet the test of Safran's last three criteria: a strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well-preserved homeland”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett writes that neo-klezmer musicians invoked an imagined homeland in pre-World War II Eastern Europe that decentered Israel in what was, for some of these musicians, a symbolic attempt to return to Jewish socialist, working class, Borscht Belt “roots.”<sup>7</sup> Having a criterion for what diaspora *is*, other than stating just that it refers to a group dispersed from an

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<sup>2</sup> I do not seek to create a concrete definition of diaspora (or Diaspora) in this thesis. Rather, I would like to discuss the ways diaspora is invoked and deployed for the purposes of identity formation and analysis.

<sup>9</sup> William Safran, “Deconstructing and Comparing Diasporas” in *Diaspora, Identity, and Religion: New Directions in Theories and Research* (London: Routledge, 2004) 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>11</sup> James Clifford, “Diasporas” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 9, No. 3 (August 1994) 305.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett, “Sounds of Sensibility” in *American Klezmer* 142.



ancestral homeland but still maintaining an identity associated with the homeland in their host country, suggests a problematic amount of exclusivity. However, as Safran writes, there is necessarily more to diaspora than just dispersal and an associated identity:

If the 'Irish' identity of a third- or fourth-generation American is little more than an after-dinner self-labeling (the sort of hyphenated self-identification often made by a person to make her/himself look more interesting), it is not a genuine diaspora identity. Being in diaspora implies a tension between being in one place physically—the place where one lives and works—and thinking regularly of another place far away.<sup>8</sup>

Still, there is a space for diaspora consciousness to exist among Jews without regular thoughts of physical or emotional return to Israel. This issue is addressed by Clifford, who states that “transnational connections linking diasporas need not be articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland . . . decentered, lateral connections may be as important as a teleology of return.”<sup>9</sup> Looking at the diaspora this way leaves room for a diaspora consciousness constructed through ongoing transcultural relationships. Additionally, Clifford's view pulls the diasporic homeland out of the position of static origin point and places it in a position where it can also be active in the ongoing construction of diaspora.

The klezmer revival, then, represents a way of forming diasporic connections across time and generations, with an imagined Eastern Europe figuring as the homeland, but with New York as the true diasporic focal point. Klezmer musicians forged these connections through uncovering historic recordings on 78 records, and also by forming relationships with older musicians who were generationally closer to their immigrant roots. The latter example, the formation of relationships, is the focus of this chapter.

### **Sokolow Meets Tarras**

Peter Sokolow met Dave Tarras towards the end of Tarras's career and performed with

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14 Safran, “Deconstructing and Comparing Diasporas” 12.

15 Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora* 4.

the final incarnations of his band, in the last decades before Tarras's death in 1989. Sokolow had heard about Tarras from his elder musical associates in the Catskills and elsewhere, but finally met him in 1959 at a hotel in New York City, where Tarras had been hired to play tenor saxophone alongside Sokolow on alto. According to Sokolow, Tarras told him, in his Yiddish accent, "I am teacher of clarinet. All the best players come to me." While perhaps initially taking offense to Tarras's tone, when Tarras rose to play clarinet, Sokolow realized that Tarras's extreme confidence was well deserved. Sokolow became the last regular keyboard player for the man he proudly described as "The #1 klezmer of all time."

While Dave Tarras became a good friend and colleague of Sokolow late in Tarras's career, Sokolow's exposure to Naftule Brandwein occurred via a more typical revivalist route. Sokolow described missing Brandwein in the Catskills, and hearing him for the first time from Henry Sapoznik and other revivalists on 78 records during the 1970s. Sokolow described having had an opportunity to hear Brandwein as a teenager, and later regretted that he did not make it to the other side of Loch Sheldrake in order to hear Brandwein perform. While Sokolow was responsible for introducing Henry Sapoznik to the elder klezmer musicians he performed with, forming an intergenerational link, Sapoznik was responsible for introducing Sokolow to Naftule Brandwein on 78 records.

In 1957, I had my first Catskill mountains summer job in Loch Sheldrake . . . And, Naftule was in Loch Sheldrake, too, but on the other end. And he was playing in a place called The Overlook, I believe. I didn't have a car, I was too young to drive, nobody took me over there. I would have *killed*, at this point, to have heard Naftule.

I first heard Naftule in the late 70s, I believe. Because all of these young revivalists were mainly interested in Naftule. The first revivalists to come around were Henry Sapoznik, and the Klezmorim, out in California. A guy called Marty Schwartz was one of those. Now, one day in 1978, Henry and this Schwartz come to my house, and I had a lovely recording of Dave Tarras playing in 1939 with a local band, which is really very good.

And I heard more of my first Naftule things from these very early revivalists. I never really got a chance [to meet him].<sup>10</sup>

Sokolow, between the fifties and the seventies, turned more toward American popular music, and then Hasidic music, since he could find work with the Hasidic communities in New York. While Sokolow made a living playing Hasidic music, younger musicians like Joel Rubin and Henry Sapoznik recorded klezmer onto cassettes from 78 records and traded tapes. Through this community of young musicians, they connected with their Eastern European Jewish, immigrant roots.

### **Joel Rubin's Intergenerational Connections**

After being exposed to klezmer through 78 records, Joel Rubin formed The Old Country, and then the Hester Street Klezmer Band in Portland, Oregon, with his older brother on bass and his partner, Lisa Rose, on *tsimbl* (hammer dulcimer). However, after several years of playing, Rubin felt that he had exhausted the existing klezmer repertoire. Meeting older musicians at KlezKamp in the Catskills, beginning in 1984, reinvigorated his interest in the music.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.



Sandra Layman, Lisa Rose, and Joel Rubin performing in the early 80s. Portland, Oregon.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Henry Sapoznik and Andy Statman, who lived and performed in New York, Rubin's residence on the West Coast left him with little exposure to the older generation of musicians, with a few exceptions. Ben Baysler, who played on the first *Brave Old World* album, came from a Polish klezmer family. But Rubin maintains that there were no klezmer families in Los Angeles, because these families tended to settle in specific locations, the West Coast not among

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<sup>11</sup> Personal collection of Joel Rubin. The musicians' prioritization of what they viewed as authentic cultural revivalism is apparent in their performance clothing. They are dressed as if they belong in a late 19<sup>th</sup> century shtetl, or at least the way they imagined that individuals in these communities dressed. Note that their musical inspirations from the 1920s performed in a suit and tie, and the Naftule Branwein famously donned Christmas lights and an Uncle Sam suit.

them. According to Rubin, Baysler “was there even when I was growing up, but there was no klezmer music. He was playing continental music, he played at Jewish weddings, but there was no klezmer music at Jewish weddings, essentially, except at very isolated places at that point.” The isolated places Rubin refers to, at least in the United States, were the traditional, Hasidic communities where Sokolow made his living.

