

Jewish Popular Music

Joel E. Rubin

Most scholars agree that there is no such thing as “Jewish music”, but rather there are numerous Jewish musical traditions that have developed in a diasporic setting over many centuries and a wide geographic range. This article will focus predominantly on music that has been created outside of Israel and is perceived to be Jewish by its creators and/or consumers, whether or not they are Jews. The question as to whether music created in the modern nation-state of Israel should be considered Israeli or Jewish, or both, is complex and will only be briefly discussed. Many popular Jewish performers sing in both Jewish and non-Jewish languages, dialects and styles, and service a multilingual and multi-religious public. Thus the line between “Jewish” and “mainstream” popular music can be fine. Genres of Jewish popular music have emerged that are predominantly secular as well as those that are religious, and they include music created by Ashkenazim (originally Central and East European Jews), Sephardim (originally Jews from the Iberian Peninsula), Mizrahim (originally Jewish from the Arabic-speaking lands) and other, smaller groups (e.g. Jews of Central Asia, Caucasus, India). Jewish musical traditions are often performed in settings not normally associated with popular music – the synagogue, and at weddings and family and holiday gatherings – yet aspects of popular musical culture are present in many of these traditions. Because of Jewish migration patterns in the wake of the upheavals of the twentieth century, it is common to find large communities living in a double diaspora, such as Bukharian Jews in Queens, New York or Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, New York.

Ashkenazi Music

Ashkenazi Jews form the largest group outside of Israel. The relaxing of religious strictures in the wake of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment, late eighteenth century) first enabled Jewish secular musical traditions to emerge from the mid-nineteenth century on, and paved the way for the emergence of popular music.

Yiddish popular music began in mid-nineteenth century Eastern Europe with the Broder Singers, who performed original songs and skits in inns, wine cellars and restaurant gardens. The professional Yiddish theater, credited to Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908) in Iași, Romania in 1876, built on the Broder Singer tradition. European Yiddish theater followed the form of the operetta and drew additionally on musical elements from Jewish and other East European sources, including synagogue chant,

folk song, *nigunim* (religious songs of spiritual elevation) and klezmer music. The most important composer was Chone Wolfsthal (ca. 1851-1924) in Lemberg (Lviv).

The popularity of Yiddish music grew with the emergence of sheet music publishing and the recording industry around the turn of the twentieth century. In the wake of the great immigration wave (1881-1924), Yiddish theater rapidly established itself in urban centers, especially New York. There the musical aesthetic shifted to musical comedy and Tin Pan Alley song form. The composer most responsible for this shift was Joseph Rumshinsky (1879-1956). Other significant composers were Sholom Secunda (1894-1974), Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946) and Abraham Ellstein (1907-63). The theater formed the centerpiece of a Yiddish popular music culture that ranged from broadsheets to vaudeville, recordings, radio and films. Mediated forms of instrumental klezmer music were performed by musicians such as the American immigrant clarinetists Naftule Brandwein (1884-1963) and Dave Tarras (1895-1989) as the music began to be heard more frequently in non-ritual contexts such as in cafés, cabaret restaurants, wine cellars, dance halls, vaudeville, radio and film.

Local popular song scenes emerged in all urban centers with a significant Yiddish-speaking population, from Buenos Aires to Berlin, where it continued even during the National Socialist regime. In Poland, for example, Jewish performer-composers from klezmer families such as Jerzy Petersburski (1895/97-1979) and Henryk Gold (b. 1902-77) dominated Polish popular music with their salon and jazz orchestras. In the ghettos and concentration camps, and among the Jewish partisans during World War II, popular song played an important role as a survival mechanism. The Soviet Union saw a brief flowering of Yiddish popular music culture in the late 1930s and again after the death of Stalin in 1953. Singers such as Misha Alexandrovitch (1914-2002) and Nechama Lifschitz (b. ca. 1927) became international *causes célèbres* as they attempted to and eventually did emigrate.

In the United States, Jewish swing musicians such as Benny Goodman (1909-86) utilized Yiddish theater and klezmer melodies in the late 1930s as fuel for crossover hits such as Sholom Secunda's "Bay mir bistu sheyn" (1937), building on earlier crossover successes by vaudevillians like Eddie Cantor (1892-1964). Yiddish-influenced hits were also created by non-Jewish musicians, such as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band ("Palesteena", 1920).

