Jewish Music and the Eclectic Electric

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Jewish music seems as if it must be ancient, but it isn't. The fixed part of Jewish culture is the texts, and the communities that follow their logic. Ever since the destruction of the Temple rituals, with their large orchestras and choruses of Levites, music has been suspect and contained. The rabbinic authorities were particularly dubious about instrumental music, which they banned from diasporic synagogue services.

This is not to say that melody was not essential to Jewish cultures. The texts had to be chanted, not spoken, according to strict rules that preserved the sense and purity of the words. Praise and celebration songs proliferated, as part of the general injunction of *hiddur mitzvah,* to beautify what is required. Some medieval European authorities explicitly state that melodies are allowed to vary from place to place, according to the principle of *minhag*, or local custom. But no one wrote down those tunes, so we have no real idea of the age and origin of melodies played or sung today that might hark back to the many centuries before 1800.

It was then that modernity intervened in this music system. The *haskalah*, usually called the Jewish Enlightenment, allowed for europeanized, formal musical composition of liturgical music. As Christian Europeans gave Jews access to musical training, Jewish virtuosi eventually dominated the classical music world. Modern composers sprang up, some interested in their roots, others pointedly ignoring them. Sound recording of Jewish music is now just over one

hundred years old, giving us peepholes, if not picture windows, into Jewish musical life.

But all along, like the Oral Law that paralleled the written text, unofficial, vernacular Jewish musics flourished. Everyone sang folksongs, from children and women through gray-bearded Hasidim. Families of professional instrumentalists cheered local celebrations and provided a chance to dance. In both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic worlds, around the Mediterranean and across northern, central and eastern Europe, a dense system of musical creativity and aesthetic evaluation crossed age, gender, class, and sectarian boundaries. What was created in those lands spilled across the Atlantic to the Americas along ramified routes of emigration. Older forms yielded to newer soundways, creating a long history of American-based Jewish musics that are my my topic this afternoon.

In what follows, I will first lay out some basic principles of Jewish-American music over the last 150 years. After this panorama, I will zoom in on recent developments as a way of framing tonight's performance by David Krakauer and his colleagues.

My basic approach for how musicians work is first to identify the *resources* they have available. Next, I wonder about the *strategies* they bring to those resources, which leads to the question of what their *agendas* might be. All three of these components change constantly over time. Resources add up. Sound recording has made it possible to stockpile them for repeated use and ongoing memory work. Strategies shift as new opportunities open up and older ways of making and selling music fade. Agendas can change with fashions, markets, ideologies, or personal orientations. Add to this the transition of Jewish-Americans from immigrants to ethnics to mainstream

membership and the impact of history—the ebb and flow of migration, the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel—and the possibilities only mutiply.

Still, there is stability in the Jewish-American music system. Let's start with the resources, which are always of two types: those that are available in American popular culture and those thought of as Jewish. Let me stress "thought of," or what might be called "the *assumed* Jewish element." Musicians, audiences, and media have tended to tag units such as scale-types, or particular tunes and songs, as "Jewish," regardless of their time and place of origin. The "Hava Nagila" sound (sing augmented second) is one, or a similar interval differently placed (sing other A2 type) has symbolized Jewishness in the US for over a century, even though the same structures can be found around the eastern Mediterranean among other traditions.

One could do a whole lecture on the strange origin and diffusion of "Hava Nagila" itself, but I leave it to you to check out dozens of world variants on YouTube.com, from a Polish heavy metal group to a cross-dressing Thai nightclub.

Assumed Jewish resources also include "heritage repertoires," melodies like the most popular one for "Shema yisroel," a Germanic tune by a nineteenth-century Viennese cantor that most people think of as ancient, or the timeless "Sholom Aleichem" by Israel Goldfarb that's from the 1920s. There are also Zionist and orientalist sets of musical resources. Beyond musical elements, there are stable social resources, such as the cantor and the klezmer, and venues, ranging from catering and concert halls to synagogues and summer camps.

