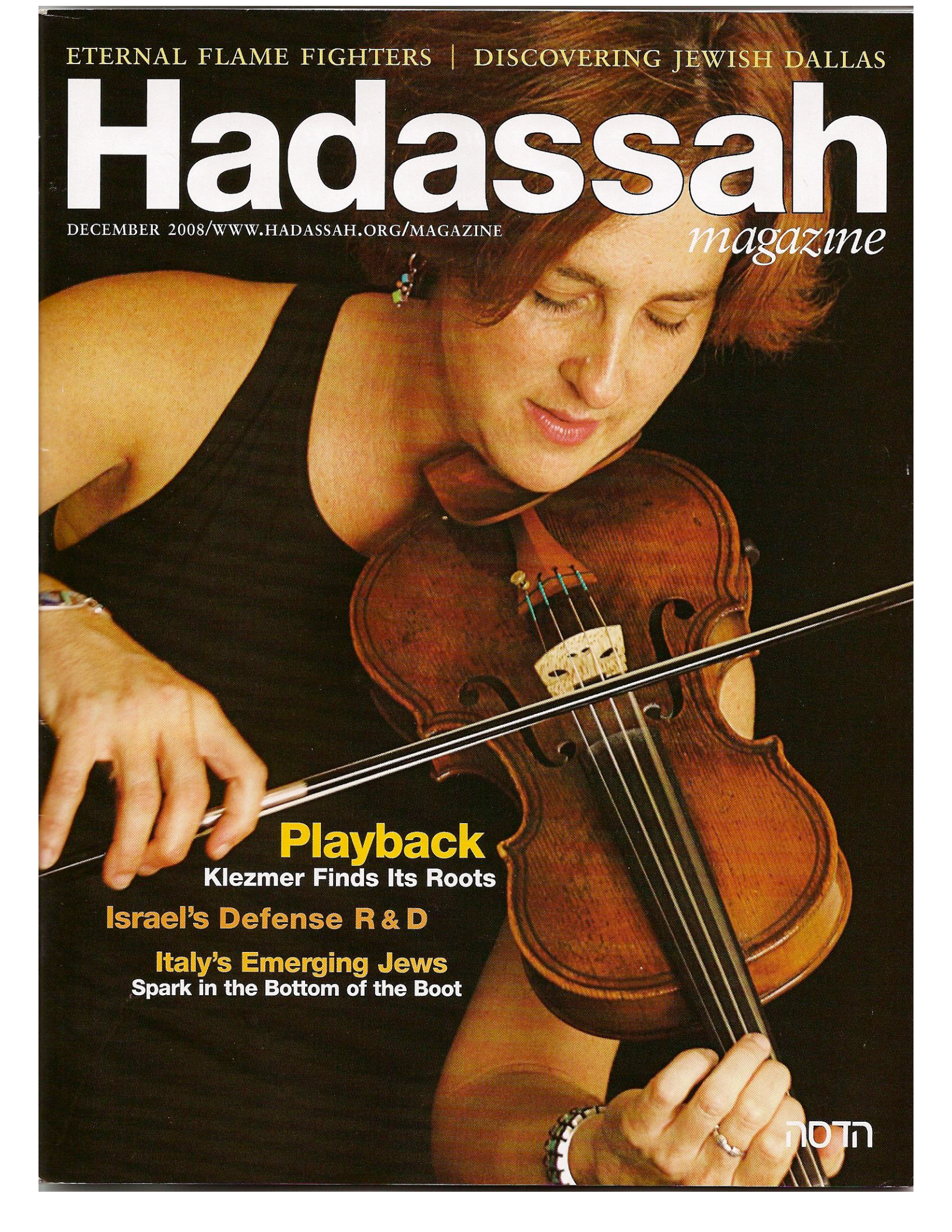


ETERNAL FLAME FIGHTERS | DISCOVERING JEWISH DALLAS

Hadassah

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magazine

A close-up photograph of a woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a black sleeveless top, playing a violin. She has her eyes closed and a serene expression. The violin is a rich, dark wood color. The background is dark, making the subject stand out.

