

"Sing a new song to the Lord!" the Psalmist said – and Jewish songwriters across America are still listening.

In the past 35 years, there has been an explosion of new Jewish music – liturgical, inspirational and expressive – that pushes the boundaries of what Jewish music 'sounds' like. Now Jewish music sounds like jazz, gospel, soul, folk, rap, hip-hop, blues, even chazzanut, sampled with avant-garde new compositions, and it's all finding an audience in the Jewish world.

Tracing the beginning of this movement isn't hard – one young composer with a big guitar and a lot of enthusiasm named Debbie Friedman began writing music that swept the Reform movement camps in the summer of 1972. Her first album, *Sing Unto God* was revolutionary – she had written Jewish music that sounded contemporary. Her melodies provided an entry point for the disaffected youth of the day. By taking the well-known lyrics of prayers, some in Hebrew and some translated into English, she created a whole genre of accessible, singable music. When the kids raised their voices to sing Debbie's music, a new energy was unleashed in Reform (equivalent to UK Liberal) congregations across the country, setting up a conflict between 'camp music' and 'synagogue music' that has not yet been resolved. Her outsider status, as song-leader, not cantor, did not help this tension. And yet, she deserves credit for re-introducing 'Mi Shebeirach' which is sung in almost every Reform synagogue in the world after years of omission, with the verses translated into Hebrew for use in Israeli Progressive synagogues. It was Debbie's own struggle for health that led her to write music for healing services.

Around the same time, a young cantor and rabbi duo, Kol B'Seder (Rabbi Danny Frelander and Cantor Jeff Klepper), were writing their own version of prayers and interpreting Talmudic sayings in song. Some of their melodies, 'Shalom Rav' and 'Oseh Shalom' are sung throughout the progressive Jewish world as standard settings, while their song, 'Lo Alecha' was a very popular styling for the text from *Pirke Avot* 'You are not



MARGE EISEMAN on new wave



revolutionize the Shabbat worship scene with their own brand of energetic, accompanied music (in what had been a moribund Conservative shul). These large-scale revitalizations demonstrated that it was possible to introduce and integrate new melodies very quickly with a large population.

Contemporary Jewish music is targeted to a wide audience – it's not just for teens at summer camp, nor is it for little kids (although they like it well enough). Musicians who began their

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obligated to complete the task, but you are not free to abstain from trying'. They recently released *Snapshots: The Best of Kol B'Seder Vol 1* with material recorded over the past 30 years.

They were joined over the next decades by some very talented composer/performers, but none became as well-known as these pioneers until 1999. Then Craig Taubman recorded *Friday Night Live* and popularised the music he had composed for an outrageously successful Friday night service that was attracting almost 1,600 young adult worshippers once a month in the Los Angeles area. It was a happening scene, made lively by Craig's musical expertise and charisma. On the east coast, people were talking about 'BJ' (Congregation B'nei Jeshurun) in New York, whose Argentine-born and trained clergy and enthusiastic approach to prayer were attracting thousands to their Friday night services on the Upper West Side. They were beginning to

careers as rock 'n' roll musicians, like Rick Recht and Beth Schafer, or as camp songleaders, like Dan Nichols and his band, E18teen, and Scott Leader, have come on the summer camp scene with their melodies, just like Debbie Friedman did years ago, but their music hasn't made it back into the synagogues in the same way. And, there are Jewish children's musicians, like Peter and Ellen Allard, Shira Kline and Judy Caplan Ginsburgh, whose music reaches the young children and their parents, but is rarely used in synagogue settings.

The most exciting scene is the world that OySongs founder Joe Eglash calls 'Contemporary Jewish Music'. His website ([www.oysongs.com](http://www.oysongs.com)) offers the myriad singer/songwriters the opportunity to have all their music included in a searchable database that can be downloaded digitally. At the time of writing, there are about 180 albums listed in this genre, recorded by

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s in contemporary music in the US



about 60 different artists or groups, most of them American. By my count, less than a fifth are cantors or rabbis. That means that most of the composers are inspired lay people who encounter a text or a situation and feel the call to put their own interpretation into music, to express one's soul in a Jewish way.

Who are the next Jewish music superstars? There are two guys named Joshua Nelson. One recently performed at Limmud in Nottingham, and the crowd went wild for his 'kosher gospel' stylings. The other Josh Nelson has assembled a group called the Josh Nelson Project, with music that he describes on his myspace page as "Led Zeppelin, Ben Folds, Miles Davis, and The Beatles making a Kiddush". And Matisyahu (profiled in *JR* January 2006) is clubbing all over the country, giving 'props' to HaShem in his reggae/hip-hop fashion. For the intellectual folkies, Rabbi Joe Black reaches out with sophisticated guitar-playing and intelligent song composition, as well as superb production values on his albums. Stacy Beyer, from Nashville, Tennessee has

perhaps the widest range of styles on her CD, HaMakom and Shalshet Festival honoree Rebecca Schwartz is for all the Barbra Streisand fans who wish for that pure sound in new liturgical settings.

