Icons of Ethnicity: Pictorial Themes in Commercial Euro-American Music

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Europeans who immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have produced a large number of artifacts that contain pictures. These illustrations can serve as a gateway into the internal ethnic world that groups construct as part of their self-conception. Of all these icons, the ones associated with music are particularly powerful in symbolic value, as music (along with food) is one of the chief markers of identity among Euro-American ethnic groups. In recent decades, Old World languages have tended to wane as definers, and religious choice has taken on a somewhat neutral value as the notion of cultural

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pluralism has advanced. Instead, a secular ethnicity based on the manipulation of commonly recognized symbols prevails among the groups we are discussing, for whom ethnic identity is largely a voluntary matter. For those marked off by American society due to appearance (Afro-, Asian-, Latin-, and Caribbean-Americans) ethnicity is much more involuntary, and the discussion of iconography takes on a quite different meaning.

I will begin my discussion by citing my first work on ethnic iconography, a study of the cover illustrations of sheet music produced by the Jews for their own consumption during the peak decades of immigration, the 1890s through 1920s[1]. Having established a few basic iconographic themes, I will then turn to a different musical artifact, the record album cover, one of the prime symbolic emblems of ethnic identity in the last three decades as the long-playing record became the dominant form of music packaging. We will look at the Jews again, and then at discs produced by Polish-Americans for comparison. I cannot claim a refined methodology for this approach to iconography, as I developed it intuitively by close observation of a specific body of materials; comparative materials being nonexistent, it is hard to be comfortable with any generalizations. What I proposed for the sheet music material, and am putting forward here regarding record jacket illustrations, is the notion that careful study of this sort of visual imagery can lead one to much larger issues of ethnic improvisation in the realm of expressive culture.

Turning to the sheet music examples, our first illustration (*fig. 1*) is ›The Titanic, or The Watery Grave‹, a 1912 Yiddish-language song from the major publisher of the period, Hebrew Publishing Co. The image of the great ship sinking is taken directly from the standard newspaper drawing of the day, and is not at all ethnic. The very idea of having a Titanic song is hardly Jewish, as nearly 200 songs were written about the disaster, many of them as part of a competition sponsored by a song-publishing company. On the other hand, there is distinctly in-group imagery present: the embracing couple being crowned by the angel. This added visual component directly illustrates the song text, which runs parallel to the images. Similar to Titanic songs in most respects, this Yiddish variant includes the story of Isidor and Ida Straus, the prominent Jewish passengers whom we see on the cover; Straus owned the world's largest department store, Macy's in New York. Ida Straus refused to get into the life boats with the other women and went down with her husband, and the song praises her self-sacrifice as a model of conjugal fidelity. The »Titanic« sheet music cover, then, represents our first pictorial theme: the domestication of mainstream imagery by an ethnic group. For the Jews, this is merely part of a long-term cultural pattern. For example, the classic Yiddish-language ballads of Europe often take a Christian theme or a plot related to the life of the nobility and turn it into suitably Jewish material by situating the narrative in a family context; thus, the wicked Lady So-and-So becomes a mother-in-law[2].

Our second theme also involves the dialectic between ethnic group and mainstream, a basic fact of social life. Recognizing one's ethnicity involves a two-part process: maintaining ethnic boundaries or choosing to tear them down in the face of mainstream pressure. A third process, having the mainstream define an ethnic boundary for you, largely in the form of stereotyping and caricature, lies beyond the scope of my discussion here, though it has its own iconography[3].

1 For a full discussion, see Mark Slobin, Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants (Urbana/Illinois 1982).

2 For a full discussion, see Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, ›International Motifs in the Yiddish Ballad‹, in: For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday: Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature and Society (The Hague 1964), pp. 209–228, especially 211–214.

3 This process applies to voluntary and involuntary ethnics alike. For a good discussion of pictures of Afro-American music used by the record industry, see Jeff Todd Titon, Downhome Blues (Urbana/Illinois 1977), especially pp.

Fig. 1

Fig. 1

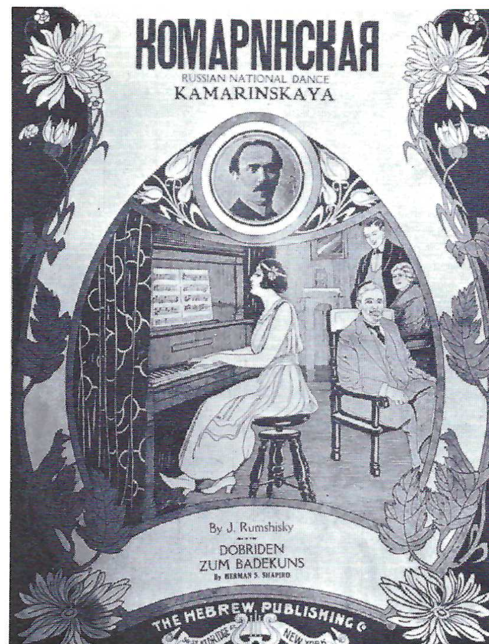

Fig. 2

Sheet music is a good barometer of mainstream pressure, as the whole notion of sheet music, an item to be taken home and reproduced as performance on the parlor piano, comes from the heart of general popular culture and musical consumerism. *Fig. 2* shows a Jewish cover illustration that has been lifted straight from the mainstream popular music industry[4]. If you look closely, you can see a small hat added to the old gentleman, the only bow to ethnicity. Surrounding this purely stylized American image of the good middle-class girl at the piano with satisfied family is a wealth of detail about an ethnic song[5]. This information – publisher, title, composer's name – is visually marginal to the central image, which can be interpreted as calling on the ethnic to remove internal boundaries and join the mainstream. In short, this is an icon of upward musical mobility, our second theme.