Playback

Klezmer Finds Its Roots

Israel's Defense R & D

Italy's Emerging Jews
Spark in the Bottom of the Boot

החיה

The Arts

Playback

Tired of the ubiquitous jazz-infused klezmer? Try some tunes from the genre's European past.

By **George Robinson**

The first thing that grabs you is the sound. The shimmering, golden tones backing the strangely plaintive fiddle line—it's as if you are hearing a violin for the first time. In fact, it sounds as if you are hearing the first violin ever played.

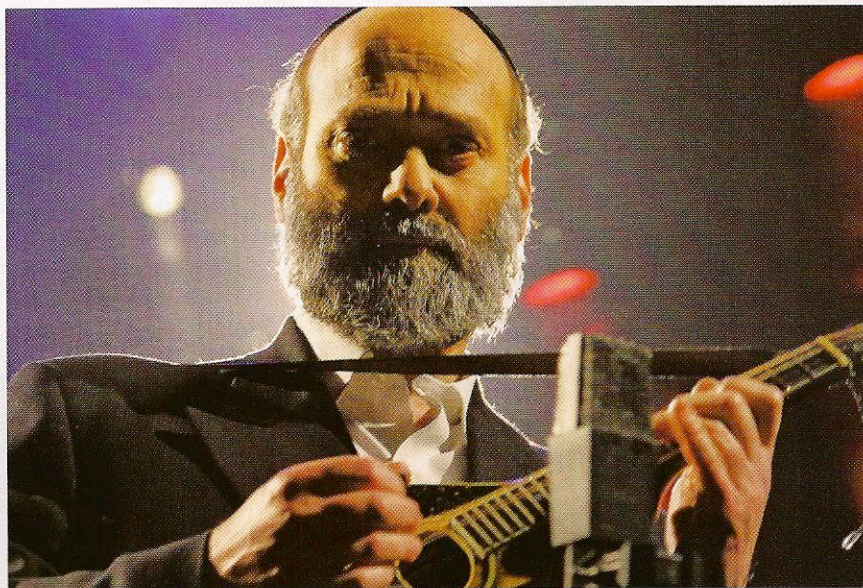
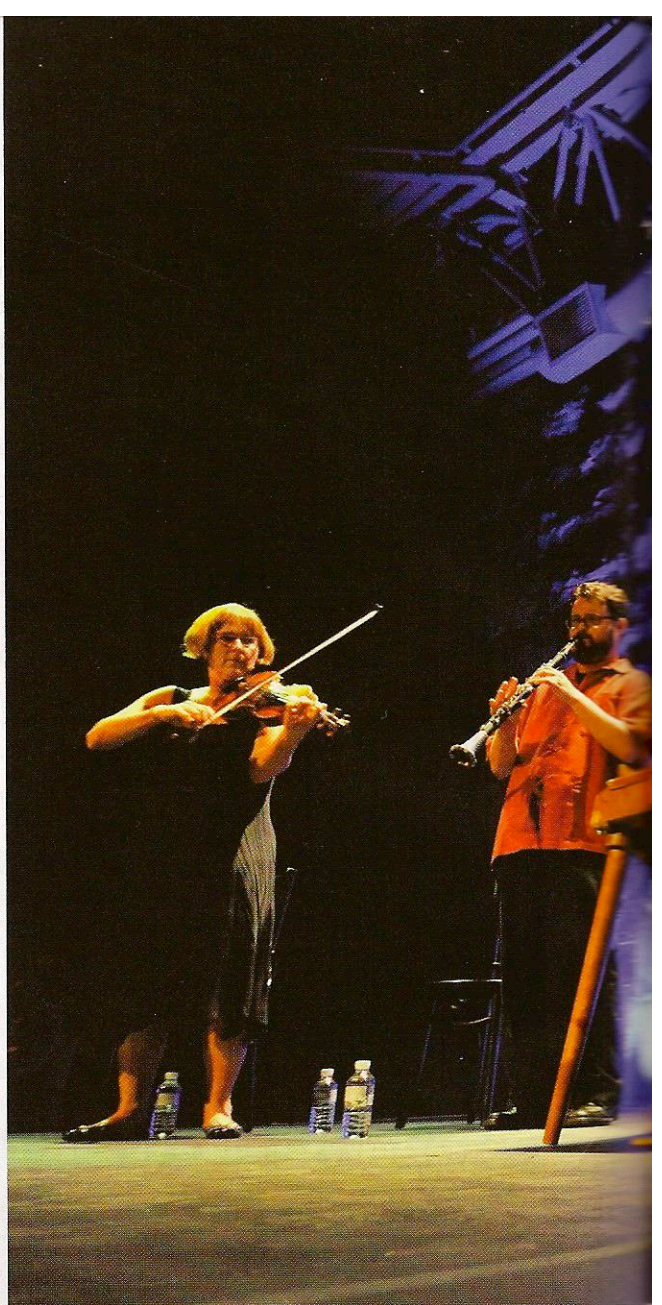
There's no brass, no drummer, no Yiddish vaudeville, probably no vocals.

