Negotiating Boundaries: Musical Hybridity in Tzadik’s Radical Jewish Culture Series

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[Strangers] are that “third element” which should not be. The true hybrids, the monsters: not just unclassified, but unclassifiable. They therefore do not question this one opposition here and now: they question oppositions as such, the very principle of opposition, the plausibility of dichotomy it suggests. (Bauman 148)

To represent “I’m part American, part Jewish” by music containing Klezmer and Rock influences does no more to deconstruct either “Jewish” or “American” than saying “I’m part Jewish, that’s why I’m good with money, but part American, cause I like to party . . . .” It accepts pre-existing hegemonic belief. (Ribot 27)

On New York’s Lower East Side in the 1990s, a flurry of musical activity erupted that has had a lasting affect on the nature and content of secular American Jewish music. The venues in which it unfolded were primarily nightclubs like Tonic (a former Jewish winery-cum-nightclub, now closed due to higher rents caused by the area’s recent gentrification [Chinen, “Requiem”]) and The Knitting Factory (originally on East Houston Street, then in the Lower Downtown district, and now in Brooklyn). Jews who frequented these venues may have been partially motivated by questions about their own Jewish identities, but mostly they
wanted to hear good music—and not just any music. They wanted to hear John Zorn’s groundbreaking Masada Quartet riffing on Jewish musical motifs just as jazz greats John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman once riffed on the blues. They wanted to hear clarinetists David Krakauer and Don Byron play as though the continuum of American klezmorim had never been broken. Hearing Krakauer and the Klezmatics play klezmer tunes and riffs to an avant-rock accompaniment must have seemed as though the music of klezmer icons Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwein never faded into obscurity. From a contemporary perspective, artists like Zorn and Krakauer seem like a natural progression emerging from a tradition stretching back to Eastern Europe and the minstrel-like klezmorim who traveled Europe playing for Jewish weddings and celebrations, encountering non-Jewish musicians and, without really thinking twice about it, incorporating the sounds they heard into their own music.

The flurry of musical activity described above eventually coalesced into what has generally become known as Radical Jewish Culture. Radical Jewish Culture did not emerge ex nihilo, but rather was a kind confluence of two musical streams: one klezmer, the other the downtown avant-garde (Gammel). Though it emerged from these streams, it eventually went beyond them, incorporating not only klezmer and avant-garde music, but also non-Ashkenazi Jewish folk music, Jewish liturgical music, jazz, folk, rock, and a host of other musical genres and traditions. However, the central feature of much of this music was a focus on hybridity—the mixing of various forms, styles, and elements within what is generally considered “Jewish music” with other non-specifically Jewish musical genres. This continuing emphasis on hybridity has remained a relatively stable aspect of Radical Jewish Culture over the past twenty years.

In the epigraphs above, Zygmunt Bauman describes hybrid people and practices as elements that from the perspective of the status quo “should not be;” that is, as unclassifiable phenomena which threaten and destabilize distinctions between self and other. Marc Ribot posits a different view of hybridity. From his perspective, hybrid cultural practices can just as easily reproduce “pre-existing hegemonic beliefs” as they can challenge or subvert them. This essay focuses on what we might call the double-edged sword of hybridity these two perspectives represent. My central question is how the hybrid music of Radical Jewish Culture is related to the boundaries that exist around constructs like “Jewish” and “Jewish music,” and binary oppositions such as Jewish/non-Jewish. Has this music lived up to its promise of redefining Jewish culture and identity? Or, has the hybridization of Jewish and non-Jewish served to reinscribe boundaries and reinforce binary oppositions. In this essay, my aim is to
explore these questions through four musical examples, in conjunction with ethnographic information, from musical recordings released on a recording series devoted to documenting and disseminating this music. First, we can begin by gaining an overview of Radical Jewish Culture, and a discussion of the concept of hybridity.³

**RADICAL JEWISH CULTURE**

Radical Jewish Culture is the title of a recording series launched in 1995 by avant-garde musician, composer, and impresario John Zorn on his record label, Tzadik (Hebrew: righteous person). The moniker’s origins date to 1992 when Zorn was commissioned to curate the Munich Art Projekt, an annual German music festival devoted to new music. Having recently become interested in both his own Jewish identity and the pervasiveness of Jewish musicians active in the New York “downtown scene,” Zorn gave the festival a Jewish theme and titled it “Radical New Jewish Culture.” The 1992 festival saw the world premier of Zorn’s first Jewish-related work, *Kristallnacht*, and featured performances from the likes of Lou Reed, Marc Ribot, God Is My Co-Pilot, Gary Lucas, and Shelley Hirsch, among others. A series of festivals followed in New York, most of which were held at the Knitting Factory. “New” was eventually dropped and these multi-artist performances became known simply as Radical Jewish Culture festivals. Zorn related the phrase’s inspiration to author Steven Beeber:

I’d been reading a book that discussed the JDL [Jewish Defense League, both famous for its “radical,” baseball bat-swinging responses to anti-Semitism and infamous for its terrorist attacks], and as much as I deplored their practices and attitudes, there was something about that word *radical* that I liked. I’d been thinking about calling the festival “New Jews” or “New Jewish Music,” and Ribot had suggested the ironically comic “Loud and Obnoxious Music.” But then I heard that word and I had it—“Radical Jewish Culture.” That was it. (Zorn, quoted in Beeber 211, emphasis and bracketed interpolation Beeber’s)

What exactly Radical Jewish Culture might mean is an open and ongoing—sometimes contentious—debate. On its website, Tzadik, an organization “dedicated to releasing the best in avant garde and experimental music,” describes the series as “Jewish music beyond klezmer: adventurous recordings
bringing Jewish identity and culture into the 21st century” (www.tzadik.com). But individuals I consulted during the course of my fieldwork gave varied and divergent responses to questions about its meaning. Some pointed to Jews’ historic involvement in leftist politics, labor unions, and the Civil Rights Movement as evidence that Jewish culture had, in some senses, always been radical. Others, like Zorn, conceived it in purely musical terms, associating it with avant-garde and experimental musical practices, or as Jewish music that was innovative, new, and would not be disseminated through more traditionally oriented channels. In this sense, “radical” connotes being at odds with tradition. Some equated radical with the foregrounding of their Jewish identities, with explicitly calling their music Jewish and putting their Jewishness up-front—something few felt comfortable doing prior to Radical Jewish Culture. Others thought Radical Jewish Culture was nothing more than a marketing catch-phrase meant to spur record sales.

The perhaps inevitable controversy over both the phrase and its associated music has not gone unnoticed. To cite one example, New York Times critic Adam Shatz has accused Zorn of disingenuously exploiting his Jewish identity, calling his focus on Jewish identity an “atavistic form of identity politics,” and his music “little more than radical kitsch” (Shatz). Shatz’s criticism took particular aim at the Great Jewish Music sub-series of recordings, which acknowledges and celebrates notable ethnically Jewish composers and songwriters such as Burt Bacharach and Serge Gainsbourg, “musicians whose Jewish ancestry is incidental, if not irrelevant, to their work.” Still, beyond the polemical tone and biased nature of Shatz’s editorial, he raises some important and valid points. The ethnically oriented question of whether or not there was an inherent “Jewish” quality to all music made by Jews surfaced in several of my interviews, and Zorn argues this point precisely in his liner notes to the Serge Gainsbourg album. However, in some senses, Shatz’s focus on this point misses the forest for the trees. Zorn’s modus operandi is not to provide simple and comprehensive answers to complex questions. In his view, the artist’s job is to raise questions, however complex or uncomfortable they might be.