Our third theme is the internal self-conception an ethnic group develops in America as revealed through iconography. Through an examination of persistent imagery, contrasted with the depiction of other ethnic groups, one can gain insights into the way the immigrant-era Jews thought about themselves. A good place to start is a sheet music cover produced by Jewish immigrants illustrating Rumanian music. If they wanted to hear the Balkan music they loved they had to publish it themselves, since there was no Rumanian-American sheet music industry. The cover[6] is completely faithful, even ethnographic, in its depiction of Rumanian shepherd music,

225–269. Even presumably mainstream white Americans can be subjected to the same process if they are rural »backwoods« musicians; see the ongoing feature entitled ›Graphics‹ by Archie Green in: John Edwards Memorial Quarterly, one of the inspirations for my own work on iconography of American popular music.

4 I am grateful to Henry Sapoznik for the identification of this image as a borrowing from mainstream American sheet music.

5 For a thorough discussion of the upward social mobility aspect of the parlor piano and its music in American life, see Arthur Loesser, Men, Women and Pianos (New York 1954).

6 See Slobin (footnote 1), fig. 13.

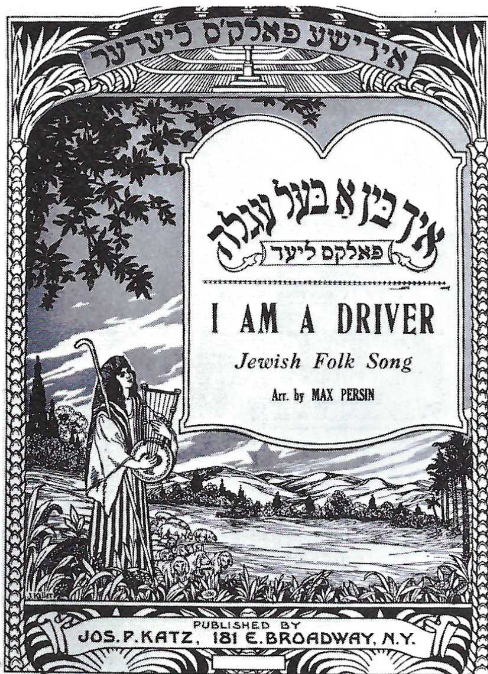

Fig. 3

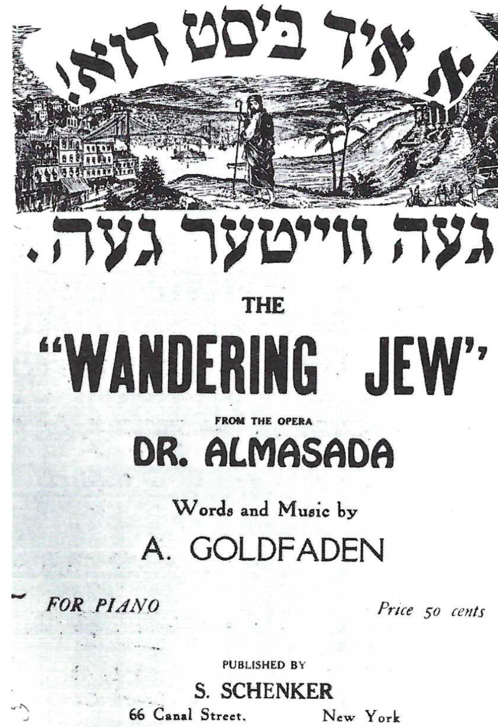

Fig. 4

showing two peasants playing the correct musical instruments. Even the orthography of the title, ›Album Musica Română‹, has the correct diacritical marks. Now, if one were to make a comparable sheet music series of Eastern European Jewish folk music, what should it look like? The answer is a bit surprising. The image of the self (*fig. 3*) turns out to be biblical, not ethnographic. We see the Jewish shepherdess with a lyre and a Star of David on the horizon, all encircled by sheaves of wheat, while a menorah is worked into the upper margin. Now, to be convinced that this is not merely an accidental self-conceptualization and that a consistent imagery exists, one must find the imagery repeated. In fact, both the shepherd and the biblical setting recur in numerous sheet music covers of the period. A fine example of the theme depicts the biblical figure poised between ancient ruins of the Holy Land on the right and New York, with the Brooklyn Bridge, on the left (*fig. 4*)[7]. A river, serving as the Jordan on one side and the East River on the other, meanders across the picture. With the Torah strapped to his back and looking over his shoulder, the figure of the wandering Jew stands between worlds. The self-identity as biblical, rather than Eastern European, is clear, confirming the consistency of this internally generated image.

To round out this initial survey of a few basic themes, we can add a fourth: the emergence of the ethnic star performer as symbol of in-group music-making and self-identification (see *fig. 5*)[8]. Here the expressive image of Jennie Goldstein has pushed the song and publication data to the

7 ibidem, fig. 10.
8 For further discussion of this issue, see ibidem, pp. 173–175.

