"They Danced It, We Played It": Adaptation and Revitalization in Post-1920s New York Klezmer Music

Joel E. Rubin

Parallel to other Eastern European Jewish immigrant phenomena such as the Yiddish theater and the mutual aid societies known as landsmanshaftn,¹ the New York instrumental klezmer tradition appears to have reached its zenith in the 1920s and begun to diminish by the 1930s.² The initial decline has been attributed to a combination of factors, including restrictive immigration legislation, acculturation and assimilation, linguistic attrition, Americanization, and the Great Depression. Later events, in particular the Shoah and the founding of the State of Israel, as well as the aging and eventual passing away of the original immigrant generations, also significantly affected the development of the tradition. Based largely on ethnographic interviews with the generation of musicians born after 1910, I hope to convey a more variegated picture of adaptation and revitalization in the New York klezmer milieu during the approximate period 1930 to 1960, as the musicians developed new styles and repertoires and created new markets.

In Eastern Europe, the ritual and celebratory instrumentalists known as klezmorim (sing. klezmer) had always served multiple constituencies: within the Jewish communities, the Chasidim and their ultra-orthodox opponents, the mitnagdim, as well as more liberal denominations; outside the Jewish communities, the landowning aristocracy and peasants of various ethnicities. This required klezmorim to maintain several differing sets of repertoire and stylistic attributes, necessitating from the beginning that they be attuned to adaptability and change. It was this pattern of adaptability, I argue, that later enabled the New York Jewish instrumentalists to regroup and revitalize their profession within a period of general decline.³ The immigration laws of the 1920s—in particular the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924—had drastically limited the number of new Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, those who might have provided a continued audience for klezmer music.⁴ Daniel Soyer has written regarding the relationship of the American-born generations to the landsmanshaftn: "They had
little attraction for most of their members' American children, who had
developed their own sense of Jewish-American identity and to whom their
parents' parochial loyalties seemed irrelevant at best. The fact that the
aging societies continued to utilize Yiddish and Yiddish-accented English
as their official language made them seem all the more old-worldly."

The same could be said of the children's relationship to the continued
utilization of klezmer music at their banquets and other public and private
gatherings. As clarinetist Max Epstein (1912-2000) explains it, "The kids
wouldn't use me if their life depended upon it. It was the parents that
wanted us."

During the 1930s, a contemporary American klezmer style emerged,
fuelled by the composition of new Romanian and Greek-influenced tunes
by musicians such as clarinetist Dave Tarras (1895-1989)—at the time the
pre-eminent American klezmer musician—the trumpeter Alex Fiedel (ca.
1887-1957), and the multi-instrumentalist Beresh Katz (1879-1964). It
appears to have stemmed from a pre-existing predilection among Yiddish-
-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe for certain types of Romanian music,
intensified by the fact that a number of influential New York klezmer
musicians had emigrated from Romania, Bessarabia, and other southerly
regions, as well as by musical interaction between Jews and other European
ethnic groups in New York, including Greeks and Roma [fig.1].

A typical example of the musical syncretism brought about by such
intercultural interaction is the Tarras composition "Ich bin deiner [I'm
Yours] - Shpit," recorded by his quartet of clarinet, accordion, string bass,
and drums in 1945 for the Standard label. The title indicates it was to be
danced as part of the popular Eastern European Jewish square dance, the
Russian shtetl. The same performance was also released to a Greek audience
as "Zefki - Hasapiko," referencing the popular Greek dance, hasapostérviko,
with a choreography similar to the Eastern European Jewish bulgar
and Israeli hora. Here, the typical American Jewish dance beat—with its
characteristic polyrhythm creating accents on the first, the offbeat of the
second, and the fourth beat of each four-beat cycle—has been evened out
to a more generic two-beat rhythmic cycle perhaps more familiar to Greeks
and other southeastern European ethnic groups. As Tarras' drummer Irv
Gratz describes it, "I made a lot of recordings with Dave where we played
strictly a two tempo, not the Jewish tempo. For what purpose? For Greek
purposes and the nicolodeons. [fig. 2]"

In addition, Yiddish theatrical composer Abe Ellstein (1907-1963)
contributed new klezmer-style compositions for performers like Tarras.
These two trends culminated in one of the most fruitful periods in recorded
American klezmer music, producing the Dave Tarras and Abe Ellstein
sessions of 1939-1941 for RCA Victor, as well as Tarras' 1945 sessions for
the Standard label and the Ellstein and Tarras recordings on the Banner
label from around 1950. [fig 3]

The emergence of a popular song culture and the professional Yiddish
theater in the latter part of the nineteenth century had already profoundly
affected the klezmer tradition in Europe, and recordings of popular songs
from the theater were among the earliest instrumental klezmer recordings
in the 1910s. The relationship between popular Yiddish song and the
klezmer tradition appears to have intensified in the United States through
the influence of younger composers, such as Joseph Rumshinsky (1879-
1956), Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946), Sholom Secunda (1894-
1974), and Abe Ellstein, and was a contributing factor to the changes
in klezmer repertoire and style after the 1920s. It was Rumshinsky
fig. 2 Perry Voilto's "Greek" Orchestra with mostly Jewish membership, sometime before 1936.
First row, l to r: Murry Kalefsky, drums; Max Epstein, clarinet and saxophone. Back row, l to r: unidentified Greek musician; Aaron Phillips, saxophone and flute; Harry Turkischen, trombone; unidentified Greek musician; Isidor Drutin, sousaphone; Manny Cohen, trumpet; Chizik Epstein, saxophone; Beverly Musiker (Cohen), piano; Pericles Voilto's, violin and clarinet.
Courtesy of Ray Musiker.