Rubin began traveling to New York for klezmer music in the early 80s, and he knew Henry Sapoznik and Andy Statman, but connected with the older generation of musicians mainly when he started attending KlezKamp. Rubin recalled teaching at KlezKamp for the first time in 1985. At this event, Rubin met clarinetist Sid Beckerman, son of first generation American klezmer Shloimke Beckerman. He also met violinist Leon Schwatz, Yiddish folk singer Bronya Sakina, and Peter Sokolow. Rubin recalled teaching with Sokolow and Beckerman, and how meeting the older generation changed his attitude toward the music.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin recalled meeting Peter Sokolow and other musicians at the first KlezKamp: “I met Pete at KlezKamp, so that was December 1985, yeah. It was a very small bunch in that first year, there were maybe 100 of us, or there were maybe 100 participants and maybe 20 faculty or something. And it was mostly musicians, I would say. You know, over the course of the years it became much bigger three, four, five hundred people would come, sometimes even more, and many of the people were not musicians. A lot of elderly Jews came as kind of a cheap vacation and a way to enjoy the music and stuff, but they weren’t really actively involved. But in the first year, it was mostly musicians, so that’s where I met a lot of those people. Also, a lot of the revival people, that’s where I met Alan [Bern] for the first time, in particular. I guess the others I knew already. I mean, I certainly knew Stuart already, I knew Michael Alpert already. I think I met some of the Klezmer Conservatory people also for the first time. Because a lot of the Klezmer Conservatory band people were also in that initial faculty. So, people like Hankus Netsky, they’re not even in the Klezmer Conservatory band anymore, but Mimi Rabson is a violinist, and Dave Harris is trombone. I think it was the three of them mostly, were the Klezmer Conservatory Band, and—well Mimi was the violin teacher, what other instruments are there—I don’t remember who they had on trumpet. I think it was somebody—it wasn’t Frank London, it was—maybe they didn’t even have a trumpet teacher. If they did, maybe it was Ken Gross, who was a guy coming more out of like Pete Sokolow, he was also playing Hasidic weddings and things. But his father had played piano with Brandwein, so he had a little bit of a klezmer connection. There was a drummer there who was an orthodox guy, who was also playing a lot of Hasidic weddings, who never really was a part of the klezmer scene. I don’t know, they had him because he was the only drummer they knew, I think, at that time. That was before Dave Licht and some of those other people got involved. What other instruments did we have? Violin, piano was Pete, Stuart Brotman covered the low instruments. Michael was of course teaching singing, but he also played the violin, and Alan was covering the keyboards, and—oh maybe Jim Guttman was there! Also from the Klezmer Conservatory Band. He might have been the original bass teacher, and maybe Stuart was teaching

All of the sudden I thought, wow, there's this—I mean, these guys, this is actually a direct connection, this is not some dusty old recording or something, even though their music was kind of a shadow of what the previous generation had been, but still it was a direct connection, and it made me suddenly take it a lot more seriously.

Rubin's cross-generational connections deepened when he pursued klezmer research academically. In 1990, Rubin wrote a German language book on klezmer. Shortly thereafter, he began a PhD in Ethnomusicology, eventually writing one of the first dissertations on klezmer, and focusing on the work of Brandwein and Tarras. Rubin corresponded with a number of older musicians while working on his project, and also with Dorothea Goldys-Bass, the granddaughter of Naftule Brandwein. Additionally, Rubin worked closely with the Epstein Brothers, ultimately arranging a European tour with them and filming the documentary, *A Tickle in the Heart*.

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some other instruments or something. I don't exactly remember. Probably somewhere, if I could find that box of my old files that go back to the early 80s, it would be in there.



The Hester Street Klezmer Band, early 80s. Portland, Oregon.<sup>13</sup>

### **KlezKamp and the Klezmer Community**

Joel Rubin attended KlezKamp for the first time in 1985.<sup>14</sup> Initially called the Yiddish Arts Festival, the camp offered a chance for practitioners of Yiddish folk arts to connect with one another, and also functioned as “sort of a cheap vacation” for elderly Jews.<sup>15</sup> Margot Leverett recalled KlezKamp as something she looked forward to all year, especially as she worked as an occupational therapist on the west coast and played music on the side.<sup>16</sup> Peter Sokolow recalled

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<sup>13</sup> Personal collection of Joel Rubin.

<sup>14</sup> Rubin was familiar with the music camp culture prior to this, however, having attended Balkan Camp on the west coast in the past.

<sup>15</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

Leverett explained the importance of Holocaust survivors to the persistence of KlezKamp

Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

Joel Rubin Collection, KlezKamp brochures 1985 – 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

being one of the first clarinet teachers at the camp.<sup>17</sup> Sokolow, a career music teacher, taught clarinet alongside Sid Beckerman at the first meeting.

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.





די פוילישע יידן ♦ Jews of Poland ♦ Żydzi Polscy ♦ די פוילישע יידן

Ninth Annual VIVO  
**Yiddish Folk Arts  
Program „KlezKamp“**

December 22-28, 1993 ♦ Paramount Hotel ♦ Parkville, New York

KlezKamp Program, 1993<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Personal collection of Joel Rubin.

The camp functioned as a meeting point for the entire klezmer community. While the center of the klezmer revival community was located in New York City and Boston, musicians from all over the country gathered in the Catskills for this event. Joel Rubin lived on the west coast of the US and later Berlin.<sup>19</sup> Margot Leverett lived on the west coast before moving back to New York for her musical career.<sup>20</sup> Peter Sokolow, a lifelong Brooklynite, through his connections with Henry Sapoznik, brought the so-called old-timers, his friends, to the festival. This is how klezmer revival musicians from multiple disparate locations connected with elderly members of this music scene. These older musicians, though second generation themselves, had played with Tarras, Brandwein, and Shloimke Beckerman, in many cases. Some, such as Max Epstein, had existed in the same world as these first generation musicians, having played at parties for the Jewish organized crime ring, Murder Inc., and generally traveled in the same circles as Naftule Brandwein.<sup>21</sup> KlezKamp programs and menus show that the camp supported Yiddish revivalism beyond music.<sup>22</sup> These festivals served kosher food and observed Shabbat, and also taught Yiddish folk arts, poetry, and dance.

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<sup>19</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>21</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>22</sup> KlezKamp programs, menus 1986 – 1990s.



Lauren Brody and Joel Rubin at KlezKamp. Early 90s.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Personal collection of Joel Rubin.



## Sokolow Builds Bridges



Peter Sokolow, mid 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Personal archive of Joel Rubin.