Fig. 5

margins of viewer consciousness; she has become the main vehicle both for marketing the songsheet product and for group identity. Increasingly, the star stands for the group in all aspects of American popular culture, ranging from the athlete and the entertainer through the musician. This process begins well back in the nineteenth century with the ascendancy of Irish performers and boxers, continues through white and black minstrel show singers, and seamlessly translates to the newer arrivals such as the Jews in the early twentieth century. The marketing of star imagery naturally intensifies as the hit song becomes the centerpiece of the music industry, transferring from sheet music to record jacket covers as the showcase technology shifts.

With this brief background for further analysis, let us move on to recent times and the record jacket illustrations. In the present short essay, I will try to concentrate on the basic pictorial themes already established, but of course this should not be taken as an attempt to show methodological, not historic continuity, since the audience and marketing of 1970s ethnic records differ markedly from the sheet music situation just described.

We will begin our examination of the Jewish material with a discussion of the emergence of a distinctive musical style and set of musicians who, since 1977, have dominated the secular ethnic music culture. That year saw the appearance of the first record album of what has been labeled klezmer music. Young Jewish musicians who had played professionally a variety of American music, ranging from folk music and bluegrass through jazz and Balkan dance styles, discovered their own ethnic tradition of lively dance tunes, originally played in Europe by wandering minstrels called klezmorim (plural of klezmer, the Yiddish-language term)[9]. They decided to celebrate this tradition, particularly as they rediscovered it on the American commercial recordings of the period between the two world wars. The pioneering band, from Berkeley, California, appropriately called itself the Klezmorim. *Fig. 6* shows their first record album cover[10]. It features a drawing of anonymous European-looking musicians, perhaps representing a collective, mythic past. The album is titled ›East Side Wedding‹, referring to the Lower East Side, the early Jewish immigrant neighborhood of New York City. Thus, in this very first iconographic example for the klezmer movement, both Europe and America are acknowledged as sponsors of the emerging style.

The record notes on the back quite specifically date the ideal time to which the band harks back: »Neglected manuscripts and forgotten 78 rpm recordings are your ticket to the union halls, cabarets and proletarian weddings of 1927«, a year which was indeed the high point of the commercial recording of the genre. The band speaks to the tradition on a »disc-to-disc« basis but likes to think of itself as belonging personally to the tradition, as does the romanticizing cover illustration creating an artificial genealogy which is typical of the reinterpretation of American ethnic music:

> Our own checkered musical backgrounds have to some extent paralleled those of the original klezmorim. Like them, we learned our craft playing with small bands in bars and cafes, at dance parties, and on the streets.

On their second album, the Klezmorim made their self-conception more explicit[11]. The disc is titled ›Streets of Gold‹, clearly referring to the usual immigrant myth of America as the land where the streets were paved with gold. The cover features a drawing commissioned from the

9 For fuller discussion of the klezmer movement, see Mark Slobin, ›»Klezmer« Music: An American Ethnic Genre‹, in: Yearbook for Traditional Music (1984), pp. 34–41.

10 The Klezmorim, ›East Side Wedding‹ (Arhoolie 3006, 1976). The two quotations below are from the anonymous liner notes on the back of the album.