in particular who had been largely responsible for the shift in Yiddish theatrical music from that based on grand opera and operetta to one modeled on United States musical comedy and Tin Pan Alley song-form, and instrumental covers of hits such as Rumahinsky's "Sheyn vi di levone" [Beautiful As the Sun; Text: Chaim Towber] and Eliststein's "Abe gezunt" [If You Are Healthy; Text: possibly Molly Picon], both from the late 1930s, became staples of the wedding repertoire. An example of a klezmer cover of songs from this later phase of Yiddish theater is the "Medley Of Old Yiddish Theater Songs," performed by the Murray Lehrer Orchestra featuring Dave Tarras and trumpeter Lou Levin (the uncle of clarinetist Marty Levitt). Recorded around 1959, it includes, among others, a rendition of Abe Ellstein's popular song, "Oy, mame bin ikh farlib" [Oh Mama, Am I Ever in Love], with lyrics by the well-known Yiddish poet Itzik Manger. "Oy, mame bin ikh farlib" was from the soundtrack to the feature Yiddish-language film Yidl mitn fiddl (Yiddle with His Fiddle) from 1936, shot in Poland by Joseph Green and starring Molly Picon in a cross-dressing role as a klezmer violinist in her father's kapelye [band].

It was Tarras' new compositions and style of interpretation in particular that dominated American klezmer music—and, through distribution networks, klezmer music internationally—from the 1930s onwards. Clarinetist Sid Beckerman (1919-2007), a member of the fourth generation of a famous klezmer family from the Ukraine, remembers the effect of the release of Tarras' 1945 recording "Ich bin deiner," discussed above. "The big hit that had just come out was by Dave Tarras [sings 'Ich
bin deiner]. We played from 9 pm to 5 am. I couldn’t blow anymore, and Nat [Max Shulman, the trumpeter and bandleader] was still standing there, still blowing ['Ich bin deiner']...We played it a few times [that night], that was like the newest bulgar out that everyone played."

Apparently even the elder, musically illiterate clarinetist Naftule Brandwein (1884-1963)—at that time Dave Tarras’ chief clarinet-playing rival—felt compelled to learn the new Tarras tunes. Marty Levitt relates that in the early 1940s, when Tarras had released a new recording of a bulgar, “[My father] wrote it out [from] the record. And he worked that night with Naftule Brandwein. And Naftule didn’t know it, he was trying to pick it up and he couldn’t read. So my father was teaching it to him, you know, on the job, by ear.”

In addition to the commercial recording industry, the advent of Yiddish radio in the mid-1920s provided a new avenue for the dissemination of klezmer music. In his study on Yiddish radio, Ari Y. Kelman points out that the number of native Yiddish speakers in America reached its high point between 1920 and 1930. Yet, Yiddish radio programming did not reach the height of its popularity until the late 1930s. One might ask: Why would Yiddish-language culture appear to be blossoming at a time when the number of native Yiddish speakers in America was rapidly dwindling? Kelman postulates that the explanation for the popularity of Yiddish radio during this period lies partly in the passive nature of listening. You didn’t have to be a fluent speaker to follow a broadcast, as long as you understood. For instrumental music, this was even more the case: you didn’t have to have any language facility in order to appreciate it.

Yiddish radio became not only a primary mechanism for the popularization of the new music, it also provided steady work for a number of its creators. A musician such as Tarras led his own bands and was a featured soloist on numerous programs. Max Epstein preferred radio work to the Yiddish theater shows because of his higher pay and daytime working hours. According to him, the theater paid only $75 per week at that time, whereas he could earn $55 for a two-hour radio show in the daytime and still appear at a wedding the same evening.

It was also during the 1930s that the percentage of “American” (i.e., non-klezmer) music performed at Jewish weddings increased dramatically. Sid Beckerman estimated that such music comprised as much as eighty percent of the repertoire by the time he became a professional in the mid- to late 1930s. By that time, Tarras and his European contemporaries were competing with a younger generation of American-born clarinet soloists—especially Max Epstein and Sam Musiker (1916-1964)—who were bi- or polymusical, equally versed in klezmer and Yiddish music, and various American popular styles. Max’s youngest brother, drummer Julie Epstein (b. 1926), remembers:

When [Max] started out as a Jewish clarinet player...all of these old-time guys wanted to hear what the kid does....They were amazed that a young guy, American-born, could play with the enthusiasm and the inflections that they grew up with, and he learned from them. And then he played American dance music...that was very...contemporary at that time....And they couldn’t do that. So it was amazing to them a guy could play American music and so-called Jewish music at the same time and be so good at it.

In order to remain competitive, the European-born players had to engage American-born players like Epstein to play the American repertoire. Almost as a by-product, the American-born players became well versed in the Yiddish material, with which they had already been familiar.

The paths taken by the American-born children of the New York klezmer families are a reflection of the acculturative processes within the Jewish communities as a whole. While most of the male—and some of the female—children became musicians and carried on their family traditions to a certain extent, almost all were, like Epstein, polymusical. By that point, not all of the musicians had been born into klezmer families. The Epstein Brothers, for example, had entered the klezmer world by learning from European-born musicians. Clarinetist Rudy Tepel (b. late 1910s), also relates, “I was an American musician.” When he came back from being on the road with the big bands, Tepel “fell into the Brandwein [klezmer] family. We became very good friends.”

By the 1940s, a number of the Jewish wedding orchestras in New York consisted entirely of American-born children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, many of them from the klezmer families. What these American-born musicians brought to klezmer music was a rhythmic and harmonic sense shaped by their experiences playing in hotel and society dance orchestras and big bands. This coincided with the emergence of so-called “club date” orchestras, generic bands that played at celebrations such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, and anniversary parties. Here it was the type...
of event, and not the religion or ethnicity, that became the determining factor, and the music we now know as “klezmer” was subsumed within the general club date field, although Jewish weddings in urban populations such as New York made up a large percentage of the work of club date musicians. Therefore, specifically Jewish and Eastern European repertoire was retained. The proportion of so-called “Jewish” to “American” repertoire at any one particular event depended largely on the generational makeup and linguistic and religious orientation of the clientele [fig 4].