Joel Rubin spent a considerable amount of time with the Epstein brothers, and particularly Max Epstein. Like many older generation musicians, Rubin met them through Peter Sokolow at KlezKamp, recalling that Sokolow's role was indispensable in terms of connecting the younger and older generations. At that point, hardly any scholars had studied klezmer, though Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett interviewed Dave Tarras in 1975. For Rubin, this dearth of scholarship, and the deaths of most American klezmers prior to Tarras being interviewed in 1975, demonstrated the importance of Peter Sokolow as a bridge figure. Rubin recognized Sokolow as the only living figure of his generation, in the community, who knew about klezmer prior to the revivalists. Sokolow, unlike the other musicians, was not involved in the 1960s counterculture or folk revival movements, and instead saw himself more as a jazz musician, with Hasidic music being a more effective way to earn income.<sup>25</sup>

Well at that point [in 1975], of course, Brandwein was dead for twelve years already, so nobody ever interviewed Brandwein, nobody interviewed Schloimke Beckerman, who also died in I think 1974, maybe? So [Brandwein, Tarras, and Schloimke Beckerman] were the three main American klezmer musicians, and of the three, only one of them even got interviewed, let alone all the other generations that were already dying in the 1940s and 50s. So, Pete had his finger on the pulse about that, because he knew, he was the only one of our generation—he's sort of the tail end of our generation—the only one who really knew about klezmer music before people like, say, Henry Sapoznik or some of those other people started getting interested in [klezmer] in the late 70s.<sup>26</sup>

Sokolow acted as a “middle man” for Rubin and the other klezmer revivalists, introducing Rubin to the Epstein brothers, Ray Muziker, Danny Rubinstein, Howie Leese, Paul Pinkus, and Marty Leavitt. According to Rubin, Sokolow informed him, “These are the guys, you gotta talk to them!” and gave Rubin all of their phone numbers. Rubin then contacted these musicians, and went to visit the Epsteins in Florida, where the surviving brothers had retired.

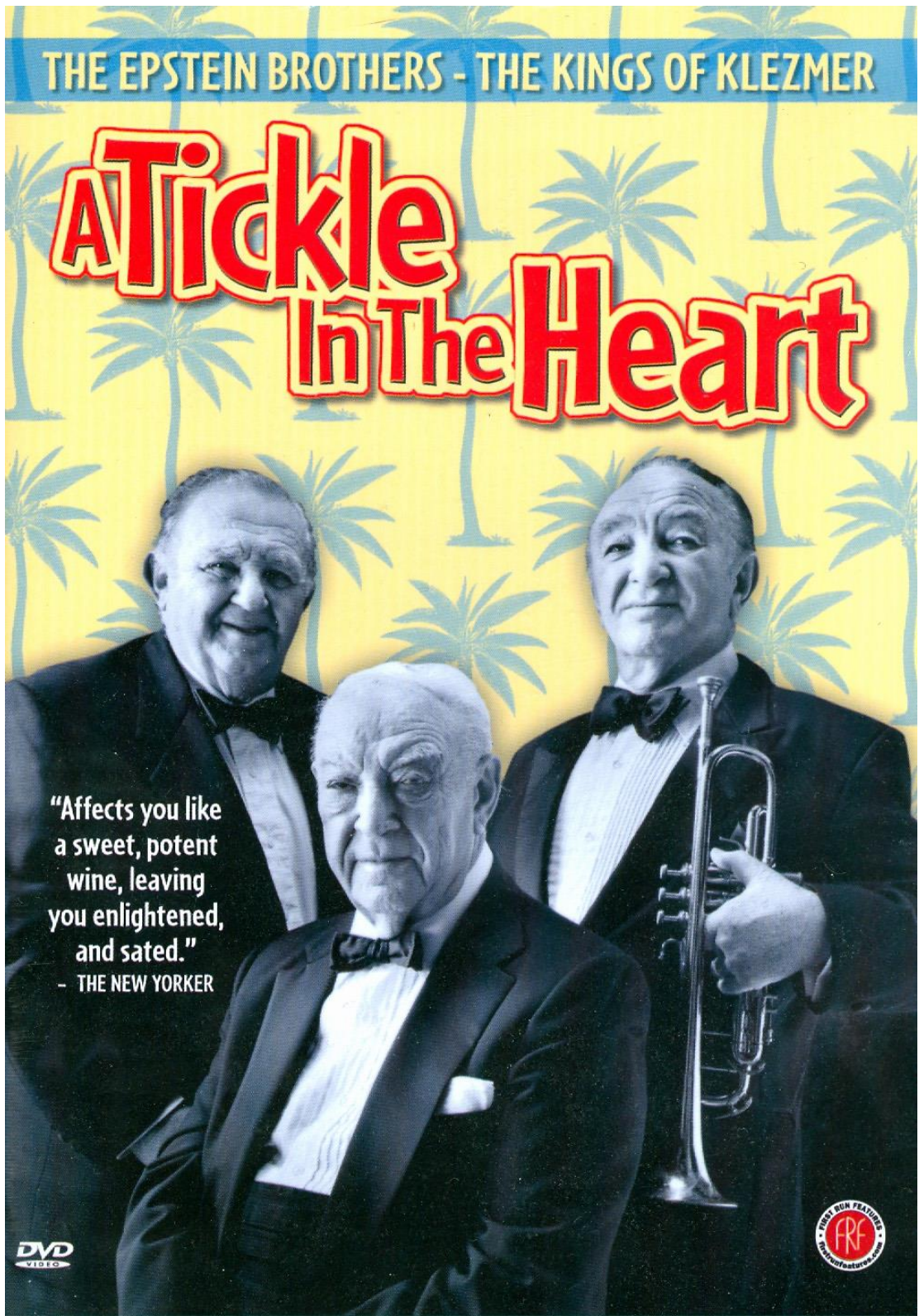
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<sup>25</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

Rubin recalled visiting Max Epstein in Florida in 1991, when Epstein was 78 years old. Both Epstein and his wife were suspicious of Rubin at first, but Rubin stated, “Once those guys figured out that not only was I a musician, but that I played really well, then they took me much more seriously.” Rubin noted that the Epsteins had never recorded any klezmer, and that most of their records were Hasidic music. This, and the fact that Max Epstein retained his mastery of the clarinet even at 80 years old, inspired Rubin to arrange a European tour for the brothers. This tour became the subject of *A Tickle in the Heart*. As klezmer revivalists sought to build a bridge between the 1980s – 1990s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe, their bridge reached 78 recordings and elderly musicians, who came out of retirement to play with revivalists.





A Tickle in the Heart DVD cover (1996)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> JoelRubinKlezmer.com.





Album cover, Joel Rubin and the Epstein Brothers, "Grandfathers and Grandsons." 1995.