This is klezmer?

It certainly is. It is klezmer as it might have sounded at a *shtetl* wedding in Galicia or Podolia or the Carpathian Mountains 125 years ago, an eerie music that bends traditional ideas of intonation and harmony.

Perhaps. As even those who play this music will tell you—and many of them are trained ethnomusicologists—we cannot know for sure since there are no recordings and little written documentation of the sounds that modern

klezmerim are trying to reimagine. Additionally, as several working in the genre observed, East European Jewry experienced a series of severe ruptures in the sort of continuity on which folk music relies—the Shoah, suppression of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union and the assimilation of many who immigrated to the United States.



BUT ACCURATE OR NOT, THIS IS THE sound that has become one of the dominant strains in the contemporary klezmer music scene. The European klezmer style is a breath of fresh air for those who have become sated with the never-ending stream of jazz-influenced klezmer bands—even when they are as good as the Klezematics—all playing the same repertoire of Yiddish theater, vaudeville and instrumental classics from 20th-century giants like Abe Schwartz, Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein. So it is back to the future for many listeners and musicians.

“Every scene has people who want

TOP: COURTESY OF ARDY STATEN/AVANT
BOTTOM: JEFFREY M. HARRIS



to get to the oldest layer,” says Henry Sapoznik, a central figure in the original klezmer revival. As one of the creators of KlezKamp—a week-long series of workshops, jam sessions and concerts celebrating Yiddish culture and music, held every December for the past 24 years—Sapoznik is also a key participant in spreading the music throughout the world. “The klezmer scene is starting to have that, with a new generation of players and scholars and researchers.”

One of the best examples is Pete Rushefsky. It was the sound of the tsimbl, an East European version of the hammered dulcimer, that grabbed

him, although he was already playing klezmer banjo. Then he heard Joshua Horowitz, best known for his work with the old-style band Budowitz, play tsimbl at KlezKamp.

“It’s the beauty and mystery of the instrument,” he says. “It’s got this haunting sound.”

He abandoned the banjo and took up the tsimbl. Today, he is one of the premier performers on the instrument and is in constant demand for recordings and live sessions.

“I consider myself the third generation of contemporary klezmer tsimblist,” he says. “Zev [Walter Zev Feldman] and Stuart Brotman [of Veretski

Back to the Past Budowitz in concert; (opposite page) Andy Statman was one of the first to try a European sound.

Pass] were first, then Josh and Kurt [Bjorling, of Brave Old World]. I’m just following in their footsteps.”