The 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of new forms such as the "Yinglish" comedy song, popularized by singer-clarinetist Mickey Katz (1909-85). The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by nostalgia and dominated by performers such as Theodore Bikel (b. 1924) and Martha Schlamme (1923-85).

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of the klezmer revival in the United States. The movement was the outgrowth of cultural reassessment in the aftermath of the

Holocaust and a general ethnic roots-seeking in the wake of the civil rights and black power movements and the US Bicentennial in 1976. The first recordings by The Klezmerim (e.g. *East Side Wedding*, 1977) as well as Andy Statman and Zev Feldman, Kapelye and the Klezmer Conservatory Band, garnered significant media attention. Earlier, Israeli clarinetist Giora Feidman (b. 1936) had begun to popularize what he called “Jewish soul music” in the early 1970s. The klezmer revival broadened the music to include song. By the mid-1980s, groups such as The Klezmatics and Brave Old World pushed klezmer in the direction of world popular music. German audiences were receptive to klezmer, and Germany has become an important market for klezmer over the past thirty years. The past decade brought forth a plethora of eclectic younger performers who grew up within the klezmer revival in a phase that could be termed post-klezmer, such as clarinetist Michael Winograd (b. 1982), singer-songwriter Daniel Kahn (b. 1978) and his indie group The Painted Bird, and hip hop musician Josh Dolgin (Socalled, b. 1976).

Since 1992, saxophonist-composer John Zorn and other improvisers in Manhattan’s Downtown Scene and elsewhere have propagated what is loosely known as Radical Jewish Culture, which draws on elements from jazz and other improvised traditions as well as rock and art music, often with influences from various Jewish musical traditions.

Since the 1960s, several forms of popular music have emerged in the United States, notably the music of the Ultra-Orthodox and of the Reform Movement. The first major figure in Orthodox popular music was Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1926-94), whose songs with religious lyrics combined the concept of the Hasidic *nign* with the aesthetics of the US folk revival. Since the 1970s, the most prominent stars have remained the singers Mordechai Ben David (b. 1951) and Avraham Fried (b. 1959), who are accompanied by large bands incorporating synthesizers and electric guitars, and elements of rock, along with Hasidic *nigunim*. The major figure in Reform music was Debbie Friedman (1951-2011), who composed many new songs in Hebrew and English influenced by American folk music of the 1960s. Younger figures such as Rick Recht (b. 1970) play rock with religious lyrics in English and Hebrew.

Sephardi Music

Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) song is often associated with the medieval period in pre-Inquisition Spain and Portugal, but experienced over 500 years of development after the Inquisition, when Sephardim settled predominantly in the Ottoman lands of the Mediterranean Basin. There they continued to interact with their Muslim and Christian neighbors. Judeo-Spanish popular song developed at the turn of the twentieth century in centers such as Salonika (Thessaloniki) and Constantinople (Istanbul). Recent popular songs from other languages, such as Turkish and Greek were translated, or

new lyrics in Judeo-Spanish were set to their melodies. In addition, new songs were composed incorporating also tango and fox trot. With the emergence of the music as popular entertainment, the tradition became professionalized. While the folk songs had been traditionally sung by women without instrumental accompaniment at family gatherings, public performances by male and female singers were backed by a professional ensemble known as *çalgi a la turca*, with instruments such as *'ūd* (lute), *kanun* (plucked zither) and *keman* (spike fiddle), and sometimes violin and clarinet. The two most influential performers were Rabbi Isaac Algazi (1889-1950) and Haim Efendi (ca. 1853-1938) in Turkey. A similar culture evolved in the coffeehouses of Manhattan's Lower East Side, where singers such as Victoria Hazan (1896-1995) performed. In post-World War II America, Sarajevo-born singer-composer Flory Jagoda (b. 1923) has been influential. As in the case of Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish singers were multi-lingual and often well-known interpreters of the music of the dominant cultures. For example, Rosa Eskenazi (ca. mid-1890s-1980) of Salonika was one of the most popular interpreters of Greek *rebetika* songs. A modest revival of Judeo-Spanish song has taken place since the last decades of the twentieth century, incorporating a multiplicity of influences such as flamenco, Spanish popular music, the US folk revival, Balkan and Middle Eastern musics. The majority of the revival performers are not of Sephardic origin. One of the most popular contemporary singers has been Israeli Yasmin Levy, who combines Judeo-Spanish song with flamenco, tango and other international influences.