Jewish club date groups performed by ear and without arrangements in a manner known in the business as “faking”—musical attributes that klezmoirn had honed for centuries in Eastern Europe within an orally transmitted tradition. In the 1940s, Max Epstein became an important figure in this emerging field, leading a band with his colleague Sid Cherry (Sherry?) at catering halls in Brooklyn such as the President’s Chateau.54 A typical recording from that era was the “Yiddish Bulgar” by Hymie Jacobson’s Orchestra, recorded in December 1947, and featuring Max Epstein, clarinet; Paul Pincus, tenor saxophone; Willie Epstein, trumpet; Lou Weissman, drums (later president of the American Federation of Musicians Local 802); Charlie Galazan, bass; and Al Hausman, piano, all of whom are featured in the photograph of the Max Kletter Orchestra depicted above.55 Ironically, neither Jacobson nor Kletter was a musician; they were both well-known actors in Yiddish theater and vaudeville and appear to have acted here only nominally as bandleaders. The musicians in the group formed the elite of the American-born generation of klezmer instrumentalists. According to Max Epstein, this recording was a by-product of a late night recording session in New Jersey accompanying the Yiddish Theater star Jennie Goldstein. During the pauses between takes, the musicians were jamming on some of their klezmer repertoire, and the producer heard it and liked it. He offered to record the material, which was then performed without rehearsal or written arrangements.56

With this recording, another subtle shift had taken place. Whereas the Tarra recording, “Ich bin deiner,” featured a musician who had reached musical maturity in Russia, “Yiddish Bulgar” reflected a complete shift, a product of the polymusicality discussed above represented by Max Epstein and his musical cohort. Here, the subtle effects of years of experience playing in American dance bands seep through, for example, in the way the clarinet attacks the first note of a phrase, the swing band-influenced tone of the trumpet, the extensive use of saxophone as a rhythmic element in the ensemble, and the more regimented metric feel of the drumming [fig 5].

Despite the flurry of activity among both European and American-born klezmer musicians during the period 1930-1945, the members of the second American-born generation either left the realm of klezmer music or did not become professional musicians at all. At least three of Brandwein’s grandchildren became professional musicians, for example,
They Danced It, We Played It

first American-born generation to do so: “My father was somehow under
the idea that if you learned that repertoire, you'll always make a living.
But he didn't realize the migration had stopped and when I was set to go
there was no one around to play it for.”

Yet even in the 1950s, Levitt
performed year after year for several landsmanshaftn:

I remember playing about 1950 for the Ushatner Ladies Auxillary
[from Usszod, Hungary]....They liked me and the following year
they called me again....And then as the people started passing
away, they started cutting down on the band. Then it went to
four pieces, three pieces....And then one year the president...calls
me up and says “Please, send us one man, an accordion player.
Only I and the secretary are alive,” and I felt like crying.

The immediate post-War period was also a time of a lot of black market
activity, and Jewish nightclubs flourished on the east side of Manhattan and
along Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville. Singers appeared there, accompanied
by klezmer musicians. Levitt recalls, “They worked primarily for tips....It
would consist of a violinist, an accordion player, and maybe two or three
girl singers. They would sing Yiddish songs and sit on the men's laps.
Then they would go into the walk-in refrigerator and split the tips.”

Even popular entertainers from Yiddish theater and vaudeville, such as Jennie
Goldstein, sang in these clubs. The clientele at such establishments,
which often consisted of figures from the Jewish underworld, was also at
least partly American-born by this point. Levitt remembers a nightclub on
Pitkin Avenue called Dave's Inn:

Once a guy comes over to me and he says, “hey kid, I like the way
that you play that thing.” He says to me, “what time do you get
finished playing here?” I say, “approximately twelve.” He says
“well, tonite you'll stay here 'til three.” So I said, “no, we finish
at twelve.” So he says, “look, kid, you make your living with that
thing there,” and he points to the clarinet. “I make my living this
way,” and he takes out a gun, puts it on the bar....And then he
says, “you'll be here.” About two-thirty the same guy comes back
with about a hundred people....He says, “kid...play that thing
again.” It was a doyne. So I played it again. He says, “all right,
everyone ante up.” I got about a hundred dollars. So he says,
“now you can go home.”

Also tremendously popular in those years were the Yinglish musical
parodies by American-born performers such as the Barton Brothers, Benny Bell, and Mickey Katz. The audience for these recordings seems to have been comprised both of Yiddish-speaking immigrants and, especially, their bilingual children—exactly those children of the *landsmanshaft* members. Whereas clarinetist Mickey Katz hired Hollywood jazz musicians such as the well-known trumpeters Mannie Klein and Ziggy Elman, trombonist Sy Zentner, violinist Benny Gill, and arranger-pianist Nat Farber to play sophisticated arrangements with four-part voicing, singing comedians Benny Bell and the Barton Brothers preferred more *heymish* (downhome) accompaniments by klezmer musicians like the Epstein Brothers, who created the musical backdrops for their antic comedy routines. According to pianist Hal Silvers (b. Harold Silverman ca. 1919), the Benny Bell recordings were made in Bell’s basement, next to the coal, in the years just before World War II. Silvers, together with Max, Chi (Isidore “Chizik” Epstein, 1913-1986), Willie (1919-1999), and Julie Epstein, would record there Tuesdays and Wednesdays, for which they would get paid $8 or $10 for a record.

