

## **Reflections on Being a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Klezmer Musician**

**by David Krakauer**

For those of you who are among the uninitiated, klezmer music is the traditional celebration music of Eastern European Jewry. This is the music that was played at weddings (and other festive events) for the Jewish communities of Russia, Poland, Byelorussia, Moldavia, Rumania, the Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Hungary, among other countries. Klezmer (which means music in Yiddish) was brought to the U.S. during the great wave of Jewish immigration between 1880 and 1920, and is primarily known to us today through recordings made in New York beginning in the early 1920s by musicians who came to America during this time period. Because the Holocaust was to eradicate most of Eastern European Jewish culture, klezmer music in America exists as a precious and important vestige of a varnished world.

It is an incredibly interesting time to be playing klezmer music -- with a rise in Jewish consciousness, with Europeans examining an aspect of the soul of their continent that was destroyed during World War II, with the tremendous excitement of the "world beat" phenomenon, and simply with the joyous "danceability" of this music. In fact, klezmer music has gone through two revivals since the mid-1970's, and I believe we are now in a tremendously creative post revival period. While those of us playing klezmer today are still constantly studying old recordings and other source material to retrieve what was almost lost to us there is, at the same time, a new sense of freedom and playfulness with the music that has given rise to a diverse repertoire, tremendous international participation and a wide variety of approaches. In my own work, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century American, I freely incorporate influences of funk, jazz and, most recently through my collaboration with sampling wizard So-called, hip hop.

For me personally it is important to do two things in playing klezmer. One is to preserve the Jewishness -- the inflection of the Yiddish language in the music (that I recognized in the speech inflections of my grandmother), the melodic shapes, the ornaments, the phrasing, the traditional repertoire, and the flavor of the cantor. But the second is to keep klezmer out of the museum -- to write new klezmer pieces and to improvise on older forms in a way that is informed by the world around me today. My colleague Alicia Svigals, former violinist of the group The Klezematics, talks about tradition always being in flux -- that there is no such thing as static "tradition." For example, when I write a more extended composition, I try to keep the feeling of a klezmer melody or ornament -- but at the same time abstract that into a single gesture. Or, when I write a new tune, it has to be danceable, yet full of quirky and weird aspects -- in short, Klezmer Madness!

In both brand new pieces and re-interpretations of older standard repertoire, everything I play adheres to (or refers to) the basic forms of klezmer music: the Doina -- rhapsodic, cantorial improvisation; the Chosidl -- a kind of walking slower dance; the Turkish -- a dotted-rhythm dance form from Rumania via Turkey ("oriental" in flavor); the old Rumanian Hora -- a slow dance in a limping 3/8; and the Bulgar or Freylekh -- an up-tempo dance tune for circle dancing and lifting honored guests up in chairs. This is a music that has been played from a time way before the earliest memories of my great great grandparents in Eastern Europe; and I'm honored to continue this great tradition. So all I can say now is . . . ENJOY!!!

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