**Joel Rubin and Max Epstein pose in front of a storefront synagogue in South Florida. Mid 1990s.<sup>28</sup>**

### **Conclusion**

What is the significance of klezmer in the larger ethnic revival movements of the 1970s? What is the relationship between klezmer and Jewish identity? And what sort of identity did revivalists express? In order to analyze these currents, we must consider the multiple, complicated factors contributing to why the klezmer revival happened when it did. In an appropriate, but particularist move, folk revivalists turned toward their roots, inspired by the Black Power movement and proclamations that “black is beautiful,” in addition to the popularity

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<sup>28</sup> Personal collection of Joel Rubin.

of Alex Haley's *Roots*.<sup>29</sup> Rubin described the ethnic revivalist currents of the klezmer revival as things that were "already in the air" during the 1960s. Significantly, Hankus Netsky was inspired by similar revivalist currents in Irish music.<sup>30</sup> The desire for a particularly Eastern European identification, and a connection with Yiddish culture, also occurred as a response to the dominance of Israeli cultural production in the United States during this time. This is particularly evident in the stories of Rubin and Sokolow, who wanted to distance themselves from Israeli music, favoring what they associated with Yiddish culture.

Rubin recalled that Israeli music and culture did not fully resonate with his ethnic identity.<sup>31</sup> He reasoned that this was because "a lot of [the klezmer revivalists] didn't come from really heavily Zionist families." Rubin's grandparents, he remembered, were communists who called themselves "progressive people." According to Rubin, Israeli nationalism ran counter to their values as secular universalists. Rubin recalled of his upbringing, "We didn't have Hebrew lessons, we weren't members of a synagogue, so it was totally secular. I didn't even have a bar mitzvah."

Joel Rubin maintained that his relationship to the klezmer tradition had little to do with his Judaism or Jewish identity. However, this stands somewhat in contrast to other statements about finding his Jewish identity through involvement in the music and the community. Rubin, as a self-proclaimed "fierce defender of the klezmer tradition," expressed an ambivalent Jewish particularism. This particularism is simultaneously self-conscious and open-ended. Desiring to connect with Yiddish, in opposition to Hebrew, and the secular, in opposition to the religious, demonstrates an inclination to connect with what he perceived as *his* roots. His grandparents

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<sup>29</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Harris, allmusic.com.

<sup>31</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

were communists, universalists, “progressive people.” Rubin’s “people” were thoroughly Jewish, but socialist and largely uninterested in institutional religion.

I’m a fierce defender of the klezmer tradition, and of the musicians of the past, I worked with a lot of traditional musicians, I worked a lot with the Epstein brothers, and basically all of the still-living musicians of that generation that I could get my hands on in those days . . . I feel like an upholder of their legacy, but not necessarily because they were Jews and I’m Jewish, it’s not like that. I could just as easily—my relatives could have been from Vietnam or something.

Connecting with musicians of the past did inspire a renewed Jewish identity, however. His diasporic connections to musicians of the past and aging musicians of the present offered a way of expressing Jewish identity through Jewish music. As Rubin’s impulse to find “authentic” art drew him to klezmer, as a musician influenced by the folk revival and counterculture, Rubin experienced “authentic” Jewish identity, as understood through his own family history. This identification stood as distinctly Yiddish, politically progressive, and, for Rubin, nonreligious. Rubin stressed the importance of secularity in a way that suggested an ambivalence toward any kind of particularism, in keeping with his grandparents’ philosophy.

Sokolow, not growing up with Yiddish language or culture in the home, discovered his identity through diasporic relationships with aging musicians in the Catskills. Joining their bands and carrying their music forward, he identified as “The Youngest Old Guy,” rather than with the revivalists. For Sokolow, this represented a way of expressing a more “authentic” alignment with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer musicians, and the klezmer tradition. By saying “I am the youngest old guy,” Sokolow was actually saying, “I am an authentic klezmer, I am closer to the original practitioners than the klezmer revivalists.” For all of these musicians, aligning themselves with what they viewed as authentic, ethnic Jewish identity functioned as a way to imbue their lives with deeper meaning. The aging 1960s counterculture’s concern with

authenticity met folk revivalist impulses and turned inward, associating authenticity with ethnic particularities as opposed to the universalism that characterized the 1960s. Here, the diaspora connection linked to a romanticized eastern Europe, which functioned as an “authentic” origin point, with music that needed to be revived, preserved, and honored by a new generation of Jews concerned with finding themselves outside of the confines of their parents’ ideas of religion.

### **Chapter 3: “A Great Gift from a Very High Realm” – Counterculture and Spirituality in the Revival**

David Shneyer was born in 1948 in Brooklyn, NY, though he grew up in New Jersey, in a resort center with many hotels and Jewish vacationers.<sup>1</sup> While Shneyer spent his early years on a rural egg farm, his parents moved to Lakewood, New Jersey, when Shneyer was 13, as the egg market declined. He, like Rubin, came from a musical family. His mother played piano and kept Yiddish song books, and his father sang in the synagogue choir.

Shneyer began playing guitar as a young child, joining a band in his teen years, and playing in the local hotels. In the early years, Shneyer played primarily rock music, often entertaining teenage tourists. However, Shneyer also studied with Menachem Goldman and Goldie Malovsky from the Malovsky family choir, learning cantorial arts and developing a deep love of Jewish music. He also learned Jewish folk songs from his mother’s Theodore Bikel songbook. Affected by the folk revival in the 1960s, Shneyer’s band experimented with Yiddish music, Russian shers, and other material from the Kaymen Yiddish songbooks often used by klezmer revivalists. Shneyer majored in Hebraic Studies at Rutgers University, but moved to Washington, DC shortly after graduating. He recalled that he was offered a job in a Conservative synagogue in Washington and tasked with starting a Havurah so that the youth could feel comfortable gathering without their parents watching them. Shneyer then created the Fabrangen center in Dupont circle, with the vision of a Jewish countercultural gathering place.

Shneyer, and the Fabrangen Fiddlers, represent a more religiously-oriented strand of the klezmer revival. While many revivalists became more religious as they aged, the Fiddlers were

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<sup>1</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

firmly situated within Jewish religious counterculture from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> They also represent the other side of authenticity discourse in the revival. While musicians like Sokolow hewed true to early 20<sup>th</sup> century klezmer, the Fabbrangon Fiddlers strived for a spiritual, existentialist idea of authenticity, typical of the 1960s counterculture and folk revivalists in general.

### **Counterculture and Folk Revivalism**

The folk revival effectively bridged music and activism for the early 1960s counterculture. However, by the late 1960s, the national folk revival was waning in commercial appeal. Stephen Petrus and Ronald Cohen write that, in New York, the folk revival persisted beyond the sixties in the form of ethnic cultural revivalism.<sup>3</sup> Other examples of this cultural revivalism included a renewed interest in traditional Irish music. Additionally, The Balkan Arts Center, founded in 1966, hosted Greek and Balkan artists. This organization eventually became The Society for Traditional Music and Dance, and by the early 80s, had expanded to feature the cultural production of the many ethnic communities of New York.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1970s, the Society for Traditional Music and Dance hosted one of the first major performances of the klezmer revival, when Andy Statman shared the stage with Dave Tarras.<sup>5</sup> According to narrator Joel Rubin, many klezmer musicians were also involved in the Balkan arts movement prior to the klezmer revival.<sup>6</sup> These two musical movements are so firmly intertwined that the Klezmerim's first album features both Balkan and Yiddish music, and to the average listener, the styles are difficult to distinguish.<sup>7</sup> The stylistic underpinnings of the Klezmerim, a West Coast band, show

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview* by Claire Gogan.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Petrus and Ronald Cohen, *Folk City* 311.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 305.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 307.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview* by Claire Gogan.

