

# Old-Time Music and the Klezmer Revival: A Personal Account

**B**y the time I graduated from high school in 1971, I knew that I had a great affinity for traditional music — especially “old-time” music from Appalachia.

Cutting loose from my Orthodox Jewish upbringing and liturgical studies under my cantor father, I put my Jewish music in deep freeze and careened my way through rock and protest, winding up with “authentic folk.” Dubbing myself “Hank,” I ventured forth with my \$10 Japanese banjo intent on embodying the hard livin’, hard travelin’ repertoire of rural Americans. Haunting the numerous coffeehouses in Greenwich Village or heading to the Wailing Wall of folk music, Washington Square Park, I would play a host of antique American songs with other children and grandchildren of East European Jewish émigrés. The music scene was awash with fiddlers, banjo players, mandolin players, and guitarists who, with their long stringy, beards and intense gazes, looked like nothing less than students playing hooky from *beys medresh*, the Jewish house of study. I fit right in. One band I sat in with was The Wretched Refuse String Band, whose name underscored the relatively recent immigrant backgrounds of the musicians’ families.

The following few years were filled with listening to 78 rpm recordings of bands like Uncle Dave Macon and the Fruit Jar Drinkers, Dr. Humphrey Bates and the Possum Hunters, and my favorite, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers. In 1972, I formed my own old-time band, The Delaware Water Gap String Band. The DWG soon became a popular group

in the bite-size universe shared with other urban revival old-time bands like the New Lost City Ramblers and the bluegrass-oriented Greenbriar Boys, in which Ralph Rinzler played.

To this 19-year-old Brooklyn boy, North Carolina seemed like an amalgam of Shangri-La and Tobacco Road. My dream was to go as soon as possible. In the summer of 1973 I got a chance to make a field trip to Mt. Airy to the home of Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham, two of the most wonderful players of old-time music. Septuagenarians both, the irascible Tommy and the dryly self-deprecatory Fred made perfect teachers. They were generous, demonstrative, appreciative, accessible, and endlessly authentic. Over the next few years I made half a dozen trips; these remain some of the most powerful and wonderful memories I have.

At breakfast one morning on one of these trips, Tommy offered me scrambled eggs, bacon, and biscuits drenched in bacon-fat gravy. I opted for just coffee. The genial Tommy pressed me with “Come on, Hank, eat up!” We parried and thrust until Tommy, getting more and more obstreperous, blurted out: “What’s the matter with you, Hank? What’re you, a damned Jew?” Whoa! I’m still not sure if I was more startled by Tommy’s language or his knowing that pork is not kosher. In any case I stammered out: “Why, yes, Tommy, I am.” It turned out that, touched and impressed as he and Fred were about the boundless enthusiasm Jews had for their music and

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culture, they were still puzzled about the proliferation of us in old-time music. After all, their own kin took nearly no interest in it.

Tommy asked me, “Hank, don’t your people got none of your own music?” Well, of course we had “our own” music: cantorial melodies I sang with my father, Hasidic tunes we sang in yeshiva, numerous songs sung with gusto during Passover. There was also the Israeli music I deeply loathed. But where were the great fiddlers, the driving elemental dance tunes, and exuberant, unself-conscious genres of music? Above all, where were the Jewish Tommys and Freds? I didn’t know, but I meant to find out. And did.

Excerpted from *Klezmer! A Social History of Yiddish Music in America* (Schirmer Press, forthcoming).

## Suggested Reading

Sapoznik, Henry. “Klezmer Music: The First Five Hundred Years.” In *Musics of Multicultural America*, ed. Kip Lornell and Anne Rassmusen. New York: Schirmer Press, 1998.

## Suggested Listening

Dave Tarras: *Yiddish-American Klezmer Music 1925–1956*. Yazoo 7001.  
*Klezmer Plus! Featuring Sid Beckerman and Howie Leess*. Flying Fish 70488.

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