

## Introduction

There are many ways to uncover the story of a Jewish community. Immigration figures, demographic patterns, minutes of board meetings, fund-raising goals, and synagogue enrollments are the usual sources that provide data. These documents tell us, among other things, how many people are in the group being studied, where they came from, how the community has evolved, and what they have accomplished. Experts carefully chronicle the progress of religious, political, philanthropic, cultural, and educational institutions, looking for signs of success, stability, cohesion, and deterioration. As traditional historians take stock of the data they gather, they ponder why some institutions remain vital while others outlive their usefulness and either undergo serious renovations or are replaced by new ones that better suit the needs of new generations.

Contemporary historians have broadened the scope of such endeavors. In *The Search for a Usable Jewish Past*, David Roskies (1998) considers the story told by shtetl (Eastern European Jewish small town) literature, Holocaust studies, religious tomes, Yiddish folksongs, Zionist tractates, and the notes of burial societies. Other authors look for clues about Jewish communal history by exploring such subjects as food (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987, Joselit 1994), marriage (Joselit 1994), and sex (Biale 1992). This book draws its historical narrative from a more obscure, but perhaps equally revealing source: the documentary and ethnographic history of professional Jewish musical entertainers (klezmerim) and of the music they performed at Philadelphia's Jewish life-cycle and communal celebrations.

My focus is on the klezmer tradition in Philadelphia over the course of the entire twentieth century, a period stretching from the later part of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant era through the contemporary resurgence of

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klezmer music.<sup>1</sup> I selected Philadelphia because it is a large and resilient regional American Jewish community with a rich, hitherto mostly uncollected klezmer music legacy<sup>2</sup> and because of my own Philadelphia roots, which, more than any other factor, made this study possible.

Looking at a local klezmer tradition can illuminate connections that are often overlooked in ethnomusicological studies. The issues I address here include the nature of musician cultures (and of the klezmer tradition in particular), the ongoing tension between sacred and secular in music, the complexity of hybrid ethnic musical expression, the insider-outsider dynamic in klezmer, the story told by a single piece of music over time, and the ethnography of a nearly extinct regional musical community. It is really at the intersection of all of these topics that my study takes place, since all are embodied by klezmer, a sacred/secular genre with a long tradition as the music of Jewish communal celebrations and with a recent history as a revitalized concert music played by younger musicians including me.

Located only ninety miles southwest of New York City, Philadelphia boasted a klezmer music culture whose history contrasted starkly with that of its much larger, more diverse, and more trend-setting neighbor. After the upheaval of the post-World War II era, by which time virtually every other community had laid its klezmer tradition to rest, many of Philadelphia's musicians held on to their old-world repertoire, even with the knowledge that they were entirely out of pace with the rest of Jewish society. Indeed, Philadelphia's surprisingly enduring klezmer scene is one of the few that, at the time of my study, still boasted a large enough number of veteran musicians to make a klezmer ethnography worthwhile.

Much of my source material has been gleaned from interviews that I conducted with approximately sixty Jewish wedding musicians, caterers, and descendants of musical families. My research began in 1974, when I embarked on my own quest to explore an avenue of musical expression that had been part of my family's history for at least three generations before I was born.<sup>3</sup>

Charting the history of a klezmer community is not a straightforward task, and at the time I began my research I found very few guideposts. When I proposed writing on klezmer as a project in a multicultural music class during my undergraduate years at the New England Conservatory, I was strongly discouraged. At that time, English-language print sources on klezmer ranged from antiquated to totally erroneous, and I had no idea how to go about finding materials that might support my study.

Nevertheless, I set out on my project, first interviewing elderly members of my own family who had played in Jewish wedding bands in Philadelphia from the 1920s through the 1960s. They provided me with sketchy historical information, lists of additional names, and an assortment of attitudes ranging from enthusiasm to disbelief. They also provided me with a calling card that I could use in approaching other musicians: my "family lineage," essential in a secretive field such as klezmer, in which insider information is routinely kept close to the

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vest. My often frustrating attempts to conduct klezmer research in other locales have given me cause to appreciate this link more and more as the years go by.

My first “klezmer” contact was my uncle Marvin who had played trumpet in wedding bands from the late 1940s through the mid-1960s. He referred me to my great-uncle, Dr. Samuel Katz, an ex-musician who had given up his cornet and his freewheeling lifestyle in the mid-1930s to start a family and pursue a career in dentistry. Uncle Sam played me recordings of many of klezmer’s most important musical figures, including New York-based violinist-bandleader Abe Schwartz and clarinetists Naftule Brandwein, Dave Tarras, and the crotchety, miserly Philadelphia-based Itzikl Kramtweiss, a wild character with whom he had worked on many occasions. He showed me klezmer tune books penned by his first cornet instructor, a transplanted old-world bandmaster named Meyer Swerdlow, and manuscripts of repertoire he had learned from Lou Lemisch, an American-born clarinetist and bandleader who hailed from one of Philadelphia’s oldest klezmer dynasties. Perhaps most importantly, he told me stories that provided a window into a very different musical and social milieu from any I had known—a tough and unforgiving world, full of treachery, jealousy, and closely guarded family secrets (several of which involved my own family—oy!). It did not take long for me to realize that the rich musical world he was sharing with me could lead me to a deeper understanding of not only my own ancestry (musical and otherwise) but also the entire Jewish immigrant experience.