More than ten years after the series’ inception, Zorn published a manifesto on the label’s website in which he both explained and defended his impetus behind the project. The following excerpt from that manifesto posits the series as an ongoing dialectic:

The series is an ongoing project. A challenge posed to adventurous musical thinkers. What is Jewish [sic] music? What is its future? If asked to make a contribution to Jewish culture, what would you do?
Can Jewish music exist without a connection to klezmer, cantorial or Yiddish theatre? All of the CDs on the RJC series address these issues through the vision and imagination of individual musical minds. ("Radical Jewish Culture")

He closes the manifesto with a specific reference to the Great Jewish Music series Shatz critiqued:

The Great Jewish Music series is as much about Jewish contribution to world culture . . . as about an exposition of Jewish culture. If I had titled the series accordingly perhaps we all would have been spared much of the polemical discussions and arguments—and I might have been spared a few vituperative attacks. But as several good friends have said—"if people are still arguing over these issues after 15 years, you must be doing something right"—and I am content with that.

The music of the Radical Jewish Culture series is not only about the question of what constitutes Jewish music. It is about the nature, meaning, and significance of Jewish identity in the current historical-cultural moment, and about how constructs like Jewish music and Jewish identity are circumscribed, and how they shape and are shaped by the thoughts and actions of those to whom they apply. At this point it is necessary to discuss some research on Radical Jewish Culture that predates or has more or less occurred simultaneously with my own.

In this realm, there are two important works to mention. The first major work to appear on the topic of Radical Jewish Culture was Tamar Barzel's 2004 doctoral dissertation. Based on research carried out in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Barzel's work deals with the emergence of Jewish-identified musical activity in New York's downtown music scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s, artists' coalescence around the Radical Jewish Culture idea, and the eventual fragmentation that occurred due in part to disagreements that arose concerning Radical Jewish Culture's nature and purpose. The "downtown" scene in which Radical Jewish Culture emerged, she points out, was already highly eclectic, and experimentation with different musical genres and traditions was its hallmark. But it was not until the 1980s and early 1990s that "Jewish music" began to appear. Barzel locates the emergence of this music in what she calls "the Radical Jewish Culture idea," essentially the notion that the prevalence of Jewish musicians in this avant-garde and experimental music scene was more than coincidental; that is, that there might be something inherently Jewish in the inclination toward this type of fringe music (2–4). She focuses on how the
ethos of the downtown scene was manifested in Radical Jewish Culture projects, how musicians musically addressed issues of race and ethnicity, and how their music related to issues of Jewish and musical identity with respect to lived experience. A key contribution of her work has been to point out that, while Radical Jewish Culture is most often thought of as an extension of the klezmer revival (because of its Jewish focus), ethically and musically it bears a much closer relationship to the “downtown” scene in which it emerged and was nurtured. To be sure, there are overlapping themes in her research and mine, but my dissertation (“‘Beyond Klezmer’”) focused on two issues largely absent from hers: the construct of Jewish music, and the significance of the kind of hybrid musical practices that are the topic of this essay.

The issue of hybridity, however, is central to the work of Jonathan Freedman, incidentally one of Barzel’s dissertation advisors. Freedman’s 2008 book, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity*, focuses on how American Jews have, over the past several decades, transformed their status from a marginalized other to a model minority, and how in doing so they have challenged and restructured America’s dominant black/white conception of race. Freedman discusses more than music in this book, though when he does discuss music he focuses primarily on music from the Radical Jewish Culture domain. But his guiding trope, “klezmer,” functions mostly as a metaphor for interpreting how contemporary American Jews have redefined Jewishness and ethnicity. Analyzing examples from theater, literature, and music, Freedman finds a common element in much of the Jewish cultural expression of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: hybridity. He argues that this is neither new nor exceptional, but rather a return to a trope that has been central to and has defined Jewish culture for centuries. The significance of these hybrid cultural forms has, in his view, been revolutionary:

> Precisely by returning to the syncretic, heterogeneous practices that characterized Jewish cultures in the Diaspora from the assimilating project that marked American Jewish culture of the past forty years, klezmer revivalists and postklezmer Radical Jewish Culture makers alike have not only redefined “Jewishness”; they have created *new* configurations from categories (black/white, Jewish/gentile, Western/Eastern) that have long seemed perdurable, fixed. (22, emphasis mine)

From Freedman’s perspective, practitioners of Radical Jewish Culture are remaking traditional constructions of Jewishness, race, and “American-ness.”
Yet Freedman also views Radical Jewish Culture and post-klezmer music more generally as an intercultural/musical-suturing project. For instance, he points to the work of Radical Jewish Culture artist Steven Bernstein, and similar work by the Klezmatics and the Afro-Semitic Experience, as evidence of “a consistent and sustained attempt to suture these two always already intertwined musical traditions” (87). Freedman’s interpretation of these practices is compelling and eloquently argued, but also slightly problematic. I can accept his argument with respect to the Afro-Semitic Experience—their name connotes this and their press materials all but state this outright. But Steven Bernstein had a successful career in jazz before he had any significant involvement in Jewish music. Why should the sudden presence of Jewish signifiers in his music indicate an attempt to “suture” Black and Jewish musical traditions? And even if it does, how are we to read the bulk of his work, in which there are no such Jewish signifiers? I agree that the music of the Radical Jewish Culture series has, via hybridity, transcended and redefined some boundaries. But, following Ribot, I am uncomfortable interpreting this vast range of music in a monolithic or reductionist fashion. In the end, Freedman defines the revolutionizing practice of Radical Jewish Culture as “a move from klezmer beyond klezmer through Jewishness beyond Jewishness to an avant-garde modernity that is shaped by Jewishness but transcends any specific ethnic identification” (92). Again, I think Freedman has keyed into something compelling here but has perhaps over-generalized the phenomenon for the sake of argument. In contrast, the thrust and intent of this essay is to look at Radical Jewish Culture and its musical hybridity as a practice that both refigures and reproduces boundaries. But first, the concept of hybridity needs to be considered.

WHAT IS HYBRIDITY?
In this era of intense and rapid globalization, an era in which mixtures and borrowings are quickly becoming the norm rather than the exception, analyzing musical practices through the theoretical lens of hybridity might seem passé. Aren’t most musical forms hybridized? American jazz emerged from the combination of European and African musical traditions and practices. Indian bhangra combines traditional South Asian music with electronic dance music. Debussy evoked the sounds of Indonesia in some of his music, and Mozart drew upon and imitated Turkish music. One of my favorite new bands, Dub
Trio, hybridizes Jamaican dub and reggae with heavy metal, and I recently attended a concert in which a work for symphony orchestra employed idioms from rap music in its choral sections. Not surprisingly, hybridity seems to be everywhere, especially in music (see Burke 3). In fact, a growing body of literature suggests that hybridity is the norm rather than the exception, a phenomenon common both to our own time and to the past (Burke; Kraidy; Pieterse). This being the case, it makes sense to study hybridity closely. In particular, there are three aspects of hybridity that deserve to be emphasized.

