

THE Klezmerim

"Streets of Gold"



When I was small, I would spend Sunday afternoons listening for *klezmerim* — improvising Yiddish musicians. . . . hearing, at the corner, a leaping clarinet and the sweet-and-hot fiddle, I ran to get a place as close . . . as possible.

The music was so joyous that I deeply envied the *klezmerim*, getting paid for having such a good time. It also seemed magical to me (a diligent student of the classical clarinet) that they needed no scores. It was all in their heads, and furthermore, if they played the same tune again, the solos were different the second time. And the third. Like jazz players. . . .

Some of the musicians were young and doubled as jazz players in the *goyishe* nights. Others, older, were full-time Yiddish performers, and a few told me from time to time of the roots of their profession. *Klezmerim* on the highways of the Middle Ages, wandering from Bohemia to Lithuania to Poland, and beyond. And 19th-century *klezmerim* roamed Eastern Europe. . .

By the time I was in my late teens, the *klezmerim* who came to our synagogue were sounding more constrained, not of their own volition but because newlyweds were now more American in their tastes. They wanted ballads and pop novelties, waltzes from the movies, and other "refined" airs. Once in a while, for the benefit of the old folks — who, God knows, still insisted on speaking Yiddish among themselves — the players would let themselves loose. And then the clarinet and the fiddle and the trumpet would intertwine in dizzying spirals and feet would pound and I would close my eyes and grin at the ghosts of my clan in Minsk and Pinsk.

For years now, I had thought the *klezmerim* to be nearly extinct. Oh, some old players must still be boldly wailing in some dwindling Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods, but surely they are the last of their line. Quite surprisingly, however, in a new album — *The Klezmerim/East Side Wedding* — the high-spirited quickeners of my youth have returned. And they are young! Five musicians — who appear to be in their 20s and 30s — have taken up and merrily revived this heritage. . . .

Hard dues and proud roots, romance and even a little ecstasy. They're all in the music of these *klezmerim* of the New World who have somehow found a passage back to the Old.

Nat Hentoff reviewing the first Klezmerim LP "East Side Wedding" (Arhoolie 3006) in *The Nation*.

DI ZILBERNE KHASENE (*The Silver Wedding*)

From the wine-cellars of Bucharest, the alleys of Odessa, and the hashish-dens of Constantinople, wandering musicians blended nineteenth-century Western harmonies and rhythms with ancient Eastern modes to create *klezmer* music. This soulful, defiant Old World jazz came over on the boat with refugees from European oppression and was heard often in the streets of America — streets which, for many, were paved not with gold but with broken backs.

Our arrangement of this wedding *freylekhs* (merry dance) is based on three different recordings made in the 1910s by *klezmer* bands.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-tuba; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Rothfield, Dvorin & Skuse-violins; Raskin-drums, cymbals, woodblock, bells; Brotman-peckhorn)

PAPIROSN (*Cigarettes*)

This song was popularized by "Der Poyets" (The Clown), Herman Yablokoff, whose lyrics told the tale of an orphaned cigarette peddler freezing on a street corner. "Papirosn" long ago entered the folk tradition. Several of us knew variant versions. Our instrumental arrangement reflects this diversity. We begin with an improvised *doina* or lament in Rumanian-Yiddish style. Then we strike up a hot dance-band rendition which includes a version originally done by the great clarinetist Dave Tarras with Abe Ellstein's Orchestra.

The stringed instrument heard prominently here is a *tsimbalom* built by Jozsef V. Schunda of Budapest. Its 35 courses (sets) of strings are struck with a pair of small hand-held wooden hammers with cotton-wrapped tips. When the *tsimbalom* was enlarged and refined from earlier hammered dulcimers a century ago, its distinctive sound soon became an integral feature of urban Hungarian, Slovak, Rumanian, Gypsy, and *klezmer* ensembles.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Bb clarinet; Elmore-tuba; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Raskin-drums, cymbals, woodblock; Dvorin-violin; Brotman-tsimbalom)

MEDYATSINER WALTZ

We culled this lovely waltz from "Tshortkover Rebns Khasene", a wedding suite recorded by Art Shryer's Orchestra in the late 1920s. Amid the tumult of pro-



L to R: Elmore, Raskin, Liberman, Dvorin, Gray, Wishnfsky

cessional marches for the bride and groom, the clop of horses' hooves, and the ribald humor of the *klezmerim* (all crammed onto one side of a ten-inch 78-rpm disc), the wedding jester identified this as the devotional tune of the Medyatsiner Rebb (spiritual community leader.)

