

The Perils and Pleasures of Eclecticism

One of the first things anyone says about Jewish music today is that it's eclectic. Eclecticism as positive or negative, intrinsic or strategic—these issues have attracted me for a long time. In my first writing on the klezmer movement some twenty years ago, I pointed out that this eclecticism was nothing new; rather, it was built into being a klezmer, from the very beginning. It was not just professional musicians who operated with a variety of sources, but ordinary Jews. My father, born in 1911 in Detroit, can stand in for the generations between eastern European roots and the neo-klezmer era. He loved to sing, and his repertoire included the following: children's songs, nonsense songs, christian songs he learned at a Y camp—his mother didn't know the YMCA was goyish--American vaudeville and pop songs, foreign-language songs, including Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Ukrainian and German, mixed-language songs, and songs in translation: English to Yiddish, Russian to Yiddish, even English to Latin.

So Jewish musical eclecticism has been an everyday matter. But in our times, as forms of eclecticism seem to multiply, the need to interrogate the word and its applications seems to grow. What follows is more in the line of musings than conclusions.

The *intrinsic*, or *inherent* eclecticism I once described for klezmer music looks different now, for younger musicians. Let's look at three current Jewish-identified performers. The Forward newspaper runs a regular column on new, hip Jewish-identified musicians, a handy finger

on the pulse of what's up with Jewish music. One such article tells us this about how Andrew Singer, age 25, from New Hampshire, developed "his persona as the first gay, Jewish, white rapper." Singer says, "I figure if I got on stage and did a rap about how tough I was, people would be like 'This guy is a total poseur.' So instead I rap about who I am. Rap about the Jewish side. The white side. The gay side."

Another musician, Matisyahu, now a major star for young hip Jewish-Americans and fast becoming a crossover hit, says on his official bio that he grew up native to hip-hop and reggae, so feels he his channeling his native knowledge to the purpose he finally discovered: spiritual uplift, Hasidic style. Then there's Josh Dolgin, who performs and records with David Krakauer. Under his stage name Socalled, Dolgin a radically different type of artist compared to Matisyahu, but he also says he grew up as a white boy native to hip-hop traditions and a wide variety of American roots musics: "I always played piano, and accordion later on, and played in gospel, salsa, blues, funk and rocky bands, but Hip Hop really spoke to me and my peers and I wanted to be part of it." He describes "my self" as "an alienated, rural Canadian Jewish self." For these three young Jewish men, taking *ethnic* material seriously postdated their childhood experiences with non-Jewish popular culture forms. For them, a mixture of sources is not really any kind of eclecticism but, as Singer says, "who he is," which he sees as somehow unitary despite its component parts of rap, gay, white, and jewish. So a recognition of internal diversity can even lead to a *denial* of eclecticism, despite the variety of musical materials and identifications.

Before I move ahead, let me backtrack to the official definitions of "eclecticism." The Oxford English Dictionary offers many

possibilities, including these three options:

1. That borrows or is borrowed from diverse sources;
2. Unfettered by narrow system in matters of opinion or practice;
3. Broad, not exclusive, in matters of taste;

These are very different facets of the same word. "Borrowing" from diverse sources is a tricky term, since, as we've seen, many younger musicians, Jews and non-Jews alike, feel inherently at home with many styles and genres. Still, it can happen. Take the example of the Forward's description of the new Jewish band Heedoosh:

"Heedoosh is one of the first to use the angry howl and bludgeoning sounds of grunge to put a novel spin on the traditional Jewish song."

The band has two sets of brothers. One, Yaniv Tsaidi says : "My brother wanted Jewish music unlike anything anybody ever heard." On the one hand, the band "shares more similarities with Oasis than with classic Jewish performers." So they seem to be borrowing. Yet Tsaidi also says Heedoosh has a "claim on authenticity" because "nearly all of its songs are in Hebrew." Borrowing and grounding go hand in hand in this version, which I call "strategic eclecticism," a term I am proposing as being distinct from inherent eclecticism.