11 The Klezmorim, ›Streets of Gold‹ (Arhoolie 3011, 1978).

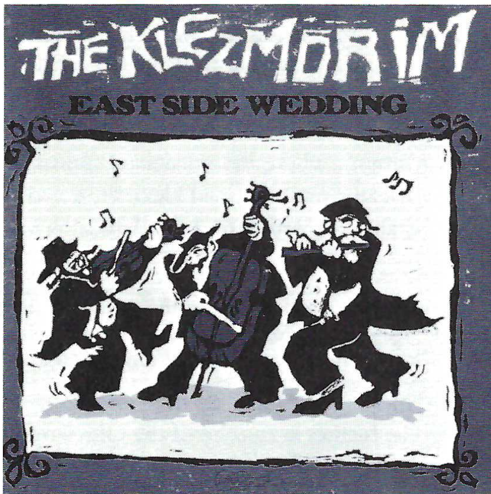

Fig. 6

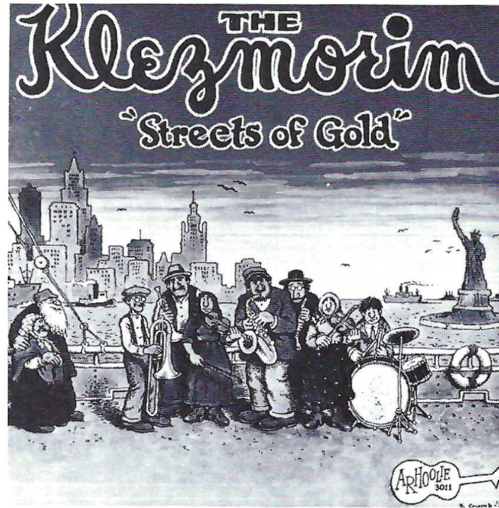

Fig. 7

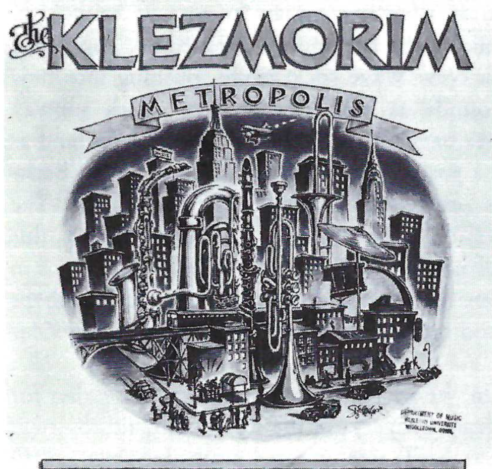

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

very popular California anti-establishment cartoonist R. Crumb, whose work for rock musicians and youth magazines was famous at the time (*fig. 7*). We see the band caricatured as immigrants arriving in New York, creating a sense of irony through the contrast of the reality of their hip California counter-culture identity with a self-conception of themselves as latter-day musical immigrants. On the back of the album there is a photograph of the band members in their everyday Berkeley backyard surroundings. The depiction of musicians on the same artifact in a self-created, professional persona and as everyday citizens is an old American tradition; there is a well-known 1850s image of the Virginia Minstrels which depicts the entertainers in their blackface stage appearance above and as respectable white citizens below[11a].

11a See e.g. Edw. LeRoy Rice, Monarchs of Minstrelsy from »Daddy« Rice to Date (New York: Kenny, 1911), p. 21: »The Virginia Serenaders 1843«.

The next two albums of the Klezmorim extended their identity as the band changed its self-definition. Following their success in establishing a market for national tours and the emergence of competing bands in the klezmer style, the group began to reach out for new markets and to broaden their iconographic base. The ›Metropolis‹[12] album cover of 1981 (*fig. 8*) shows the band's instruments as New York skyscrapers in a 1930s milieu, an environment confirmed by a change of clothing in the photograph on the back of the album, where the musicians appear in gangster clothes. The thirties are about the time when the Klezmorim redefined klezmer music as »Jewish jazz« in their advertisements and concert programs, in order to appeal to a wider audience. According to the liner notes:

> on the streetcorners of the metropolis, in mighty theatre orchestras, and finally in the studios of the fledgling recording industry, klezmorim blended their age-old instrumental tradition with the innovations of the Jazz Age to create a sound unrivaled in its rowdiness, passion, and tenderness.

Both ›East Side Wedding‹ and ›Metropolis‹ present New York City as the homeland of klezmer music, but we are dealing with two New Yorks. The former is an echo of the Old World, with its lively European-clad musicians and weddings, while the latter is the ethnically nonspecific »metropolis« melting-pot, to which the Jews add their distinctive voice, but into which they dissolve. Imagery and liner notes concur in presenting this impression of a conceptual shift – yet we are dealing with records produced only a few years apart by a single band.

Finally, with the ›Notes from Underground‹ album[13], the Klezmorim pursued the pop image even further (*fig. 9*). Here they look rather like a New Wave rock group, pushing into new pictorial territory. The visual pun on »underground« as meaning the New York subway complements a shift toward self-conception as »art« band rather than mainstream band and as present-day stars rather than figures representing a past tradition. There is virtually no back-cover commentary for this album, which includes »exotic« jazz items (»Egyptian Ella«; »The Mooche«) as well as Americanized klezmer tunes (»Yiddisher Charleston«). Interestingly, this album has been reissued in France, where the cover has been changed to show the musicians in cartoon style with their instruments growing from their heads, a more generic idea perhaps derived from the spirit of the ›Metropolis‹ cover and more in keeping with the band's outsider status in Europe.

Summarizing the developement of the Klezmorim, we see the first theme discussed earlier for the sheet music material, domestication of mainstream imagery, in the R. Crumb and the rock band imagery. The latter also illustrates an attempt at theme two, upward musical mobility. Our third theme, the notion of a stable in-group set of iconographic assumptions, is somewhat lacking here, which is entirely suitable for a very new, improvisatory ethnic musical style searching for its niche in both the in-group and mainstream musical landscape. The fourth theme proposed earlier, star billing, is suggested by the ›Underground‹ album cover.

Meanwhile, other bands working in the same genre both confirmed these trends and expanded the pictorial vocabulary to reflect their own ideology of ethnic music-making. The New York group Kapelye made its self-conception very clear with its first album cover in 1981 (*fig. 10*)[14], which unmistakably shows the band as a link between past and future, through a rainbow bridge (a rather unsuitable and unintended Wagnerian reference) which links Eastern Europe to America. The Old World, on the right, is under the word »past« and America, on the left, below the word »future« in the album title ›Future & Past‹. On the back, the band's name is given in its

12 The Klezmorim, ›Metropolis‹ (Flying Fish Records FF 258, 1981).
13 The Klezmorim, ›Notes from Underground‹ (Flying Fish Records FF 322, 1984).
14 Kapelye, ›Future & Past‹ (Flying Fish Records FF 249, 1981).

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Hebrew-character version on the right and roman on the left, continuing the imagery; that the band appears with the same photograph on front and back indicates a strong unity of purpose. Over the back photograph is this message: »this album is dedicated to our families who have taught us that our future is our Jewish past«, cementing the implication of the imagery that this band is particularly concerned with its self-identity and sense of lineage.