American resources include all the commercial formats that a vast and settled popular culture can offer. Being so geographically and demographically diverse, the United States has always relied heavily

on popular culture to unify the many layers of its population. From the start, Jews have taken advantage of mass media, beginning with a homegrown sheet music industry that I wrote a book about and stretching across recording, radio, television, film, and now the internet. Music has always been central to the circulation, and often the commodification, of Jewishness in American society, and music ranks with food as a key indicator of ethnicity in the United States.

Let me turn to the ways that musicians strategize these resources. Over the long haul of Jewish-American music, many practices occur again and again in the work of very different circles and generations. They draw on both the assumed Jewish and the American popular music systems. Multiple strategies usually coexist in the same song or piece. It is the nature of music to offer both producers and consumers a richly-layered and multitextured package. Much of our work in Jewish music lies in carefully sorting the strands that its creators weave into sonic objects that seem all of a piece. I'll give the list of strategies, but only have time to illustrate just a couple; they include parody, domestication, edginess, fusion, crossover, play of cultural levels, nostalgia, heritage, essentialism, and conservationism, as well as the master strategies of rediscovering, revitalizing, reevaluating that are particularly prominent in our times.

Any of these strategies might use Jewish or mainstream materials. For example, parody can be based on American or Jewish resources. As early as the 1890s, Jewish versions of American pop songs appeared in print, such as Yiddish lyrics for "A Bicycle Built for Two." We are more familiar with the flamboyant parodies of an artist like Mickey Katz, with his "Kiss of Meyer" for the popular tango hit "Kiss of Fire," or "Haym afn Range." It should be mentioned that parodies of the American frontier also go back to the 1890s. I'll play a

bit of this song [Ex. 1] What I just played was Mickey Katz, but not by Mickey Katz. Rather, it was the 1993 version by Don Byron, with Lorin Sklamberg of the Klezmatics as vocalist. Byron is an African American musician who was a founding member of the Klezmer Conservatory Band, which helped shape the klezmer revitalization of the 1980s. He sees himself as a border-crosser and experimentalist, not as that rare bird, a black klezmer musician. Byron used to push the limits even when playing with the Klezmer Conservatory Band. He would draw out a clarinet solo for several minutes in the middle of a klezmer piece, bringing in jazz and black music until the audience shifted uncomfortably in its seats. For Byron in 1993, Mickey Katz is a forefather of American hip edginess, in some sense an early "downtown" artist, so the album is a tribute. Here the strategies and agendas of an earlier musician are overlaid with those of a very different descendant in ways too complex to fully unpack here but should suggest how insufficient a term like "Jewish" or even "Jewish-American" music is.

Edginess is one of those qualities that are easier to hear than define. You find it emerging in the 1920s, in an era of both growing Jewish comfort with American life and discomfort, in the face of the cutoff of immigration and rising anti-Semitism, say in "The Yiddish Charleston," which has lines like "Even Henry Ford is doing the Yiddish Charleston," delivered in a suave, cynical voice backed by a dance band.

Edginess is also the name of the game for many of the projects sponsored by the musician and producer John Zorn. He started a record label called Tzadik and a band named Masada, provocative names for downtown New York secular musicians, and has commissioned a huge catalogue of experimental works under the

banner "radical Jewish music." From that catalogue, one of the edgiest is called "The Mystic Fugu Orchestra," which Zorn co-created in 1995 with famed Japanese noise artist Yamantaka Eye. I'll play a short excerpt as a backdrop for a Krakauer piece I want to highlight a bit later. (Ex. 2) What is going on here sonically and socially? It sounds like a scratchy 78 rpm recording of an old cantor, but everything you've heard is a new production--everything. Is this internal parody, nostalgia, fusion, world music, or what? Certainly it's edgy.