Of course, the two categories are hardly mutually exclusive. Performers who play up their intrinsic eclecticism can also own up to being strategic. For example, Andrew Singer, the gay, white, Jewish rapper, also tells the Forward that despite his confident stance, he was worried about the older segment of his Jewish audience. So he "broke out the violin and started doing a lot of classic Yiddish songs," thereby disappointing the hipper part of his audience. Singer is now

referencing his *intra-Jewish* eclecticism, a complex variable that could be worth a long study, including moves like straddling the Ashkenazic-Sephardic-Oriental divide, or crossing the secular-religious line in the course of a single performance or album.

Having tried a brief gloss on the dictionary's "borrowing" option, let's turn to its second facet "Broad, not exclusive, in matters of taste," needs a closer look. Are we talking about personal, aesthetic or strategic matters when we identify breadth? In my own work, I've given up trying to make such distinctions, since I feel that professional musicians tend to combine all three, both consciously and unconsciously. For example, in a concert in Boston that I attended, Josh Dolgin moved from his hip-hop beatwork to old Yiddish standards on the piano, commenting ironically to a large older audience on his relative unfamiliarity with the material. I don't take this as being purely strategic; he seems to genuinely like the old songs and styles, which he incorporates into his other work.

This complexity only multiplies in many border zones of creativity. I'd like to quickly review some possibilities through the work of three former Wesleyan students, to whom I can speak very directly about their work, knowing literally where they're coming from. One old student is Will Holshouser, who did a senior thesis on Cajun music. He exemplifies a very different version of eclecticism, perhaps all three shadings of the dictionary definitions of "broad," "borrowing," and the one we haven't gotten to yet, "unfettered by narrow system or practice." Upon moving to New York from Wesleyan, Will changed from piano to accordion as his main instrument. This allowed him to slip into any number of musical circles and genres. Here's how he describes his odyssey:

That's what I love about NY—there's these endless different scenes. One night I was playing in a club with a European singer, she was doing cabaret material, a couple of Kurt Weill songs, Edith Piaf songs, then a Moroccan band came out who mostly play at middle east weddings in New Jersey—there's a whole scene I didn't know about at all that's not really accessible to outsiders.

At one point I started getting calls from French restaurants—I hear you play the accordion; can you play any French music? Similarly with klezmer I'd always been interested in it; our band in college did a couple of klezmer tunes, but then I got some calls in NY, oh I here you play the accordion, we need a sub, would you be interested. They send me their cd, I learn the tunes. First played with Metropolitan Klezmer, then with Frank London, then later with Andy Statman. He's another example of a person who doesn't think commercially; he's just doing what he likes. Played both klezmer and bluegrass with him, in the same week.

So Will explicitly plays down the strategic side of his eclecticism by comparing himself to the “non-commercial” Andy Statman.

Then I started playing with Krakauer [in 2000] I like his very cosmopolitan approach—he brings in jazz and rock but keeps what's important about the style.

“Cosmopolitan” is one possible word for Krakauer's inherent eclecticism. This word is being much bandied about in cultural theory these days, but I think that Will's use, with its sense of urban hipness,

is a more old-fashioned use of the word. The question of “what’s important about the style” would be worth following up. But Will also wants to be known in his own right:

I also compose my own music; I think of it basically as jazz...but then I try to bring things in that I’ve learned from other contexts, but it’s not really a fusion. It feels like it doesn’t have a role in any kind of genre.

We have run into the farther edges of eclecticism, where styles that one has learned in many contexts do not create a fusion, but somehow stand outside genre. This is hardly a surprising stance for a creative musician trying to feel and sound original.

Will’s record label finds the question of the instrument more significant than genre, as their website says about his album:

What does it mean to play the accordion at the beginning of the 21st century? Is it a joke, a museum piece, a sacred cow, or a living thing? As in any era, the best way for a musician to answer is to make music. On an instrument that is often defined by tradition, Will Holshouser uses his experience in jazz, new music, and traditional accordion styles to forge his own sound.

Will is making eclecticism work. He’s a regular at the hip Brooklyn café Barbes, often playing Paris accordion styles with a band called Musette Explosion. He has teamed up with a trumpeter to do a concert in avant-garde heavyweight Dave Douglas’s series of trumpet events. He

is also a member of David Krakauer's band Klezmer Madness. Have I mentioned that Will is not Jewish?