First, hybridity may be common, both in our time and throughout history in the long term but, as Peter Burke suggests, in the short term it happens in fits-and-starts. That is, there are periods of intense hybridization followed by periods of relative stability in which new hybrid forms become normalized (66). I believe that during those periods when hybridity rapidly develops, the processes that spur it on and the resulting hybrid cultural phenomena are experienced as new, different, and at times, threatening and unsettling. For example, consider the ambivalent opinion expressed in a recent article by musicologist Marsha Bryan Edelman, in which she both acknowledges the historically hybrid nature of Jewish music, and at the same time expresses discomfort at the current pace at which this is happening:

Yes, there is an inherent postmodern [read: hybrid] strand in most Jewish music, from synagogue nusach [musical style; usually refers to liturgical chant/song] (of all communities) to klezmer jams and Eastern ragas. . . . Klezmer has, indeed, been the province of cross-pollination between Jewish and non-Jewish musicians and cultures, but it was born in a closed, insulated, and incestuous community that was not challenged to accommodate radical changes from outside its familiar home base. There is no reason it should accommodate them now. (131).

Edelman’s reaction underscores Burke’s assertion that during periods of intense hybridization, “the traditional hybrid culture is defended against the new mix” (66). The musical recordings I discuss in this essay were all created between 1996 and 2003 and are arguably a part of just such a period of intense hybridization in Jewish music that, as Barzel documents, began in the late 1980s. That some greeted them with less than enthusiasm is to be expected.

Second, it is impossible to talk about or engage in musical and cultural hybridity without invoking boundaries. As Bauman reminds us, hybrids are not simply “others”; hybrids are mixtures comprised of multiple parts, each of which comes from a different source and has certain (if variable) signifying
properties. To take an obvious example, John Zorn creates Jewish music in a variety of styles and genres. But he distinguishes (and thus draws a boundary around) his Jewish music from his non-Jewish music by employing musical scales historically associated with traditional Jewish liturgical and folk music.\textsuperscript{7} This is not a uniform practice among artists associated with the Radical Jewish Culture series. Though they are in the minority, some artists in the series do not define Jewish music in musical terms, nor do they clearly delineate Jewish music and non-Jewish music.\textsuperscript{8} The focus of this essay is precisely hybridity’s relationship to boundaries, and how it can both transcend and reinforce them. For, as sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out, “in the end, the real problem is not hybridity—which is common throughout history—but boundaries and the social proclivity to boundary fetishism. . . . The importance of hybridity is that it problematizes boundaries” (220).

Of course, as a term often used to describe a wide variety of practices and phenomena involving mixture, hybridity has its own problems with boundaries. For Burke, “it is a slippery, ambiguous term, at once literal and metaphorical, descriptive and explanatory” (54); while for Marwan Kraidy it is “a concept whose definition is maddeningly elastic, whose analytical value is easily questionable, and whose ideological implications are hotly contested” (3). Kraidy alerts us to the fact that scholars are divided on the concept, “addressing hybridity alternately as a sign of empowerment or as a symptom of dominance” (5). My own view, which I will discuss at length below, is that it can be both, sometimes simultaneously, and to varying degrees. Thus, my third and final point is that hybrid musical practices, like all hybrid cultural practices, are multidimensional. That is, they take various forms and have divergent outcomes.

One of the most influential writers on the empowerment side of the equation has been Homi K. Bhabha, who argues that hybridity engenders a “third space” or in-between space that rejects both sides of binary oppositions:

Strategies of hybridization reveal an estranging movement in the “authoritative,” even authoritarian inscription of the cultural sign. . . . [T]he hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation. . . . Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an “interstitial” agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. (Bhabha 58)

Lawrence Grossberg cites Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a type of “border existence,” not unlike Bauman’s conception. Importantly, however,
Grossberg distinguishes between three types of hybridity that are often conflated. Bhabha’s “in-between” or third space existence is one. The second, liminality, is transitional and “collapse[s] the geography of the third space into the border itself.” And the third, border-crossing, implies “an image of betweenness which does not construct a place or condition of its own other than the mobility, uncertainty and multiplicity of the fact of the constant border-crossing itself” (91–92). Hybridity can also be a means to, and expression of a diasporic identity, which I have explored elsewhere in relation to the Radical Jewish Culture series (Janeczko, “A Tale”).

In their recent volume on hybridity and appropriation in Western music, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh point out that academic perspectives on the consequences of musical hybridity have recently undergone a paradigm shift. Once seen as harbingers of inevitable homogenization and the loss of cultural distinctiveness (i.e., dominance), academics have become more sensitized to unique local responses to encroaching globalization. Born and Hesmondhalgh trace this paradigm shift to the early 1990s, and cite the work of George Lipsitz and Mark Slobin as examples of a shift to sub-cultural perspectives on hybrid musical practices. From a sub-cultural perspective, hybridity is a mode of opposition to the dominant cultural order (i.e., empowerment). Following Slobin and Lipsitz, Born and Hesmondhalgh argue for an interpretive model that recognizes the agency of the less powerful without assuming the dominating power of Western culture a priori. At the same time, they are reticent to grant musical hybridity, and those who practice it, too much subversive power:

[In their desire to read these hybrid musics as embodiments of a new and effective cultural politics from the margins, as productive ways of “writing back” against the center, Lipsitz and Slobin perhaps overstate the relative cultural power and visibility of these musics, and neglect [to interrogate] the extent to which they are structured by an increasingly global and flexible industrial complex. (27)

It may be tempting to read this statement as a wholesale negation of hybridity’s empowering, “third space” potential. But in positing this critique, the authors are not denying that music has subversive power, they are simply pointing out that such practices are not inherently subversive. As Christopher Waterman has observed in his study of Nigerian jùjù: “syncretic modes of expression may in fact uphold hegemonic ideological patterns” (9). Hybrid musical practices are influenced by a multitude of forces, be they the global
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marketplace, dominant cultural narratives, or the ethos of particular scenes. Mixing up the cultural order does not necessarily turn it on its head.

This argument has also been made by Ribot, a guitarist and bandleader who not only has contributed to the Radical Jewish Culture series, but also worked with Zorn on the 1992 Munich Art Projekt. In Ribot’s opinion, a good deal of the so-called Radical Jewish music produced during this period of intense hybridization under our scrutiny shares a common feature: “. . . all [of it] followed a basic paradigm of creating a dichotomy between contemporary and Jewish with klezmer scales and gestures signifying Jewish.” This is a problem for him, since relying on klezmer idioms and other traditional Jewish musical materials to represent the Jewish portion of the dichotomy occludes a more nuanced and elastic understanding of the concept of Jewish music, and therefore, Jewish identity. Like Waterman, he also argues that hybridity can uphold dominant ideologies:

[While] contemporary postmodern critical concepts like “hybridity” and “multiple identity” . . . are fine in themselves, the idea that identity is complex can also be used to avoid looking at the construction of its component parts. A claim to embody a dichotomy may avoid the question of how these elements became constructed as dichotomous, or how the meaning of each was constructed, or how the elements are placed relative to one another on a grid of social power.

What I am arguing for here is a similarly nuanced perspective on hybridity that accounts for the complex relationship between hybrid musical practices and the boundaries upon which they depend. Hybridity can obscure and maybe erase musical and social boundaries, but it can also reproduce them. Or, as Evan Rapport has shown, they can do both simultaneously.

