VANGUARD

Klezmer, the street and wedding music of Jewish Eastern Europe, exemplifies the Jews' gift for "importing" secular melodies into their religious traditions. The Klezmer Conservatory Band, part of the modern movement to revive the klezmer sound, often records Jewish songs based on Slavic folk tunes and other non-Jewish influences.

We're Playing Their So

ROBERT L. COHEN

Several years ago in an Orthodox synagogue in Brooklyn, I heard the rabbi sing one of the *Hallel* psalms to the melody of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." The rabbi, who fancies himself a '60s kindred spirit but is quite "right wing" in practice, would undoubtedly be distressed to learn that the melody of "This Land" was not original to Guthrie but, rather, was borrowed from an earlier song that in turn used the melody of a Baptist hymn.

He need not have worried. The appropriation of melodies from secular folk and popular music and even from non-Jewish religious sources has a long history in Jewish folk and liturgical music—as it does in other religious music and in all folk music.

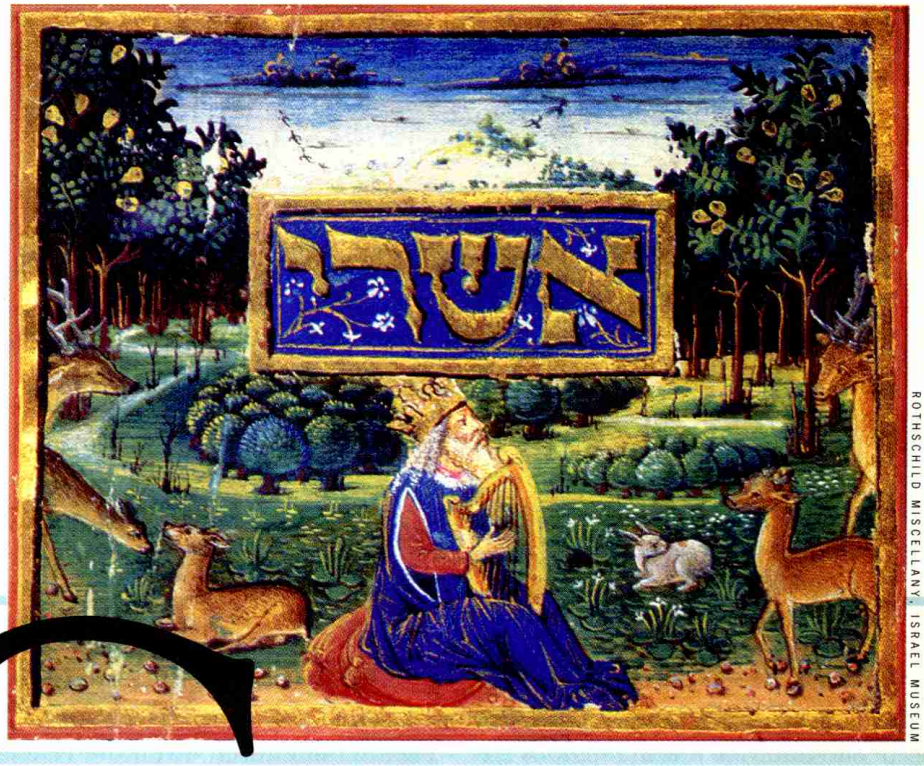
Indeed, the borrowing phenomenon is prevalent enough to have a name: Musicologists call new words written to an old or existing melody a *contrafact*, and some of our most familiar songs—like "The Star Spangled Banner," which originated as an English drinking song—fit this pattern.

Songwriters turn to well-known melodies whenever they want words to be quickly learned and widely sung; thus, contrafacts are a staple of war songs and anti-war songs, union organizing songs, civil rights songs and political campaign songs. Many songs composed in the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust were likewise intended to be sung to familiar melodies.

