

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

THE KLEZMATICS

Lemez Lovas doffs his hat to the group who, over a quarter of a century, have changed the face of klezmer music



MICHAEL MACDOE

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in suburban attics, and even the wedding and bar mitzvah – those crucibles of Jewish cultural life – had long been taken over by the two King Michaels, Bolton and Jackson. It wasn't that klezmer, or Jewish music in general wasn't cool – it just wasn't, full stop.

The Klezmatics changed all that. But when they burst onto the New York scene in the mid-80s, they weren't the first to dig into the crates at second-hand record stores and realise that there was a substantial musical heritage there that deserved another listen. That honour went to Berkeley's The Klezmerim, clarinetist Andy Statman and Brave Old World's inspirational singer and fiddler Michael Alpert. But the Klezmatics were the first to do it on their own terms. They were irreverent, adventurous and most importantly of all, eschewed rehashing those old recordings for a punkier approach, charged with the energy of the music they themselves had grown up with – jazz, funk, improv and black music.

“We didn't really set any goals at the outset,” says trumpeter and arranger Frank London, “but we found a way to circumnavigate what had been a seemingly unbreakable connection between Yiddish music and kitsch or shtick. We were part of a community and generation that put Yiddish music culture back in the contemporary cultural discourse.” If the Klezmatics had just played the most swinging,

hard-edged grooving versions of old-time Yiddish music, then that would have been good enough. But what marked them out head and shoulders above their contemporaries was a social and political consciousness that led them to produce music that was not just kick-ass, but engaged, activist and ballsy: casting them firmly as agitators in the tradition of Sophie Tucker, Lenny Bruce and the Yiddish political poets of the early 20th century.

Their 1988 debut album for the hipster Piranha label in Berlin, *Shvaygn = Toyt* (Silence = Death), was, London recalls, “both an homage to the slogan of ACT UP [an organisation committed to ending the AIDS crisis], and an acknowledgement that if one is silent in the face of injustice then one is siding with the oppressor. It was also a literal statement about the Yiddish language: if no one speaks or sings in it, it will be dead.” But it wasn't until their next two albums, 1991's *Rhythm + Jews* and 1994's *Jews with Horns* that their trademark sound – experimentation with jazz, Arabic, polyrhythms, rock drumming – came into its own. Their songs in Yiddish, sung by Lorin Sklamberg, showed deep research and respect for tradition, but only as a starting point for something else: ‘Honikzaft’ (Honey-juice), recasting King Solomon's *Song of Songs* as a homoerotic love poem.

“From early on,” says Sklamberg, “even before we made a conscious effort to make the music our own, we decided that if we sang songs, they would be ones we believed in, which, since I'm the singer, meant that we would be forgoing chestnuts of the Yiddish theatre repertoire. Not that that material isn't great, but, for one thing, other people do it better, and for another, a lot of it plays on the nostalgia for days gone by of the audiences it was by and large written for.”

Both *Jews with Horns* and 1997's *Possessed* showed that the Klezmatics had truly got something that other bands didn't. Klezmer may be instrumental music, but Jewish culture values text more than anything. It was this depth of understanding – visible in settings of Yiddish poets, collaborations with playwrights like Tony Kushner and acerbic Yiddishist Michael Wex – that made the Klezmatics stand head and shoulders above the competition. Other bands studied the same old recordings, and practised the same licks, but no one else really got the underbelly of tension and change that they did.

Fast forward 15 years, and the Klezmatics have established themselves not just as a great Jewish music band, but a great American band. What has kept them fresh and still relevant is their continuing desire to explore: records with gospel singers, an Israeli folk legend and even Woody Guthrie, whose songs provided the raw material that finally won them a Grammy with *Wonder Wheel*.

Klezmer music has changed unrecognisably since the Klezmatics started doing their thing, and while today young European bands might look just as much to great storytellers like Odessa-born Alec Kopyt of the Amsterdam Klezmer Band, alongside our own folk traditions, it was the Klezmatics who still remain as the number one reference point. They didn't show us what to do, but they showed us we can do whatever we want, lighting the flame for countless generations of future experimentation. And for that Jewish music is truly grateful. **N**

DATES *The Klezmatics play at the Union Chapel in London on October 21, with special guest Sophie Solomon*

PODCAST *Hear a track from Rhythm + Jews on this issue's podcast*

The history of Jewish music from the Bible to the 21st century basically goes like this: first King David plucked his lyre; Saadia Gaon added some theory; then Mahler and theatre maestro Avram Goldfaden came up with some tunes; Irving Berlin and Flanagan and Allen wrote some songs; Willy Bergman, Serge Gainsbourg and Zohar Argov added some grooves and finally one band put it all together – the Klezmatics.

If you think this is just a colourful

exaggeration, cast your musical minds back to 1986, the year that the Klezmatics got together. Popular Jewish music was... well, Jerry Bock's kitsch soundtrack to *Fiddler on the Roof* and some old-timers in the Catskill Mountains scraping out a living at the few kosher hotels that remained from their mid-century 'Borscht Belt' boom years. The glory years of Yiddish music, when Ben Zion Witrer, Sophie Tucker and Max Bacon spat out hymns of grandeur and self-abasement to thousands, had long been left to gather dust



BEST ALBUMS



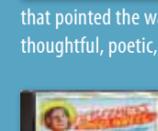
Rhythm + Jews (Piranha, 1991)
Jews With Horns (Piranha, 1994)
Possessed (Piranha, 1997)



The three albums on the German Piranha label that defined what klezmer could sound like – provocative, funky, experimental and above all, great dance music.



The Well (Xenophile, 1996)
 A collaboration with Israeli folk singer Chava Alberstein



that pointed the way towards a more thoughtful, poetic, introspective sound.



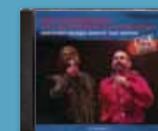
Wonder Wheel (JMG Records, 2006)
 Their Grammy-winning album of songs by Woody Guthrie, the great troubadour and voice of American social consciousness. Reviewed in #65.

BEST COMPILATION



Live at Town Hall (Fréa Records 2011)
 Excellent live album featuring music from their whole career. A Top of the World review in #83.

BEST AVOIDED



Brother Moses Smote The Water (Piranha, 2004)
 Klezmer meets gospel, a great idea, but for once, a collaboration that didn't really come off.

IF YOU LIKE THE KLEZMATICS, THEN TRY... SHE'KOYOKH



Busker's Ballroom (ARC Music, 2011)
 The UK's finest klezmer band. Although more rootsy than the 'matics, they blow up a storm on stage. A Top of the World review in #75.