<sup>7</sup> The Klezmerim, *East Side Wedding* Arhoolie Records, 1977.

that the folk revival as ethnic cultural revival persisted outside of New York, also.

### **Klezmer and the Holocaust**

While folklorists and ethnomusicologists tend to situate the klezmer revival within secular expressions of ethnic Judaism, examining klezmer as part of the ethnic branch of folk revivalism, the klezmer revival is distinct from other ethnic revival expressions for two reasons. The first is the Holocaust. The klezmer revival accesses a part of the past that practitioners felt was in danger of dying out completely, similarly to other folk revival movements. However, klezmer revivalists did this with a sense of responsibility to their ancestors, whom they were reaching for across the chasm of a great tragedy.

The Holocaust, and Holocaust memory, played a multi-pronged role in the klezmer revival. First, Holocaust memory being brought into increasing popular consciousness helped facilitate interest in Yiddish revivalism.<sup>8</sup> The near-destruction of Eastern European Jewry, and the murder of almost all of the klezmers in Eastern Europe, obscured the klezmer tradition, and Yiddish arts traditions in general. This is why Mark Slobin describes klezmer as as “part of a permanent penumbra,” cast by the Holocaust’s decimation of Eastern European Jewish culture.<sup>9</sup> Emerging from the shadows of the Holocaust, then, were glimmers of a seemingly lost culture. Additionally, the memory of the Holocaust imbued a sense in some musicians that that they were tasked with bringing back the music of their ancestors, eliminated by a great injustice.<sup>10</sup>

However, as Christina Baade notes, and as Peter Sokolow’s experience as a working musician illuminates, klezmer did not disappear due to the forces of acculturation and the

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<sup>8</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>9</sup> Slobin, *American Klezmer*.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> The Holocaust did, however, render klezmer an American art form. Additionally, in the ultra-Orthodox communities where Yiddish culture retained its force and influence, klezmer developed as any other art form, becoming more “American” and changing with the forces of musical trends. Finally, while the negative reactions many Jewish Americans, often the children of immigrants, had to Mickey Katz in the 1950s demonstrated a dominant trend in the status of Yiddish culture among Jewish Americans during that time, even less traditionally religious Jewish immigrants retained a nostalgic appreciation for klezmer as they aged.

In addition to the Holocaust playing an important role in the inspiration of the revival in general, klezmer artists recorded Holocaust-related material. While this material generally did not qualify as “klezmer,” as in, Eastern European, traditional, instrumental wedding music, this material played an important role in the revival. Klezmer revivalists, including Henry Sapoznik, Michael Alpert, and Adrienne Cooper, recorded the soundtrack to the film, “Partisans of Vilna,” setting Partisan poems to music.<sup>12</sup> *Brave Old World* similarly assembled Lodz ghetto programming in the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Margot Leverett recalled that early klezmer revival and KlezKamp audiences were significantly populated by “survivors.”<sup>14</sup> These individuals were likely motivated by a similar nostalgic impulse to elderly Jewish American immigrants whose arrival predated the Holocaust, but also other complicated feelings related to their particular experiences of trauma. For Leverett, these survivors, in particular, held a meaningful presence in the audience. These individuals were seen as privy to authentic memories of a culture that the revivalists paid tribute

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<sup>11</sup> Baade, “Authenticity”. Sokolow oral history interview.

<sup>12</sup> *Partisans of Vilna*, audio CD, liner notes.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

*Song of the Lodz Ghetto*, audio CD, liner notes.

<sup>14</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*.



to in their performance and revered for their struggles.

### **Religion and Secularism in the Revival**

The second distinguishing feature of the klezmer revival from other folk revival movements is the intertwining of Yiddish culture with Jewish religion. While, as informant David Shneyer mused, klezmer revival musicians may have used klezmer as a mode of religious expression because they felt uncomfortable with organized religion, his band, The Fabringen Fiddlers, represented a spiritually oriented thread in the revival.<sup>15</sup> As Joel Rubin noted, many revival musicians also became more religious as time went on, and he recalled becoming more observant at times, “though it didn’t stick.”<sup>16</sup>

Another distinctive feature of the Fabringen Fiddlers was their political orientation. While the klezmer revival is generally associated with progressive, liberal, and secular Judaism, Alan Oresky and David Shneyer of the Fabringen Fiddlers, the only Washington, DC band in this study, met in the activist organization, Jews for Urban Justice. Shneyer, originally from New Jersey, moved to the DC area specifically to participate in the anti-war movement. While the Fiddlers were outliers religiously, regionally, and musically in the revival, their inclusion, if somewhat peripheral, is apparent in the 2007 photograph, “A Great Day On Eldridge Street.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>16</sup> Joel Rubin, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>17</sup> This photograph is a recreation of the famous photograph, “A Great Day in Harlem,” featuring jazz musicians.



“A Great Day on Eldridge Street.” Photograph by Leo Sorrell. 2007.<sup>18</sup>

“A Great Day on Eldridge Street,” organized by Yale Strom, brought a large group of klezmer musicians together in the Lower East Side to pose on the steps of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. This photograph, inspired by the famous 1958 photograph of jazz musicians, “A Great Day in Harlem,” featured a visual return to the musicians’ immigrant roots, as the Lower East Side has increasingly been associated with Jewish immigration, and the synagogue was newly renovated. The revival, then, encompassed community based *simcha* bands such as the Fabrangen Fiddlers, in addition to musicians such as Rubin and Sokolow, who hewed close to the klezmer tradition in more musical ways.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/may/01/yale-strom-champion-klezmer/>  
Shneyer is three rows down from the top in the middle, wearing a hat and vest.

<sup>19</sup> *Simcha* = celebration



“A Great Day in Harlem.” Photograph by Art Kane, 1958.<sup>20</sup>

However, the racial differences between the two photographs are striking, echoing Eric Goldstein’s analysis of the complicated relationship between Jews and African Americans.<sup>21</sup> While writers such as James Baldwin have criticized Jews for, like other whites, failing to recognize that “The America of which they dream and boast is the America in which the Negro lives,” Jews, as a group, have seen themselves as different from mainstream whiteness, and maintained an ambivalence toward their own whiteness.<sup>22</sup> The impulse to take a photo that was originally organized in Harlem featuring jazz musicians, a majority of whom were black, and reimagine it in front of the Eldridge Street Synagogue with a majority of white, Jewish musicians demonstrates this tension clearly. Seeing themselves as different, as “ethnic,” they assembled in a historically Jewish neighborhood that has been historically aligned with Jewishness, regardless

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.harlem.org>. This photograph also demonstrates how Jewish ethnic revivalists followed in the footsteps of African American proponents of the roots movement. Harlem, as a symbolically African American neighborhood in New York, and the Lower East Side, as a symbolically Jewish neighborhood, function as backdrops for musicians situating themselves within cultural art forms born of these communities.