Borrowing in Jewish music is only one example of an impulse that has always led Jews to incorporate appealing aspects of their surrounding cultures—dances, stories, language—and give them a distinctly Jewish flavor and character. Ahad Ha'am referred to a Jewish genius for assimilating without being assimilated. Jewish music has reflected not only the styles, rhythms and instrumentation of surrounding cultures, but specific melodies—a practice that, when applied to religious music, has not been without controversy.

In Jewish religious music, borrowing may date as far back as the Psalms. Many of them were set down with anomalous superscriptions ("On the hind of the morning"; "On roses") that bear no apparent relationship to the text. Some Jewish music historians believe that these words may refer to contemporaneous songs to which these psalms were intended to be sung.

Did King David, depicted below in a fifteenth-century illuminated rendering of Psalm 1 (*Ashrei*) in his legendary role of musician, chant psalms to non-Jewish melodies? Enigmatic superscriptions on many ancient psalms may designate a contemporary melody to which they were sung.



ROTHSCHILD MISCELLANY, ISRAEL MUSEUM

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When Jewish Words Are Set to Non-Jewish Melodies, It's Strictly Kosher

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Benny Goodman (left) and Ziggy Elman borrowed a 1919 Jewish hit, "*Der Shtiller Bulgar*," when they recorded "And the Angels Sing" in 1939. The jazz greats became part of a long chain of borrowing to and from Jewish music.

Certainly by the time of the Second Temple, melodies of Greek origin were already part of Jewish worship—which we know (not uncharacteristically, as we will see) from rabbinic objections to the practice. "Alien" melodies continued to infiltrate Jewish religious life in every era, particularly as dispersion exposed Jews to non-Jewish musical cultures and as the writing of *piyyutim* (original Jewish hymns) increased the demand for new tunes. Melodies were "purloined," as music historian Alfred Sendrey puts it, from taverns, from the streets and from the Church; from French troubadours and German minnesingers; from Arabic love songs and Italian minuets and gavottes; and from folk songs, pop tunes and operatic arias.

The traditional Ashkenazic melody for *Ein Kelohenu* evolved from a German church hymn; the traditional *Ma'oz Tzur* ("Rock of Ages") from a conflation of two sixteenth-century German tunes, one of which was adopted by Martin Luther as the first hymn of the Lutheran church. Even the venerable so-called *M'Sinai* tunes associated with the High Holidays betray the influence of German folk song, and the High Holidays evening *Borchu* derives directly from a twelfth-century church melody.

(Lest this overly distress Jewish worshipers, it should be noted that Gregorian chant—and, thereby, all of Western classical music—most likely evolved from *our* Second Temple liturgical music. The thirteenth-century Jewish poet Immanuel of Rome imagined he heard gentile art music crying out, in the words of Joseph [Genesis 40:15]: "I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews.")

To be sure, the rabbis continually denounced the importation of foreign tunes into the synagogue and issued numerous edicts and responsa (legal opinions) to this effect, but to no avail; cantors and laypeople did it anyway. "The rabbis began to observe with alarm," notes a sixteenth-century historian, "spirited lovers' songs applied to holy psalms." "What shall we say and how shall we justify ourselves," declaimed the famed preacher of Mantua, Yehudah Moscat, in 1589, "as regards some of the cantors of our day, who chant the holy prayers to the tunes of popular songs of the multitude and thus, while they are discoursing on holy themes, think of the original ignoble and licentious associations!" His concern, then, was that popular tunes would inevitably distract the cantor—and, presumably, the worshipers.

Other condemnations focused on the bad taste—spiritual and aesthetic—of the service leader: A nineteenth-century New York Jewish newspaper carried a denunciation of the "grotesque" experience of hearing sensitive religious texts declaimed to dramatic operatic passages. Even today, taste and appropriateness are often absent in renditions of the synagogue's most ubiquitous contrafact, the hymn *Adon Olam*. This *piyyut* can be sung to almost any melody, from the elegant "Scarborough Fair" and the lofty "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to, regrettably, the theme song from "Jeopardy." Traditionally, *Adon Olam* was sung not only at Friday evening and Shabbat morning ser-

Lenny Solomon and his Shlock Rock band record Jewish parodies of popular rock songs, like "Go to Shul" ("Don't Be Cruel") and "Under the Chupah" ("Under the Boardwalk") in albums like "Sgt. Schlockers Magical History Tour" (above).

vices but under the wedding canopy (in Morocco), before retiring and even at a deathbed—where, presumably, one would not sing "Jeopardy."