My success with Uncle Sam convinced me to probe deeper, and to do so, I called on two other surviving musicians whom Sam had identified from an old photograph of my grandfather’s band (ca. 1925). Joe Familant, the banjo player, had become a hairdresser; like many klezmerim (professional Jewish folk instrumentalists), he hailed from a family of musicians and barbers. In his suburban New Jersey condominium, I heard about wild Hasidic, Romanian, and gypsy parties and the eclectic repertoire of “Old Man” Dave Finklestein. Since Joe was still playing both ukulele and drums, he also gave me a few basic musical tips.

Morris Hoffman, whom my uncle had erroneously identified in the photo (the clarinetist in the photo was actually a fellow named Johnny Goodman who did look a fair amount like him), immediately pointed out the irony of my call to him. He had originally learned Jewish dance music at his father’s knee. His brothers included the virtuoso concert and klezmer percussionist Jacob Hoffman and the Yiddish theater drummer Johnny Hoffman. But Morris’s career had followed a typically American progression, from ethnic roots to mainstream versatility. At the time I contacted him, he was still playing six nights each week at the Latin Casino, a popular Philadelphia nightclub where he had held one of the band’s woodwind chairs since the day the club had opened in 1949. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “You’re nineteen years old and you want to learn about klezmer music? Well, I don’t really play it anymore; tonight I’m playing for the Four Temptations [*sic*],<sup>4</sup> and tomorrow I’ll be backing the Supremes” (M. Hoffman 1978).

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At my grandmother's suggestion, I visited the musicians' union, still on Eighteenth Street near Arch at the time. The hall was quite the relic, like a saloon in an old western town; I could only imagine the card games and conversations that had gone on here over the years. Lou Herman, the union president at the time, was very friendly; he knew all of my relatives and suggested that I contact a few of the old-timers, including bandleader Abe Neff and trumpeter Morris Zeff. At the same time, he could not figure out why I might want to study a music that was such an inconsequential part of contemporary culture.

Calls to various leads that my uncle gave me bore occasional fruit, but it still was not clear to me where all this might lead. One of my other great-uncles, clarinetist Jerry Adler, was particularly bitter and negative. "What could you possibly want with that music?" he said. "It's gone, dead, buried. If you try to play it, you'll starve" (Adler 1976, pers. comm.). A mass of contradictions, Uncle Jerry had eked out his primary living installing Venetian blinds and radiator caps and kept every cent he had ever earned inside his mattress. He played hot and cold with me for years, occasionally punctuating our meetings with recordings of weddings and bar mitzvahs where he had played wailing *freylekhs* (traditional Eastern European Jewish dances) on his Albert-system "C" clarinet.<sup>5</sup> He would never do me the honor of finishing a sentence when I asked him a question, but in the end he gave me his entire music collection, hundreds of tunes that had taken him years to write out. Eventually, I received his message loud and clear: "These are the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's up to you to figure out what they mean."

Unfortunately, my subsequent attempts to contact local musicians led nowhere. Perhaps I called the wrong ones or simply did not know where to begin—or how to explain what I was after, or even how to conduct an interview. Soon, I gave up and began to focus my energy on the music itself, which was mostly available on 78 RPM recordings. I listened to and transcribed many hours of these recordings and eventually began to share what I had learned with my classes at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where I joined the faculty in 1978. It seemed to me that the music had its own intrinsic merits, and I felt vindicated when my students responded positively to it. Around the same time, I became aware that a klezmer revival was underway, with active proponents in Los Angeles, Berkeley, and New York City. Eventually, one of my students (Merryl Goldberg, now an arts education professor at California State University in San Marcos) persuaded me to organize a concert featuring some of the songs and dances I had transcribed. This well-attended performance, which took place in Boston in February 1980, officially launched the Klezmer Conservatory Band and marked the start of my own professional klezmer career.

