

Jazz and First-Generation American Klezmer Musicians

Klezmer is the traditional instrumental music of the Jews of Eastern Europe and, as far as we know, dates from the 16th century. The term “klezmer” itself derives from the Hebrew words *kley zemer*, “vessel of song,” referring to the musical instruments.

Heavily influenced by the existing folk genres in the area — e.g., Romanian, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Gypsy — and traditional Jewish cantillation, klezmer was filtered through Jewish ears and consciousness.

Immigrant klezmer musicians who came from Eastern Europe to America during the early 20th century found a ready market for their skills. Many large American cities had Jewish neighborhoods filled with large young families. Yiddish was spoken by the vast majority. The newly arrived klezmerim found work using the old repertoire at weddings, society, labor union, and synagogue functions. Those adept at reading music could also find employment in Yiddish theaters.

American-born musicians began to perform klezmer music in the mid-1920s. Max Epstein (clarinet/saxophone/violin) was playing violin in a Yiddish theater orchestra at the age of 12, in 1924. Although he plays American dance music, Epstein's klezmer clarinet and violin are totally European in overall style. He follows in the tradition of his idols, the European-born Dave Tarras (1897–1989) and Naftule Brandwein (1889–1963). Brandwein's was the dominant clarinet approach — somewhat rough, but daring and exciting — until the advent of Tarras in the late 1920s. Most of the first-generation American

players followed the style and repertoire of Dave Tarras — smooth, graceful, and elegant. I would compare the two: Brandwein is to Tarras as early Benny Goodman is to Artie Shaw.

Aside from Epstein, the most important first-generation American klezmer clarinetist was Tarras's son-in-law, the awesome Sam Musiker (1916–1964), who was the featured jazz clarinet soloist in the Gene Krupa band from 1938 until 1942. As with most in his generation, Musiker was an outstanding saxophonist as well. Jazz was an important component of Sam's klezmer playing and composing. His younger brother, Ray Musiker (born 1926), plays with a more “classical” tone, and his compositions reflect the more “modal” approach of contemporary jazz.

Others who play in the Tarras style are Howie Leess, a devotee of Artie Shaw and a brilliant improviser on the tenor sax; Leess's first cousin, Danny Rubinstein, who plays marvelous modern jazz on sax as well; Paul Pincus, a Juilliard graduate who spent many years as a clarinetist and bass clarinetist in Broadway pit orchestras and plays elegant saxophone with little jazz influence; and Rudy Tepel, for years a band leader at Hasidic weddings, who employs a curious “society” sax vibrato on the clarinet and a punchy sax style reminiscent of Charlie Barnet.

An anomaly among first-generation

Peter Sokolow

American klezmer clarinetists, Sid Beckerman follows neither Brandwein nor Tarras. Sid's style derives from that of his father, Shloimke Beckerman (1883–1974), a good technician on both clarinet and saxophone who played in a Paul Whiteman big band unit at New York's posh Palais Royale in the early 1920s. He was the only one of the immigrant generation who played the saxophone well. Sid's playing is totally devoid of jazz influence and surprisingly lacking in vibrato, which also is apparent on the few recordings made by his father in the 1920s. On Sid's other instruments, trumpet and trombone, the jazz influence varies.

When klezmer came to America, it moved indoors, from open fields to catering halls, where it found — pianos! There weren't many pianists in klezmer in the immigrant generation; the piano remained for the first-generation Americans, so many of whom were given music lessons by their parents. Klezmer dance bands used piano for “oom-pah” rhythm. The younger pianists such as my father, Abraham Sokolow (1896–1987), emulated the dynamic style of George Gershwin (1898–1937), whose innovative harmonies and rhythms pervaded American dance music from the 1920s until World War II. Some of these ideas found their way into klezmer music, introduced by Abe Ellstein, who played with Dave Tarras; Sam Eisenberg, who played with Max Epstein; and Sam Medoff, pianist and arranger on the 1930s and 1940s radio series, “Yiddish

The Fourth Annual Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert is made possible with support from The Recording Industries Music Performance Trust Funds, the Ruth Mott Fund, Friends of the Festival, and Kate Rinzler.



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Peter Sokolow, Henry Spoznik, Howie Lees, and Sid Beckerman (left to right) perform in the early 1990s.
Photo courtesy Peter Sokolow

Melodies in Swing.” Some bands used the accordion in addition to or as a substitute for the piano.

The archetypal klezmer drummer in America was Irving Gratz (1907-1989), the mighty little man who played for Dave Tarras. An immigrant who played a pure klezmer style — rolls on the snare drum, steady bass drum, and cymbal accents — Gratz’s “time” was impeccable: no rushing or slowing down, no jazz whatsoever. The drummers who put some Krupa into klezmer were the youngest Epstein brother, Julie (born 1926, in my opinion the best today), Sol Gubenko (brother of jazz vibist Terry Gibbs), Marvin Kutcher (nephew of trombonist Sam), and Si Salzberg.

I am the “bridge” between the first two generations of American klezmer and the

revivalists of Henry Sapoznik’s age and younger. I learned the music from Tarras, Gratz, Tepel, the Epstein brothers, and Sid Beckerman, all of whom I performed with regularly, starting in the late 1950s. Oddly, I learned a newer, more “yankified” klezmer than that of the revivalists, who went to the old Abe Schwartz, Harry Kandel, and Naftule Brandwein recordings for their style and repertoire. Even though I have been playing this music since before many of the “kids” were born, their basic approach predates mine! Many of my colleagues and I have introduced the revivalists to the style and repertoire of the Dave-Tarras-and-later period, which spans the years from 1930 to 1960. After 1960, klezmer music became dormant, awaiting rediscovery and revitalization through the efforts of

the dedicated scholars and performers of the klezmer revival. The revivalists have redefined our old music, lending a patina of artistry to the old, derogatory term *klezmer*, meaning a musical simpleton only capable of playing old Yiddish tunes poorly. They have brought our old-time catering-hall dance music onto the concert stage, into the recording studio, and on television and radio, giving new careers and a modicum of fame and public recognition to a bunch of old, semi-retired veterans. We “old guys” would like to thank the “young guys” for getting us a part in this wonderful music scene.

Pete Sokolow is a veteran of New York’s Jewish music scene. Cofounder of Klezmer Plus!, he is highly regarded for his New Orleans and early jazz stylings.