A Final Caveat: Most studies of hybridity focus primarily on globalization. That is, they examine hybrid cultural practices in contexts where a less powerful, developing nation or culture is adapting to encroaching forces of globalization over which it has little control, and how members of the dominating culture appropriate and represent aspects of the less powerful culture. This is clearly not the intent of this essay, as my focus is on a select few artists who belong to the Western world and are by-and-large not actively appropriating a less powerful foreign culture (though purists might argue they are appropriating traditional Jewish culture). Nonetheless, they still exist in a world largely defined by binary oppositions, where certain definitions of Jewish music, culture, and identity are more accepted than others; and where
hybrid music branded as Jewish must vie for legitimation in a field of cultural production (Bourdieu).

THE MUSICAL EXAMPLES*

I. Jazzing Up the Liturgy: “We gotta do this.”

When John Zorn asked Ben Perowsky to record an album for the Radical Jewish Culture series, Perowsky didn’t give it much thought. As a professional jazz drummer and arranger, he was busy with a demanding performing and recording schedule and, feeling somewhat ambivalent about his Jewish identity, was a bit uncomfortable with the idea of making a Jewish record. Reflecting on the moment in 2007, he recalled: “I just thought: ‘I wouldn’t know what to do for that’ [i.e., making a Jewish record]. And I was busy doing other things. So, it wasn’t like I was saying I wouldn’t do it. . . . I just didn’t have an idea.” Some time later, while traveling to a gig by train with pianist Uri Caine, the two discovered that they both attended Jewish summer camp as children and had learned many of the same songs. The trio arrived at the venue, set up their gear, and ran a sound check. Perowsky recalls:

> We went to the sound check and in the middle of some tune, [pianist] Uri [Caine] started playing one of those [summer camp] melodies. It was so funny. So, we started playing these [different] versions of those songs. And [bassist] Drew [Gress] didn’t know what the fuck we were doing, but he was playing along and sounded great. We were at a café later, and I was like, “We gotta do this. Zorn wants me to do a [Jewish] record. This is the record.”

The album that emerged from that serendipitous moment, appropriately titled *Camp Songs*, is Perowsky’s only release on the Radical Jewish Culture series (though he has performed on other recordings). The songs Perowsky

*The musical descriptions I offer in this section are meant to give readers unfamiliar with these recordings a sense of what they sound like and the perspective I am coming from in my analyses. While they suffice for this purpose, they fall far short of doing justice to the music. Readers are encouraged to consult the recordings, excerpts of which are available on the Casden Institute’s website at: [http://casdeninstitute.usc.edu/annual](http://casdeninstitute.usc.edu/annual).*
learned at summer camp and included on *Camp Songs* were mostly prayer melodies from the Sabbath liturgy (e.g., “Adon Olam,” “Yigdal,” “Shema”). The musical approach involved adapting the melodies from those pieces into themes (“heads,” in jazz parlance) for instrumental jazz performances. The use of traditional Jewish melodies for jazz performance is common on the Radical Jewish Culture series, and jazz influences could be detected in over half of the albums available at the time my research concluded.\(^9\)

As rendered by Perowsky’s trio, “Adon Olam” opens with a short introduction of simple, strummed guitar chords and a straightforward bass and drums pattern. After the short introduction, a statement of the “Adon Olam” theme follows. Played on the upright bass, bowed rather than plucked, the melody is presented in a clear and straightforward manner. This initial statement of the melody consists of eight measures and follows a simple rhythmic pattern. The bass and drums maintain a basic swing feel and walking tempo, and bassist Drew Gress offers a fairly strict interpretation of the minor-key theme. A second statement of the theme follows, this time played on the piano by the accomplished Uri Caine. Caine plays the melody virtually unharmonized, save for a couple of carefully placed accent chords toward the end of the last phrase.

Once the statement of the theme has been accomplished, the band proceeds into a series of improvisations over the established harmonic framework. They are improvisations validly read as deconstructive. Caine’s piano lines are heavily ornamented with dissonance and chromaticism. In contrast to the head, here he achieves a very forceful swing feel as the rhythm section maintains the rhythmic and harmonic framework. A short bass solo follows, and the piano lays out as Gress plucks a series of melodies over two repetitions of the chord progression. The drums and guitar keep a simple, understated accompaniment, but effectively infuse a dynamic interplay to convey the phrasing. Caine returns with another piano solo, this one more densely harmonized and chromatic than the one before. The rhythm is freer here, too. At times, Caine’s rubato (rhythmic freedom or variance) is so strong that it seems to work against the rhythm section. The solo lasts for six cycles of the chord progression, growing in intensity with each repetition. After the fourth, Caine begins to play fragments of the original theme, as if to suggest a recapitulation is on the horizon (as would normally happen in a conventional jazz performance). This never comes to fruition. Rather, Caine subtly brings back more and more fragments of the original theme as he cycles through the last two progressions, creating what amounts to a false recapitulation. The performance ends with a
densely harmonized fragment from the end of the main theme and an ascending flourish of notes.

There is a strong stylistic consistency on Camp Songs, and “Adon Olam” is fairly representative of the album as a whole. Unlike many Radical Jewish Culture albums, there is very little stark juxtaposition of styles within or between the individual tracks. As with the majority of the album’s performances, “Adon Olam” follows the standard jazz form of head—improvisations—recapitulation, and the album is firmly rooted in a traditional jazz aesthetic. When I noted this observation during my interview with Perowsky, he confirmed this. Before I even formulated my analysis into question-form, he answered, “Yeah, this is decidedly a jazz record.”

As a genre, jazz is particularly well-suited to this type of iconic deconstruction. Its foundation in improvising on pre-existing or borrowed themes makes it a natural fit for this. Read iconically, this performance is a commentary, with the “Adon Olam” theme serving as the Jewish component of the hybrid and jazz as the medium through which the commentary is presented. We may come away from it thinking a bit differently about this particular piece (no doubt having enjoyed the stellar performance), but “Adon Olam” has not been irrevocably transformed. Nor, for that matter, has our understanding of jazz; which may be why jazz critic Nat Chinen observed: “Though released under John Zorn’s Radical Jewish Culture banner, Camp Songs is less radical than reasonable: It underscores an affinity that always lurked beneath the surface.” This rendition of “Adon Olam” is one part Jewish and one part jazz; the Jewish part gets played with a bit, but not redefined. So while hybridity has served the purpose of commentary, the dichotomy between the two entities has been preserved, reproduced.

From this perspective, “Adon Olam” represents a hybrid form that reinforces boundaries more than it crosses them. Recalling Grossberg’s three varieties of hybridity, “Adon Olam” is neither a “third space” in which authority has been restructured, nor a “border-crossing.” It most closely aligns with his notion of “liminality.” “Adon Olam” lives on the border, even if it succeeds in deconstructing one side of it a bit.
II. Yiddishe Blues: “I don’t feel these kinds of polka-mazurka, Eastern European things”

If there is one artist in the Radical Jewish Culture series that stands apart from the others, that artist is Wolf Krakowski. For starters, Krakowski has a particularly unique personal history. Born in a displaced-persons camp in Austria just after the Second World War, Krakowski grew up in a rough, working-class Toronto neighborhood, endured a brief stint in the circus, and spent a good deal of his early adult life traveling the United States on a shoestring before settling in his current home in Northampton, Massachusetts. He is one of very few artists in the series whose albums consist entirely of previously composed material. And, unlike most other series artists, Krakowski has no formal musical education—a fact he takes pride in. Finally, Krakowski has no connection to either the Jewish or downtown music scenes of New York, and John Zorn never asked him to record an album for the Radical Jewish Culture series. As Krakowski relates the story, he approached Zorn about releasing his independently recorded and produced album, *Transmigrations: Gilgul*, three separate times over the course of five years. Zorn rebuffed the first two requests but relented on the third. Tzadik released the aforementioned album in 2001 and a second, *Goyrl: Destiny*, in 2002.

