music—its history, performance practice, sociological context, and more—and are creating a wide diversity of music that is both enjoyable and can creditably be labeled *klezmer,* as it is clearly derived from the instrumental music that eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Jews performed for their simkhes and other rituals.

There will always be those who claim that certain klezmorim play the music more "traditionally," more "authentically" than others, but these terms are open to a wide degree of interpretation. "Traditional" and "authentic" are important terms, and they're also politicized terms. They're also power terms. I hear a lot of people trying to sell their product, the one they like, because it's more "authentic." I can't get certain grants because I'm not "traditional" or "authentic" enough. For me, to be traditional is to be "in the tradition." To sound like a 1925 Jewish band in New York is to be traditional, but for me, it means to be informed by the past and to be part of it, but to be moving into the future, to be both part of the music, but also part of the grander scheme in which the music functions. Everything else is just someone trying to sell you something. "Tradition" does not always equal "good." Today's crop of bad disco songs about Moshiach—ubiquitous at all religious Jewish weddings while unknown to the outside world—are totally traditional Jewish music, but who really wants to listen to them?

Often, what we think of today as "traditional" Jewish music was not perceived as such in its own time. Jews at a *khasene* in nineteenth-century Poland requested that the klezmorim play the contemporary, non-Jewish polka-mazurkas and waltzes popular at the time. Today, because they've been around long enough and were recorded by the older klezmorim, these songs are perceived as being part of the klezmer tradition and repertoire. Maybe, in a hundred years, Kool and the Gang's "Celebration," one of the most requested songs at many simkhes I play, will be perceived as klezmer. And what about authenticity? Don't get me started. Suffice to say that if (as some allege) only Jews can authentically play klezmer, then only people born 150 years ago in Europe can play classical or Romantic music, and Yo-Yo Ma should throw away his cello. But rumor has it that he too is starting to play klezmer.

People ask, "Why klezmer?" What many miss is that when I listen to this music, I get aesthetically interested. It cuts through all the schlock, all the schmaltz, all the things about Jewish music that never interested me, all the Israeli music, all the Yiddish theater music, about all that sentimentality. Why klezmer music? Because it's good, just on its own terms.

CHAPTER 11

Why We Do This Anyway

Klezmer as Jewish Youth Subculture

ALICIA SVIGALS

In this chapter, I expand on some of the points Frank London has made, in his overview of the revival, regarding the variety of motivations for "reviving" klezmer among performers and audiences. I also offer my own understanding of why we're doing this to begin with. I look at the phenomenon of the klezmer revival from a sociological point of view, in the context of some larger trends in American Jewish life that have been emerging over the past two decades, and I'll speak not as a scholar presenting research (which I'm not) but as one of the participants in the phenomenon and someone who has promoted a particular use of klezmer and a direction for its future. I'll finish with my own personal klezmer manifesto.

I'm not going to try to cover all the reasons people have been drawn to klezmer, so I'm not going to talk, for example, about the fact that many musicians and listeners, both Jewish and non-Jewish, take a purely musical interest in the genre; what I'm addressing here specifically is the role of the revival in the American Jewish cultural scene.

Since the social upheavals and the ethnic-identity or "roots" movements of the 1960s and 1970s, American Jews, especially young American Jews, have been looking for new ways to negotiate our Jewishness in America. Three movements in particular have emerged that address the needs of Jews who reject the assimilationist model of the previous generation, but who haven't felt an affinity for, or haven't felt satisfied by, the Israel-centered alternative, and who want to create a new, strong

sense of Jewish identity and community. I situate the klezmer revival within the framework of these three movements.

The first two are made up of Jews who identify with the progressive left. These are people who are looking for a way of being Jewish that is consonant with their feminist, gay-positive, and other new-left values and that does away with the social strictures of the past: that is, a way of being Jewish while still being themselves. They approach the problem from two very different directions.

The Havurah/Jewish Renewal approach locates the social conservatism of the traditional Jewish world in traditional Jewish culture. It selectively revives religious observance, but leaves out the traditional overtones that evoke an old-fashioned and restrictive way of life. This model conceives of religion as timeless spirituality and seeks to distill it from the culture to create a new kind of religion-centered Jewishness. Jewish renewal folks have modified the liturgy to reflect their progressive and feminist worldview and have sometimes drawn on non-Jewish sources, such as eastern religions and New Age concepts, in reworking religious material. The result is Judaism without much Yidishkayt.

The cultural secularist model, which I'll call Yiddishism, on the other hand, locates the conservatism of traditional Judaism in the religion. It looks to Ashkenazic Yiddish culture as the source of a rich Jewish identity and proposes to salvage that culture—its language, literature, and, most importantly for our purposes, its music—but for the most part discards religious observance.