(Lieberman-flute; Gray-Bb clarinet; Elmore—tuba; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Rothfield-violin; Hanson—accordion)

MAYN RUE PLATS (*My Resting Place*)

The tailor and writer Morris Rosenfeld chronicled the desperate longings of his fellow sweatshop workers in hundreds of poems which appeared in the Yiddish press from the 1880s to the 1920s. Set to music, many of them entered the folk tradition — some as love songs, others as anthems of the emerging labor movement. "Mayn Rue Plats" is both. Miriam Dvorin learned it from a socialist songbook which belonged to her grandmother.

Nit zukh mikh vu di mirtn grin.
Gefinst mikh dorn nit, mayn shats.
Vu lebns velkn bay mashinen,
Dorn iz mayn rue plats.

Nit zukh mikh vu di feygl zingen.
Gefinst mikh dorn nit, mayn shats.
A shklaf bin ikh vu keytn klingen,
Dorn iz mayn rue plats.

Nit zukh mikh vu fontanen shpritsn.
Gefinst mikh dorn nit, mayn shats.
Vu trem rinen, tseyner kritsn,
Dorn iz mayn rue plats.

Un libstu mikh mit varer libe,
To kum tsu mir, mayn guter shats,
Un hayter oyf mayn harts di tribe
Un makh mir zis mayn rue plats.

Don't look for me where myrtles are green.
You will not find me there, my beloved.
Where lives wither at the machines,
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where the birds sing.
You will not find me there, my beloved.
I am a slave where chains ring,
There is my resting place.

Don't look for me where fountains spray.
You will not find me there, my beloved.
Where tears flow and teeth gnash,
There is my resting place.

And if you love me with true love,
So come to me, my good beloved,
And cheer my gloomy heart
And make sweet my resting place.

(Dvorin-vocal; Skuse-violin; Brotman-bass)

A GLEZELE VAYN (*A Little Glass of Wine*)

Klezmerim often received their pay in the form of alcohol rather than in negotiable currency like *kopecs* or *zlotys*. At such times a military march could end up sounding like a three-day pass.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-tuba; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Rothfield, Dvorin & Skuse-violins; Raskin-drums, cymbals, woodblock; Brotman-peckhorn)

BAYM REBNS SUDE (*At the Rebbe's Meal*)

This is one of the oldest pieces in our repertoire, and we play it as it might have been played by a street band in the days of the Czar. As in the old days, the clarinetist improvises an introduction based both on liturgical modes and on military fanfares, and the other players join in as soon as they recognize the theme. The folk drum heard here is a *baraban* made by hand out of wood, rope, calfskin, and goatskin.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-trombone; Nadezhda-baraban; Wishnfsky-trumpet)

AF SHABES IN VILNA (*On the Sabbath in Vilna*)

This raucous march from an old disc by Abe Schwartz's Orchestra has little to do with the Lithuanian town of Vilna, and even less to do with the Sabbath.

Since *klezmerim* seldom had names for the tunes they played, the titles of their recordings (which conjure up images of wedding gaiety or old country tradition) were almost always chosen arbitrarily in the recording studio.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Bb clarinet; Elmore-trombone; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Raskin-drums, cymbals, woodblock, bells)

SONYA / ANUSHKE

Of all the recordings that Brian Wishnfsky's grandparents played for him years ago in Brooklyn, "Sonya" and "Anushke" were the most memorable. These songs from Czarist Russia enjoyed great popularity here in the 1920s. "Sonya", in fact, had several different sets of lyrics about lost love, Siberian exile, and the experiences of Russian-Jewish immigrants in America.