Krakowski’s music has engendered some colorful descriptions. Tzadik describes it as “A unique fusion of traditional Yiddish song with country blues, rock, and reggae” and refers to Krakowski as “a Kerouac-inspired cult hero.” Critics have variously described Krakowski’s Radical Jewish Culture recordings as “[a] highly personal, striking modern idiom that successfully blends blues, R&B, folk-rock, country-rock, and more” (Review of *Goyrl: Destiny*); “Fiddler on the Roof laced with Bob Dylan, or *Yentl* as done by Leonard Cohen” (Rogovoy); and “the real Yiddishe Blues” (Review of *Transmigrations: Gilgul*). Krakowski refers to his music somewhat reluctantly as Yiddish world-beat, and relates that his intention behind these albums—which he feels he was destined to record—was to make a twofold statement: (1) that Jewish and American musical styles could by fused in a serious, artful way; and (2) in keeping with Tzadik’s mantra, that Jewish music encompasses more than Eastern European-derived klezmer music. Speaking about *Transmigrations: Gilgul* in 2007, Krakowski noted:

[T]here are musical cultures represented there that were never really fused—at least not seriously—with Yiddish and Jewish music. If
it ever happened, it usually happened as parody. And I actually did have an experience with that, and that in fact galvanized me to make Transmigrations. Because I saw someone perform essentially a parody, where he, accompanied by a band, brought together something Jewish with something black, blues. But it was done in a way that was a total send-up parody. I was in the audience, and I basically said, “Why is it that when these two cultures are brought together, why does it have to be a freakin’ joke? Why?” I had already been around a little bit at that time. I’d been with black people. Why is this a joke? I just didn’t accept that—that when these two cultures met it had to be a joke.

Contrary to what he observed at the aforementioned event, Krakowski finds a natural affinity between certain genres of (mostly African American-derived) American music and the Yiddish language in which his material was written: “There’s something about American style that lends itself, I think very naturally, to Yiddish language. Rock and blues and country—these things carry Yiddish language very well.” More to the point, Krakowski feels a certain dissonance between his individual identity and the music that for a time had become the sine qua non of contemporary secular Jewish music, klezmer. He explained:

I knew I wanted to express myself, but I don’t feel these kinds of polka-mazurka, Eastern European things. This is not the kind of stuff I gravitate to. I like Howlin’ Wolf. I like Slim Harpo. I like Lead Belly. I like Hank Williams and this sort of thing. I didn’t see why, if you were going to make a Jewish record, you were limited to klezmer, Eastern European music, and to clarinet, violin, and accordion. . . . There are a lot more colors in the palette.

Determined to avoid the musical gestures and instrumental timbres that characterize much Eastern European Jewish music, Krakowski went for what to him seemed more natural.

“The-mame,” the opening performance on Goyrl: Destiny, tells a story of regret. The song’s protagonist is a young person who longs for the safety and comfort of home and family and for the innocence of childhood, who questions life’s struggles and laments the illusiveness of happiness. Following a short introductory flourish on the guitar, Krakowski jumps into the first verse abruptly. He sings the lyrics in their original Yiddish—Krakowski’s first language—with a dry, Dylanesque timbre and restrained delivery, an aesthetic he maintains throughout the performance. Accompanying the simple strummed
guitar chords and plaintive vocal line are a guitar, bass, and drums/percussion trio. While the drum and bass are slow and solid with slight syncopations, the guitar plays more freely. Its timbre is rich with reverb, and the chords and melodies are heavily ornamented with vibrato and bends. Short, dramatic guitar solos interject between the verses and choruses, offering a responsorial to the lead vocal part.

Setting aside the clever comparisons and descriptions, professional critics and educated listeners have taken Krakowski’s music quite seriously.

For klezmershack.com contributor Mordechai Kamel, Krakowski’s fusion of Yiddish song and American vernacular musical styles seems completely natural:

> What touched me, and in a way compelled me to write was, in fact, the rightness and naturalness of the CD. Krakowski is not only a musician deeply rooted in Yiddish, he understands the culture we lost in a way that few if any of the other modern Yiddish singers do. He sings the folk tunes and theater tunes with an understanding of “Before” that seems totally natural. It is important to say at this point that this is not a dry recycling of prewar material or stylings, but a complete integration of his Yiddish roots with his North American upbringing. [Emphasis mine.]

Shortly after *Transmigrations: Gilgul’s* 1996 release, Ari Davidow—owner and manager of klezmershack.com, moderator of the Jewish music listserv, and, by virtue of this, one of the more visible critics in the Jewish music world—published a review on klezmershack.com. While somewhat respectful, the review was unfavorable and questioned Krakowski’s authenticity:

> I would be more excited [about *Transmigrations: Gilgul*], except that I am listening to this album after seeing Adrienne Cooper with the Flying Bulgars doing new Yiddish poetry to new klez/jazz/Afro-Carribean melodies. While Krakowski’s album memorializes a one-sided perspective of a world that is now gone. And, although there is no rational reason why the existence of one should negate the other, I have problems thinking of this pleasant album as breaking new territory, and I find myself reacting as though Krakowski has changed some external trappings, but is presenting the same old one-sided view of Jewish culture in Europe before the war.

> . . . My problem is not with the music, which is okay, certainly not unpleasant, and occasionally delightful. It is with the essence of yet another album that, in my eyes, appears to romanticize, almost to
appear nostalgic for, Jewish pain and longing, as though being victims (as individuals as well as a people) defined or defines Jewish existence. I further object to the presentation of such sentiments in a new skin as though that will speak to the memory of what was, or as if it represents something new, and especially, as if it represents something real. That is a dangerous, and, I believe, untrue place to live. (“Wolf Krakowski Transmigrations”)

It is worth noting that this excerpt does not come from Davidow’s original review. Krakowski felt that one was unfair and uninformed, and successfully lobbied to have it revised.

How are we to reconcile these divergent points of view? My concern is not that one person likes the music and the other does not, but rather with how passionately each person expresses his opinion. Kamel elevates Krakowski to the status of cultural hero while Davidow practically vilifies him. As this radical difference of opinion so clearly demonstrates, no music is uniformly received. There is no way to qualify these responses as correct or incorrect, nor is it desirable even to attempt to do so. But it does seem appropriate to explore these responses as articulations of each individual’s relationship to Jewish culture and history.

Davidow’s issue is not with the music’s hybridity. He mentions how excited he was by the Yiddish-klezmer-jazz-Afro-Carribean hybrid he had just experienced. Yet, when hears Krakowski’s music, he is unable to hear it as new, real, or true, and even objects to its purporting to be so. On the other hand, Krakowski’s reworking of the material effects in Kamel an unflinching and beautifully authentic representation of “Before.” Clearly, Kamel is not referring to historical authenticity. Krakowski’s music bears little if any stylistic resemblance to inter-war Yiddish music. The authenticity Kamel is invoking is more artistic and personal, more in the sense of truth—and hence diametrically opposed to Davidow’s reaction. For Davidow, Krakowski’s music is ideological. That is, it presents itself as new while reinforcing what he sees as a hegemonic narrative. In contrast, for Kamel, Krakowski’s music engenders a kind of third space that looks back on the pre-Holocaust lost world with 20/20 hindsight. It therefore follows that conceptions of history influence perceptions of the present and projections of the future.

