

NEW KLEZMER TRIO AND THE ORIGINS OF “RADICAL JEWISH CULTURE”

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In 1987 I started the group New Klezmer Trio. We were the first group to re-work the materials of traditional “klezmer” music in a modern, or “avant-garde” way. In the 1990’s other groups followed our example, so many that this is now spoken of as a musical movement or genre, sometimes called “Radical Jewish Culture” or “New Jewish Music”.

Some of the groups that followed the path initiated by New Klezmer Trio are John Zorn’s Masada, Frank London’s Hasidic New Wave, The Klezmatics, and groups led by Marty Ehrlich, Marc Ribot, and Jewlia Eisenberg.

The invention of New Klezmer Trio was the Big Bang of my musical life, the first time that preparation met imagination and took me somewhere I had not expected to be. I would like to try to describe my experience of that time.

In the early 1980’s, while in college, I began studying and performing klezmer music and played in a group that performed at weddings and bar mitzvahs. I was fascinated by the speedy, lurching, lyrical, exhortatory, digressive, speech-like phrasing and I wanted to find out what it was made of. The ingredients that gave the music its unique character, I discovered, were the microscopically detailed ornamentations and articulations. Each player had his own way of positioning a note in the beat, starting and stopping a note, and getting from one note to the next. I found that detailed listening (sometimes using a half-speed tape machine) could reveal the mechanism of phrasing and ornamentation. Then, through repetition in the practice room and repeated attempts onstage, those tricks could be internalized.

Here is the next thing I discovered: once you have made something your own, then you have the opportunity to contemplate it, wonder about it, fool around with it, manipulate it, and begin to learn something from it. Once I had learned and mastered, for example, how Naftule Brandwein attacks an E by beginning on D#, then bailing out of a “false” F# before landing resoundingly on the E, I could begin to mess around with it, wondering whether you just do that on E minor or if it also works on A minor (it does), and then finding out all the stranger places it can be used. What begins as mastery of someone else’s mechanics creates the tools for inventing one’s own.

The forms and tonalities of klezmer music are a weird hybrid of Romanian village music, Hungarian Gypsy rhapsodies, Greek and Turkish dances, Russian military marches, etc., with, at the very center, something unmistakably “Jewish” that somehow holds it all together. The scales used in klezmer music are most often one or another mode of what classical music theory calls the harmonic minor scale (a mode is defined by which note of a scale is used as the “tonic,” or fundamental pitch). Songs that we find in klezmer music recorded in the 1920’s employ a wide variety of harmonic minor modes, major and minor scales of various types, and some “synthetic” scales unnamed by music theory. The underlying chord structures are highly personal and idiosyncratic, and modulations between keys within a song display a unique logic.

As I studied and performed hundreds of songs, not only phrasing and articulation but the tonal and harmonic basis of the music came into focus. As with my discoveries in phrasing and articulation, having an internalized repertoire gave me material on which to reflect, wonder about things, and begin messing around with some new ideas.

One way I learned the tricks of the trade was by writing my own klezmer songs. At first my goal was simple: write something that sounded like “the real thing.” Of course, writing something that sounds “ordinary” is no ordinary matter – it required me to use everything I had, and then learn more. (As Lee Konitz has pointed out, “you’ve got to learn to play ‘far-in’ before you can play ‘far-out’.” And maybe “far-in” is the farthest out you can get! Who knows?) Then, when I was playing in The Klezmerim around 1985, I began working on a song whose rhythmic structure alternated a measure of “hora” (in 3) with a measure of “terkisher” (in 4). A sputtering, elliptical melody had been going through my mind and I found a way to fit it above this rhythm. Somehow I persuaded The Klezmerim to learn and perform this song (it exists out there somewhere in a recording entitled *Peggy’s Rice Hill*). (Wait a minute, I just found it on iTunes – we are definitely not in the 1920’s anymore! Note: that is not me on clarinet, it’s Paul Hanson.)

A word about my musical education and experience up until this point. Growing up in Denver, I played clarinet and saxophone in band, orchestra, jazz band, and various city-wide and state-wide groups. In high school I spent summers at the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. Like many public school students of that time, I came out with a well-rounded musical experience, having played orchestral music, jazz, new music, free improvisation, etc., and with pretty solid music theory training.

In those days for some reason clarinet was not thought of as a serious jazz instrument – that’s why I played saxophone. But, as John Carter once remarked after I complimented him on an early recording on which he had played alto saxophone, “Ah yes. A very good example of how *not* to play the saxophone.” (Actually John Carter sounded fine on the saxophone. But I took the comment to heart anyway because I wanted to be a clarinet player, like him.)