These two movements clearly have their antecedents in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism and in YIVO and Workmen's Circle Yiddishism, but the advent of the new left, ethnic consciousness, and identity politics has put a whole new spin on those old ideas.

Finally, there's the traditionalist model of the Ba'al T'shuvah movements, which embraces both the culture and the religion of the past unabashedly as a source of identity and community, without concern for the issues with which Jewish renewal and secular cultural Jews are grappling.

Of these three movements—the one that discards the culture and keeps the religion, the one that discards the religion and keeps the culture, and the one that uncritically embraces both—I would argue that the klezmer revival has been the province of the second, of the "cultural Jews." Of course, the audience for klezmer isn't limited to that group—in fact, it has a wide appeal for all kinds of Jews, not to mention plenty

of non-Jews. But there's a special relationship between the klezmer revival and the secular Yiddishist movement that I want to explore here.

In fact, all three of these movements have inspired or embraced a whole range of new Jewish music, not just klezmer. The Jewish renewal movement, for example, is associated with singer Debbie Friedman, whose songs are a perfect musical reflection of the Jewish renewal philosophy: she sets religious texts, modified to reflect a feminist sensibility, to beautiful, spiritual melodies that for the most part draw on an American popular-music vocabulary. Some of her songs have an Israeli flavor, but none of them is in an eastern European Jewish idiom. Her songs are included in the liturgies of so many congregations, by the way, that many people now think of them as "traditional."

Then there are such artists as the orthodox Piementa brothers, whose music is an unselfconscious and spirited amalgam of anything and everything that appeals to them, from orthodox Jewish melodies to jazz, rock, and Middle Eastern pop, all in the service of a religious message that appeals to a modern orthodox, Ba'al T'shuvah, and Hasidic following.

But the klezmer revival has been the most vibrant and active Jewish music scene to emerge in decades, and it has provided the musical sound track for the construction of a new progressive, secular, Yiddishist youth culture. Its origins in the late 1970s can be found in the confluence of the larger American "roots" and folk music movements, "folk music" being the musical department of the alternative youth scene at that time. The musicians who initiated the klezmer revival to a large extent started out playing bluegrass, old-timey, and other American traditional music genres, and these musicians jumped at the chance to have their very own folk music (as in the famous story about Kapelye's Henry Sapoznik and his watershed conversation with elderly old-timey fiddler Tommy Jarrell, who prompted the start of Henry's klezmer journey when he asked, "Don't you people have none of your own music?"). The musical renaissance has gone hand in hand with a Yiddish language and literature "roots" revival, comprising such phenomena as the growth and success of KlezKamp and the other camps that it has inspired, the National Yiddish Book Center, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research's summer Yiddish course, and the new Yiddish-language programs at colleges across the country. This rekindled interest in eastern European Jewish culture and the Yiddish language, which began for many as an extracurricular activity, has since turned into the cornerstone of a new Jewish identity. KlezKamp, for example, which has been the fertile crescent of the Yid-

dishist and klezmer renaissance for over a decade, was given a name twelve years ago that had a recreational connotation (*camp*). On the other hand, Ashkenaz, a Yiddish culture festival of more recent vintage, goes by a name that implies a nation, an ideology, and a way of life. As the participants in this renaissance have gained more cultural literacy and confidence, they've shifted their focus from study and imitation to the creation of new works of music and literature that draw on traditional material. (Ashkenaz bills itself, in fact, as a New Yiddish Culture festival and invites artists to present new works.)

There's something ironic—and very American—about the Jewish renewal and the secular Yiddishist movements, since they both depend upon a notion of the separability of religion and culture that didn't exist in traditional Jewish life. The irony jumps out when one compares, for example, Debbie Friedman's latest album and Yiddish singer Adrienne Cooper's: Friedman, whose texts are all religious, chooses not to utilize traditional Jewish musical materials, while Cooper's singing is deeply Jewish but her subject matter is almost exclusively secular. The uneasiness of this separation is reflected, in fact, in the way that people actually do float between the two movements. There is a tremendous amount of overlap (for example, I recently had the opportunity to work with Debbie Friedman when I arranged string quartet parts for her concert at Carnegie Hall and was surprised to notice a fair number of KlezKampers in the audience) and probably a lot of unarticulated desire for a community that would harmonize these two strains in Jewish life. In particular, there are many people who wish they could be culturally Jewish, spiritual, and progressive all at once. They secretly long for a congregation that would be a cross between a B'nai Jeshurun—a synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side that boasts progressive politics, religious tradition, a big youthful crowd, and sappy liturgical music of the Israeli Europop variety—and one of those shuls deep in the heart of Brooklyn that features great *khazones* (cantorial singing) but most decidedly doesn't marry gay couples.