When you talk to klezmerim, words like “generation” and “family” pop up constantly. Klezmer, which might be properly described as the folk instrumental dance music of East European Jews, used to be transmitted hand to hand, mouth to mouth. A few lucky members of the first wave of revivalists studied with Tarras, Sid Beckerman and Howie Leess, aging lions still



Yidls With Fiddles *Veretski Pass*, with (from left) Joshua Horowitz, Cookie Segelstein and Stuart Brotman; (right) Alicia Svigals; (opposite page, from left) Joel Rubin and Pete Rushefsky.

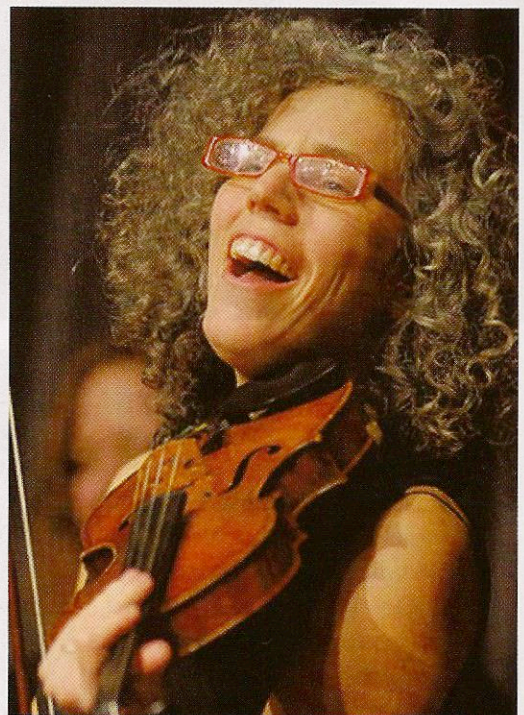
working the wedding-bar mitzva circuit with their horn-based, jazz- and pop-influenced sounds. Most, however, learned from recordings and from one another and from KlezKamp and similar gatherings it spawned.

ONE RESULT OF THE ABSENCE OF the traditional, nurturing soil is that the revivalists and their musical offspring were forced to fall back on archived 78-RPM recordings and the meager supply of notated music available in the 1970s, when the music was first reborn. The focus of almost all klezmerim in that first wave was on post-Ellis Island music, American-influenced with strong doses of ragtime and swing. As a result, their repertoire was heavy on tunes like Tarras's own "B-Flat Minor Bulgar" and Brandwein's "*Firn di Mekhetonim Abeym* (Seeing the In-Laws Home)."

To this traditional instrumental klezmer dance style, they added theater and vaudeville songs like the Molly Picon hit "*Abi Gezunt*" and Yiddish swing such as "*Bridegroom Special*."

"If you learned from YIVO and other collections of recorded music, you were geared toward the immigrant musicians," says Joel Rubin, ethnomusicologist and superb clarinetist. Rubin began looking into the music "not as a scholar but as a music nut," he says with a boyish grin.

The problem with those early klezmer revival days, he notes, is that "the same 20 to 30 tunes got played over and over." Musicians were familiar with the songs on reissued old American recordings and what was in the klezmer



"fake" books—a compilation of songs giving only melody lines and chords, enabling professional musicians to pick up semifamiliar tunes while on the bandstand—from the Kammen publishing company.

(TOP) COURTESY OF GOLDEN HORN RECORDS; CHRISTOPH GIESE; LLOYD WOLF (OPPOSITE PAGE) ANATAMA CHIRNIAVSKY

There was one other potential source, indeed a cornucopia of Jewish folk music, from the former Soviet Union: material collected and published in Russia in 1962 by Moshe Beregovski, a Soviet Jewish ethnomusicologist who forged ahead, despite the lack of sympathy for documenting Jewish culture under Communism.

few of the young klezmerim knew him. In addition, it was only in 2000 that Slobin's first Beregovski book, *Old Jewish Folk Music* (Syracuse University Press), was reprinted and, more important, a second collection, now out of print, consisting entirely of instrumental music was published called *Jewish Instrumental Folk Music*. That

ua Horowitz and others to take up the challenge of Beregovski and integrate the new sound. Rubin even titled one of his albums *Beregovski's Khasene* (Wedding).