It is this quality of “third-spaceness” that I think is the key to both the success of Krakowski’s music and the source of Davidow’s consternation. Commenting upon the ease with which the music came together and the albums were made, Krakowski sees them as reflections and manifestations of his
life experiences: “This is who I am. It’s not like I went out and made a study. This is who I am. It’s not only who I am, but it’s very real to me. It’s not something I’m stepping into and doing for now. It’s an accumulation, and representative of all the mileage.” For Krakowski, then, the “real Yiddishe Blues” reflects the successful and natural hybridization of his inherited tradition and cultural identity with his individual and musical identity. The music succeeds precisely because it doesn’t try to. It succeeds because is it an honest and heartfelt reflection of its creator’s individual relationship to Jewish culture and history, a reflection that resonated strongly for Kamel. But it falls short for Davidow because it represents a view at odds with his own history. Hybrids that break down boundaries and challenge dichotomies threaten those who live by them; they call into question the notion that Jewish music, culture, or identity can be neatly or singularly defined.

III. Cantorial Death Metal: “. . . as long as there’s a Jewish motive in the music”

If you have never heard the music of the Israeli-born, London-based Koby Israelite, just imagine a reality television show where several musicians of divergent tastes are forced to live and play together. Hopeing for a huge ratings spike, the producers decide to pair up a speed metal band with a classical violinist, a cantor, and an accordion player. Then, they invite a host of the other contestants to sit in: a trumpeter, a clarinetist, maybe a jazz bassist. The producers, and probably most of the viewing public, expect a disaster of historical proportions. Instead, the combination proves a success and the group winds up winning the million-dollar record deal offered as the grand prize.

Hearing Koby Israelite’s music can be a baffling experience. Tzadik’s description of the album I discuss here draws comparisons to Frank Zappa and the Northern Californian experimental band, Mr. Bungle, and, seemingly at a loss for words, offers “Cantorial Death Metal, Nino Rota Klezmer, Balkan Surf, Catskills free improvisation,” and concludes, “You’ve never heard such sounds” (www.tzadik.com). Israelite has released three albums on the Radical Jewish Culture series: Dance of the Idiots (2003), Mood Swings (2005), and Is He Listening? (2009).

“If That Makes Any Sense,” from Dance of the Idiots, begins with slow, droning chords played on an accordion, and a deep, cantorial voice singing over top. The accordion plays a simple tonic–dominant chord progression, while the vocalist sings florid, improvisatory melismas, that is, a musical style
that bridges and blends multiple musical tones across single syllables. This introduction lasts just over a minute, before abruptly segueing to a fast heavy metal section. Here, electric guitars play chunky, syncopated riffs over a driving drumbeat. The cantorial vocals return periodically throughout the performance, superimposed on the heavy metal pattern and interspersed with guitar and accordion solos. Israelite even inserts a classical-style piano and strings section at one point, but immediately returns to the heavy metal idiom to end the song.

In a 2003 interview with Zeek magazine, Israelite related how he became involved with the Radical Jewish Culture series:

I always loved and respected [Tzadik owner and producer] John Zorn, so I sent him some demos of mine and one of the tracks had kind of a Jewish motive to it. He replied that if I wanted to release an album under the Jewish series, I should give him a ring. I was really happy but I freaked out because I never associated that strongly with Jewish music. I took the challenge with reassurance from Zorn that I can do whatever the fuck I want. I can go as crazy as I like, as long as there’s a Jewish motive in the music. (Israelite, quoted in Roth)

In the sense that Koby Israelite utilizes a range of musical genres and styles, his musical orientation aligns most closely with other series artists I have elsewhere classified as “experimental” (see “Beyond Klezmer”). These artists often approach hybridity by starkly juxtaposing and superimposing different musical styles. But unlike most of those artists, atonality, extreme timbral experimentation, and free-improvisation do not figure prominently in Israelite’s music. Israelite draws on a wide palette of musical styles, combining klezmer, Balkan, cantorial, and Middle Eastern melodies and rhythms with Western rock, metal, jazz, and classical idioms. But he does so in an unpredictable, often cut-and-paste-like manner, making it difficult to anticipate what might happen from one moment or track to the next. The most apposite analogy to the visual arts would be collage, where disparate, often seemingly unrelated, elements are juxtaposed or superimposed with no attempt to blend the boundaries between them.

Ari Davidow, whose lukewarm reaction to Wolf Krakowski I discussed in the previous section, takes quite a different view of Israelite’s music. His review of Dance of the Idiots, avers, “Israelite creates not a new unified style, but instead a hip-hop pastiche of Jewish identity and incredible music.” His response to the song “If That Makes Any Sense” is that it “makes much sense.”
And he argues that, “Israel [sic] is staking a claim to the vast territory that defines ‘Jewish,’ or at least his musical world, some of which includes ‘Jewish,’ whatever that means.” Finally, commenting on the album’s brazen hybridity, he opines, “It is rare that this sort of mixture works. Here it does. The mixture of genres, of sacred and profane, from heavy metal to nusakh [cantorial art] shouldn’t work, but it does, and the more one listens the deeper one goes” (Review of *Dance of the Idiots*).

*Zeek* magazine contributor and poet/author Matthue Roth shares Davidow’s laudatory opinion of the album:

Some of the tracks sound dangerously similar to that band that you begged your parents not to play at your Bar Mitzvah. The first song, “Saints and Dates,” is a straightforward klezmer groove. But, by the third song [“If That Makes Any Sense”], when a straight-out-of-Detroit fuzz-guitar starts riffing over Marcel Mamaliga’s violin and Koby singing the wordless melodies of Hasidic nigguns [i.e., wordless melodies which, in Hassidic tradition, are sung to induce an ecstatic spiritual experience], we realize that we are in the midst of something completely new.

*Dance of the Idiots* is half a Sunday-morning brunch album and half a Saturday-night slam-your-friends-against-the-wall-dancing record. Sometimes, during the clarinet-and-accordion breakbeat groove of “Dance of the Idiots,” it’s both at once.

It is clear that both Roth and Davidow are moved by Israelite’s music. But their discourse also suggests that they are hearing it as a jumbled mixture of divergent elements rather than an integrated whole (e.g., “half a Sunday-morning brunch album and half a Saturday-night slam-your-friends-against-the-wall-dancing record”; “not a new unified style, but instead a hip-hop pastiche of Jewish identity and incredible music”). Israelite’s music, compelling and exciting as it is, seems to highlight rather than blur boundaries. By juxtaposing and superimposing Jewish motives over a pastiche-like musical framework, “Jewish” becomes one ingredient in a multi-musical stew rather than a musical melting pot in which the various elements have been blended into something new. Such juxtaposition and superimposition might complicate fixed notions of Jewishness, but it doesn’t seem to have done so for Roth or Davidow. Rather, it seems to reflect their own conceptions of a modern American Jewish identity informed by (and accepting of) distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish. It “makes sense” because, for all of its juxtaposition, it doesn’t confuse anything.
After all, both pointed out which aspects of the music represented “Jewish” and which did not. Following Bhabha, Israelite’s music represents a kind of “in-between-ness” that revels in difference, but its in-between-ness is dependent upon boundaries, which are so prevalent in the music. It evokes Grossberg’s notion of a permanent liminality that collapses its “third space” potential and lives on the border rather than in spite of it.