Domestication is a more straightforward term I favor, which labels the way musicians and communities take outside materials and adapt them for internal usage. Recently, 92-year-old Irving Fields has been celebrated for his early work in domesticating Latin music to the Jewish party scene. There's been a reissue of his classic 1959 album "Bagels and Bongos." This is on a label called Reboot Mix that exemplifies the heritage strategy. Irving Fields's efforts, and those of many of his colleagues, were not so much parodies of other people's music, like Mickey Katz's songs, but internalizations. They succeeded in making Latin dances absolutely required for musicians hoping to get bar mitzvah and wedding work for decades. In 2006, John Zorn moved Irving Fields from the domestication column to the edgy category by inviting Fields to make a Tzadik album.

As should be obvious by now, all the resources and strategies, domestication can serve very different agendas. Domestication by Irving Fields is wildly different in intent than a similar move by the yeshiva-based group "Shlock Rock," for example. Those young men caused a sensation in the 1970s by putting out counter-versions of American rock 'n roll songs to bring Orthodox values to young people, a trend that has continued ever since. For example, they turned "Bar-

bar-bar, Bar-bra Ann" into "Bar-bar-bar, Abar-banel," the name of a great Spanish Jewish mystic.

With this bird's-eye view approach, I do not mean to say that each period of Jewish-American history is somehow the same. Every era has its own spotlighting of particular resources, attractions to particular strategies, and of course varied agendas. Even within one timeframe, there are clashing and competing factions of musicians and audiences looking for different forms of satisfaction. But every age has been cheerfully eclectic, an overarching and indispensable term for Jewish music in general. "Eclecticism" is a term with a bad reputation since people often use it to mean ill-advised mixture. But I have always thought it was a very neutral and useful word, coming as it does from a Greek root having to do with choosiness, selectivity: Chosen People choosing music. But this is not just basic to Jewish culture. Eclecticism marks all of world music today, in an age of multiplying media and unprecedented mobility and deterritoralization.

Jewish music has always been selective, drawing on a vast set of resources. Take, for example, my father, born in 1911 in Detroit, who can stand in for the generations between eastern European roots and today's heritage era. He loved to sing, and his repertoire included the following: children's songs, nonsense songs, Christian songs he learned at a YMCA camp—his mother didn't know the Y 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. The *intrinsic,* or *inherent* eclecticism in my father's repertoire has only intensified among 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 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, who started as a draw for young hip Jewish-Americans and became 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 comes across as 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." No wonder his new album has the multi-sided title "Ghettoblaster." For these three young Jewish men —Singer, Matisyahu and Dolgin—discovering and applying assumed Jewish material seriously postdated their childhood experiences with American and Caribbean 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 and grounding go hand in hand, often in the service of what I call "strategic eclecticism," distinct from the inherent eclecticism I cited earlier. 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 appealing to 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. I've also seen Josh Dolgin do this in concert. In this way, musicians reference their *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 dictonary'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, when I saw Josh Dolgin move from his hip-hop beatwork to old Yiddish standards on the piano, he commented ironically on his relative unfamiliarity with the material. I don't take this as being purely strategic, a way of being endearing to silver-haired listeners. He seems to genuinely like the old songs and styles, which he incorporates into his other work.

This complexity only multiplies along the many border zones of today's musical creativity. I'd like to touch on some possibilities through the work of one of my former Wesleyan students, since I literally know where he's coming from. Will Holshouser (who's here tonight) did a senior thesis with me on Cajun music, based on fieldwork in the bayous. He is also a musician you are about to hear as a long-time member of David Krakauer's band Klezmer Madness. Will 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 described his odyssey in an interview with me:

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.
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 getting a workout in cultural theory these days; Will's use, with its sense of urban hipness, is a more old-fashioned sense 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. As the liner notes to Will's second album say, *Like a chef making an ingenious dish with basic common ingredients, he dazzlingly blends all of these colorful musical styles in his profoundly personal "unconventional" compositions.*

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 appeared in avant-garde heavyweight Dave Douglas's series of trumpet concerts. 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 [Ex. 3] For comparison, here is Will's work from his own 2006 album, which has pieces spinning off various stylistic gestures. [Ex. 4] 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.