In the meantime, American klezmerim were going back to the sources, returning to the Old Country in search of the aging musicians who escaped Hitler, Stalin and the passage of time. Yale Strom, a filmmaker, photographer, writer and violinist, found himself—in the literal and figurative senses—in Eastern Europe in 1981, where he went in search of klezmer's roots (see profile, page 52).

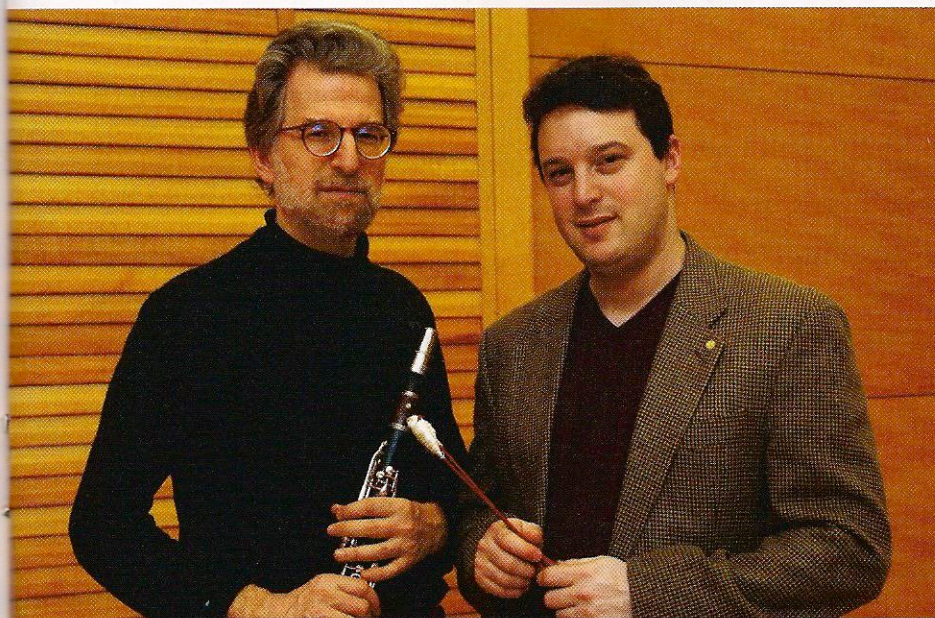
"I realized that I was in search of who I was as a person and as a Jew," Strom recalls. "Klezmer became important to me. I was getting music that would form the basis of the bands I play with now. I was intrigued to find that there were still Jews living there, still some semblance of Jewish culture. That's when I was also first introduced to the Rom culture, the Gypsies."

STROM AND MANY OTHERS BECAME acutely aware of the interaction between itinerant Jewish musicians and their Rom counterparts, that these two historically persecuted peoples had more in common than a shared fate in the death camps.

And Strom resolved that when he returned home he would explore klezmer further and would not play from the Kammen books or the old 78s, a promise that he has pretty much kept, creating music that combines the East European folk traditions, both Jewish and Rom, with occasional jazz and blues tints.

However, Strom is considered something of an outsider in the klezmer revival, and it probably was necessary for an insider to make the next move that would lead to a big breakthrough for the European style.

Enter Alicia Svigals, the archetypal insider. She is a founding member of



Ashkenazic Jewry experienced a series of severe ruptures in continuity in the past century, and much of its folk music, such as klezmer, was lost.

Mark Slobin, a professor in the music department at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, who is largely responsible for the publication of Beregovski's books in the United States, explains: "Beregovski was an amazing person. At his institute he created a real archive of Eastern European Jewish music in the proper style—a thousand wax cylinder [recordings], a detailed file-card index. He was the only person to do this for Yiddish music [in Europe]...."