The klezmer revival had a profound effect on the klezmer scene and even made believers out of members of my family. Prompted by other activists, klezmer icons, including preeminent New York clarinetists Dave Tarras and Max Epstein, came out of retirement, offering their services both as teachers and performers. Henry Sapoznik's Klezkamp spawned numerous offshoots, workshops and camps that have attracted large multigenerational klezmer-

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hungry crowds in the United States and abroad. My own band became relatively well known, making numerous appearances on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion;" collaborating with actor Robin Williams, Broadway star Joel Grey, and concert violinist Itzhak Perlman; and providing the scores for several high-profile films, ballet and dance performances, and theatrical productions. I was also able to bring the music back to Philadelphia, performing it at synagogues, senior centers, YMHAs, universities, and prestigious concert venues such as the Academy of Music, the Mann Music Center (with violinist Itzhak Perlman), and, eventually, the Kimmel Center.

In 1996, when I turned my focus back to research, I found myself working in a very different climate. No longer considered an obscure, embarrassing, and archaic part of America's Jewish past, klezmer had become a point of departure for some of the world's most creative and enterprising musicians. Its resurgence had attracted the attention of numerous scholars and journalists, and since then, several full-length studies have explored the music's revitalization, including Rogovoy (2000), Slobin (2000, 2002), Ottens and Rubin (2003), Sapoznik (1999), and Strom (2002).

Luckily, the klezmer resurgence also had a positive effect on many of Philadelphia's old-timers (the few that were still alive!), who realized that the music they were once scorned for playing was now considered "interesting" enough to be the subject of a PhD thesis. In this new climate, I found that many of klezmer's more experienced practitioners desperately wanted their story to be told. I worked with producer/filmmaker Jackie Borock and with the Philadelphia Jewish Archives on a film documenting the city's Jewish wedding music scene.<sup>6</sup> Along with veteran clarinetist and saxophonist Joe Borock (Jackie's father), trumpeters Marvin Katz (my uncle) and Susan Watts (Morris Hoffman's grand-niece), guitarist/banjoist Barry Warhaftig, bassist Harold Singer, and percussionist Elaine Hoffman Watts (Morris Hoffman's niece), I performed and recorded some of Philadelphia's 1940s klezmer repertoire with a group that I dubbed the Philadelphia Klezmer Heritage Ensemble. I even wrote a monthly newspaper column for Philadelphia's leading Jewish newspaper, the *Jewish Exponent*, titled "Professor Klezmer," trying to raise consciousness about the local Jewish wedding music tradition and hoping to acquire additional data and materials. I can imagine the editor's response had I proposed such a column back in 1974!

The response to all these activities was extraordinary. I received detailed written communications from vocalist Edith Lit—one of the best singers on the traditional Jewish music scene and the wife of Dave Kantor, the last of the truly "greenhorn" bandleaders, from the son of "Singing Jack Orkin," a prominent Jewish drummer and entertainer and from Lou Gold whose brother, Al, had been one of the last Jewish "Cordovox" (electrified accordion) players. I was able to speak in person with Bobby Roberts, Jay Jerome, Jules Helzner, Stu Harris (Hoffman) Harold Rubin, Marty Portnoy, Alan Helzner, Marty Lahr, Bobby Block, and Jackie Gold, all prominent Jewish society bandleaders with strong Jewish roots, as well as with sidemen including Victor Mazer (stage name: Chick

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Sherr), Max Spector, Mel Davis, Cal Shaw, Bernie Weinstein, Elliot Jacoby, Freddie Kornfeld, Bernie Greenbaum, and Pat Shalenza. Vocalist Geri Dean became a particularly gracious and generous source, along with well-known Philadelphia-born Hollywood composer Dave Raksin. Family members of old-time bandleaders, veteran caterers and florists, and prominent local klezmer revival figures also opened their doors to me, giving me pretty much everything I needed to pull the pieces back together.

I also began to look into the stories of klezmer in other cities. My band's travels afforded me the opportunity to compare Philadelphia's klezmer story and repertoire to those of Milwaukee, Detroit, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and New York. Doing so convinced me that Philadelphia's klezmer scene was indeed both unique and historically significant.

I must admit that, at various times when I was working on unearthing Philly's klezmer scene, I found myself on slightly uneasy footing as a researcher. As ethnomusicologists are so fond of asking, was I an outsider or an insider? Clearly, by some standards (my uncle Jerry's for example), I would have to be considered an outsider, although at some point I seemed to have become an insider whose musical output has been pivotal, at least to the revival of the genre. I am not alone in this regard. At least six other active performers who were attracted to klezmer while in their late teens or twenties (Joel Rubin, Walter Zev Feldman, Joshua Horowitz, Michael Alpert, Henry Sapoznik, and Yale Strom) have published articles or books on the subject, and I would not be surprised if many more individuals join their ranks in the years ahead. It is perhaps worth considering how this new cadre of "klezmer experts" fits into ethnomusicology in general and the klezmer world in particular.