The hammered dulcimer heard on this track is a *tsambal mik* from Rumania. For several centuries this portable predecessor of the *tsimbalom* provided melodic, rhythmic, and chordal effects in traveling bands of Central and Eastern Europe.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-mandolin; Elmore-tuba, cymbals, drum; Nadezhda-tsambal mik; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Hanson-accordion)

FIREN DI MEKHUTONIM AHEYM (*Leading the In-Laws Home*)

Our source for this elegant tune in the *sirba* rhythm ("limping" 3/8 from Rumania) is a recording made in the mid-1920s by clarinet master Naftule Brandwine, whose career was brilliant and brief. We've been told that he used to perform with his back turned to his listeners, to prevent anyone from copying his technique.

(Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-trombone; Rothfield-lead violin; Skuse-violin; Brotman-tsimbalom)

LEBEDIK UN FREYLEKH (*Lively and Merry*)

At a traditional wedding the jester or bandleader would frequently shout, "*Lebedik! Lebedik! Freylekh!*" to urge the musicians on to excesses of speed and virtuosity. This is one of our favorite *klezmer* tunes and if you don't dance to it, you'll never find out why.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-trombone; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Raskin-drums, cymbals, woodblock; Dvorin-violin)

FREYLEKHS FUN L.A. (*Merry Tune From L.A.*)

The band learned this nineteenth-century *klezmer* tune from David Gray, who learned it from fiddler Mark Simos, who learned it from his neighbor Israel Lakretz, a mandolin-playing retired farmer born in Russia and now living in Los Angeles.

(Lieberman-flute; Gray-sax; Elmore-trombone, drums, cymbals; Nadezhda-tsambal mik; Wishnfsky-trumpet)

BESSARABYANKE (*Girl From Bessarabia*)

We all seem to have always known this Russian Gypsy melody in one form or another. Our title comes from a version which made the rounds of Continental cafes after the 1917 Revolution, recalling the fine wines and wild women of Bessarabia.

(Lieberman-sax; Gray-Eb clarinet; Elmore-trombone; Nadezhda-tsambal mik; Wishnfsky-trumpet; Rothfield-violin; Hanson-accordion)

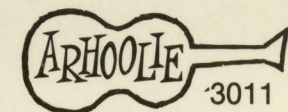
TAXIM (*Improvisation*)

A plaintive *doina* and dance melody originally recorded over 50 years ago by violinist Jacob Gegna.

(Skuse-violin; Brotman-tsimbalom)

All of the arrangements on this album were created improvisationally by the performing musicians under the direction of Lev Liberman and David Julian Gray in the style of the *klezmerim* who recorded between 1905 and 1931.

The performers, ranging in age from 23 to 35, have never forgotten the remnants of *klezmer* style which they heard as children. They consider themselves fortunate to have been able to trace the *klezmer* tradition back to its "Golden Age".



DI ZILBERNE KHASENE

(The Silver Wedding) (3)

PAPIROSN (Cigarettes) (3)

MEDYATSINER WALTZ (1)

MAYN RUE PLATS

(My Resting Place) (3)

A GLEZELE VAYN

(A Little Glass of Wine) (3)

BAYM REBNS SUDE

(At the Rebbe's Meal) (2)

AF SHABES IN VILNA

(On the Sabbath in Vilna) (3)

SONYA / ANUSHKE (2)

FIREN DI MEKHUTONIM AHEYM

(Leading the In-Laws Home) (3)

LEBEDIK UN FREYLEKH

(Lively and Merry) (3)

FREYLEKHS FUN L.A.

(Merry Tune From L.A.) (2)

BESSARABYANKE

(Girl From Bessarabia) (2)

TAXIM (Improvisation) (3)

THE KLEZMERIM:

Lev Liberman: alto sax & flute

David Julian Gray: Boehm Bb & Albert Eb

clarinets, mandolin & alto sax

Rick Elmore: bass trombone, tuba, bass drum & cymbals

Brian Wishnfsky: trumpet

Nadezhda: tsambal mik & baraban

Susie Rothfield: violin

Miriam Dvorin: violin & vocal

John Raskin: percussion

with:

David Skuse: violin

Lew Hanson: accordion

Stuart Brotman: tsimbalom, peckhorn, & string bass

Produced by The Klezmerim and
Chris Strachwitz

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