But until the initial American publication of parts of his work in 1981,

event was one of the triggers for a new interest in klezmer as it might have been in the Old World.

Rubin notes that Zev Feldman and Andy Statman had already made a first effort at a "European" sound as far back as 1978 with their album *Jewish Klezmer Music*. It included many familiar tunes, mostly drawn from the wedding circuit, including the seemingly ubiquitous "*Firn di Mekhetonim Aheyem*." But Feldman went back to his studies and Statman took up the clarinet, and they didn't follow up on their inspiration. It fell to Rubin, Josh-

the Klezmatics, the most successful of the new klezmer bands, and taught violin at KlezKamp. When her 1997 album, *Fiddl*, was released, its sound was almost totally unprecedented: It was a startling amalgam of the astringent sound of pre-WWI folk violin from Eastern Europe and a Jewish music stripped of all American influences. “Everybody *wants* to do some-

thing different,” she says. “I had no intention of doing something different. My attitude was ‘This is what I must do, I hope people don’t mind.’”

Asked what triggered the idea for the album, Svigals sits and stares into space for a long time, shaking her head. “I’m trying to remember,” she says hesitantly, then perks up. “Kurt Bjorling had this tape of a fiddler

from the Old Country, and he said to me, ‘You play the violin—you should hear this, because nobody else is doing it.’ I became obsessed with this tape. I kept asking myself, ‘How do they make that sound?’”

When she finally figured it out, she began integrating the new concept into her own playing.

“I’m not a folklorist,” she says. “I’m a musician who was rediscovering what had already happened. My impulse was artistic, not historicist or sociopolitical.”

Fiddl marks a turning point for American klezmer, one that was later reinforced after the end of the Soviet system with the sudden freedom accorded to Jews throughout Eastern Europe. While there hasn’t been a flood of new immigrant musicians coming to the United States and Canada from the former Warsaw Pact countries to reshape klezmer, there have been some significant additions to the available repertoire.

Two of the most important contributions come from the late clarinetist German Goldenshteyn and singer Arcady Gendler. Goldenshteyn grew up around what is now the Ukraine-Moldova border, and his music reflects both Ukrainian and Moldovan influences. His “book” of some 300 previously uncollected tunes has been a major addition to the short shelf of klezmer sheet music. Gendler, born in Soroke, Bessarabia, has recorded numerous Ukrainian folk songs that were previously unfamiliar to his North American listeners.

STEVEN GREENMAN, A GIFTED VIOLINIST and one of the few contemporary klezmerim composing music in the old styles, was in Eastern Europe in 1989, the annus mirabilis of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He notes that the political changes have led to another important musical change.

“Things were happening for a long

How Catalina visited the Kotel



Yad Sarah learned about 93-year old Catalina Schwab and her dream to see Jerusalem and the Western Wall.

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time before, but now it's allowed a lot of musicians to come out, especially young ones," he says. "I teach at Klez-Kanada [a Canadian version of Klez-Kamp], and there are...musicians there [who live in] the former Soviet Union, and you see amazing things from them. They couldn't get access to the recordings before—now they have more resources available, and they're developing their own stuff."

In other words, they are learning the music their grandparents probably brought here and taking it to Europe, where they are reinventing Ashkenazic music yet again.

It's sort of an ironic spin on something violinist Cookie Segelstein of the band Veretski Pass says.

"Around the world there are scenes of people from the cities looking for a source [of wisdom and culture] in the villages," she asserts. "After the Holocaust, [traditional Jewish music] went to sleep. When we played that music at the holidays when I was a kid, it led to

sadness. But it was a sleeping giant. Now I have children of my own, and I have enough distance from my childhood that I can teach my children the music."

It really does come back to family. Segelstein and her partner, Joshua Horowitz, are two-thirds of Veretski Pass (with Stuart Brotman). That band is among the best of the newer "old-style" klezmer aggregations and takes its name from the small village at the base of a Carpathian Mountain pass, from which one side of her family came.