An example of a Bell piece with a klezmer-style arrangement is the tune “Jolly Jingley” on the LP collection, *Kosher Comedy* from 1960. The musical accompaniment is likely provided by Willie Epstein, trumpet, Hal Silvers, piano, and Chizik Epstein, saxophone. The tune is sung by Bell entirely in Yiddish and derives much of its humor from sexual double entendres. Based on a verse and refrain structure, both melodies appear to derive from Hasidic sources and have variants in the folk song and klezmer repertoires. Prominent is Bell’s Hasidic—*badkhn*-style singing, which was also clearly influenced by his father, who was a *khazan* [cantor]. The klezmer-like instrumental fillers by the Epstein Brothers and Silvers are also a typical characteristic of the music of Benny Bell and of the Barton Brothers [fig 6].

Most of the American-born musicians cut their musical teeth as teenagers at the various hotels in the Catskills and similar resort areas. There, klezmer music formed only a small part of the musical smorgasbord offered up to the guests, and the klezmer specialist gave way to the well-rounded musical entertainer. Levitt joined the orchestra of bandleader Abe Schwartz—known for his work in Yiddish vaudeville and klezmer music—in the summer of 1949. Besides Schwartz, “they weren’t really klezmers”; as he describes it:

A klezmer booked the band, and he filled it in with other types of musicians, ‘cause...he needed a musician to read the show, and he needed a musician to play American music...I was the only [other] klezmer in the band....They’d have different acts come in...with written music. We’d rehearse them in the afternoon. In the mountains, as the Catskills were known, the musicians would not only back up aging Yiddish theater stars, but also mainstream English-language entertainers.

The late 1940s was in general a time of regrouping for American Jewry in the wake of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Among the thousands of survivors who settled in New York from 1945-1952, two groups emerged that provided a new potential audience for the klezmer musicians, and the musicians were quick to retool their skills in order to service them: the Chasidim (and other ultra-Orthodox) and the so-called *grine* [greenhorns]—non-Chasidic and largely non-Orthodox survivors who hailed mostly from the urban centers of interwar Poland.

---

**fig 6** LP cover, Benny Bell, *Kosher Comedy*. Bell Novelty Records, 1960; collection of Joel E. Rubin and Rita Ottens. Used with permission of Joel Samberg.
and Hungary. The pre-war Chasidic rebbes in Europe had advised their followers not to immigrate to the United States because they predicted it would be too difficult for them to maintain a religious way of life in such a highly secular environment.55 Thus, there had been only a negligible Chasidic presence in New York prior to the Holocaust. In addition, according to Levi:

The Hasidim would call the klezmer music goyishe muzik [non-Jewish music]...You couldn't play klezmer music at a hasidic job...The religious music, the rabbi [i.e., rebbe] would compose a melody to a prayer in the Bible; that would be the song. And every rabbi [rebbe] had his own nignim.56

"For many, many years the only people who ever played hasidic weddings were old klezmer," according to keyboard player and arranger Pete Sokolow (b. 1940).57 Since the Jewish musicians of New York were by that point mostly American-born, they had had little or no previous exposure to Chasidic music and had to learn the repertoire directly from the surviving rebbes and their followers. Max Epstein recollects:

The Satmar rebbe happened to [hear the Epstein Brothers and] say, un di muzik klingt azoy sheyn! [And the music sounds so beautiful]. Well, that was it....The next day...people were calling us....We used to come with a...music pad....The kids used to come, "khob a nayem nign" [I have a new tune] and we would notate it.58

Rudy Tepel, who was the most popular band leader in the Chasidic wedding business from the late 1940s until the late 1960s, describes how his own business was transformed by this new development: "After playing the old klezmer music for years...we all swung into...the hasidic field. Once I got into hasidic, then I was busy all the time....I could book seven jobs on a Tuesday."59 Besides performing at thousands of events over the years, Tepel recorded two LPs of Chasidic nignim in the early 1960s with a band that included fellow klezmer Howie Leess (1920-2003). An example of Tepel's music is the recording "Kabbolas Ponima Khosn" [Greeting the Bridegroom] from his LP, Lubavitch Wedding: Rudy Tepel and His Orchestra Play 17 Nignim/Rikudim. Melodies/Dances, from ca. 1962 on the Collectors Guild label. Using the instrumentation of clarinet (Tepel), tenor saxophone (Leess), trumpet (Marty Bass), bass, drums, and piano, the recording—although made in the studio—captures the spirit of a live performance without the use of arrangements or other studio techniques. The basic style is that of American klezmer music, played slightly faster to accommodate the simpler melodic structure of the nignim. In addition, Tepel's clarinet sound is fatter and utilizes a wider vibrato than the typical klezmer sound of the day as exemplified by Naftule Brandwein, Dave Tarras, or Max Epstein. His concept of how the instrument should sound was likely influenced in conception by his experience performing the music of the swing era [fig. 7 and fig. 8]. Klezmer musicians continued to dominate the New York Chasidic music business until the mid-1970s, when a younger generation of Orthodox musicians, influenced by Israeli and American popular music and rock, began to create an Orthodox popular music, and large Chasidic and Orthodox wedding bands such as Neginah [Melody] and Neshoma [Soul] emerged.60 According to Sokolow, the relationship between the klezmer musicians and the Chasidic and other Orthodox communities was tenuous. There had always been a preference to hire musicians who were shomer shabbos [Sabbath observant]. The attitude towards the klezmer musicians was that their superior skill and stylistic knowledge made hiring them somewhat of a necessary evil, even though most of them were not Orthodox. As soon as the skilled, younger Orthodox players emerged in the 1970s, however, the

fig. 7 Rudy Tepel Orchestra, New York, ca. mid-1940s. Courtesy of Rudy Tepel.
dominance of the Chasidic market by klezmer musicians rapidly waned, bringing about significant stylistic changes and ushering in the emergence of Orthodox popular music.\(^6^4\)