In *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, Bruno Nettl (1983) cautions "outsider" scholars against representing themselves as or trying to transform themselves into "insider" master musician. He makes it clear that he prefers to leave the teaching of world music to bona-fide insiders (268). Nettl seems to have formed his conservative view of transmission in his early years while studying Persian *dastgah* (an intricate modal tradition) with a teacher who expressed the kind of skepticism that would have made many of my family members proud. "You will never understand this music," he was told in no uncertain terms, after he attempted to chant a passage in traditional style (259). Humbled, Nettl vowed to confine himself to the circumscribed role of theoretical ethnomusicologist. While he might study a style of world music and appreciate the intricacies of its construction, he would never feel comfortable teaching the style himself and spent much of his career cautioning world music students against doing so.

Despite Nettl's warnings, today's ethnomusicology features a wide array of "outsider" scholars who teach *gamelan*, African drumming, north Indian *raga*, and countless other ancient and once far less accessible world music styles with varying degrees of effectiveness and cultural sensitivity. Ethnomusicological study has in many ways mirrored the eclectic ambitions of contemporary classical and popular musicians who liberally borrow from many traditions, ignor-

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ing the admonitions of cautious scholars. The lure of world music is too great for many of its adherents to resist, or as Mark Slobin puts it, “The exotic can be much more powerful than the national or the diasporic, since an imaginary connection that fuels the fires of passion can even drive a person to lifelong commitment” (Slobin 2000: 18).

Actually, this phenomenon, which is not uncommon in revivals, is a salient feature of the American folk revival, a movement that arguably made the neoklezmer phenomenon possible. The folk revival of the 1950s was launched not by mountaineers, but by young New York-based folklore students, only some of whom had southern roots. Groups such as the Kingston Trio “with their colorful short-sleeve Ivy League shirts, close-cropped hair, easy drollery, and unambiguous enthusiasm” (Rosenberg 1993: 45) came to represent the folk culture they ostensibly parodied. As Robert Cantwell points out in his essay “When We Were Good: Class and Culture in the Folk Revival” (included in *Transforming Tradition*, Neil Rosenberg’s anthology of essays on music revivals), American folksong revivalists set the stage for later ethnic music revivals:

They inspired thousands of young middle-class men and women to learn folksongs, to accompany themselves on folk instruments, particularly the guitar and banjo, to search out and lionize authentic folk musicians, and finally to dress, groom, speak, comport themselves and even attempt to think in ways suggestive of the rural, ethnic, proletarian, and other marginal cultures to whom folksong was supposed to belong. In this process, many kinds of music that at other periods had been commercially performed and recorded, such as blues, old-time and bluegrass music—music chiefly of southern or southeastern rural origin—came to be regarded as folk music and enjoyed a revival on that basis, to be followed in the next decade by Irish *ceili*, Klezmer, and other ethnic musics. (Cantwell 1993: 36)

The klezmer world is a perfect place to question the lines between musical insider and outsider, and in truth, I still think it is unclear exactly where the boundaries fall. Yet one thing is certain: Studies of Jewish communal life have generally been done by Jews. In his book, *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry*, Jack Kugelmass takes note of the likely reason for the often self-reflexive nature of much American Jewish ethnography:

It does seem rather clear that it is integrally related to the general issue of ethnic identity as an alternative to hegemonic ideologies, or, as Michael Fischer argues in regard to ethnicity, “as alternatives to the melting pot rhetoric of assimilation and to the bland, neutral style of the conformist 1950s.” Indeed, the search for that identity is particularly acute within the postmodern world of fragmented cultural universes. In this sense, the personal quest for authenticity and communal identity needs to



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compete deep within the heart of the anthropologist with interests that are purely scientific. (Kugelmass 1988: 2)

I would contend that the same argument holds true for Jewish musicians involved in the klezmer revival. The movement fulfills the needs of its proponents on several levels, with its music functioning both as a topic for serious study and as a pathway to personal musical identity. In any event, this has certainly been true for me.

As in all of the revivals mentioned earlier, it did not take long for those revitalizing klezmer to eclipse their mentors in both popularity and financial success. From my insider/outsider position, I cannot help but notice the discrepancy between the high status that was achieved by those who played the retooled music of the neo klezmer movement and the much lower status generally accorded the older generation of Jewish wedding musicians.<sup>7</sup> It is in the context of the klezmer revitalization movement that Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett labeled klezmer a “heritage” music, defining heritage as “a mode of cultural production in the present with recourse to the past,” which can add value to a commodity. In her opinion, heritage could not “be lost and found and always remains accessible” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 37).

On further reflection, I have come to realize that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of heritage had little resonance with the view of klezmer music espoused by many of my informants in the period of my early research (before the “revival”). When I found out about klezmer music, I was promptly told that there was no way for me to learn it. My uncle Jerry articulated this view well: to him, the only way to become a klezmer was to be “born into it.” Only now do I understand that being a klezmer was a much larger issue than the simple act of playing the music. If there were no longer dimly lit catering halls, endless family weddings, or dances that degenerated into fistfights, then there was no longer a klezmer tradition to be born into. Even though four of my uncles, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather had all grown up performing the music (providing me with at least enough of a bloodline to do interviews), the torch could not really be passed on to my generation. As a part of a culture that had been both abandoned and destroyed, in Jerry’s view, the music would have to rest in peace.