In any case, the various rabbinic condemnations of borrowing melodies do not always agree on exactly what they are condemning. Some proscribed all gentile songs; some only sensuous Arabic songs; some—this was Maimonides' position—sensuous songs in any language, including Hebrew. Some forbade all melodies learned from Muslims, or from Christians.

But not all authorities were so disapproving. Rabbi Joel Sirkes (Poland, 1561-1640), in a responsum, held that though "they sing in the synagogues the melodies that are sung in the churches," only "such melodies as are...traditionally or characteristically part of the Christian ritual can be banned." Israel Moses Hazan, an Italian rabbi of the nineteenth century, reported approvingly that the Jews of Smyrna, when in need of fitting tunes for Rosh Hashanah, would visit Christian churches "in order to learn those melodies which invoked in the congregation a spirit of humility." In modern times, the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, approved of secular melodies in the synagogue if they lead the congregation to a religious experience.

Sephardim have a long history of borrowing and adapting melodies—from the folk songs of their countries of dispersion as well as from the Judeo-Spanish folk song repertoire (whose songs themselves are often derived from non-Jewish ballads). In his published collections, Israel Najara (c.1555-c.1628), our most prolific composer of Shabbat *zemirot*, specifically indicates the Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Italian or Spanish melody to which he intended each to be sung.

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We're Playing Their Song

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Syrian Jews have a tradition, which they have continued in Brooklyn, of *pizmonim*—original Hebrew texts, composed for a Jewish holiday or life-cycle celebration and set to borrowed melodies. Traditionally the tunes were and are Arabic, although American ones ("Sunrise, Sunset") are being heard today.

Some of today's more ingenious borrowings join words and melodies that are linked thematically or spiritually. My colleague Jeff Oboler (Yosef Ben Shlomo HaKohen) taught some of us to sing *Eliyahu Hanavi* at the end of Shabbat to Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'," subtly appropriating the messianic content and connotations of the Dylan song along with its melody. Levi Kelman, rabbi of the Kol Haneshamah synagogue in Jerusalem, set the concluding verse of Psalm 150 ("Let every soul praise God"—the Hebrew gave him the name for his shul) to a Michael Praetorius setting of the church liturgy "Jubilate Deo" (Psalm 100). Rabbi Jack Gabriel of Fort Collins, Colorado, likes to lead the Priestly Blessings to the Beatles' "Let It Be"; there's a lovely likeness, in meaning and sound, between *kein y'hi* ("so may it be") and the Beatles' refrain.

Musician David Shneyer, a self-described "Judaist" in Rockville, Maryland, uses the melody for "Dust in the Wind" by the rock band Kansas for the parallel words "A man's origin is from dust and his destiny is back to dust" from the High Holidays prayers. My teacher Sherwood Goffin, the Orthodox cantor of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York, borrowed Shlomo Carlebach's melody for "Pour Out Your Heart Like Water" (Lamentations 2:19) for the *tal* and *geshem* prayers for dew and rain. Goffin restricts himself to so-called "internal borrowing," whereby appropriate Jewish religious melodies, compatible with the proper *nussach*, or prayer mode, are adopted for other parts of the liturgy. Thus, the *Mi Chamochah* prayer is often sung during the month of Nisan to the Passover hymn *Adir Hu*, or during Kislev to *Ma'oz Tzur*.