Let's listen to some snippets of his work, featuring two compositions. One is from Krakauer's album *Live in Krakow*. You couldn't ask for a more Jewishly-marked venue, band, and album. Will wrote a piece called "Dusky Bulgar," and here's his solo, with a return to the theme and Krakauer's clarinet [EX] For comparison, here is Will's work from his own album, which has pieces spinning off various stylistic gestures. [ex] The Bulgar solo for Krakow seems more New York-downtown than this piece from his downtown album, and it's not easy to put your finger on where the music is coming from.

No talk on eclecticism can end without a gesture to John Zorn. As the *Forward* says, "you can't toss a latke in a downtown club without hitting a musician who has worked with Zorn or recorded with his Tzadik label," and the first quality they cite about him is his eclecticism. Here I'll reference another former student of mine, Ted Reichman, who has also played in David Krakauer's band. Ted put out an album on Tzadik. Let's start with Ted's basic take on being Jewish in the 1990s:

There was a bit of heritage connection, but not a lot. The Jewish aspect—I became ambivalent pretty quickly. I didn't want to feel I was exploiting the fact that I was Jewish. I always felt that klezmer music wasn't the voice of my being a Jewish person. the tradition of Jewish music that I grew up with was Debbie Friedman. But at that moment, I'm a young Jewish person living in NY and I wanted to be involved with it, because it was new. The fact I played accordion—it all seemed to click into place. It's not like I was suddenly interested in exploring

my heritage.

Ted came up with the idea of pairing his compositions with photographs by the great photographer Andre Kertesz, who happened to be Jewish but is not generally thought of as a Jewish artist. Zorn liked a couple of the pieces and commissioned Ted to do a whole album, which he labeled "Emigre." Despite the possibilities of borrowing, lack of constraints, etc. that we've been looking at, or Zorn's easy labeling by people like the Forward columnist as the arch-eclecticist, not much about Ted's work is what you'd call eclectic. Here's a piece from the album, to go with a photo just called "Paris, 1930," and I guess it evokes that time and place while sounding a lot like many tracks from the Zorn-circle albums. [EX] I would say that Ted's Kertesz project is rather anti-eclectic in a way that still lets you hear all the sources. Like Will, perhaps Ted is blended, rather than eclectic. This type of *multimusicianship*, both in lifestyle and composition, needs some thorough study.

I'd like to wrap up with an even more attenuated example, the current album of Sam Bardfeld, yet another old Wesleyan student and multimusician. A violinist, Sam often gigs with Will Holshouser. Getting back to Sam Bardfeld, he is an expert of the Latin violin, even writing an excellent tutorial on the subject. He does not identify himself artistically as Jewish, but he likes to tell this story as an example of the complexity of identity: once, when he played on tour in Colombia with an American salsa band, the local newspaper singled him out for praise, running a headline that said "el judio demostró calidad," the Jew demonstrated quality. Curiously, Sam is part of Robert Rodriguez's Zorn-related project of Latin stylings with Jewish hints. Here Sam's eclecticism leads him to partner on solos with a Japanese violinist on a

Jewish-identified album; Ted Reichman is also on the album as accordionist and Krakauer has also played with Rodrigues. Need I say that Rodrigues himself is not Jewish?

Back to Sam Bardefeld. His own eclectic statement comes on his recent cd, which I heard him perform live. It offers high-level jazz compositions, each preceded by a short spoken commentary featuring a character named-- Saul. Sam in no way references his alter ego Saul as being Jewish, but he told me that his Barcelona record label rejected the album title, "The Book of Saul," on the grounds that it sounded ethnic or religious. In New York, "Time Out" magazine lamented that it was too bad Sam was qualifying his excellent jazz compositions with ethnic humor. The liner notes say that Bardefeld "realizes the implied narratives in his music through the vehicle of a fictional protagonist...a generation-X bumbler as epic hero." Here's the beginning of the first piece on the album, tentatively titled "Periodic Trespasses (The Saul Cycle)." I leave you to figure out this variety of eclecticism: [EX]

In conclusion, I have no conclusion, except to say that eclecticism is easily tossed around by journalists, but hard to pin down. I like to query terms to see how far they can get us, and the more we push this one around, I think the more we can learn about the full range of complexity, strategy, individuality and sometimes downright chutzpah of the current and future Jewish music scene.