The cover of ›Future & Past‹ pairs very nicely with a sheet music cover cited above (*fig. 4*), which portrays the Old World as biblical landscape on the right and New York on the left, showing unconscious continuity in iconography. However, the fact that here the Old World is drawn ethnographically, as Eastern Europe, rather than mythically, as ancient times, shows a distinct shift in group consciousness. Once again, iconography provides a clue to self-conceptualization. In the case of Kapelye, we can be sure that the cover reflects the group's feelings, since the group leader's brother was enlisted to provide the illustration. In other cases, the jacket illustration is forced on the group by the record company[15].

Kapelye's second album shows a strong move toward a purely American identification. The album, ›Levine and His Flying Machine‹[16], is named for a 1927 Jewish-American popular song about Charles A. Levine, who followed Charles A. Lindbergh in a trans-Atlantic flight. Levine's flight to Berlin, outdoing Lindbergh's Paris destination, was comic – he and his pilot lost their way and ran out of fuel before they reached their goal – and this way of viewing the past is stressed in the cover, which shows the band in front of an old »flying machine« manned by two aviators. This illustration is an ironic tribute to the group's grandfathers and their sometimes stumbling attempts at successful Americanization. Suitably, there are commentaries on the past in the songs on the record as well. In one case the group's founder, Henry Sapoznik, has added a new verse to a 1923 Yiddish song to update it. The old song is a hymn of praise to the Russian Revolution, seen then as a move toward liberation from the czarist yoke. Sapoznik's new stanza, in Yiddish, urges the superpowers to put an end to nuclear weapons. Here are the refrain of the old song and the beginning of the newly composed verse in English translation:

15 This tension between group and producer over graphics typifies mainstream popular music as well as ethnic productions. Research in this area would provide valuable insights into the role that visualization plays in the shaping of performers' self-image, one of the many branches of the iconography of popular music that remain undeveloped.

16 Kapelye, ›Levine and His Flying Machine‹ (Shanachie 21006, 1985).

> Russia, you are a Bolshevik.
> How did this come to be?
> No matter where you go, all you hear is:
> Russia, you are a Bolshevik!
>
> Now look what's happening in West and East
> Between Russia and America
> They are preparing militarily with nuclear weapons
> To fight a war no one can win.

This displacement of past interests into present concerns is typical of the reinterpretation that ethnic groups apply to their history; the irony shown by the new text complements the comedy of the cover illustration. The interplay of the iconography and the musical content of the ethnic package is always worth investigating.

Only one branch of the klezmer movement has ever considered using a photograph of actual klezmorim from Europe: the scholarly wing. Henry Sapoznik, just cited for his reinterpretative side, has also been an important researcher of the discography of klezmer music, and has edited an album of reissues of old recordings[17]. For that cover, he uses a photograph of an early klezmer band from the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the organization that sponsored the disc. Following YIVO's ideology, all jacket cover information is presented in both Yiddish and English; a gray backdrop belies the romanticism that has infused much of the klezmer movement with its vitality. Sapoznik extends his scholarship to Kapelye's records; they are the only discs cited here to contain pull-out sheets with historical notes and song texts, and on the ›Levine‹ album, he identifies himself as »musician/ethnomusicologist Henry Sapoznik«. Thorough study of the disc as ethnic artifact, of course, must look to all parts of the packaging.

To round out our klezmer survey, we can register the presence of our theme of upward musical mobility, apparent in some recent illustrations. Two bands, the Klezmer Conservatory Band and the Andy Statman Orchestra, find themselves depicted in formal dress against the glitter of the New York skyline[18]. Unlike the early Klezmorim album covers, photographs of current bands appear on the front rather than the back of the album, underlining the fact that these are current, well-known entities, a stance that veers toward the star theme. In the case of the Statman band, the 1984 upward mobility photograph is particularly notable, since their album of the previous year showed them clowning before a homey Jewish delicatessen. Titles changed too: the earlier disc was simply ›Klezmer Music‹, while the later is called ›Klezmer Suite‹.

It should be noted that bands do not always consciously choose these depictions of self. In the case of the Klezmer Conservatory Band, the group was unhappy with the fashionable look, but preferred it to the record company's only other choice: a Chagall painting, which was altogether too stereotyped for the band, as I was told by Hankus Netzky, its founder and leader. While it is helpful to know the background to such illustrations, the fact that the band does not necessarily determine its image is not an essential component for either the consumer or the analyst, both of whom take the commercial music product literally at face value. For example, we have the case of a San Diego band which appears photographed ankle-deep in the waters of the Pacific. Whether or not the band originated this image, it suggests to the observer the »end of the world« placement of San Diego in the geography of klezmer music and Jewish-American life. This album is also one of the first to feature a newly composed tune in the klezmer style, thus paralleling the

17 ›Klezmer Music: 1910–1942‹ (Folkways FFS 34021, 1981).
18 The Andy Statman Klezmer Orchestra, ›Klezmer Suite‹ (Shanachie 21005, 1984), and The Klezmer Conservatory Band, ›A Touch of Klez‹ (Vanguard VSD 79455, 1985).

frontier spirit of the cover. The liner notes once again make the ideology explicit, explaining the album title:

> ›Cholent with Huckleberry‹, as the title suggests, mixes the traditional with the non-traditional. The old familiar melodies of our zade's and bobbe's (grandfathers and grandmothers) sprinkled with some provocative klezmer sounds of the 1980s[19].