<sup>21</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* 219.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

of the changing demographics in the intervening years between the 1920s and the 2000s.<sup>23</sup> Taking klezmer's "Jewish jazz" nickname to heart, they recreated this photo as a way of asserting similarity to these musicians, and also ethnic particularity. An appropriative gesture, it echoes the klezmer revival's trailing on the heels of Black Power and *Roots*.

Here we find a clear example of Jacobson's assertion that ethnic revivals among whites exclude African Americans from their picture of America.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, the 2007 photo in front of the Eldridge Street Synagogue does little to reflect the contemporary racial demographics of the neighborhood during this time. While Jewish ethnicity is celebrated, people of color are excluded from this vision of America. Additionally, the social contexts of African American jazz musicians in 1958, compared to white Jewish musicians in 2007, are vastly different. The Jewish musicians featured are able to freely celebrate their ethnicity from a position of privilege. The African American jazz musicians, however, lived under the constant specter of white supremacy.

However, the Eldridge Street photograph also provides an evocative demonstration of Jewish discomfort with whiteness. According to Goldstein, at the time of the 2000 census, many Jews were frustrated by their inability to identify as anything but white.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, while some European ethnic groups were included in the census, Jews were not, leading to many write-ins. This extended to many Jews identifying as "other" rather than "black" or "white." Jews, continuing to see themselves in ethnic and racial terms into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, asserted their difference as a way to avoid being subsumed into a white category that they did not feel wholly a part of. We see this clearly in Shneyer's imagination of the Fabringen Fiddlers, a "Jewgrass" group with a mission to be both distinctly American and distinctly Jewish.

### **'Jewgrass,' Klezmer, and The Fabringen Fiddlers**

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<sup>23</sup> Page, Max and Randall Mason, *Giving Preservation a History* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 4.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too*.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*

David Shneyer and his good friend and bandmate, fiddler Alan Oresky, attended the Galax Old Fiddler's Convention in 1971.<sup>26</sup> Both men were bluegrass fans, both members of the Fabrangen havurah, and both were in their early twenties. David Shneyer remembered this festival as a turning point for the cultivation of "Jewgrass," a term he recalls inventing at the event. Shneyer remembered he and Alan jamming in the festival parking lot, when they decided to play "Dayenu" in a bluegrass style.<sup>27</sup> Other festival goers noticed. David and Alan followed "Dayenu" with "Tzena," a popular Israeli song famously recorded by The Weavers, in a bluegrass style.<sup>28</sup> According to Shneyer, people gathered to dance horas around them. He remembered that there were a few Jews at the festival, but "people were really getting off on this music, you know, like 'where's that melody from?'" The music was not "Old Joe Clark" or other Appalachian fiddle tunes that the attendees were used to hearing. "So [Shneyer and Oresky] saw that, wow, we could actually take the [bluegrass] style and apply it to Jewish or Israeli music."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the anti-war movement, Shneyer was drawn to Washington, DC by an affinity for bluegrass music and the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. Growing up during the 1960s folk revival, Shneyer graduated from rock to bluegrass guitar playing, during this time also keeping Yiddish music as part of his repertoire. After Oresky and Shneyer's 1971 revelation, they mixed Jewish and Israeli music with the bluegrass they loved. Shneyer recalled,

We started to take off as a community simcha band . . . We didn't call ourselves 'klezmerim' as such.<sup>30</sup> My background is also in history, Jewish History, so I knew about the klezmer of eastern Europe, and I had listened to and fallen in love with Giora Feidman in the 1970s, but we didn't consider ourselves [klezmerim], because that style of music was identified more with a particular region and a particular location.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>27</sup> "Dayenu" is a song typically sung during a Passover Seder

<sup>28</sup> <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc19745/m1/>

<sup>29</sup> In this passage, note that Shneyer is using the phrase "playing Jewish" when he talks about Yiddish or klezmer music.

<sup>30</sup> A "simcha" is a Jewish party, such as those held in association with a bar mitzvah or wedding

<sup>31</sup> David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*

The Fabrangen Fiddlers' catalogue was eclectic, and they played what they wanted, instead of conforming to a certain "authentic" style. "We played whatever we liked! So some of it included freilachs, some of it was horas . . . and for some of the *simchas* that we played, we'd throw in a little rock 'n' roll . . . We became quite popular. We were the only group really doing it."<sup>32</sup> By the time they released *American Chai!* In late 1970s, the Fabrangen Fiddlers had added a singer and piano player, Sue Romer; a bass and sitarist, Theodore Stone; and a clarinetist, Frank Sparber. The Fabrangen Fiddlers also created The Country Klezmers, without Sue Romer, for Orthodox events, since these events did not permit a woman singer. But Shneyer's idea of revival had a different flavor than the other revivalists. The Fiddlers wanted to bring back a feeling, an activity particular to Eastern European Jewish communities, rather than a specific sound. Shneyer recalled,

We were part of a movement to give the Jewish people something . . . that was uniquely of the Diaspora. And that was important to, I think, all the revivalists, that what we were creating was an indigenous, or a new form of Jewish music, and for some . . . it was more heavily rooted in the klezmer style, and for some of us it was more heavily rooted in the Hasidic style, and for others, it was creating a hybrid.

Significant in Shneyer's identity was a desire to identify himself as *a klezmer*, but not someone who exclusively or even primarily plays *klezmer music*. Their tendency toward hybridity is extraordinarily apparent on their album, *American Chai!*, where some tracks have identifiable Yiddish or Israeli influences, while others are more reminiscent of The Byrds' *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* or the Beatles' ventures into sitar music.

### **Klezmer and Sonic Hybridity**

Possibly anticipating Alicia Svigals call to caution against "folk-fetishism" and her admonishment that "the 1920s were no more authentic a time than any other," Shneyer's idea of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

what it meant to be a klezmer differed from many others in the revival.<sup>33</sup> He described the word klezmer as “a noun as well as an adjective, a klezmer is a Jewish folk musician . . . not necessarily in the sense of Eastern Europe, because I don’t live in Eastern Europe . . . we are Jewish musicians that are about helping people celebrate life. Celebrate their simchas, with joy.” For Shneyer, his role as a klezmer, his way of reviving the tradition, was to participate in the community as a simcha musician. Shneyer stated, “I didn’t start thinking of myself as a klezmer until the 1970s, when I realized that what we were doing was like what people used to do in Eastern Europe.”<sup>34</sup> When the Fiddlers started being invited to community celebrations, Shneyer realized, “We are the new klezmer.” While Shneyer connected with older Yiddish musicians, particularly Rudy Teppel, a friend of Peter Sokolow’s, his goal was to combine Yiddish folk music forms with what he saw as American folk music. Shneyer sought to create music that was distinctly “of the Diaspora,” meaning, Jewish music that represented the particular experience of “dispersed,” non-Israeli identified Jews.