Contrafacts in Jewish music were rife in Najara's days, writes the Israeli scholar Yosef Yahalom, because of a need to communicate religious ideas in a time of spiritual crisis. A similar spirit motivates New Yorker Lenny Solomon, a modern Orthodox musician who began writing Jewish parodies (in English) of rock'n'roll songs "just for fun" and realized that his songs could bring alienated Jews closer to their heritage. For his "Shlock Rock" series of albums, Solomon writes (in addition to original pieces) lyrics that skillfully mirror the title and content of the original: "Under the Chupah" from the Drifters' "Under the Boardwalk"; "Go to Shul" ("Don't Be Cruel"); and "Rabbi Akiva" ("Lady Madonna").

Chasidim, who believe in the unique power of spiritual melodies or *niggunim* to help Jews achieve closeness to God, consider it a *mitzvah* to use any spiritual melody for a religious purpose. One *m'kadeshes* the melody—imbues it with holiness—and transforms it into a genuine *niggun*.

Early chasidic rebbes found sparks of holiness in peasant songs, shepherd's tunes, military marches and polkas; "La Marseillaise" was sung as a *niggun* by the first Lubavitcher rebbe. Today, returnees to Judaism via Lubavitch frequently appropriate melodies from popular American culture; David Lazerson, a Lubavitcher who uses rap music to promote black-Jewish harmony in Crown Heights, has recorded his "Let's Bench" to the 1950s doo-wop classic "Get A Job."

This generation of American Jews, open to the potential of melodies from non-Jewish sources to enrich and revitalize Jewish life, can be characterized as "neo-chasidic." Conceived out of the security of feeling at home in two cultures, their borrowings are, by turns, playful and pious.

That is the experience of the so-called Tremont Street synagogue in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where three melodies—"Take Me Out to the Ball Game," "Ol' Man River" and George M. Cohan's "Yankee Doodle Boy"—are traditionally incorporated into Simchat Torah services in a fashion writer Moshe Waldoks—one of the leaders—calls "postmodern chasidic." Similarly, a new a capella group called Beat'achon has recorded the Shabbat *zemirah "D'ror Yikrah"* to "Sloop John B," the Beach Boys' hit.

My own students in workshops on music and Jewish prayer have creatively set Jewish liturgy to Irish tunes, English country dances and a Macedonian folk dance—hoping to match the essential spirit of a melody with the Jewish text. I learned that my own setting of the Shabbat song *Yom Zeh Mechubad* to a New England contra dance had traveled, on its own, to Jerusalem!

As musicians on the cusp of what Jewish music historian Eric Werner calls the process of "borrowing and lending, assimilation and absorption," klezmer musicians have often been "importers" of non-Jewish music and "exporters" of Jewish melodies to mainstream culture. The klezmer wedding standard "*Khusn, Kale, Mazeltov*"—known to Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe—probably derives from southeastern European popular songs and/or a British street ballad; in it you can hear "St. James Infirmary." "*Der Shtiller Bulgar*," recorded by the Jewish Orchestra in 1919, was reborn 20 years later as "And the Angels Sing" in a recording by Benny Goodman and Ziggy Elman.

Often we don't know the origin of the melodies we sing. Folk singer Pete Seeger has demonstrated that "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," a "wandering melody" that has versions in innumerable cultures, becomes, when played in a minor key—yes—*"Hatikvah."* In fact, this melody first appears in Jewish music in a sixteenth-century Sephardic setting for the *tal* (dew) prayer; later it was adapted by Ashkenazim for the Friday evening *Yigdal* prayer and Shabbat morning *Eitz Chayim*. Christians, meanwhile, borrowed the melody for "The God of Abraham, Praise."

Borrowing melodies unites us with Jews of other times and places, and with non-Jews following other spiritual paths. When done with sensitivity, it connects us more deeply to the prayers themselves and imbues our worship with more fervor and intensity. "If you cannot concentrate in prayer," wrote Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg, "search for melodies, and if you pray choose a tune you like. Then your heart will feel what your tongue speaks; for it is the song that makes your heart respond." Ⓜ