The band is also only half-Jewish in personnel. One band member, with an ethnically ambiguous name, appears with a Yiddish-English dictionary on his lap for easy identification.

The antithesis of the Americanization just discussed is the album issued by pioneer klezmorim Zev Feldman and Andy Statman[20]. Both have done research on the roots of klezmer music, studying with the oldest of the surviving musicians who recorded in the 78 rpm era, Dave Tarras; Statman made a point of using Tarras's own clarinet for concerts and recordings, while Feldman is a scholar of Turkic linguistics and culture. Their album is unique in using only modest Old World instruments, the clarinet, the tsimbl (cimbalom), and the string bass without the added brass back-up instruments of the Klezmorim, or American additions such as Sapoznik's banjo. Their liner notes take pains to point out musicological details and their own long period of study with not only the surviving klezmer musicians but with »a number of fine exponents of the related Moldavian, Greek, and Armenian traditions«, pointing up their impressive scholarly credentials. Perhaps it is this careful eclecticism which led to the note to listeners added by the record company producer, Daniel Michael Collins, who tells his audience (largely used to Irish records only, at that point) how he came to appreciate klezmer music: »I realized it contained all the elements to make it a must for anyone interested in traditional folk music.« To illustrate this disc, then, one would expect Feldman and Statman to have conjured up a very Old World image. In fact, they found an extremely European-looking synagogue in a remote corner of Brooklyn and placed themselves in a tightly framed shot of the facade (*fig. 11*). Also appropriately, they positioned the non-Jewish member of the ensemble, a Greek-American bass player, on the back cover[21].

To conclude our survey of Jewish-American music, we will step away from the secular klezmer tradition and take a look at products of the religious music revival of recent years. There has been a great upsurge of right-wing Judaism that has found its voice in an explosion of songs that express the values of old-time religion, often using up-to-date musical styles. Whether coming from the Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform branches of American Judaism, these new religious commercial artifacts also have their iconographic consistency. Moving from right-wing to left-wing American Judaism, we will start with Hasidic records. The Hasidim, whose striking style of East-European dress and speech dramatically mark them off from other American Jews, have captured the musical imagination of a broad cross-section of today's listeners. Their record jacket illustrations show a strong interest in Old World roots. Depictions of the traditional Hasidic world usually rely on drawing, the standard iconographic choice for archetypal imagery. This type of depiction is common on albums of old Hasidic tunes. A disc of new Hasidic favorites[22] self-consciously takes off from this established style, showing the line-drawn Hasidim at the heart of a record, an appropriately reflexive gesture for a new product based on old values (*fig. 12*). Meanwhile, in the mainstream, non-Hasidic orthodox world, we have the phenomenon of fundamentalist youth groups doing American show business-derived music, partly in English

19 Zmiros, ›Cholent with Huckleberry‹ (Goggle-Moggle Productions, 1983).
20 (Shanachie 21002, 1979).
21 Zev Feldman and Andy Statman, ›Jewish Klezmer Music‹ (Shanachie 21002, 1979).
22 (Rone Records RRS 1442).

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

and partly in Hebrew, the sacred tongue. It is not surprising to find a very forthright graphic representation of this music, showing, for example, the Miami boys' choir in three vignette photographs, all showing off their glittering Broadway outfits, striped jackets and canes and chorus-line format[23]. On the one hand, this would seem to illustrate our theme of domestication: show business is our business now. On the other hand, it also appears to tend toward upward musical mobility, with the Great White Way, presented here in costume version, as model.

Another group, Kol Simcha, is even more daring in its depiction of modern religiosity. Their 1979 album of newly composed religious songs[24] shows an old-time Jew chiseling the song titles into the most sacred spot in Judaism, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Taken literally, it would indicate a self-conceptualization of considerable hubris, an almost sacrilegious appropriation of traditional imagery in the service of self-promotion. This chutzpah is continued in the picture; to the old workman's side lies a copy of the Jerusalem Post with the headline »Messiah Has Come!« while the record label is Messianic Records. The fact that the record was available as a fifty-cent remainder perhaps indicates the failure of this stance[25].

Finally, moving to the centrist and left-wing Conservative and Reform movements, we find a strong interest in arresting imagery as well. Sol Zim uses the theme of the ethnic star in every facet of his work, carving out a specialized slot through a long series of recordings and crowded concerts, including places like Las Vegas. In *fig. 13*[26] we see the maximal use of celebrity centrality in one of his holiday theme records, each one of which boldly places the Zim family in front of the consumer as model of Jewish observance. Similarly, in the music closer to the Reform wing of American Judaism, an album by Debbie Friedman places her in heaven, emerging from clouds to announce the title: »and the youth« (presumably including herself as prophetess) »shall see visions«, stressing her own roots in a religious youth movement and affirming her star status[27].

23 ›Miami Live!‹ (Kee-Tov Records KT 5600, 1980).
24 Kol Simcha, ›Messianic‹ (KSA-2001, 1979).
25 The world of Jewish religious pop music has grown so large and complex that it deserves a separate study; it has become dominant on Jewish ethnic radio programing and in record/cassette sales within the last decade.
26 Sol Zim, ›The Joy of Chanukah‹ (Zimray 109, 1979).
27 Debbie Friedman, ›And The Youth Shall See Visions‹ (Sing Unto God 978, 1979).