However, Shneyer’s music demonstrates most clearly how Jewish musicians in his community created a home for themselves in the Washington, DC, area, on the border of the Blue Ridge mountains. Washington, DC and Baltimore hold the distinction of being areas where individuals tracing their lineage to the Appalachian Mountains relocated to find work, bringing their musical traditions with them. Bluegrass festivals proliferated around DC and Baltimore, providing considerable opportunities for young people interested in this music to play and hear it. David Shneyer and Alan Oresky, then, made musical pilgrimages to places like Galax, Virginia to hear Appalachian music. They made internal, spiritual, cultural ‘pilgrimages’ to the

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<sup>33</sup> “Klezmer Manifesto” David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

sites of Yiddish cultural forms. The intersection of these two art forms became Shneyer's Jewgrass, a hybrid of playing bluegrass and playing Jewish.





Fabrangen Fiddlers, *American Chai!* (1977)



## “Miles Davis Isn’t Jewish”

If klezmer, as I have argued thus far, represented a way for Jewish musicians to connect with their “authentic” roots, then what of non-Jewish klezmer musicians? Clarinetist Margot Leverett grew up in a non-Jewish, largely secular family. Like Joel Rubin, her background was in classical clarinet, and she attended conservatory. While she considered the jazz program at Indiana University, she “found it to be very male, very macho . . . not soulful.” In her search for a more authentic form of expression than her classical training allowed, Leverett discovered avant-garde music, which eventually led her to klezmer.

In 1985, through her contacts in the New York avant-garde scene, she auditioned for The Klezmates, who she played with for about two years. Discouraged by the music business, she moved to California and trained to be an occupational therapist. However, she made contacts with musicians on the West Coast, which led her back to New York, and to KlezKamp. Leverett felt that avant-garde music was too cerebral and wanted to find her place in folk music, seeking an authentic way to express herself on the clarinet. She found this in klezmer, and later, bluegrass, with the opposite musical trajectory as the Fabrangen Fiddlers. Leverett recalled that the klezmer scene was more welcoming to women and “multi-ethnic people” than other available music scenes.

Klezmer was more welcoming of multi-ethnic people and females than other kinds of music were. Like, I never would have gotten a foot in the door as a rock musician or as a jazz musician . . . Klezmer, it came out of . . . the very liberal Jewish community, which is very open to all different kinds of people . . . It’s a very progressive community in every way.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, Leverett studied with klezmer clarinetist Sid Beckerman in New York, who encouraged her to pursue professional klezmer performance.<sup>36</sup> Leverett remembered Beckerman,

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<sup>35</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

when she made a mistake, telling her “Goyim play that way!” When Leverett finally told Beckerman she was not Jewish, he informed her that she could still be a good musician, even as a non-Jew, and offered a list of great musicians who weren’t Jewish. “Miles Davis isn’t Jewish.” This demonstrates a tension in the klezmer community during the 1980s. While non-Jewish musicians were welcome to participate, those in the community often assumed that performers were Jewish due to their desire to play Jewish music, and with klezmer being largely an ‘insider’ community.

## Conclusion

Klezmer, despite its commerciality, is folk music, and the early klezmer revivalists shared folk revivalist influence with others of their generation.<sup>37</sup> But what were they reviving? On the surface, Peter Sokolow and David Shneyer’s ideas of musical authenticity are completely different. Indeed, Shneyer expressed a deep admiration for clarinetist Giora Feidman, whose music Sokolow saw as completely inauthentic, and not something that should be called “klezmer.”<sup>38</sup> Early in his career, Joel Rubin and Lisa Rose, dressed as late 19<sup>th</sup> century eastern European Jews for PR photos for their klezmer duo, The Old Country, in an effort to re-create, “authentically,” the aesthetic of a specific time period.<sup>39</sup> And Margot Leverett, while describing klezmer specifically as eastern European Jewish instrumental dance music, sought out klezmer out of a desire to connect with a more meaningful form of expression than her stodgy classical training allowed.<sup>40</sup> However, all of these musicians, perhaps with the exception of the slightly

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<sup>37</sup> I dispute Michael F. Scully’s claim that folk music played by the “folk” in context is necessarily non-commercial. Klezmer, even in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, functioned as an organic part of community life, and yet it was still commercial, in that klezmerim were professionals paid for the role they served in the community.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*  
David Shneyer, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>39</sup> Promotional photograph of Joel Rubin and Lisa Rose, 1983

<sup>40</sup> Margot Leverett, *interview by Claire Gogan*

older Sokolow, shared the desire to seek authenticity characteristic of their generation's counterculture movements.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, though Sokolow called himself "The Youngest Old Guy" and identified with older musicians, his age positions him in a generation that would have been affected by the perceived forces of Cold War sterility, as the other musicians were. Moreover, his decision to identify with his elder associates demonstrated a desire to be so "authentic" of a klezmer musician that he could not possibly be among the revivalists, who tended to be much more experimental.

Where Leverett and Shneyer differ from Rubin and Sokolow, however, is their conception of authenticity. Shneyer, seeking an authentic, "of the diaspora" religious experience, combined klezmer, bluegrass, and folk revivalist influences, styling himself as a "klezmer," as in, a community musician. While Margot Leverett hewed closer to tradition in her definition of klezmer music, her first klezmer band, The Klezmatics, have made a career out of synthesizing klezmer with rock and roll, jazz, and other musical influences. Leverett's current band, her project since 2001, The Klezmer Mountain Boys, synthesize klezmer and bluegrass, playing fiddle tunes with Leverett often leading on the clarinet. Leverett also converted to Judaism in the mid-2000s, announcing her conversion at KlezKamp. Shneyer is now a Rabbi overseeing the Am Kolel congregation in Maryland. Both sought what they perceived as a more meaningful life through Jewish religion and Yiddish music.

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<sup>41</sup> Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*

## Conclusion

At the end of 2014, a week after Sokolow had a stroke, Jon Kalish interviewed him in his home for a segment on NPR's weekend edition. Sokolow, having previously considered himself "The Youngest Old Guy," proclaimed that he was now "The Oldest Old Guy," because all of his older klezmer musician friends, the ones he truly identified with, were dead.<sup>1</sup> In this interview, he talked about his experiences with klezmer music in a way that suggested his affiliation with the older generation, the "shockaroo of [his] life" when people wanted to sit and listen to klezmer during the revival, and described himself as a bridge figure. However, Sokolow was much more than a bridge. While the conventional narrative of the klezmer revival hinges on the rediscovery of 78 records from the 1920s, Sokolow arguably played just as important of a role.