The lesson I learned from Jerry Adler was that an abandoned heritage is not a true heritage at all. Many of the musicians I interviewed had watched klezmer music go from something in vogue to something old-fashioned but serviceable and then to something useful only as the hokiest form of nostalgia. It did not even seem within the realm of possibility that it could be in vogue again or that the culture of my great-uncle’s generation would find any resonance with younger performers, and to a large extent those older musicians were right: What we revived bore little resemblance to their culture. For those of the older generation, the neo-klezmer movement was merely a curiosity.

It fell to me and to several other independently motivated activists to create a context in which what we saw as the klezmer heritage (basically, the music



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itself) could become available again.<sup>8</sup> As new “revival” contexts took hold, klezmer splintered into such diverse communities as mainstream, fusion, downtown, feminist, classical, historical performance, religious, and even “tourist-oriented.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, klezmer did become a “heritage” music,<sup>10</sup> but one might argue that it did so at the expense of its roots.

Of course, the revitalization movement’s klezmer is not, to paraphrase some ironic downtown New York hype, “my grandfather’s klezmer.” While offshoots of the movement (including many trendy hybrid forms) have become well known as far away as Japan and New Zealand, the story of traditional klezmer as performed in American cities has remained shrouded in mystery. Except for the folklorized accounts found in Yiddish fiction, almost nothing has been written on the music and its performers that focuses on its formational performance context—the music of Jewish weddings and celebrations.<sup>11</sup> Even when older performers have been interviewed and quoted, they quickly segue to their careers as recording, radio, and concert musicians<sup>12</sup> to project more “respectable” public personas. Their deliberate obfuscation of their years in the wedding scene has only further fueled my desire to learn the real story.

I had noticed that portrayals of klezmerim in Jewish folklore, including in short stories by Peretz (1947), Rabinovitch (1979), and Singer (1982), tended to reinforce derogatory and romantic stereotypes, including images of Jewish wedding musicians as itinerants who engage in every possible deviant practice, a conclusion that my research has in many ways corroborated. Yet the idea of musicians’ lives as models of deviant behavior is not at all limited to Jewish literature. It is a common theme in African American music history, especially evident in Keil 1966 and explored in detail in *Outsiders* by Howard S. Becker (1963), who studied the culture of club-date musicians in Chicago to obtain his data. He notes that the musicians’ culture is built firmly on a dichotomy that, in the language of the 1950s, separated musicians from “squares”:

The musician is conceived of as an artist who possesses a mysterious artistic gift setting him apart from all other people. Possessing this gift, he should be free from control by outsiders who lack it . . . This attitude is generalized into a feeling that musicians are different from and better than other kinds of people . . . An extreme of this view is the belief that only musicians are sensitive and unconventional enough to be able to give real sexual satisfaction to a woman . . . The family . . . as an institution that demands that the musician behave conventionally, creates problems for him of conflicting pressures, loyalties and self-conceptions. His response to these problems has a decisive effect on the duration and direction of his career. (Becker 1963: 85–87)

This attitude is precisely the problem of the klezmer. Within his<sup>13</sup> own world he sees himself as a superior individual with great gifts and extraordinary powers, but within Jewish and general society he is part of the underclass, a

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legion of what Peter Stallybrass and Alon White call the “low domain.” In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, they explore why societies feel the need to define themselves by differentiating between high and low, polite and vulgar, civilized and grotesque and branding those consigned to the lower echelons with an aura of disgust. This is not to deny that society does, in some way, relish what such individuals bring to it:

But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as “Other,” return as the object of nostalgia, longing, and fascination. The forest, the fair, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the seaside resort: all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire. (Stallybrass and White 1986: 192)

It is not much of a stretch to add the bandstand to this list of venues. Still, according to Stallybrass and White, looking at any type of underclass poses a problem to the academic:

These contents, or domains, are subject to misrecognition and distortion precisely because idealization and phobic avoidance have systematically informed their discursive history. Thus, on the one hand, these sites have been singled out by some social historians in a nostalgic and privileged way as the ever vanishing trace of real “community.” But this precisely duplicates, at the level of academic discourse, the object of analysis. On the other hand, “rigorous theory” has tended to look down upon “mere content” as obvious, crude, and vulgar, redeemable only through a process of abstraction and refinement. (Stallybrass and White 1986: 193)

Perhaps it is this fear of less savory elements that has kept the full story of klezmer and many other aspects of Jewish culture from public view. This may explain why Jewish scholars have also paid relatively little attention to the *bad-khones* (folk poetry) tradition and to the *shund* (popular or, more literally, “trash”) Yiddish theater. While some attention has been paid to Jewish folksong, it has mostly come from writers based in sociology or cultural anthropology. Indeed, the prejudice has also been geographic: Jewish historians have always tended to favor the scholarly Jewish heritage of the northern Jewish settlements of Poland and Lithuania over the folk religion and culture of the more southern Ukrainian and Moldavian Jews (Tabak 1990: 4). One must look to fiction for windows into the psyche of Jews from less erudite backgrounds.