Clarinetist Andy Statman's artistic development and career trajectory is an interesting illustration of this interplay of religious/cultural scenes and musical genres. He started out as a bluegrass mandolinist who then became one of the pioneers of the klezmer revival. When he turned to orthodox Judaism some years later, he expanded his musical horizons to include the music of his new community. His latest album, *Songs of Our Fathers* (which he recorded with former bluegrass colleague David Grisman), incorporates both repertoires and offers in its title a poetic reflection of the Ba'al T'shuvahs' comfort with the values, and in particular the gender roles, of the past: the music is identified with their fathers, but dedicated in the liner notes to their mothers, in a respectful but separate arrangement.

In a conversation I had recently with Mark Slobin, he brought up the question of why klezmer is considered an appropriate musical choice for progressive secular American Jews. The old-time klezmorim themselves, after all, weren't necessarily the most progressive of individuals. I think it's because, given the inextricable nature of religion in traditional Jewish culture (in the language, in the rhythm of daily life), klezmer instrumental music, being textless, is as close as we can get to secular Jewish music, along with Yiddish folk, theater, and art song—which, not surprisingly, have also been included in the repertoire of the klezmer revival. Although this may not be true of all the individuals in it, as a movement, the revival has been staunchly secular. When religious sources are drawn upon, like cantorial singing or Yiddish Hasidic folk songs, their appeal is basically as cultural artifacts. That's the spirit, for example, in which KlezKamp programs religious material—as an official stance, the approach is ethnographic, although the individual campers' relationship to the material might not necessarily be that detached. In this sense, the revival is a true descendant of the YIVO. Many secular revivalists find an apt metaphor for what they're doing in the fact that old-time klezmorim irreverently but affectionately took liturgical melodies and turned them into upbeat dance tunes. In reality, though, this practice was an expression not of opposition to religion but of total comfort with it and reflects the integration of religion into Jewish life.

I started out by describing how American Jews have been looking for new ways to be more Jewish. I think one can also say, though, that these progressive Jewish movements are the newest expression of a long-standing desire to find specifically Jewish ways to be more American. According to Walter Zev Feldman in his article on the origin of the bulgar (chapter 6 in this volume), the fascination the immigrant generation of American Jews felt at the beginning of this century for Jewish music and culture of Romanian provenance (which, he argues, led to the birth of the music we now call *klezmer*) reflected the notion that Romanian Jewish society, like the mainstream American society the immigrants sought to enter, was a freer, looser, less socially restrictive place than the rest of Jewish Eastern Europe. An identification with Romanian Jewish culture therefore connoted a hipper and more American way of being Jewish (in fact, Feldman argues that this was the real contemporary meaning of the

song "Rumania, Rumania," which today we think of as pure and silly nostalgia). A few decades later, klezmer music and Yiddish culture in general went into decline as American Jews became enamored of Israeli culture, learning modern Hebrew and Israeli folk dancing, and in general making Israel the focal point and major marker of American Jewish identity. My theory is that Israelism held such appeal for American Jews partly because Israel, with its frontier ethos, macho sabras, strong military, and statehood, was a kind of Jewish America, more in harmony with American values than the old eastern European Jewish culture, with its skinny and unathletic yeshiva boys, its emphasis on the intellect, and its nationlessness. So identifying with Israel was a way for American Jews to assimilate and remain Jewish at the same time. In the same way, fashioning a new Jewish culture in the seventies, eighties, and nineties that was in harmony with hip and progressive young America can perhaps be seen as yet another Jewish way to be American, complete with a traditional music scene—klezmer—to mirror its American folk music counterpart.

One of the most interesting new developments in the Yiddishist movement and the klezmer revival is a move toward a kind of twentysomething, in-your-face radicalism that carries the banner of Yiddish culture as a symbol of unapologetic Jewish pride à la "Queer Nation." Among klezmer bands, this approach is represented by the Klezmatics, with our "out" presentation and our tendency to mine the rich socialist Jewish past for songs we can relate to (like "Dzhankhoye," whose lyrics include an admonition to "spit in the anti-Semites' faces"). The wider Yiddishist scene owes this new trend in large part to the growing "Queer Yiddishist" movement, made up of Queer Nation types who also identify as Yiddishist, and who bring a queer radical sensibility to Yiddishism. In fact, among progressives of all stripes, gays in particular have found a home in the new secular Yiddishist environment from the start, surprising each other and everyone else with our unexpectedly large numbers at KlezKamp and the YIVO summer program, and on the staffs of YIVO and the National Yiddish Book Center. As younger gays started showing up, they brought queer sensibility, and then Queer Yiddishism, with them.