While at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the early 1980’s, I studied clarinet with Rosario Mazzeo, the dean of twentieth century clarinet teachers. I got better on the instrument and began to think about how to use the clarinet in jazz and improvised music.

The Klezmerim was one of the first groups to resurrect traditional klezmer music, beginning in 1975. When their original clarinetist left the group in 1984, they asked me to join. For some reason The Klezmerim was spending a lot of time in Paris in 1984 and 1985 – tours would be booked with gaps of one week, two weeks, and everyone would hang out in Paris until the next gig. That was fine with me because it allowed me to listen to, and eventually meet, one of my heroes, Mr. Steve Lacy. Steve’s music really touched me, and he had devoted himself solely to the soprano saxophone so he was a good model for my plan with the clarinet.

When not on the road Steve Lacy would often play at the Sunset, a medieval basement club in the heart of Paris, and I would be there if I could. After asking politely for about a year I finally persuaded Mr. Lacy to give me a lesson – he probably saw I was serious and / or figured it was the only way to get me to stop pestering him. Well, that lesson changed my life. Steve showed me exercises for investigating the fundamentals of intervals, harmony, and melody. The exercises were strong medicine – the first time I played them I got dizzy and almost fainted. But I worked on those exercises for the next five years and began to gain access to the basic materials of music. (Later, when a friend of mine played the first New Klezmer Trio record for Steve, he ground his fists together and said “worlds collide.” When I heard that I knew I was on to something.)

So, the elements of friction were in place: modern thinking in most of my musical life, and one place where the goal was to sound “old.” When I made my first attempt, with *Peggy’s Rice Hill*, to write a “modern” klezmer piece, I was doing so from within a community of klezmer musicians who valued “authenticity,” which to us entailed the ability to phrase and ornament exactly like the original recordings. But my musical knowledge and experience were very much a part of the modern world. Even though I had gotten pretty good at sounding like someone fresh off a boat from the old country, that’s not who I was – the very next night I might be playing modern chamber music or free jazz – and I began to wonder about it. Sounding authentic was beginning to feel pretty inauthentic to me.

Now, when I began to think about it I realized something: not only was *I* not the sentimental image of the untutored folk musician, growing up in a village playing the music of his people because that’s all he ever heard; neither were the folks who had made these recordings. Naftule Brandwein, Dave Tarras, and their colleagues were sophisticated, trained, ambitious musicians living in New York in the 1920’s and 30’s, hanging out with jazz musicians, hustling gigs, looking for opportunities, and trying to smoke each other with an unbeatable solo on their next record for Columbia. Even if their recordings were marketed by the record companies as something that would instantly transport the listener back to the Old Country, they themselves, like all serious musicians, had their sights set in one direction: the future.

But something had happened to Jewish music in the Forties and Fifties. The decimation of the old country, changing tastes among a generation of American-born Jews – for a variety of reasons klezmer music had petered out while the jazz with which it shared so much rhythmic and melodic vitality had evolved in countless fascinating directions.

I began to wonder: what would have happened if klezmer music had stayed vital, if ambitious creative musicians had continued to work with its melodies and forms in the same way they had with jazz? I had mastered the stylistic elements of klezmer; what would happen if I applied the full force of my artistic ambition to these ingredients? Was the music strong enough? Was I?

At a folk music festival in Sweden in 1986 I met Ziya Aytekin, a zurna player from the Caucasus who performed long duets with a drummer, improvising on traditional melodies for half an hour or more. As I listened to him, mesmerized by the power of the music, I thought about *Interstellar Space*, John Coltrane’s groundbreaking duet album with Rashied Ali. Coltrane had studied traditional forms, like Indian music, in his search for a way into the deepest part of music. As I listened to Mr. Aytekin play melodies that must have been centuries old, I realized that I could find no way to identify what I was hearing as either “old” or “new.” Take the music from *Interstellar Space* (or the more recently-issued *Stellar Regions*): is that music old, or new? I could not answer the question. I felt I was ready to make my move.

One day in 1987 I got together with Dan Seamans and Kenny Wollesen, with whom I had often played traditional klezmer music. I suggested we take a familiar tune and cut loose on it to see where it might go. As we were playing I was suddenly swept along by a powerful force – a force bigger than me, bigger than my ideas about music. I had gotten to that current through careful study and incremental advances, but I could tell there was nothing incremental about how the

current moved, and where it might take me. It was an exhilarating, powerful effect – my first taste of music as a transformative, liberating force.

We began to rehearse weekly – I was writing songs as fast as I could and we made arrangements of traditional tunes we knew. Dan came up with the name New Klezmer Trio, after the New Tango Quintet of Astor Piazzolla, whom we admired for his radical rethinking of tango. We played our first concert in 1987 at the Vulcan Café in Oakland; the owner made a flier advertising “Benny Goodman meets Ornette Coleman” – I wish I had a copy of that! We began playing shows around the Bay Area.