The scholarly focus in the field of Jewish music studies has been similarly narrow. An antisecular bias figures prominently in the writings of the pioneering Jewish musicologist, Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, who nevertheless included a well-researched and useful chapter on klezmorim in one of his books. Idelsohn’s overall conception of Jewish music was inherently intertwined with Jewish reli-

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gious society, which he regarded as its only true source. He expressed this viewpoint in his seminal work, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*: “Life as the Jew visualized it has no room for what is commonly denominated ‘secular,’ therefore Jewish folksongs are rooted in the sacred. . . . Sacred song has been folk song and folk song, sacred song. Jewish folk song nestles in the shadow of religion and ethics” (Idelsohn 1929: 358).

There is a lot to be said for this viewpoint. Indeed, many of the signifiers (most important and unique characteristics) of Jewish musical performance might well be linked to religious expression, and in many cases, religious songs have become templates for later secular songs, although the reverse has also been true.

Yet, traditional Jewish music scholarship has also often carried with it a rampant disregard for hybridized diasporic traditions that can be directly traced to Idelsohn’s solidly Zionist ideology: “The Jews have never been divorced from the land where they developed from nomadic tribes into a nation. The topography, the atmosphere, the very soil of Palestine, was molded into their faith, their thought, their spiritual culture, and folklore” (Idelsohn 1929: 357).

Other musicologists (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) were quick to accept Idelsohn’s obsession with Israel as Jewish music’s “wellspring,” ignoring the possibility that, given the Jews’ thousand-plus years’ sojourn in various parts of Europe, other templates might be more relevant. For many years, none questioned his discovery of “timeless unifying principles” in Jewish melody or his tracing of these principles back to “biblical-era” sources. Even today, many Jewish music scholars follow Idelsohn’s dicta, downplaying the “Jewishness” of diasporic traditions.<sup>14</sup>

Other Jewish music scholars chose to see the klezmer tradition as a relic embedded deeply in the Jews’ distant European past. As recently as 1975, cantorial scholar Macy Nulman, wrote the following: “The klezmer, an itinerant musician fulfilling the artistic and cultural needs of the Jewish community, appeared in Central, Western, and Eastern Europe until about the middle of the nineteenth century” (Nulman 1975: 138–139). He goes on to state that, although itinerant and musically illiterate, klezmerim “were the forerunners of numerous Jewish interpretative musicians (classical violinists and pianists), and important in the development of European art music” (140). By 1929, Idelsohn was already writing about klezmerim in the past tense, as did Amnon Shiloah as recently as 1992. It is as if the emergence of a Jewish art music tradition rendered the klezmer tradition intrinsically obsolete.

The first Jewish ethnomusicologist to squarely challenge the Jewish music scholars’ view of klezmer was Moshe Beregovski, head of the ethnomusicological section of the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences from 1930 until it was closed in 1948 (the exact dates are in some dispute). As Mark Slobin writes in the introduction to his translation of a collection of Beregovski’s essays and musical transcriptions, “[Beregovski recontextualized] the Jews as a part of a rich inter-ethnic musical network within a given region” (Beregovski 1982: 3). Unlike many Jewish ethnographers who

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preceded him, Beregovski created his own detailed musical transcriptions, and in contrast to his Jewish music studies predecessors and contemporaries, he was deeply interested in the Jewish informant's entire cross-cultural repertoire. His collecting expeditions in the southern Ukraine led to the publication of several pivotal volumes, first published in Russian in the 1930s and, more recently, translated into English and published in the United States. In this passage from the introduction to his 1934 folksong collection, he takes issue with the more mainstream Jewish music studies approach:

The zealous adherents and preservers of the liturgical musical tradition condemned Jewish secular folklore to death and did not want to believe that this useless “Yiddish musical jargon” lay at the basis of Jewish “national music culture.” The only Jewish music worthy of “regeneration” according to the clerical Zionists (Idelsohn, et al.) was the “lofty liturgical melody.” (Beregovski 1982: 22)<sup>15</sup>