The \textit{grine} listened and danced to entirely different music than the “klezmer” music that had become popular in the United States during the period 1880-1950—a reflection of the rapid changes in musical taste among the younger generation of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, especially during the interwar years. Particularly popular during that period were the tangos and waltzes by Polish-Jewish composers such as Jerzy Petersburski (1895/97-1979), Henryk (b. 1898/1902) and Arthur Gold (1903-1943), and Władysław Szpilman (1911-2000).\(^6^2\) These progeny of Polish klezmer families wrote the soundtrack to youth culture in interwar Poland—Jewish and non-Jewish.\(^6^3\)

Marty Levitt recognized the potential of this new audience:

I knew some of the repertoire because it was part of the klezmer repertoire, songs like “Serce” [Heart], “Ochitchornia” [Dark Eyes], etc. I started playing these songs and I noticed there was a reaction from the audience. ...I learnt...the Polish repertoire that was popular in the Thirties. Polkas I knew anyway. ...My wife was a vocalist and she learned it in their language and I developed a whole business, and that was going pretty strong from the Fifties till...about the early Seventies when their children got married. ...I played in the Waldorf, the Statler, and I had big bands. ...At one time I was known as the tango king. ...I used to go to their houses. I got very friendly with some of them, and they gave me records...and my dad and my uncles...would transcribe the melodies. ...My mother would teach my wife the lyrics, cause my mother spoke Polish and Russian.\(^6^4\)

A typical example of Levitt’s repertoire is the tango “Two Sparkling Eyes,” as arranged and recorded by Marty Levitt with his klezmer ensemble.\(^6^5\) Noticeable in Levitt’s recording is the absence of characteristic klezmer ornamentation such as the bent notes, grace notes, and trills that are to be heard on the other recordings discussed in this article. Here it is clear that the style is marked as generically Central European, and not specifically Yiddish, although Levitt’s New York audiences comprised entirely Holocaust survivors. Within the framework of the community of survivors, it was the dance in particular that played an important role. Drummer-entertainer Max Goldberg (1911-2001), who began to cultivate a clientele among the \textit{grine} immediately after the war, sums it up: “They danced it, we played it. We knew what they wanted.”\(^6^6\) [fig. 9 and fig. 10].

Beyond the changes discussed thus far, the founding of the State of Israel brought about a general shift in orientation among the American Jewish community from the Yiddish culture of its Eastern European past to the nascent Hebrew-Israeli culture and what was perceived as the possibility of a future. This new orientation brought about a dramatic shift in repertoire at American Jewish weddings as well. As Max Epstein describes it: “I played some Israeli music before the State of Israel...but when the State of Israel came in, the new generation heard nothing else but that. They didn’t hear the old klezmer music, they heard Israeli music.”\(^6^7\)
A typical example of Israeli horas as performed by klezmer musicians is the recording “Israeli Medley” by Dave Tarras and Lou Levinn with the Murray Lehrer Orchestra, recorded ca. 1959.68 Here, as was the case of the Tepel recording of Chasidic nigunim discussed above, the dominant performance style was that of American klezmer music, with the horas being played at a faster tempo to accommodate their simpler melodic structure.
Despite the shift in orientation to Hebrew culture, klezmer repertoire continued to be performed after 1948 to an aging and rapidly dwindling audience in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto. Naftule Brandwein continued to maintain a busy performing schedule until shortly before his death in 1963 at the age of almost eighty, so much so that his grandson, who married in the early 1960s, exclaimed, "I had to reschedule my wedding four times for that son of a bitch to play at my wedding."69

CONCLUSION
In the post-War period, New York klezmer musicians used centuries-old patterns of adaptation to forge new markets among the Chasidim, the gire, and the American-born, with their love of Yiddish and especially Yingleish vaudeville and humor and their newfound enthusiasm for Israel. The styles in which the performers played all of these genres—with the notable exception of the Polish tango—were remarkably similar. This is because the musicians applied the originally Eastern European klezmer style of phrasing and ornamentation to each successive genre that they learned, giving the repertoire a fairly unified sound, even though it stemmed from quite different sources: the old-time klezmer tunes had been composed largely by instrumentalists raised in a tradition that placed great emphasis on instrumental discipline and virtuosity; the Hasidic nigunim were created by rebbes and their followers who often had little or no musical training; the Polish tangos were written by musicians from klezmer families who had left the tradition behind and often enjoyed conservatory training; and the Israeli horas were penned by composers who, although in most cases they stemmed from Eastern Europe, had little knowledge or interest in the old klezmer tradition and infused their pieces with Middle Eastern motifs.

The period of revitalization among the New York klezmer musicians was, however, short-lived. The advent of rock and roll in the 1950s and changing musical aesthetics—also among the ultra-Orthodox—led to the gradual obsolescence of even the American-born musicians.70 What finally brought klezmer music to an end as a commercially viable enterprise was the restructuring of the club date business in the 1960s. A few musicians saw tremendous business potential in the emergence of the bar mitzvah as a luxurious festivity, and they banded together to form several large club date booking agencies known as offices. According to Levitt, "they paid off caterers, they got the leads, and all of a sudden, one group of guys are booking fifty, forty jobs on a Saturday night and they knocked out all of the small band leaders."71 Although a number of these performers, such as Danny Rubinstein and Ray Musiker, are still alive and playing today, their music would not really be appreciated again until after the emergence of the klezmer revival movement in the mid-1970s.