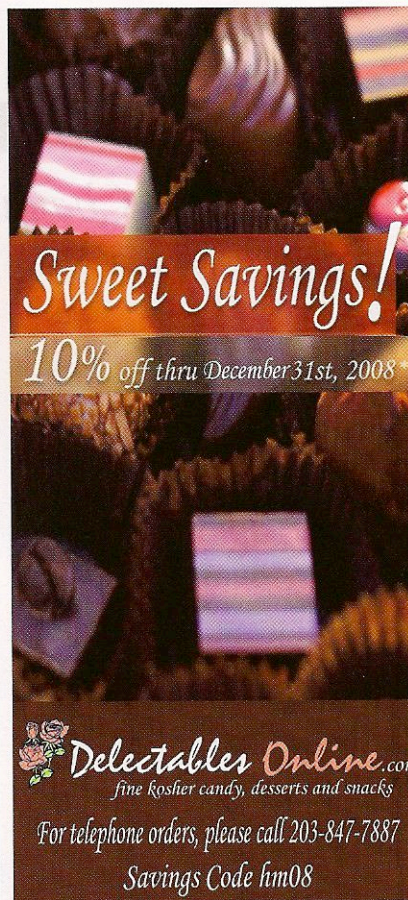
"It was this tiny place but it had so many ethnicities and so many different musics," she says. "[The band] is a way for me to explore those sounds—to start out with a village sound and just play the way it feels good." **H**

George Robinson is a music and film critic for New York's The Jewish Week. He is the author of Essential Judaism (Atria) and Essential Torah (Pocket Books).

Old-New Sound: The Must-Have List

Interested in European-style klezmer? Here are a number of suggestions to get you started. CDs are available through www.cdbaby.com or Hatikvah Music (www.hatikvahmusic.com; 323-655-7083).

- *Fidl* (Traditional Crossroads), Alicia Svigals' seminal album, tops the list.
- *Stempenyu's Dream* from violinist Steven Greenman brings together top musicians in the genre on a two-CD set, including Pete Rushefsky, Stuart Brotman and Walter Zev Feldman (available from www.stevengreenman.com).
- *Midnight Prayer* (Traditional Crossroads) by Joel Rubin, who has been responsible for many excellent records, none better than this, his most recent.
- *European Klezmer Music* (Smithsonian Folkways) from the band Khevrisa (Greenman paired with tsimblist Feldman).
- *Live* (Golden Horn), a two-CD set, is the best introduction to Budowitz.
- *Trafik* and *Veretski Pass* (both Golden Horn) by Veretski Pass.
- *Di Naye Kapelye* (Oriente), a self-titled debut by the band headed by Rob Cohen.
- Tsimblist Pete Rushefsky has duet CDs well worth seeking out: *On the Paths: Yiddish Songs With Tsimbl* (Yiddishland Records) with vocalist Rebecca Kaplan; *Tsimbl un Fidl: Klezmer Music for Hammered Dulcimer and Violin* with fiddler Elie Rosenblatt.
- *Café Jew Zoo*, *Garden of Yidn* (both Naxos World) and *Borscht With Bread, Brothers* (ARC Music) are three highlights among several worthy albums by Yale Strom and his band Hot Pstromi.
- *A Living Tradition* from German Goldenshteyn gives a taste of the last of the old-timers, available from Living Traditions, the organization that runs KlezKamp.



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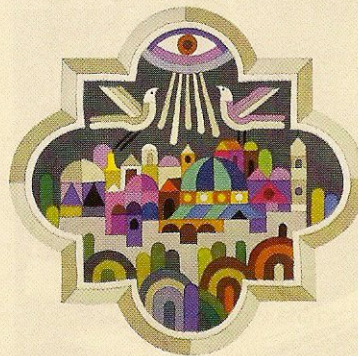
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