Liturgical music is still the mainstay of Jewish contemporary composition. Putting aside 'Adon Olam', which can be sung to almost any melody with four lines of four measures each, there are a number of prayers that have multiple settings. Some composers, like Debbie Friedman, even have more than one version of the same prayer, written at different times in their careers. But most composers reach for a new melody because of a need to hear the prayer in a different way. As the prodigiously talented Danny Maseng once told me, "if we are honest, there are places in the prayer which trouble us, and in those places, the music should also be troubling us". It is incongruous to hear a raucous setting of the *piyut* (personal prayer) that leads into the 'Amidah', nor should one be yanked out of private prayer by a rip-roaring setting of 'Oseh Shalom'. Do these settings exist? Unfortunately, yes! But they won't win any prizes at the Shalshet International Festival for New Jewish Liturgical Music.

The other dominant category of Contemporary Jewish Music is inspirational or personal – the predominantly English language setting of an interpretation of an experience or encounter with text or with the Divine. For example, Florida musician Beth Schafer's 'A Way to Say 'Ah'' was written after a plane ride home from California with a horrible head cold. She wrote in the intro, "I heard myself say 'Aahhh' as we landed, and realised that I had held my breath the whole way down. I was so glad to get where I was going...like the Shehechyanu, Thank God, I'm alive".

A snippet of text can inspire a journey into song. 'Lo BaShamayeem Hee' (It's Not in Heaven), takes a phrase I first heard as a discussion-ending retort from my rabbi. Understanding the words wasn't the hard part – getting to the heart of why he said them is what made me write a song. I looked at the lines in Deuteronomy 30, and realised that there was a message for all of us there: it's not too hard or far away! The teaching is in your hearts and in your mouths. And as the last verse interprets, "It's there for the taking. It's a gift we can make our own. Lessons from the life we choose – goodness is the path we're shown!"

Marge Eiseman composes, performs and travels the world as a spiritual teacher. She will be presenting at Glasgow Limmud on 10 February 2008. [marge@jewishwaves.org](mailto:marge@jewishwaves.org)

## WHERE TO LEARN, PARTICIPATE OR JUST HEAR

**Shalshet International Festival for New Jewish Liturgical Music** ([www.shalshet.org](http://www.shalshet.org)) The biennial festival, organised by Chazan Dr Ramón Tasat, began in 2004 and features a public concert and classes performing the best of new liturgical music that has not otherwise been published. The first festival selections were recorded and made available as a CD, and the printed music is available in a songbook, to expand the reach of these new compositions. **Hava Nashira** ([www.osrui.org](http://www.osrui.org)) annual 5-day workshop at Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute (Reform Movement camp) Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. It was founded in 1992 by Debbie Friedman, Cantor Jeff Klepper, and others – all of whom have remained core faculty members – to train summer camp leaders, and it has welcomed talented teachers such as Craig Taubman, Peter and Ellen Allard, Cantor Ellen Dreskin, Dan Nichols, Julie Silver and Merri Levinger Arian. Each year, up to 150 people with an interest in songwriting or songleading (at summer camp, in religion school settings or as service leaders) come to learn repertoire, practise leading and be inspired. There's always time to share your own music at late night open mics or just by staking out a spot under a tree with friends and guitars!

**Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE)** [www.caje.org](http://www.caje.org) Conference this year to be held at Washington University St Louis, Missouri, August 5-9. Also with warm, welcoming and supportive folks who encourage the growth of new musicians.

**Radio on the Web** [www.jewishwaves.org](http://www.jewishwaves.org) Co-hosts Andy Muchin and Marge Eiseman offer a weekly one-hour show featuring the new Jewish music. **B'nai Briith Radio** [www.live365.com/stations/bbiradio](http://www.live365.com/stations/bbiradio) and **Five Towns radio** [www.fivetownsradio.com](http://www.fivetownsradio.com), stream Jewish music every day.

Photos: Anti-clockwise from top left: Marge Eiseman, Josh Nelson, Craig Taubman at Hava Nashira 2006, Debbie Friedman and Peter Allard at Hava Nashira 2004, Rabbi Joe Black, Rebecca Schwartz, Saturday morning at Hava Nashira 2006. All Hava Nashira photos by Angela Gold [Angela@silverbygold.com](mailto:Angela@silverbygold.com)