An understanding of the first American-born generation of klezmer musicians and the music they created is, I argue, crucial to our understanding of the transformation undergone by American Jewry during the critical period of the 1930s to the 1960s. On the one hand, the communities moved away from Orthodoxy and moved out of the working class and the inner cities and into the professions and the suburbs;72 on the other hand, Chasidism took root on American soil and laid the groundwork for the spiritual re-affiliation of the second and third American-born generations from the Sixties onward, whether it be through Jewish renewal, the ba'alai teshuvah movement, or simply by affiliating with what has been termed "klezmer yiddishkayt."73

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
"They Danced It, We Played It" comes from Max Goldberg in a recorded interview with Joel Rubin, Peter Sokolow, and Rita Ottens, Brooklyn, January 3, 1991. This article is based on research originally carried out for the following publications: Rita Ottens and Joel Rubin, Klezmer-Musik (Kassel and Munich: Bärenreiter and dvr, 1999); Joel E. Rubin, "The Art of the Klezmer: Improvisation and Ornamentation in the Commercial Recordings of New York Clarinetists Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras 1922-1929" (Ph.D. diss., City University of London, Department of Music, 2001; UMI 2003); Stefan Schwietert (dir.), A Ticklet in the Heart (documentary film, 1996); Joel Rubin with the Epstein Brothers Orchestra, Zeydes un Eynkleskh (Grandfathers and Grandsons): Jewish-American Wedding Music from the Repertoire of Dave Tarras (Mainz: Schott Wergo, 1995, CD, SM 1610-2); and The Epstein Brothers Orchestra, Kings of Freylekh Land: A Century of Yiddish-American Music (Mainz: Schott Wergo, 1995, CD, SM 1611-2).

NOTES
1 Landsmanshaftn (sing. landsmanshaft) are formed by immigrants from the same town, city, or region of Eastern Europe. An immigrant from the same town as another is referred to as a landsman (pl. landsleyt).
They Danced It, We Played It


As ethnomusicologist Jeff Titon has pointed out, any comparisons drawn between speech and music can only be approximate, as the language of music is "verbally and emotionally symbolic in a much more general sense than the language of words." Jeff Titon, "Ethnomusicology of Downhome Blues Phonograph Records 1926-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, Department of Music, 1971), 65. For a discussion of the relationships between music and language, see Steven Feld and Aaron Fox, "Music and Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 25-53.

The *bakhonim* (pl. *bakhonim*) was the traditional jester, master of ceremonies and moralizing preacher at an Eastern European Jewish wedding. Usually possessing at least some rabbinical training, the *bakhon* chanted in rhymes to wedding rituals such as the *kalet ha-setso*, the ritual "seating" of the bride, in which he spoke of the importance of the occasion and, in particular, the transition from girlhood to womanhood in traditional Jewish society. The *bakhon* tradition was often referenced by Yiddish actors and comedians, such as Leo Fuchs (in the American film *Izk vil zayn a name!/I Want To Be a Mama*, 1937) or Shimon Drigan and Yisroel Shumacher (in the post-War Polish film *Unszere Kinder/Our Children*, 1949).

Although preceded by several other laws in the early 1920s, the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) is considered to have dealt the critical blow to Eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States. Abraham J. Karp, *Golden Door to America: The Jewish Immigrant Experience* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), 111.


The folklorist Samuel Weisenberg stated already in 1913 that the klezmorim were "becoming extinct" in Russia as a result of the modernization of the traditional Jewish wedding. Samuel Weisenberg, "Die 'Klesmer' sprache," *Anthropologische Gesellschaft in Wien. Mitteilungen* 43 (1913): 127. As the folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has noted, "Jews as a folkloristic object have been 'disappearing' for at least 150 years, though the trope of the vanishing object is an older and more general aspect of ethnoraphic discourse." Cited in Aviva Weintraub, "An American in Poland: Photography and the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 15:1 (1993): 14.

3 In order to better understand these processes of adaptation, it is useful to draw comparisons to a model for the Yiddish language developed by Benjamin Harshav. A major characteristic of the language as it developed in Europe was its "polylingualism," which consisted of two kinds, "internal" and "external." Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 9-26. This likely derives from Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Internally, the Jewish communities utilized Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic, which were "interlaced in one polysystem." Harshav, *Meaning of Yiddish*, 21-22. Since most Jews lived in a multi-ethnic society, they came in contact with numerous state and minority languages, calling for at least an oral knowledge of several of them—or "external polylingualism." Ibid., 24.

In a similar fashion, it could be said that the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe were "polymusical," exhibiting characteristics of internal and external polymusicality. The internal musical languages of the klezmorim, secular folk song, *bakhones* [the chanting of the *bakhon*], and the music of the *purim-spiel* [the medieval folk plays for the holiday of Purim] (representing Yiddish) and those of the various types of synagogue chant and religious folk song (representing Hebrew-Aramaic) were also interlaced in a kind of musical polysystem with which most Jews were familiar. See also Bethja Bayer, "Musicians," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12: 678. Cantor Max Wohlberg has shown, for example, the influence of Eastern Ashkenazic liturgical music on Yiddish folk
around on the piano, finally put together three parts, was a bulgar....I composed several bulgars...Everyone wrote something, I would say." Marty Levitt, recorded interview with Joel Rubin and Rita Ottens, Brooklyn, New York, December 22, 1990.

Since hardly any commercial klezmer recordings were made in New York from 1929-1939 due to the Depression, the trajectory of change is difficult to trace. The beginnings of this new klezmer style may be seen, however, in the Kammen International Dance Folio: New Folio No. 9. A Collection of Famous International Songs, Dances, Medleys, Selections and Overtures, Arranged by Jack Kammen and William Scher (New York: J. & J. Kammen Music Co., 1934), which contains a number of newly composed bulgar tunes. See, for example, numbers 13-15, 18-19, 31 and 63.