David Krakauer comes from very different places than Will Holshouser, and so do the rest of the members of Klezmer Madness. Let's pick up on a few thoughts Krakauer was willing to share with me, then listen closely to one Klezmer Madness piece that pulls together many of the threads of this talk. David says he has six strands of clarinet style: klezmer, Greek, Turkish, straight and contemporary classical, and New Orleans jazz. He keeps all of these separate, as you have to when you play Brahms with the Tokyo String Quartet one day and klezmer the next, or classical on the first half of a concert and klezmer on the second, as you'll hear tonight. He changes mouthpieces, fingerings, and his mindset. I heard him play that Brahms once, expecting to hear klezmer tinges in the rhapsodic sections of the slow movement. But it was the Tokyo Quartet's Russian violinist who did that, not David, because, as he says, "what I've always fought hard to do is to integrate it so that it comes out sounding like me," and integration of sound does not mean showing off klezmer chops in Brahms.

Actually, it's not that hard to achieve an clearly personal sound in the klezmer pieces. You have the precedent of the old masters who did it, like Dave Tarras, whose 1979 concert sparked Krakauer's

interest in klezmer. But it's more about the big divide Krakauer mentions: "I wasn't picking up on a current music, but something that was abandoned by my parents, and even my grandparents' generation, [caused by] the three-pronged interruption: the holocaust, Stalin, and the assimilation of the diaspora." So unlike the Brahms context, for David, klezmer carries "responsibility," which can even be "political" when he's playing in Germany. And you can do that in your own voice. At the same time, Europeans see klezmer as "a branch of improvised music, an offshoot of the jazz tree," so the album we're listening to in this talk came out on the prestigious French jazz label, Train Bleu, not a world music label.

In the final analysis, Krakauer's hard-earned, integrated eclecticism lives itself out in his band, Klezmer Madness, now over ten years old. The cast changes, but that's not important. As he says, "new people come into the band; maybe I've gotten better at explaining what I want--each transition is smoother." "What's important is that everyone be a skilled improviser. Certain people in the klezmer community are great players, but they'd never fit in my band, since they're not improvisers." So each band member brings his or her eclectic music-sets into the studio and onto the stage, selects some resources, sets up strategies in synch with the others, particularly Krakauer, and the group agenda is mainly just to make a convincing piece. I wouldn't want to probe for more meaning. Musicians often don't like to talk about agendas, or give different answers at different times, depending on the interviewer, the context, or their own shifting perspectives. And in a collaborative piece like this one, the artists themselves might be bringing different aims to the process of making, recording, and reflecting. For Krakauer, one of his agendas is to play out his integrated eclecticism to the hilt.

We'll zoom in on one group composition. It comes on the same "Krakauer in Krakow" album as Will's tune, and it's the first track, called "Turntable Pounding." Turning to the resources, we have a set of live instruments-- clarinet, electric guitar, bass, accordion, violin—along with the electronic apparatus of the dj, who has sampled a variety of voices and noises. The musical materials include both American and assumed Jewish resources: hip-hop and rock, with some latin and jazz tinges, alongside cantorial and hasidic singing, plus a klezmer instrumental tune. The title—"Turntable Pounding"—elegantly welds dj technology to the Hasidic practice of pounding on the tish—the table—when singing with the rebbe. Before plunging into the piece, we need the reference point of the klezmer tune Krakauer features, Dave Tarras's classic "Dem trisker rebns khosid" of 1925. Tarras, of course, is using the resources and strategies of his period. It's no problem circling back to that moment, since my view of Jewish-American music means to be overarching, rather than evolutionary. You'll hear the almost vehement brass back-up to the clarinet; that's an American development. Already by the 1910s, a klezmer musician from Europe might be working under John Philip Sousa at the highest level of band arrangement. And the bare fact of the clarinet as band leader, which we'll hear tonight, arises from the limited acoustic levels of early sound recording. The piercing clarinet replaced the more plaintive tones of the flute, the violin, and the tsimbl, the struck-string zither. Here's the Tarras sound that became a template for the 1970s pioneers of the neo-klezmer movement: [ex. 5]