Let us turn to another ethnic group for comparison to see how widespread our proposed pictorial themes might be. If the themes prove resilient enough to apply to a situation removed both in time and ethnicity, my sense that the kernel of a methodology might be available will be strengthened. The Polish-Americans are ideal for comparison, as their musical activity is particularly band-centered and competitive. The commercial polka band, both live and recorded, goes back to the 1920s, and is an important component of a number of American ethnic groups[28]. The album is a common unit of currency both for the bands, who hope it will help them gain audience recognition, and for audiences who invest in ethnic consciousness through acquisition of artifacts. Selected album covers of Eddie Blazonczyk's band can serve as a model for analysis. Blazonczyk, the son of immigrants, moved from rock to polka in 1962 and »owns his own record label distributorship and studio. Besides making frequent hometown appearances, he spends ten months a year touring throughout the Polka Belt and beyond, from Hawaii to Poland«[29]. This probably means that Blazonczyk's chosen imagery is what we see on his records, not some outside producer's whims.

Domestication of mainstream motifs is quite common in this repertoire (*fig. 14*)[30] places the band squarely in the mainstream of everyday tourist imagery of the vacation paradise, Hawaii. There is, of course, absolutely nothing Polish in the image being presented; it is simply an appropriation of Hawaii as model of »the good life«. There may, however, be other implicit messages as well about the success of the band, or of polka bands in general, which might touch on the upward mobility theme; the picture certainly advertises Blazonczyk's success as a touring artist. Any visual symbol, of course, is open to multiple interpretations by either consumer or analyst, just as any one-to-one correspondence between an image and its »meaning« is probably a simplification.

Blazonczyk's imagery plays on a number of stereotyped American images, at times very loosely. One record, ›Roaring Polkas‹[31], seems to refer to the stock notion of the »Roaring Twenties« in American popular culture. Yet the reference is simply a visual tie-in to the mainstream and is not reflected in the music. The sloppiness of the pictorial idea underlines this casual approach: the raccoon coat stereotype of the twenties is flanked by the standard mustache-and-sleeves-with-garters imagery of the 1890s, or »Gay Nineties«, another ready-made decade icon. It is America in general which is being domesticated, a process which need not require precision in details. When the »old country« is depicted, it appears, appropriately, in generalized drawing fashion, as we saw for the Jewish-Americans. A documentary approach such as using a photograph of Poland is bypassed in favor of the more mythic quality of a crude sketch of happy peasant dancers[32]. The title of the album, ›Old Country Style‹, is rendered in Polish in parentheses (›Po Staro Krajsku‹), which marginalizes the Old World language while appealing to it. Similarly, while the European dancers are drawn, Blazonczyk and Kowalowski, the vocalists, are shown in photographic form: realism versus memory.

28 For a survey of the Polish-American polka band, see Janice Kleeman, The Origins and Stylistic Development of Polish-American Polka Music (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley 1982). Charles Keil, whose book on the subject is forthcoming, sees the Polish polka band as one example of a cross-ethnic, nationwide »blue collar« music tradition which is distinctively American and which is class-related. See his ›In Pursuit of Polka Happiness‹ (= Cultural Correspondence no. 5 [1977]) and ›Class and Ethnicity in Polish-America‹, in: Journal of Ethnic Studies 2, (1974) pp. 37–45.

29 Larry Birnbaum, ›The Polka Continues to Thrive Across America‹, in: New York Times (25 January 1987), H21.

30 Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones, ›Hawaiian Polka Tour‹ (Bel-Aire LP 3032).

31 Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones, ›Roaring Polkas‹ (Bel-Aire 3029).

32 Polish Mountaineer All-Star Orchestra with Eddie Blazonczyk and Chet Kowalowski, ›Old Country Style‹ (›Po Staro Krajsku‹) (Bel-Aire 3067).

Notions of domestication and a play of stereotyped imagery reach their high point in Blazonczyk's illustrations in *fig. 15*[33]. Here the band leader places himself in the pantheon of American heroes carved at Mt. Rushmore, while the title emphatically underscores the message: ›Polka Music is Here to Stay!‹[34] The irony evident in some klezmer albums is paralleled and surpassed here. One is obviously not to take seriously the megalomania the image implies but to laugh at the incongruity. This acknowledgment of the marginality of the group is resonant of the deeply felt sentiments of a minority group and again indicates that record jackets can be a locus for rather serious commentary, even if it is disguised as humor[35]. While the Mt. Rushmore cover hints at upward mobility, other polka band covers make the theme much more explicit. An illustration for a Ray Henry album *(fig. 16)*[36] makes this obvious by placing the homespun polka in the context of the Great White Way, complete with the title ›Broadway Polka‹. This is a direct counterpart to the glamorization of the klezmer band and just as irrelevant to the music. Another in the same band's series is titled ›Ballroom Polkas‹ and shows a photographed, formally clad, ecstatically swooping couple.