Beregovski modeled his work on that of K. V. Kvitka, a Ukrainian ethnomusicologist for whom he had great respect and with whom he worked for many years. He based his methodology on Kvitka's interethnic model for collecting local materials. Beregovski's ideas and research propelled Soviet Jewish ethnomusicology in the direction of documenting the co-territorial sharing of melodies. This concept formed the basis for the subsequent comparative work of a fellow Soviet, scholar Max Goldin, whose pioneering article, “On Musical Connections between Jews and the Neighboring Peoples of Eastern and Western Europe” (Goldin 1989), contains compelling examples of bridges between Jewish, Romanian, and Ukrainian music traditions. More recently, lectures by Americans Walter Zev Feldman (2000, 2001) and Martin Schwartz (2000) expanded on this approach, emphasizing klezmer's Greek, Turkish, and Rom connections. Intercultural connections also figure into Joel Rubin's 1998 research on Israel's *Haredi* (religious) klezmerim and Walter Zev Feldman's observations in a 1998 lecture about klezmerim in Galicia.

Klezmer history has been examined by several Israeli writers, including Joachim Stutschewsky (1959), a scion of a klezmer family who gathered together a large amount of information on the klezmer traditions of pre-state Palestine. A fellow Israeli, Isaac Rivkind (1960), expends a great deal of energy in his klezmer volume challenging Stutschewsky's methodology, and Joachim Braun (1987) contextualizes much of the older European literature on klezmer, mostly exploring the work of the descendants of klezmer families who became active in various branches of Russian concert music. In his 1998 CD titled “The Klezmer Tradition in the Land of Israel,” Yaakov Mazor documents the repertoire of klezmerim that play for the *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic) community.

I have chosen to take an ethnographic approach to Philadelphia's klezmer scene to highlight cross-cultural connections and bring social, cultural, and historical issues to light that mere musical analysis will tend to overlook. I also

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consider it important to establish a concrete relationship between a musical world and the society that spawned it. In their 1955 classic, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro bring the jazz scene vividly alive by including Earl Hines's memories of gangsters, Bunk Johnson's descriptions of "real" jam sessions, and Jelly Roll Morton's eloquent commentaries on nude dancing in New Orleans. In *Only a Miner*, Archie Green (1972) brings coal miner's ballads to life by showing how they relate to actual historical events. In *Last Night's Fun*, Ciaran Carson (1997) takes the reader deep into the world of Irish (Galway-style) *ceili* (music sessions) to meet the musicians, taste the food and liquor, feel the passage of time, and get into the spirit of Celtic folklore—presenting a convincing argument that listening to a recording is no substitute for experiencing a culture.

Evocative ethnographic writing on vernacular music can also be found in *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray's 1976 work on African American religious and dance music traditions. Here, dance music is given its due as a significant cultural force:

The quality of dance music may actually be of far greater fundamental significance than that of concert music anyway. Dance, after all, not only antedates music, but is also probably the most specific source of music and most of the other art forms as well. . . . Furthermore, dance, according to impressive anthropological data, seems to have been the first means by which human consciousness objectified, symbolized, and stylized its perceptions, conceptions, and feelings. (Murray 1976: 189)

Murray includes other statements about the blues that could easily be applied both to klezmer's bittersweet mood and its significance in Jewish communal celebrations: "Hence the dance hall as temple. . . . Ballroom dances . . . are of their very nature festive occasions . . . but even the most exuberant stomp rendition is likely to contain some trace of sadness as a sobering reminder that life is at bottom, for all the very best of good times, a never-ending struggle" (17).

When music is intertwined with community life it reflects the nature of that life. When it finds its way to the concert hall, its status may become elevated, but its function in the community changes radically:

It provides a showcase for the new and serves as a permanent gallery, so to speak, for the enduring. Moreover, as in the case of the great masterpieces of European church music, it affords opportunities for the music to be heard on its own, apart from its role as an element in a ritual, in other words as a work of art per se. . . . [The concert hall] can serve as a finger-snapping, foot-tapping annex auditorium. (Murray 1976: 183)

Murray points out that concert music is about displaying works of genius, creations of icons. In contrast, the world of the dance musician is a more

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conservative one, a world of folk expression drawing on habit and time-honored tradition:

The assumption that folk expression is the unalloyed product of a direct stimulus/response interaction with natural environmental forces is fallacious. Folk expression is nothing if not conventional in the most fundamental sense of the word. Far from being spontaneous, as is so often supposed, it is formal. It is of its very nature traditional. The exact opposite of unadulterated invention, growing out of the creative ingenuity of individuals uninhibited by regulations and unencumbered by the whims of fashion, it conforms to rigorously restrictive local, regional, which is to say provincial, ground rules that have been so completely established and accepted as to require little if any enforcement as such beyond initiation and apprenticeship instruction. (Murray 1976: 203–204)

So much of traditional klezmer history is precisely what Murray describes—the learning of provincial ground rules through initiation and apprenticeship. Individuals stretch the rules according to their creative abilities, but the greatest barometer of change is approval or rejection by the community. Indeed, for the dance musician, it is the community that primarily initiates the need for innovation, not the musician.