IV. Avant-klez: “That’s not my music!”

Given John Zorn’s position as the curator of the Radical Jewish Series and his standing in the music world, it is easy to think of him as the godfather of Radical Jewish Culture. But while the extent of his influence and his role in furthering the cause should not be underestimated, the historical record suggests that Zorn was simply caught up in a zeitgeist already underway. For example, artists like the Naftule’s Dream ensemble and Andy Statman, began experimenting with klezmer/Jewish and avant-garde/experimental hybrids as early as the mid-1980s, not to mention Don Byron’s work, which also predates the 1992 Munich Art Projekt and subsequent establishment of the Radical Jewish Culture series. As a powerful figure in the world of music and the owner of a record label, Zorn had the clout and the infrastructure to give this new approach to Jewish music a global voice that could not be ignored. But in the estimation of Glenn Dickson, founder and leader of the Boston-based Naftule’s Dream, the Radical Jewish Culture phenomenon was destiny: “As someone who was doing it before [Zorn] even started his thing, to me it was going to happen either way. This whole thing was going to happen. This music was going to happen.”

A five-piece ensemble consisting of clarinet, guitar, tuba, piano/accordion, and drum set (previously trombone as well), Naftule’s Dream is the alter ego of the more conservative Shirim Klezmer Orchestra. And, like a significant number of the ensembles and projects on the Radical Jewish Culture series, its roots lie in Boston’s New England Conservatory. It was here that Dickson first heard and played klezmer music as a member of Hankus Netsky’s Klezmer Conservatory Band, and decided to found the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra.

The difference between the two ensembles is purely musical, since the personnel for each group is identical. On the one hand, the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra plays more traditionally oriented material in a more conservative style, while, on the other, Naftule’s Dream plays more original music in a
more experimental style. Naftule’s Dream has three recordings on the Radical Jewish Culture series (Search for the Golden Dreydl, 1997; Smash, Clap!, 1998; and Job 2001; plus Pincus and the Pig, a klezmer-style Jewish adaptation of Serge Prokofiev’s children’s suite, Peter and the Wolf, performed by the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra), but their aggregate recorded output comprises significantly more. Dickson discussed the need for two ensembles in a 2007 interview:

[F]or quite a while we were just doing traditional tunes, sort of in the same mold as the Klezmer Conservatory Band—Yiddish theater and traditional klezmer music. And then, eventually, some time in the late eighties—probably ’86 or ’87—I started writing tunes, just because it seemed like a fun thing to do. . . . I was trying to do something more developed. And then in the late 80s and going into the early 90s I was doing more and more of that and arranging traditional folk tunes in very different ways. And a lot of that’s on the Naftule’s Dream album [by Shirim]. There are a lot of traditional tunes that I just wrote in more expansive ways. The arrangements just open up and go in different places. And that was the point that we really started having problems with the audiences, because the people who wanted to hear just traditional stuff, who were there for nostalgic reasons, basically, it was upsetting them . . . that we were messing with things. . . . Literally, we would have old folks come up to the stage while we were playing or in between songs yelling “That’s not my music!”

Naftule’s Dream incorporates klezmer scales and gestures into a musical framework informed by avant-garde jazz, and rock and metal music. “Free Klez 1 & 2” and “Free Klez 3 & 4” come from their 1998 release, Smash, Clap! “Free Klez 1 & 2” begins with a complex additive rhythm built on unpredictable beat groupings of two and three. The drummer accents the stressed beats with the kick-drum and tambourine, filling in the non-stressed pulses on the hi-hat. The clarinet, tuba, and accordion play a harmonized, angular melody that grows progressively more dissonant until it reaches its peak around thirty-five seconds into the track. The band abruptly transitions to a long improvised section that begins with a virtuosic, unaccompanied clarinet solo and progresses to a full-band free improvisation. The band eventually settles into a regular groove in which the tuba plays a repeating pattern while the other instruments improvise quasi-freely. Their parts become increasingly intense and erratic until the piece ends abruptly.

“Free Klez 3 & 4” follows a similar structure, beginning with a strong
rhythmic theme and moving into an unmetered collective improvisation. Here, the clarinet and accordion improvise high-pitched, dissonant lines, eventually giving way to a guitar, tuba, and drum collective improvisation before the opening theme returns. Another unmetered, collective improvisation follows, replete with dissonances and ambient, unmetered percussion. This improvisation lasts nearly five minutes and the performance ends with a slow fade-out.

On the surface, the music of Naftule’s Dream bears some resemblance to that of Koby Israelite (e.g., the experimental nature of the music, the incorporation of rock and metal influences). But while it is thoroughly hybrid, it lacks the pastiche, cut-and-paste quality that is so prevalent in Israelite’s music. As noted by Davidow, Naftule’s Dream stands apart from other artists on the Radical Jewish Culture series:

Where many of the musicians recording for John Zorn’s “Radical Jewish Culture” label are using the recordings as a place to explore what “Jewish” means, or might mean for them, looking inward. This does not appear to be Naftule’s Dream’s dream. Rather, having explored Yiddish culture and klezmer, they are looking out to see where it leads them.

In this sense, the music is far more connected to the specific worlds of experimental music than many of the label’s other recordings, and especially true to the sense of creating new music grounded in “Jewish” (whatever that means). Of course, if we follow that thought, we find ourselves right back at the “Haskalah,” the age of Jewish enlightenment and the furor of experimentation created by Jewish creativity breaking beyond the pale. It’s a fascinating turn of thought, and the sort of fascinating turn of thought that one feels whilst engrossed in music as involving and exciting as “Free Klez,” or the urgency of “Speed Klez.”

That particular flowering was destroyed . . . But here’s the thing about this particular dialogue and outpouring of passion and creative exploration of the avant-garde. It’s [the haskala] back, and one listen to “Smash, Clap!” will make it clear why it couldn’t be suppressed. (Review of Smash, Clap!)

In a laudatory and very colorful review, Jazziz critic Howard Mandel compared the group to the only Yiddish-language author to ever receive the Nobel Prize for literature, Isaac Bashevis Singer:
Negotiating Boundaries

Forsaking not the aromas of Sabbath breads and wine, embracing as well raucous laughter, delicate, quasi-minimalist vamps, and spectacular, horrifying blowouts, Naftule's Dream has a range actually akin to the late Yiddish writer I. B. Singer's... Singer's readers, and [early twentieth-century American klezmer clarinetist/composer] Naftule Brandwein's fans, too, knew that the old Jewish life was not one to pine for. Naftule's Dream plays so that the keen truths sounded in early Jewish American jazz are much more than mere nostalgic sighs for time that never was. (70)