A random sampling of Queer Yiddishist cultural production: the Third Seder, a multimedia Passover extravaganza performed in New York at La Mama in 1993 and the Jewish Museum in 1995, featuring radical queer Jewish artists like visual artist Neil Goldberg, playwright Tony Kushner, author Sarah Shulman, and the explicitly homoerotic

Yiddish love songs of the Klezmatics; the work of Eve Sicular, former YIVO film and photo archivist, who writes and lectures on gay subtext in Yiddish film; the rediscovery of gay Yiddish literature from earlier this century in recent Yiddish "reading circles," and the enactment at a recent YIVO Yiddish summer program graduation of excerpts from Sholem Asch's play about lesbianism, *Got fun nekome;* the work of poet Irena Klepfisz, who has been trying to integrate her Yiddishist and lesbian feminist worlds since long before the advent of the current movement; author Ellen Galford's novel, *The Dyke and the Dybbuk;* and a host of filmmakers and performance artists who are incorporating Yiddish language and music into their gay-themed work. The Queer Yiddishist movement was recently written up for the first time in the *Village Voice* (making it official!).

As Yiddishism and the klezmer revival stretch in these more radical directions, its adherents occasionally run into another movement that is coming from a completely different direction, but ending up in some ways in the same place: downtown N.Y.C. "Radical Jewish Culture." This is a group of people who started out as punks, downtown noise musicians, etc., and have recently decided to come out as Jews in their scenes and celebrate their Jewishness with the same kind of radical pride that they also probably picked up from Queer Nation—although often with little or no knowledge of traditional Jewish culture to draw on, just a feisty newfound sense of Jewish identity. Examples include downtown musicians Marc Ribot and John Zorn, Jewish punk 'zine *Mazel Tov Cocktail,* and rock group God Is My Co-Pilot (who straddle the space between the two movements, performing punk versions of songs from the Workmen's Circle *hagode* [prayerbook for the Passover seder]).

THE MANIFESTO

As an openly Yiddishist klezmer musician, these are the tenets of my faith.

• *No Nostalgia*

Klezmer music is our music, not just the music of our grandparents, to be reproduced in a kind of tourism of the past. When the Klezmatics first formed, I had a job playing at a Greek nightclub in New York and was struck by how identified the young Greek clientele were with Greek traditional and popular music, much more so than they were with Ameri-

can pop music, which they also listened to. I want the same thing for klezmer music—that it will truly become the identity music of Jewish American youth.

• *High Jewish Self-Esteem*

There's an unfortunate tradition of "Uncle Tom-ing" in American Jewish culture—that is, of presenting Yiddish language and music as something funny and cute. This spilled over into the early phases of the klezmer revival, when, encountering the Rorschach blot of available source recordings, many musicians somehow heard goofy and cartoony elements (the chirps and scoops of clarinetist Kramtweiss, the supposedly "drunken" tuba sounds) and chose to reproduce and emphasize them. Tempos were also speeded up, producing an effect reminiscent of cartoons or old movies. When I first heard the recordings of clarinetist Naftule Brandwein, what struck me was the total seriousness and dignity of his music (which, again, reminded me of the Greek music I was involved with). High Jewish self-esteem would mean taking the music completely seriously.

Of course, 1990s revivalists also hear what we want to in that Rorschach blot, like the power chords I heard in Brandwein's "Terkish Bulgarish" that led to the Klezmatics' arrangement of that tune on *Rhythm and Jews*. The Klezmatics also sometimes speed up tempos, but in an emulation of a punk, rather than a cartoon, aesthetic.

• *Our Own Language*

My grandmother's sister, who was a native Yiddish speaker, used to deny Yiddish was really a language, calling it a *zhargon* (jargon). Similarly, journalists and music critics repeatedly emphasize the supposedly hodge-podge nature of klezmer, calling it a mix of everything from polkas to calypso. In fact, neither is true. Yiddish is a language—Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich used to say "a dialect is a language without an army"—and klezmer is an idiom with its own stylistic unity and integrity. Like any musical language, klezmer needs to be studied and absorbed so it can be spoken with a native accent.

Perhaps this tendency of American Jews to deny the legitimacy of our language and music, prevalent among older Jews, is a reflection of low Jewish self-esteem or of a desire to assimilate. Or maybe, like comic "Uncle Tom-ing," it's the strategy a minority culture comes up with to

avoid antagonizing the often-hostile majority—in this case, a self-representation that says, "Don't worry, we're just like you; we don't really have our own language and we're not really a group apart."

• *No Folk-Fetishism or False Definition of "Authenticity"*

A corollary to the idea that this is our music is the notion that, having inherited it, we can now do with it whatever we wish. I want to play authentic Jewish folk music—but not in the sense of reifying a particular slice of Jewish musical history, such as, say, the 1920s. There are defining elements of klezmer style (melodic types, ornamentation) that have remained constant over time, but as a musician, I know that every musical idiom constantly changes and interacts with other musics, and the 1920s were no more "authentic" a period than any other. Rather, I believe in playing "authentically" in the sense of being true to oneself. My hope is that now that we're becoming fluent in our language, we can go beyond simply reciting a received text to speak spontaneously in our own voices.