To complete this Polish polka excursion, we can note two additional trends which indicate the possibilities of future analysis. One is depiction of ethnic geography, as in *fig. 17*[37]. Each Euro-American group has its own map of America, centering on those cities that have the largest populations of their fellow ethnics. Here, Buffalo is highlighted, the graphics making it clear that it is a major »polka town« while the background map points out other major centers of Polish population and polka band business. It is perhaps significant that Buffalo is marked with a star, the standard American mapmaker's notation for a capital city: this truly makes the Polish map a self-conscious substitution for normal American reality, Buffalo not being the capital of the state of New York. A visual pun on »star« performer, another of our themes, is certainly also a possible reading. Finally, yet another theme can be found on polka jacket covers: ethnic entertainment's featuring of itself, a reflexive tendency common to all popular culture, from film and television through the record industry. One jacket cover has the artist legitimizing himself through the simple depiction of his Polka Hall of Fame plaque, using the industry award to bolster both his own credentials and those of the polka band establishment[38].

Thus, even a brief excursion into the Polish-American world turns up themes that parallel those of the Jews, confirming our iconographic notion that there may be a basic relationship between picture and group identity. At the same time, each set of record jacket illustrations suggests additional iconographic themes for future research.

The present short introduction to the world of ethnic musical icons and to one method of interpretation – identification of pictorial themes as clues to ethnic identity and ethnic-mainstream dialectic – is meant only as an invitation to a wide range of possible approaches to a rich area of study. I hope that in this brief presentation I have demonstrated the interpretive power of popular culture imagery and the important role of pictures and of possible iconographic systems in the continual process of self-definition faced by American ethnic groups in a complex and heterogeneous society. That this is equally true of other regions in a world increasingly dominated by the images of popular culture only means that many more music cultures and subcultures could be studied in a similar fashion.

Fig. 14

Fig. 16

33 Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones, ›Polka Music is Here to Stay!‹ (Bel-Aire 3034).
34 Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones, ›Polka Music is Here to Stay!‹ (Bel-Aire 3026).
35 Parallel analysis of polka song texts also reveals often explicit statements about ethnic life.
36 Ray Henry and His Orchestra, ›Broadway Polka‹ (Dana DLP 1248).
37 The Dynatones, ›Buffalo is a Polka Town‹ (WAM LP 4027).
38 Dick Pillar and His Orchestra, ›Polka Star Series‹ (Stelto 724).

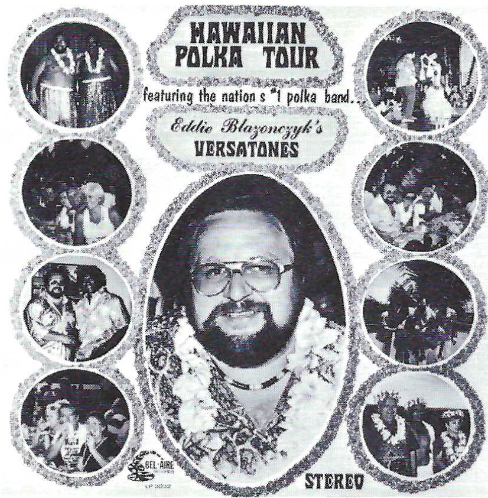

Fig. 14

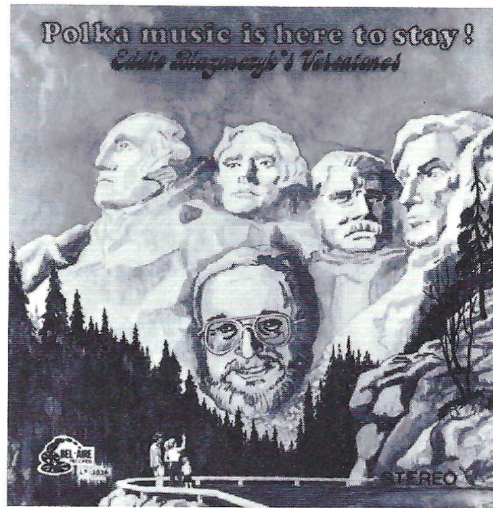

Fig. 15

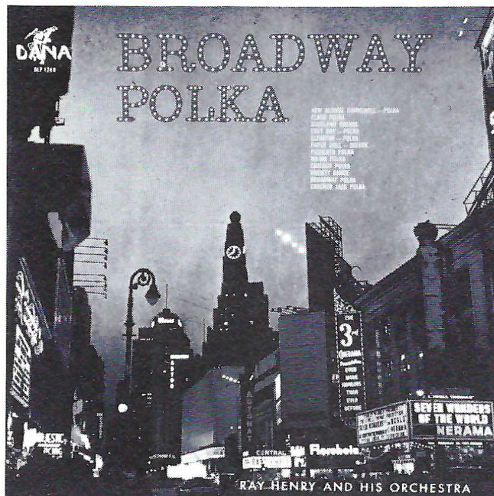

Fig. 16

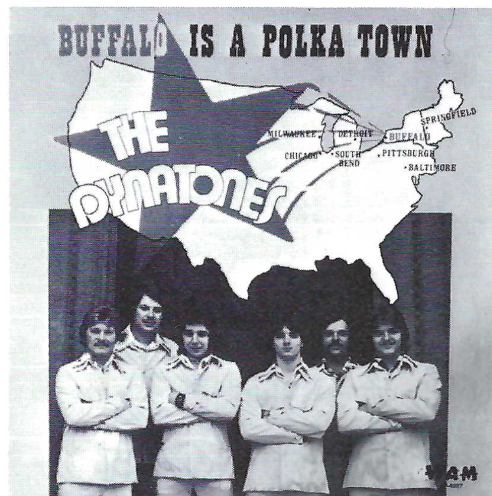

Fig. 17