The Russian sher is a type of Eastern European Jewish square dance for four or more couples. In the United States, it was one of the most typical and widespread of the Eastern European Jewish wedding dances. "That was a big thing, the Russian sher. That's where they made the money. And when they played Russian shers, they had four couples, each [person] paid 10¢. We collected 80¢, there was about five different sets [of dancers], that made $4. They loved Russian shers better than fox toots or tangos. A Russian sher would last about eight minutes." Max Goldberg, recorded interview, together with Marty Levitt and Dave Levitt, with Joel Rubin and Stefan Schwietert, Brooklyn, November-December 1994.

They Danced It, We Played It

10 "Ich bin deiner – Sher," Standard F-8001-B. The Greek version, "Zefki – Hasapiko," was released with the catalogue number of Standard F-9001-B and was in the private collection of Dino Pappas of Detroit. It was reissued on LP as part of the collection Music of the Jewish People Featuring Dave Taras Orch. & Allen Street Gypsies, Colonial LP-120, and has been reissued on the CD Dave Taras: Master of Klezmer Music. Volume One: 1929-1949 (New York: Global Village, 1990, CD 105).

Originally the Bessarabian dance Bulgărescă, Feldman traces the bulgar dance form's ascendency in popularity and consequent transformation to a quintessentially American genre known as the bulgar. Feldman, Bulgărescă/Bulgarian.


12 The discography of the 1939-1941 recordings is listed in Richard Spottswood, Ethnic Music on Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States: 1893 to 1942. Volume 3, Eastern Europe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 1324-25 and 1535-36. A number of the 1945 recordings were reissued on the LP Music of the Jewish People Featuring Dave Taras Orchestra and the Allen Street Gypsies (Colonial Records LP-120, n.d.). Early examples of a Jewish-Greek syncretism in New York include the four recordings of Greek repertoire by the Columbia Greek Orchestra from March 1929—actually a Jewish klezmer band featuring Dave Taras—in renditions of "O Mortis" [the Bum] and "Politikeskyrtos" [Constantinopolitan syrtos dance], as well as four klezmer-style recordings with titles such as "Lechayim" [Good Luck] and "In Vain Keller" [In the Wine Cellar] by the Greek-Macedonian clarinetist Kostas (Gus) Gadinis, recorded on June 18, 1937 and March 13, 1939. Spottswood, Ethnic Music, 1143, 1166.


Even in the 1920s this was the case, as can be seen from cover versions by the Abe Schwartz Orchestra of the popular Yiddish vaudeville songs “Yosi, Yosi” and “Sha, sha der rebbe geht” (Quiet, the Rebbe’s Coming), recorded in New York in October 1924. Spottswood, Ethnic Music, 1500.


Frailach in Hi-Fi was a series of three LPs released under the direction of bandleader and accordionist Murray Lehrer in approximately 1959. They were originally released on Period Records as Murray Lehrer and His Ensemble, Dave Tarras, Clarinet, Lou Levin, Trumpet, with the catalogue numbers RL 1006, 1915, and 1916. The albums later appeared as Frailachs for Weddings and Bar Mitzvahs and other Celebrations on Request Records, listed as Murray Lehrer and His Orchestra, Dave Tarras, Clarinet, with the catalogue numbers SR LP 10102, 10103, and 10182. I thank Robert and Molly Freedman for the discographical information on these recordings.


Sid Beckerman, recorded telephone interview with Joel Rubin, New York-Brooklyn, October 20, 1996.

Levitt interview, 1990.


Recordings, however, continued to supply “a kind of solace or mediating mechanism for many years, even beyond the 1920s, helping the immigrants to become comfortable in the new land.” Ibid., 78.

After the recording strike of 1942-1944, the recording of Yiddish music was dominated by small ethnic companies that filled the void left by the three major companies: RCA-Victor, Columbia (CBS), and Decca. Spottswood,


This also could explain why the current interest in instrumental klezmer music has caught on with a generation with a very low level of Yiddish literacy.

See http://www.yiddishradioproject.org/exhibits/ymis/ for information on Yiddish Melodies in Swing, one show featuring Tarras.

On the radio, they would play Jewish and Russian instrumental music, provide fillers, and back up acts such as the singer Pinchas Levanda and Alter Levine with his choir. Max Epstein interview, 1993; Max and William Epstein, recorded interview with Joel Rubin and Stefan Schwietert, Plantation, FL, November 29, 1994.

Sid and Mae Beckerman, recorded interview with Joel Rubin, Brooklyn, March 26, 1991. Such “American” repertoire included tangos, rhumbas, American waltzes, Viennese waltzes, Hungarian csardas, polkas, polka mazurkas, and o dereks, in addition to the fox trots and two steps.

In contrast, clarinetist Ray Musiker (b. 1926) remembered American music filling a much smaller niche at the affairs he played at in the early 1940s. Ray Musiker, Howie Lees, and Paul Pincus, recorded interview with Joel Rubin and Stefan Schwietert, Long Island, November 30, 1994.


Julie attributes the longevity of Max’s career in klezmer music to his polymusicality. Julius Epstein interview, 1993.

For example, Brandwein would hire his nephew, the trumpeter Eddie Brandwein, or Max Epstein on saxophone, to cover the American music at jobs. Max and William Epstein interview, 1994.
Further examples of younger Americans hired into the bands include Naftule Brandwein’s nephews, the pianists Nat Brandwein (1910-1978) and Chester Brandwein, both of whom accompanied Brandwein at weddings as youths. Nat Brandwein later became a popular American “society” dance bandleader and recording artist. Max Epstein, recorded telephone interview with Joel Rubin, Berlin-Tamarac, FL, April 1999.