In working on this project, I have learned that it is only through the understanding of an intact community's entire operating system that one can truly gain insight into the workings of music in culture. Ethnomusicological and cross-cultural approaches have done much to open up avenues of research into klezmer, but the fundamental relationship between the American incarnation of ethnic musics and the immigrant communities that created them still remains to be explored. This relationship, in this case between the klezmer tradition and Philadelphia's Jewish community, is precisely what this study is about.

**T**his work is divided into two main sections. The first three chapters focus on klezmer musicians, and Chapters 4 and 5 examine wedding music traditions.

Chapter 1 considers the historical place of the musician in Jewish society, following klezmerim from their origins in medieval Europe through the 1800s. In this chapter I explore the biblical roots of the tensions between musicians and the rabbinical authorities, as entertainers established their role in providing an alternative form of enlightenment for the Jewish community. I then consider the place of music in Jewish society, examining texts that condemn music's potential for engendering moral degeneracy and presenting the restrictions that have traditionally prevented folk performers and entertainers from transcending their underclass status. This chapter also includes insights into the klezmer lifestyle, introducing the reader to both real and folkloric klezmerim. We learn about *klezmerloshn*, the Jewish musicians' secret language; hear about the coarse treat-

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ment that musicians often afforded one another and their patrons; and become acquainted with klezmer's musical transmission process through the memoirs of a nineteenth-century musician. This exploration of klezmer's European roots is essential to understanding the attitudes of and toward the American musicians I discuss later.

Chapters 2 and 3 present the history of Philadelphia's klezmer community. In Chapter 2, I trace klezmer's development from the earliest days of Eastern European immigration through its transformation in the hands of the first American-born generation, paying particular attention to the unique circumstances that made Philadelphia particularly rich as a klezmer scene. We meet transplanted old-world musicians and see how musicians from a younger generation (circa 1920) reconcile their European musical roots with their desire to become American. I also examine the standardization that occurred as Philadelphia's Jewish bandleaders consolidated their repertoire into a singular and unique local canon.

Chapter 3 picks up after World War II, when a second American generation took up a tradition that had, by then, become somewhat of a relic. I look at the competition that emerged between Jewish "society" and "traditional" bandleaders, showing how the demise of traditional musical practices reflected larger trends in post-World War II Jewish society. I also consider the various types of "revival" and "heritage" bands that emerged in Philadelphia beginning in the early 1980s.

Chapter 4 examines the klezmer's musical contribution to Philadelphia's Jewish weddings. This chapter has three sections—beginning with a review of the European Jewish wedding music repertoire, continuing with a look at a typical Philadelphia Jewish wedding circa 1905, and concluding with the actual sequence of musical events at a "standard" mid-twentieth-century Philadelphia wedding (circa 1930–1960).

Chapter 5 focuses entirely on the origins and development of Philadelphia's Russian *Sher medley*, a string of dance tunes that epitomizes the European roots of the traditional American Jewish wedding. I examine how the music played for the *sher* evolved in Philadelphia's Jewish community over the course of more than fifty years, following it through its historical journey as codified versions emerged, small instrumental groupings gave way to larger ones (and, later, to smaller regroupings), older European-style sections became interspersed with more contemporary material, meticulous transcriptions were abandoned in favor of half-remembered fragments, and a gradual decline in interest led to the dance's disappearance and the medley's obsolescence. In the process, I attempt to extract the story that the *sher medley* tells us about the musicians who created it and the community that reveled to it at their celebrations.

In the Epilogue, I discuss my own efforts to reenact a 1940s-style Jewish wedding on the outskirts of Philadelphia, in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, as part of Living Traditions' Klezka in December 2000. Enlisting the help of a local veteran caterer/dance leader and a distinguished group of Philadelphia and New



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York musicians, I staged a celebration almost in real time, replete with a Grand March, phony telegrams, and a twenty-five-minute *mezinke* ceremony, proving that you can go home again, especially when you need to collect some data. And, before I knew it, this exercise took on the life of a real party, with real laughter, real tears, real romance, a fair amount of shtick, and even a little bit of community building. Who knows what might have happened if actual food and liquor had been added to the mix?

Klezmer is a body of music that is once again in circulation in many parts of the world. It provides flavor for film and theatrical scores, family parties, classroom curricula, symphonic pieces, improvisational excursions, and even religious services. But by itself, the music is now often only a symbol, a tease, a keepsake that pays a small deference to a lost world and then takes its place in a contemporary musical culture that has no use for its historical context. Perhaps, by shedding some light on that context, the role of klezmer at community celebrations, I can help foster a deeper understanding of the music as a tradition with thick layers of meaning accumulated on a long journey.