I cite these reviews at such length to illustrate a point, one that allows me re-enter an important dialogue that we began in the opening pages of this essay. Both critics make reference to the music's hybrid quality, and both also place the band in a particular historical continuum. This brings us to a point where Freedman's view of Jewish hybrid cultural practices resonates forcefully. Of particular relevance is his notion that practitioners of Radical Jewish Culture have paved paths toward the future by returning to the hybrid past, have opened up new hybrid spaces by engaging old ones, and have created new hybrid categories out of existing monolithic ones. A view toward the future, accomplished in the present through looking to the past, provides a fresh perspective on history, which in turn influences perspectives on the present and future. Recalling Grossberg, this is neither a liminal, transitional space, nor border crossing for the sake of border crossing. In the music of Naftule's Dream, we can see (and hear) the traces of a true third space—one that lives in spite of the border rather than because of it, and exists in productive tension with the forces between which it lives.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have examined four fairly disparate musical examples loosely tied together by both their Jewish focus and their hybrid nature. My aim has been to show that hybrid cultural practices are not one-way streets to strangeness and subversiveness, but can also have an ideological dimension. Boundary crossing is risky business, not only because of the consequences, but also because boundaries themselves are tricky. We tend to think of them as fixed, but in reality it seems more likely that they are malleable and contextually defined. This might be why hybridity can be so effective at both problematizing and reifying them. Regardless of their orientation, hybrid cultural practices
put boundaries in a new context. Ethnomusicologist Sarah Weiss argues that hybridity is always political, because, “the highlighting of cultural mixture . . . situates issues of authenticity, ownership, purity, difference, and power as unavoidable filters through which people of any culture process the aesthetic impact of the production” (209). The next logical step, one that Weiss takes as well, is that the success of a musical hybrid can be judged based on the degree to which it mediates these different filters.

What I am arguing here is that music that starkly juxtaposes different genres or cultural traditions, such as that by Perowsky and Israelite, highlights these “filters” more than it mediates them; whereas music that more fully integrates the different elements, such as that of Krakowski and Naftule’s Dream, is more successful at mediating them. Music that lives in spite of borders rather than because of them can create the alternate spaces that are crucial to reimagining and remaking identities and the boundaries that circumscribe them. Some scholars (Kraidy; Weiss) have followed M. Bakhtin in distinguishing between “natural” and “intentional” hybrid cultural forms. In this perspective, natural hybrids emerge over time and are more likely to lead to distinctly new genres, whereas intentional hybrids are more dependent upon the highlighting of difference. In Kraidy’s view, this latter approach “increases the possibility that it will become a process of othering” (152). So, does that mean that the intentional hybrids I’ve discussed here, Perowsky and Israelite, represent a kind of “othering” of the self or some sort of “exoticization” of Jewishness? Do natural hybrids represent empowerment and intentional hybrids domination?

In line with my contention that hybrid musical and cultural forms are neither conceived nor received unilaterally, I am uncomfortable making such an assertion. My intention here has not been to accuse Perowsky or Israelite of exoticizing Jewishness. However, I do think that the ethnographic evidence suggests that they are working with conceptions of Jewishness rooted in binary oppositions, and that these binary oppositions are present in their music. More broadly, as much as my research consultants expounded the view that Jewishness was flexible and multi-dimensional, they also often spoke it about in terms of dichotomies.

Pieterse points out that hybridity is important because it problematizes boundaries. But it seems reasonable, then, that some hybrid forms accomplish this more effectively than others. I believe that we live in a gray world, one so confounding that we are constantly trying to refigure it in black-and-white. Hybrid musical forms that highlight difference are empowering in that they can deconstruct the black-and-white view—but they don’t achieve grayness.
They may not construct third places of their own, but, through their intentional juxtaposition and superimposition of differences, they can put binary oppositions momentarily in flux, which, depending on the listener, just might open the door to something new. By contrast, hybrid musical forms that do not highlight difference exist in spite of boundaries rather than because of them, inhabiting a gray world ripe with the imagination and possibility necessary for refiguring identities and the categories that define them. So, rather than viewing Radical Jewish Culture as a wholesale reconstitution of Jewishness, Jewish identity, or Jewish music, I think it’s important to look closely at how and to what degree its various hybrid forms problematize the boundaries from which they emerge. When we do this, Radical Jewish Culture appears less as a radical break from the dominant cultural order, and more as a complex, conflicted, and ongoing negotiation of boundaries.
Notes

1. Klezmorim is the plural of klezmer, the Yiddish word for “musician” (or, more specifically, “instrumental musician”), which is a contraction of the Hebrew phrase for musical instruments (k’li zemer, lit. instruments or vessels of song). Since the 1970s, klezmer has been used to describe the repertoire and practices of contemporary musicians who play Eastern European Jewish folk music or some derivative thereof (see Levin).

2. Marcus Gammel defines the “New York Downtown Avant-Garde” as “a fluid, hard-to-define conglomerate of musicians with some common aesthetic and political ideas, who [value] the refusal of any musical categorization and the interest in a vast number of musical styles that are sometimes pasted together within single concerts, albums or pieces.” Tamar Barzel defines the “downtown scene” as “the network of jazz and improvisational musicians—and the clubs, rehearsal spaces, record stores, record labels, and audiences who support them (23).

3. This essay is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2006 and 2007, and my own musical analyses of the works discussed. Though many of the consultants I discuss have since read and commented upon my work (and, in some cases, edited their statements for clarity), the interpretations and analyses are wholly mine. I take full responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations.

4. For example, saxophonist Paul Shapiro related an anecdote from the 1980s, in which a bandleader introduced him to the audience as Paul Sergeant because he thought Shapiro sounded “too Jewish.” Shapiro felt that the Radical Jewish Culture project had made it easier to publicly proclaim one’s Jewishness.

5. German filmmaker Claudia Heuermann has produced several excellent films on Zorn and Radical Jewish Culture. For more on Zorn’s view of the artist’s role in society, see Heuermann, Bookshelf. For more on Zorn and Radical Jewish Culture, see Heuermann, Sabbath and Following Eden.

6. For more on the fragmentation and dissolution of Radical Jewish Culture, see Barzel 205–08.

7. Zorn’s Masada project has involved writing “tunes” that can be arranged and performed by numerous ensemble arrangements. In his own work, this has ranged from classically oriented chamber music arrangements to an avant-garde jazz quartet and large rock ensemble. All of these tunes are based on “Jewish” musical scales.

8. I deal with the issue of defining Jewish music throughout my dissertation (“‘Beyond Klezmer’”), but particularly in ch. 4, 233–77.

9. At the time my research concluded in December 2007 the Radical Jewish Culture series comprised 120 recordings. Chapter two of my dissertation (“‘Beyond Klezmer’”) surveys and categorizes those recordings according to a genre taxonomy of my own design.
10. The longer and more colorful version of this story involves several phone calls, two refusals, and a couple of heated exchanges between Krakowski and Zorn before Zorn finally agreed to release it.

11. Zorn has never claimed to be the inventor of the avant-garde approaches to Jewish music featured on the Radical Jewish Culture series.

12. Glenn Dickson related that his impetus for exploring klezmer through an avant-garde lens was inspired by seeing Andy Statman perform several times in the 1980s. For more on Don Byron's work, see Barzel.

13. Readers may be interested to know that while some members of Naftule’s Dream are Jewish, several, including founder and bandleader Dickson, are not. Non-Jewish side-performers are common in the Radical Jewish Culture series; non-Jewish bandleaders are less common, but exist nonetheless.

14. A significant portion of Radical Jewish Culture artists attended the New England Conservatory, including Glenn Dickson, Jamie Saft, Alon Nechushtan, Oren Bloedow, and Frank London, as did Don Byron, whose Mickey Katz tribute album (1993) also predates the Radical Jewish Culture series. The New England Conservatory is home to both the Klezmer Conservatory Band and a number of avant-garde/new music advocates.


———. Telephone interview. 28 Feb. 2007. Digital audio recording. West New York, NJ.