“Society” music refers to the division of the club date business devoted to “a largely wealthy, upper-class clientele.” Bruce A. MacLeod, _Club Date Musicians: Playing the New York Party Circuit_ (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 4.

28 For example, Sid’s European-born father, clarinetist Shloime Beckerman, would hear Sid playing the Yiddish music, and he’d correct him: “Don’t play like that, [it] sounds like a jazznik. You don’t play that way. Let me show you how it should be play[ed], and he would show me how it should go.” Sid and Mac Beckerman interview, 1991.

29 Fluidity of membership in the klezmer profession was already present in Europe at least as early as the nineteenth century. See Rubin, _Art of the Klezmer_, chapter 3.

31 Rudy and Lucille Tepel, recorded interview with Joel Rubin and Rita Otten, Brooklyn, December 20, 1990.

The Brandweins, including Naftule and his siblings, sons, and nephews, were one of the leading New York klezmer families at that time.

32 As Julie Epstein has noted, new musical styles necessitate new rhythmic conceptions, which meant a “built-in obsolescence factor” for drummers in particular. What made Epstein valuable as a drummer in the Jewish music business, was his ability to play American and Latin American popular music, such as cha-cha, merengue and, especially, rock and roll, which the European-born players could not. Julius Epstein interview, 1993.

33 MacLeod, _Club Date Musicians_, 1. Unfortunately, MacLeod did not trace the history of club date entertainment prior to World War II, which might have provided a crucial link to klezmorim and other entertainment musicians from earlier periods.

34 According to MacLeod, faking is the ability to improvise inner voices to standard melodies so that they sound like written arrangements. MacLeod, _Club Date Musicians_, 2-3.


36 “Yiddish Bulgar” was originally released as Delux Records 1135. It has been reissued on _Oytre (Treasures): Klezmer Music 1908-1996_ (ed. Rita Otten and Joel Rubin; Mainz: Schott Wergo, 1999, CD SM 1621-2, track 18).

37 Max Epstein interview, May 1999.

38 David Rubinstein, recorded interview with Joel Rubin and Rita Otten, Los Angeles, January 1993. See also http://music.ucdavis.edu/people/ and then brandweinne.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid. Marty Leviitt, recorded telephone interview with Joel Rubin, New York-Brooklyn, October 27 and 29, 1996.

42 Julius Epstein, personal communication, 1993.

43 _Dyvne_ [doina] is a rhapsodic, semi-improvised lamentation for soloist and accompaniment. Originally a Romanian shepherd’s lament, forms of the doina were adopted by professional Jewish, Roma, Greek, Turkish, Armenian, and Bulgarian musicians in Europe during the nineteenth century. The Judaized or klezmerized form of the doina was known among the musicians and their immigrant audience to be a quintessentially Romanian form, yet by mid-century it was one of the few remaining elements of the klezmer repertoire to still be regularly performed at weddings and other celebrations. For more on the Jewish doina, see Joel Rubin, “‘Alts nent zikh fun der doyne’: The Romanian-Jewish Doina: a Closer Stylistic Examination,” in _Proceedings of the First International Conference on Jewish Music_, City University, London, April 1994 (London: City University, 1997), 133-64.

44 Leviitt interview, 1990.

They Danced It, We Played It


Levitt interview, 1990. On nignim, see footnote 48 above.

Peter Sokolow, recorded interview with Joel Rubin, Rita Ottens, and Michael Alpert, New York, December 12, 1990.


Tepel interview, 1990. Tepel’s wife Lucille took care of the booking and drove him from gig to gig.


They Danced It, We Played It

68 Freilach in Hi-Fi Volume 2: Jewish Wedding Dances. Murray Lehrer and His Ensemble Featuring Dave Taras on the Clarinet, A3. Volume 2 was reset issued anonymously on CD Freilach for Weddings and Other Jewish Celebrations (Los Angeles: Laserlight Digital 12933). The track title was changed to “Israel Dances.”
70 Julius Epstein interview, 1993.
73 Janet Hadda, “Yiddish in Today’s America,” Jewish Quarterly 170 (Summer 1998): 33-37. Baal teshuvah (pl. baalei teshuvah) means literally “master of repentance” and refers to Jews who have (re)affiliated with Orthodox Judaism. Yiddishkayt means literally “Jewishness” and has different meanings depending on which Jewish denomination is using it. In the sense as used here by Hadda, yiddishkayt refers to a loose set of cultural attributes considered to be “Yiddish” or “Jewish” by secular Yiddishists. For a survey of current trends in secular Yiddishism, see Jeffrey Shandler, Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
I Will Sing and Make Music: Jewish Music and Musicians Throughout the Ages

Studies in Jewish Civilization
Volume 19

Editor:
Leonard J. Greenspoon

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization-
Harris Center for Judaic Studies
The Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society

Creighton
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Distributed by the University of Nebraska Press
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................ vii

Editor's Introduction .................................... ix

Contributors ............................................. xxi

Jewish Music: What Is That? ........................... 1
Joshua R. Jacobson

The Musical Notations in the Book of Psalms ........ 11
Charles David Isbell

Salomon Sulzer and Franz Schubert: A Musical Collaboration ........ 27
Charles Jurgensmeier

Composing Art Music Based on Jewish Musical Material ........ 43
Paula Eisenstein Baker

Revitalizing the Synagogue Ritual: Cantor David Putterman's
Annual Service of New Music at New York’s Park Avenue
Synagogue .............................................. 59
Emily A. Bell

From Scroll to Stage: The Story of Ruth in Cantillation and Opera .. 73
Helen Leneman

“From Biblical Times to Lyrical Rhymes”: The Assertion of
Jewish Identity in Music as Cultural Resistance ............. 93
Dan W. Clanton, Jr.