

## ARTICLE



### **KLEZMER MUSIC AND SEATTLE**

by Bernice Maslan

What is klezmer music? Klezmer music originated in Eastern Europe in the late 1800s. Lovely melodies were played to accompany wedding celebrations; different tunes helped to shape and choreograph the ceremony itself and enliven the festivities (which might last a week or so). The music was founded upon Jewish liturgical (cantorial and congregational song - niggunim); as time went on the tunes became infused with the melodies and rhythms of the local regions (Ukrainian, Moldovan, various Balkan, Turkish, Greek, Russian, etc.).

This metamorphosis is ongoing – there is now Kosher Hip Hop & even Kosher Gospel! Melodies and lyric lines are often traded back and forth between musicians and Jewish houses of worship. Age-old biblical themes and languages such as Yiddish and Hebrew become intertwined with new-age musical ideas and intermingled with modern issues.

Small bands of versatile musicians (“klezmer” – a Yiddish word which is the same as the Hebrew word for musician; derived from the Hebrew term for musical instrument: ie., “Kley Zemer”) would travel from town to town (from “shetl to shtetl” or “dorf to dorf”) to play for weddings on old worn brass military instruments, violin, and drum. While the klezmerim (musicians) typically played styles of music for weddings which would best suit the family and local tradition, they often brought new melodies and dance forms to the small town. The better and longer they played, the more money they might earn. Each portion of the elaborate wedding ceremony had a particular type of melody to accompany it; there’s a special tune which the musicians play to accompany the in-laws back to their home!

Klezmer music transformed when Jewish musicians from Eastern Europe arrived in America in the late 1800s; musician’s unions formed, played for private parties, and large orchestras played at public gatherings and labor strikes; the

music was recorded, people from the old country bought records in droves; sheet music and folios were published; the music was played at Yiddish theatres and in Hollywood films; even banjos appeared in klezmer bands! Tin-Pan-Alley and Broadway were greatly influenced by klezmer music. Melodies created amidst the whirlwind of America would include such swing hits as “Bei mir bist du Shoen” and “And the Angels Sing”.

After the second World War, klezmer in America waned. Its birthplace in Eastern Europe and the Jews who lived there were savagely devastated by the war. Yet, miraculously, the late 1960s and early 1970s brought a klezmer revival.

You don't have to be Jewish to love Klezmer music. While some of the music is sad, much of it is hand clapping and joyous! So join in, clap your hands together, stomp your feet, dance, and join in the fun!

History of Klezmer in Seattle: Seattle's first klezmer band, The Mazel Tov Klezmer Band founded by Peter Lippman, played at the Northwest Folklife Festival in 1981. At various times the band included Peter, Sandra Layman, Meg Glazer, David Adlhoch, Ron Long, Rabbi Jim Mirel, and Wendy Marcus (during the early period). Times changed and this band ended sometime in 1982. The klezmer music seed was planted. Wendy Marcus and Rabbi Mirel founded the Mazeltones in 1983. The Mazeltones and klezmer music became so popular that they were among the featured acts in the 1986 Northwest Folklife benefit concert. In 1990, the Mazeltones played for a wedding at the Kobe Bell during Folklife.

There is a klezmer music/Israeli dance connection as well. In 1993, both the Mazeltones and the Tzahalah Folk Ensemble celebrated their tenth anniversaries at Folklife with a joint concert at the Center House. When Tzahalah founder Pam Berry and Wendy Marcus proposed the joint concert idea to Folklife, festival organizers were enthusiastic and expanded the concept to a day-long Jewish stage.

The Mazeltones ended their run in 1998, having experienced personnel changes over the years. Among musicians in the Mazeltones were Wendy Marcus, Patricia Spaeth, Mary Kantor, Shawn Weaver, Marc Smason, David Hirsch, Rabbi Jim Mirel, Will Dowd, Steve Rice, Mel Webb, Charlie Nordstrom, Marcus Duke, Margot Leverett, Bob Meyer, Barry Pollack, Aaron Alexander, Yankl Falk, Dan Adams, Carol Robins, Rabbi Martin Applebaum, and David Kappy. As in so many genres, musicians have formed new groups incorporating other musicians, such as the Shalom Ensemble with Rabbi and Julie Mirel and Mary Kantor; Shawn's Kugel with Shawn Weaver, Will Dowd, Steve Rice and Spencer Hoveskeland. Wendy Marcus and Shawn Weaver started the KlezKidz at Beth Am almost 13 years ago, a multi-generational klezmer band taking the next generation forward to meet klezmer music head on. Just as Folklife honors musical and cultural knowledge by passing it on to the next generation and helping communities rediscover their music, so did the Mazeltones do their part

in restoring klezmer music to its rightful place in the Jewish community.

As klezmer grew in popularity in the northwest, these new bands found their way to Folklife. The Big Jewish show and other stages have featured the Koshers with Liz Dreisbach, Sheila Fox and Eugene Jablonsky; Kesselgarten with Laurie Andres and Carl Shutoff; Disciples of Goldenshtayn featuring Marty Morgenbesser, Milton From and Ethan Chessin; the KlezKatz with Harvey Niebulski, Jay Krulewitch, Brad Spear, Oren Sreebny and Thaddeus Spae; and musicians like Marc Smason and Sandra Layman. At one Folklife a few years ago, we had enough klezmer and Jewish music to fill two Jewish shows. There have been portions of the international dance evening devoted to Yiddish dancing, as well as Klezmer music jam sessions and Yiddish singing workshops.

Current Seattle Klezmer Scene: Many fine klezmer bands grace the Seattle scene, including [Kesselgarten](#), [Klez Chaos](#), [KlezKidz](#), [Klez Katz](#), [Klezmer Balabustas](#), Klezterbalm, [Koshers](#) (in Spokane), [Marc Smason and the Katatonics](#), the [Nu Klezmer Army](#) (who may have disbanded), [Orkestyr Farfeleh](#), [Shalom Ensemble](#), [Shawn's Kugel](#), and the [Yiddish Republik](#). There is also a University of Washington Klezmer band led by Shawn Weaver and a monthly open klezmer jam hosted by Bernice Maslan. Information can be found at the [seattleklezmer.com](http://seattleklezmer.com) website.

[Bernice Maslan](#)