Tarras said that he assigned arbitrary names to his studio recordings, but this one rather specifically suggests a Hasidic milieu—the circle of the Trisker rebbe, so it's particularly suitable as source for

the “Turntable Pounding” piece recorded in 2000. Recordings like this 1925 session have turned into a canon. 75 years later, Tarras’s clarinet has becomes assumed Jewish music and a source for heritage strategies. David Krakauer combines that assumption with the classical skill-set, and the New Orleans legacy, paying tribute to jazzmaster Sidney Bechet as inspiration, even in the title of a track on the same Krakow album we’re drawing on here, but also saying that he always hears his grandfather’s voice. This is a sonic spanning of the Jewish-American hyphen.

“Turntable Pounding” is about nine minutes long, divided more or less into two sections and a coda. This is what David told me about the piece, which has sampling and underpinning by Josh Dolgin, aka DJ Socalled:

He made the beat out of somebody cross-country skiing; Hasidim from somewhere. He puts this on and I start jamming. He calls out “traditional tune.” We started to think of a structure, guitar player starts adding a little something, bass player starts reacting, accordion player. Will is playing regular khosidl, but now, plays pad chords, and he started adding harmonic things to it.

This work process sounds spontaneous and amorphous, but Krakauer quickly refutes that impression by saying:

I tend to want to have a formal structure; it scares me not to have a formal structure.

The first section of “Turntable Pounding” is a kind if exposition of basic resources: sampled Hasidim and a cantor, a strong hip-hop beat,

Krakauer's entrance, and his playing of the Tarras tune. Let's listen to this three minutes or so [Ex. 6 [some discussion cantor—cf. Zorn;
hip-hop beat uses frame drum with jingles—mideast?
echo: creates time distance?
backup harmony—smoothes
guitar: almost a clave rhythm
clarinet: recognizable DK licks
violin: syncopated and looped
accordion: dissonant to conventional]

In a second section, we have a set of episodes of instrumental solos juxtaposed against the cantor and the Hasidim, featuring electric guitar and drums, with elements of rock, jazz, and perhaps a Latin beat. Krakauer weaves in and out in at will, as befits the band leader. A coda brings the elements together. I'll play a healthy amount of the piece try to allow you to focus on the interweaving, juxtaposition, and layering that only music can offer as a fully realized texturing of resources and strategies, but want you to think of this only as a warm-up for the main event, tonight's concert. [Ex. 7]

Time simply does not allow for a thorough analysis of this complex piece; I could certainly run a whole seminar session on the components and their combination. But we should not overlook where this performance was recorded: Krakow, Poland, coincidentally the source of David's last name, a fact that is not without significance. At one level, Krakauer seems to be bringing Jewish music back home. Indeed, thousands of Poles come to the festival convinced that what they hear is authentically Jewish, often with profound results for their thinking. But at the same time, little about this music is Polish in origin; it comes to Krakow as an American import. The intense

ambiguity of musical ownership and circulation permeates the entire klezmer revitalization period of the past thirty years.

The Krakow location does make one agenda of this album clear: to project the heritage strategy of Jewish-American music. But the band has other aims, among them simply embodying their own skill at blending musical resources for purely creative purposes. What does this one piece on one album tell us about the past, present, and future of Jewish music? "Turntable Pounding" showcases what happens when many eclectic visions—some of them Jewish--overlap. Krakauer's many-sidedness is very different from Will Holshouser's or Josh Dolgin's, in terms of strategies and resources and, I imagine, agendas. Yet they have come together to produce that most identifiable of unified musical products, the album, collaborating with several other equally versatile musicians who also bring their multiple selves to this table.

All I can say in conclusion is that the electric electric will continue to thrive among performers whose origins are Jewish and non-Jewish, who can draw on an unlimited set of musical sources, whose drive for personal identity is both deeply American and exportable, and whose creativity often overlaps with the strong heritage sensibility that characterizes so much of world music today. Is this "Jewish music?" The answer is no more clear now than it has been in any period of music history. Thanks, and enjoy the concert tonight.