I found that everything I had worked so hard to master – the ornamentation, quirky phrasing, harmonic devices – was now available to me as tools for building my own thing. I found ways to pivot from one key to another using the characteristic sound of the harmonic minor scale, the augmented second. For example, the C and D# in the fifth mode of E harmonic minor could become C and Eb in the key of C minor; then pivoting on the B natural and D natural in C minor I could suddenly be in Ab minor #4, or the fourth mode of Eb harmonic minor. The possibilities were infinite, and because I felt a multitude of minor tonalities to be eternally present, I called this philosophy Twelve Minor. (Later I made a crazy record called *Twelve Minor* on the Avant label.)

One principle that was important to us from the beginning of New Klezmer Trio was our conviction that what we were doing was not a “fusion” of old and new – klezmer music and free jazz, for example. It was important to us to be able to describe (and sometimes defend) what we played as “klezmer music.” (This led to some funny encounters. Once after a concert at the San Francisco JCC an irate older gentleman came backstage and began shouting at Dan and Kenny “you call this klezmer? This isn’t klezmer. Goyim have more soul than you!” I guess he didn’t realize I was the only Jew in the band.) We felt our task was to look deeply into klezmer, using everything we had, and find out what was there.

In June 1990 we spent three days recording at Music Annex in Menlo Park. Our idea was to make a record (actually a record – it wasn’t until right before manufacturing that we saw which way the wind was blowing and realized it should be a CD). I was so nervous that I couldn’t listen to the tapes for three months. The album was eventually issued on the Nine Winds label, and we named it for an especially tricky song I had written called *Masks and Faces*. Molly Barker did the painting for the cover and that was the beginning of a lovely partnership that has lasted to this day.

In early 1992 I was excited to receive a call from the composer John Zorn, who had found a copy of *Masks and Faces* and wanted us to play at a festival he was curating in Munich called Artprojekt 92. He called his section of the festival “Radical Jewish Culture” and featured many of the “downtown” New York musicians who played at the Knitting Factory. Zorn’s *Kristallnacht*, which makes use of klezmer themes, was premiered there. New Klezmer Trio was the only group at the festival playing a modern version of traditional klezmer music; most of the music did not seem to have “Jewish” ingredients. By putting so much diverse music under the heading of “Radical Jewish Culture” Zorn set the stage for a lively and useful debate: what is “Jewish music”?

New Klezmer Trio received an enthusiastic mention in the German newsweekly Die Zeit based upon our appearance at Artprojekt 92, and we were able to begin touring Europe.

Suddenly musicians were interested in doing something new with Jewish materials. The scene was referred to by journalists as “New Jewish Music”; Zorn had his “Radical Jewish Culture”; and the Knitting Factory, not to be outdone, began booking concerts and tours featuring various groups in what they dubbed the “Jewish Alternative Movement.” New Klezmer Trio participated in one of these, a brutal winter tour of Europe complete with documentary film crew. The highlight was seeing Prague for all of the three hours it took to play a concert there, then driving all night to Budapest, after which there was a concert in Seville that required a mad dash to the Berlin train station, where we arrived just in time to see the owner of the Knitting Factory sitting on the luxury high speed train to Madrid – with all the money and train tickets. The musicians traveled third class and had a mutiny when we arrived.

It was backstage at the Panzerhalle in Munich during this tour that I first heard a tape of John Zorn’s new group, Masada. Now, *there* was klezmer-meets-Ornette! I was very excited: I felt that we had really accomplished something.

In 1995 John Zorn started his Tzadik record label, which has had an enormous impact with its Radical Jewish Culture series. He immediately released New Klezmer Trio’s second album, *Melt Zonk Rewire*, and arranged to reissue *Masks and Faces*. Our third record, *Short for Something*, came out in 2000.

Joe Lovano has said that Mel Lewis could play a downbeat that was so strong it would last for eight bars. Perhaps there are some downbeats that keep ringing for the rest of your life. For me, New Klezmer Trio was this downbeat, a moment when the ingredients I had worked so hard to prepare first came together in an experience that continues to illuminate the depth and range of musical possibility in this world. I’m glad it lasted long enough to be developed and recorded, and that some people heard what we were doing.

In years since, I made a conscious turn away from identifying what I did as “klezmer,” but the sounds, thoughts, and disruptions of this time are still in the air. In 2009 I recorded an epilogue to New Klezmer Trio (and an epitaph for my father) with Kenny Wollesen and Greg Cohen, a record of recent reflections on Jewish music called *Speech Communication*.