While 78 records provided a finite amount of repertoire for the klezmer revivalists, connecting with musicians provided access to a living tradition.<sup>2</sup> As with other folk revival movements during the same era, such as old time, seeking older musicians as mentors played just as important of a role as old recordings. Indeed, old recordings appear to be the introductory materials for folk revivalists, the initial inspiration. When revivalists delved deeper into their musical-historical interests, however, seeking "authentic" mentors followed. This is especially apparent in the importance of Henry Sapoznik's story of his mentor in the old time tradition, Tommy Jarrell, asking if Sapoznik's people, Ashkenazi Jews in America, had any of "their own" music. This story pervades the literature on klezmer, figuring in promotional materials for KlezKamp and serving as a mythic origin story for the revival. When Sapoznik sought "his own" music, he searched for klezmer on 78 records, but he also contacted his friend, Peter Sokolow,

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<sup>1</sup> "Oldest Old Guy" interview 2015

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*

whom he knew growing up, and who played with Jewish old timers.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of David Shneyer, who corresponded with Peter Sokolow's friend, Rudy Teppel, all musicians described in this study had a direct connection with Sokolow, and learned from Sokolow-associated musicians. Joel Rubin described his interest in klezmer being reinvigorated by meeting musicians of the older generation. Sokolow facilitated this. Sid Beckerman mentored Margot Leverett, and Sokolow brought Beckerman to KlezKamp. Henry Sapoznik knew Sokolow previously and connected with him as a bearer of the tradition. By bringing old timers out of semi-retirement to play with young revivalists, Sokolow worked as a largely unheralded catalyst for the revival.<sup>4</sup> Sokolow, an accomplished musician in his own right, continues to play klezmer with younger musicians. His current project, Tarras Band, showcases a continuation of his Yiddish musical authenticity vision, playing the music of Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein. Even the name, Tarras Band, shows Sokolow's priority of hewing as close to "traditional" klezmer as he can. In my interview with Sokolow, he hailed Tarras Band clarinetist, Michael Winograd, as one of the few living clarinetists who could authentically "play Jewish." Not an old guy, and not a young guy, Sokolow served more as a pivot than a bridge in the revival, being responsible, in some way, for connecting each revivalist who attended KlezKamp in the early years with the older generation.

Klezmer, as a reconstituted tradition, represents a point of convergence, where countercultural musicians influenced by the folk revival and widespread search for authenticity among young people met the *Roots* and Black Power-inspired ethnic revivals of the 1970s. As Gary Gerstle writes, the Rooseveltian "melting pot" characterizing much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century split

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Sokolow, *interview by Claire Gogan*

<sup>4</sup> This is true, at least, for all New York-associated musicians who attended KlezKamp in the early years. No Boston musicians were included in this study. They may tell a different story.

apart in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Taking a shorter term view, one sees the universalism that characterized 1960s countercultural visions turning inward toward the particular. The klezmer revival stands at a point where the 1960s counterculture intersected with the ethnic revivals of the 1970s. The klezmer musicians' decisions to "revive" Yiddish cultural forms indicate a desire to celebrate being "in diaspora," rather than attach themselves to Israel. Furthermore, the revival demonstrates the persistence of Jewish ambivalence toward Anglo-American whiteness, as performing ethnic particularity made this music especially appealing to certain musicians. Sokolow, Rubin, Shneyer, and Leverett, while representing a relatively small sample of revivalists, show how this movement connected old-timers with young musicians. Their stories also demonstrate religious, secular, and countercultural identifications with the music. All of these things make up the complex klezmer world, held together by the strand of Yiddish culture and performance.

The story of the klezmer revival primarily showcases two elements. The first are cross-generational connections, and the importance of these connections to the idea of "authenticity," and authentic identity, in revival movements. While most klezmer revivalists initially cross-generationally connected with 78 records from the 1920s, Sokolow introduced them to living musicians, deepening these connections and breathing life into this story of musical conferral. For Sokolow, there was no revival. The music was always with him, as he sought work in Jewish musical communities. For the revivalists, coming out of the counterculture movements of the 1960s, klezmer represented a way of connecting to an "authentic" past that was, for various reasons, more true to them than the forms of music they had been playing previously.

The second primary element showcased by this story is the long trajectory of Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> Gerstle, *American Crucible*



American identity negotiation. Goldstein describes this in terms of Jewish American whitening, while Jacobson takes a wider view, looking at white ethnics in general. Performance of ethnic particularity became increasingly important to Jews beginning in the 1960s. Affected by larger cultural forces, such as the dominance of Israeli artistic forms in Jewish music, some individuals wishing to play Jewish music looked more to Yiddish eastern Europe. For these musicians, this felt like a backwards look, a look to a nostalgic, romanticized past. However, Sokolow's work as a bridge shows how this was truly a transgenerational, and even transcultural, look towards a Yiddish culture that these musicians had, for various reasons, lacked intimate familiarity with prior to the klezmer revival. Sokolow's role was transgenerational because he introduced the revivalists to elder musicians, and transcultural because he continued to work in Hasidic communities, as a musician. While also Jewish, Hasidic culture in America can hardly be considered the same culture as that of liberal Jewish American young people in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The genesis of the klezmer revival happened when it did because young people involved in various counterculture movements moved toward ethnic particularism, and away from the universalism in the 1960s. In the klezmer revival, this particularism was expressed in an artistic way, through music. More broadly, the recording industry facilitated any musical movement that could be called a "revival" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creating portable, physical commodities upon which music could be preserved, exactly as it was, for future generations. A group of primarily Jewish musicians decided to "revive" klezmer as a way of finding their "authentic" selves, and a more "authentic" form of expression. The meaning and execution of this authenticity took on vastly different qualities, depending on the individual musician's priorities. However, all musicians in this study shared a dissatisfaction with both Anglo-American and Israeli cultural

forms during this time period.

Klezmer also functioned as a way for participants to negotiate their identities as both American and Jewish. While critical whiteness studies scholars generally agree that Jews were fully “white” by the late 1970s, an ambivalence toward their status as whites persisted. This ambivalence took on a quality not necessarily shared by other white ethnics, due to Jews’ long-term, historical status as outsiders. In the 1970s, the language and visual representations used to express this outsider status were largely appropriated from African American culture. Many klezmer musicians, however, used a Yiddish identity as a vehicle for returning to what they saw as their Jewish socialist, secular, working class, eastern European roots. This identity, in the klezmer revival, functioned as a way of being fully “authentic,” whether that meant true to the music as played by 1920s New York artists, or true to oneself creatively.

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### **Oral History Interviews**

Joel Rubin: September 11, 2015; November 6, 2015; November 25, 2015

Margot Leverett: July 27, 2015

Peter Sokolow: June 16, 2015

David Shneyer: September 4, 2015

### **Archives**

YIVO, New York, New York

Personal collection of Joel Rubin