Mizrakhi Music

Because of religious restrictions in Islam on the playing of instruments, Jews often became the primary group of instrumental specialists throughout the Muslim world, helping to shape the development of art, folk and popular music throughout the Maghreb, the Middle East and Central Asia. While most popular music associated with Mizrakhi culture has been created in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in Israel, it has represented an increasingly important influence on Jewish musical groups in the diaspora. Of particular note was the development in the 1970s of Israeli Mediterranean Music (*Muzika yam tikhonit yisraelit*), a form of pop music influenced by Middle Eastern, Balkan and Italian music. The primary figure was singer Zohar Argov (1955-87). Another significant development has been Israeli ethnic music (*Muzika etnit*), a form of world music fusing Middle Eastern music with diverse elements, especially jazz and other improvised forms. Pioneers included the group *Habreira Hativ'it* (The Natural Gathering) since the 1970s and Yair Dalal (b. 1955) since the 1990s.

The music of the Syrian Jews of Brooklyn, New York is an example of popular music within the religious context. Their paraliturgical hymns known as *pizmonim* consist of Hebrew texts set to preexisting traditional and popular Arabic tunes. In the twentieth

century, they were influenced by the popular Arabic musicians Umm Kulthum (ca. 1904-75) and Mohammad Abdel Wahab (1902-91). Instrumental accompaniment, when allowed, is by an ensemble that corresponds to the Arabic *takht* ensemble, and features the *'ūd* and violin.

Several popular groups have adopted a Sephardic-Mizrahi musical aesthetic, such as singer-songwriter Basya Schechter's Pharaoh's Daughter in New York, which draws on influences including Middle Eastern, African, and US folk-rock.

Other Music

Finally, small pockets of popular music are being created in the diaspora by Jews as diverse as the Bukharian Jews in Queens, New York and the recently-converted Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, who do not fit the three main categorizations. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Jews were important proponents of the classical urban Central Asian *shashmaqam* tradition, as well as related popular music forms which served both Muslim and Jewish communities. A leading group in this tradition is the New York Ensemble Shashmaqam, which uses the *tanbur* and *tar* (long-necked lutes), *doire* (tambourine), clarinet and accordion, and also performs the liturgical repertoire of the Bukharian Jews. The Abayudaya Jews are a small community of several thousand who adopted Jewish ritual in 1919 and officially converted to Judaism in 2002. Their music incorporates Hebrew and English texts, as well as those in Luganda and other Ugandan languages, set to accompaniments that combine elements of Afro-pop and African traditional choral singing and drumming, along with non-African Jewish sources.

Literatur:

- BERGMEIER, HORST J.P., et al., Vorbei . . . Dokumentation jüdischen Musiklebens in Berlin 1933-1938, Hambergen, 2001.
- BRINNER, BENJAMIN, Playing across a Divide: Israeli-Palestinian Musical Encounters, New York u.a., 2009.
- HESKES, IRENE, Yiddish American Popular Songs, 1895--1950: A Catalog Based on the Lawrence Marwick Roster of Copyright Entries, Washington, DC, 1992.
- HOROWITZ, AMY, Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic. Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology, Detroit, 2010.
- KLIGMAN, MARK, Contemporary Jewish Music in America, in: American Jewish Year Book 101, 2001, 88-141.
- LOEFFLER, JAMES und JOEL E. RUBIN (HG.). Proceedings of the international academic conference <Hearing Israel: Music, Culture and History at 60>, in: Min-Ad. Israel Studies in Musicology 7 (2), Jerusalem 2008-09 <<http://www.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/>> (25.06.17).

- REGEV, MOTTI und EDWIN SEROUSSI, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*. Berkeley u.a., 2004.
- SHELEMAY, KAY KAUFMAN, *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews*, Chicago u.a., 1998.
- SHELEMAY, KAY KAUFMAN (HG.). *Studies in Jewish Musical Traditions. Insights from the Harvard Collection of Judaica Sound Recordings*. Harvard Judaica Collection Student Research Papers No. 7, Cambridge, MA, 2001.
- SLOBIN, MARK, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants*, Urbana, IL, 1982.
- SLOBIN, MARK (HG.), *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, Berkeley, 2002.