

Photo: Hannes Wanderer



KLEZMER GOES EAST

LEMEZ LOVAS CONTINUES

JR'S ANALYSIS OF THE KLEZMER REVIVAL

Klezmer is alive and kicking, make no mistake – idle through the on-line bible www.klezmer.shack.com and you'll see local bands vying for simchas all over the Jewish world, in places as far flung as Uzbekistan and Japan. Granted, these two particular bands might enjoy something of a monopoly – but the fact remains that klezmer today is a truly international phenomenon.

The so-called revival, which has been gaining momentum since musicians like Kapelye's Henry Sapoznik started dusting off old 78s in the late seventies, has tended to focus on North America, home to hundreds of bands from coast to coast, and the vast majority of archive sources, scholars, recent innovators and leading practitioners. Not that this is in any way surprising: the only other country to which Ashkenazi Jews fled in large numbers before the war, Israel, has always had an uneasy relationship with Yiddish culture and its perceived associations of victimhood.

In Europe, the Jewish music scene is particularly interesting. Especially in Eastern Europe, there are many non-musical issues closely linked to klezmer's growing popularity. In the Ukraine, for example, klezmer is playing a crucial role in revitalising the community. In a country where, until the 1980s, religion was officially forbidden, Jews were seen and came to see themselves as a racial, ethnic group. The great race/religion/culture debate here is very simple – go into any local community centre and you will see wallcharts proudly displaying photographs of distinguished Jewish chess players. As the culture itself was discouraged and diluted, listening in secret to Jewish musicians was as close as people could get to Jewish music. Soviet society was relentless in its daily assertion that it is what you are, not who you are, that matters.

All that is now changing. With support from US Jewish charities like the Jewish Community Development Fund for

Russia and Ukraine, and the "JOINT" (JDC – Joint Distribution Committee), Jewish music is now regular part of community life across the country. Thanks largely to the vision and hard work of the Centre of Jewish Education in Kiev, Jewish music in the Ukraine is getting more vibrant by the day. One sensational new group to look out for is the Kharkov Klezmer Band, a traditional five-piece band with a virtuosity that is making waves across Europe and an album coming out in the spring. The most important recent development on a national level is an annual summer Jewish Music Festival, 'Klezfest', in the south of the country on the Black Sea coast. To be there is a phenomenal experience – all of a sudden klezmer makes sense, you can feel

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the music reconnecting to its roots. Talented singers and musicians flock there from all over the former Soviet Union, and the number of applicants is doubling every year. Older generations of musicians, like the mesmerising trio of seventy-something Yiddish tango exponents, Khaverim, literally cannot be dragged away from all-night jam sessions with young students, and you can understand why – after all, last year's Klezfest was the first Jewish music festival in the Ukraine for over 70 years.

Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the Jewish music scene is also dancing back into the public eye with a vengeance. Budapest is home to the wonderful Klezmer and Literature festival every

December and to groups like the Budapest Klezmer, the Odessa Klezmer Band and Di Naye Kapelye; Poland is re-establishing its Jewish heritage on the international music scene with a big summer festival in Crakow and two bands, Kroke and the Cracow Klezmer Band, with a growing international reputation as world-class musicians and key innovative players in the new wave klezmer movement. Jewish music festivals are springing up in Moscow and St Petersburg, and bands like Klec in the Czech Republic and the Pressburg Klezmer Band in Slovakia are also starting to make a name for themselves.

Most interesting of all though is the scene in the country that has done the most to support klezmer on the international stage over the last 20 years...Germany. The statistics are nothing short of amazing: there are 32 bands on the German site www.klezmer.de; independent record labels like Piranha and Oriente are dedicated klezmer promoters, and Germany is home to some of the largest and most enthusiastic audiences in the world. Heiko Lehman, who played with East Germany's first klezmer band, Aufwind, in the early 1980s, gives a fascinating account of the reasons behind the popularity of Yiddish culture on both sides of the Wall (see website list below). Whatever the reasons – guilt, anti-fascism and opposition to state culture all played a part – the klezmer scene in Germany is remarkable in that few of the bands or audiences are Jewish. Some people argue that it is inappropriate for non-Jews, and Germans in particular, to play klezmer. But inside the names of dedicated non-Jewish klezmer bands, like Holland's 'Di Goyim', is a sign of the music's fundamental success in Europe – that it has been accepted as an authentic and respected folk music that interests serious musicians, whatever their background. And that can only be a good thing for Jews everywhere. ■