Synagogue Folk

Guitars, not organs, shape a Jewish music renaissance

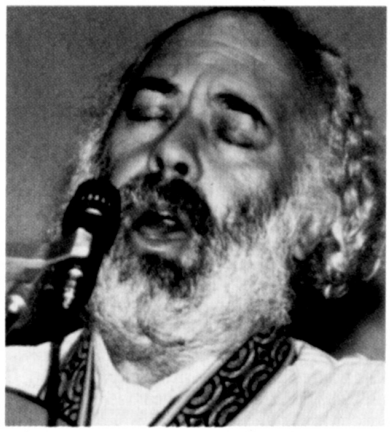
by Robert L. Cohen

In a Hasidic story told by philosopher Martin Buber, a Jew from Cracow dreams of a treasure buried in Prague under a particular bridge. He sets out on a journey to dig it up, only to find that the bridge is heavily guarded. A kindly guard who questions him reveals that he too has dreamt of a treasure—buried in Cracow, under the traveler's stove. Sure enough, the man returns to find that the treasure he has been seeking lies, as it were, in his own back yard.

This story says more than a little about how most American Jews today view Jewish music. When I ask my students or lecture audiences what "Jewish music" brings to mind, they mention Yiddish folk songs or theater music; Eastern European klezmer music or cantorial singing; an Israeli popular or folk tune; or perhaps a song from *Fiddler on the Roof.* Their answers are telling, for all reveal a vicarious or nostalgic sense of Jewish identity. Virtually never do people mention the liturgically inspired folk music composed by living Americans that can often be heard in their own synagogues.

"Every Sunday in most American cities," folksinger Pete Seeger has written, "various people get together and sing religious folk music. They don't call it folk music, but it is, just as much as what is sung in the local coffeehouse." Much the same could be said of modern Jews. The austere "edifice music" composed for the "cathedral synagogues" of Europe (and America until the 1950s) no longer dominates. Like other religious Americans, many Jews today seek closeness and spiritual connection to God, and to each other—not distance and reserve. And with characteristic American pragmatism, we are open to whatever music "works" to make this connection happen. No wonder, then, that the cultural children of Seeger, the Weavers, and Peter, Paul, and Mary have created a distinctive, often exhilarating style of liturgical *folk* music—an indigenous American product.

The music now sung in synagogues and minyanim (less formal services often held outside a synagogue) reflects the influences that have shaped contemporary American culture in general. You can hear this in the modern preference for the inviting guitar rather than the distancing organ, and for congregational singing instead of coloratura cantorial solos. Our musical eclecticism is evident as well. Jewish liturgical folk music has been shaped by the same cross-cultural fusion that has led in recent decades to Jewish bluegrass, Jewish country, and Jewish reggae and world music—even Jewish rap.



Shlomo Carlebach

While the influence of modern American culture has been profound, a distinctly European Jewish movement—Hasidism—has also left its mark on Jewish music, as on Jewish renewal generally. Hasidism began in 18th-century Eastern Europe by stressing devotion to a loving God through simple, joyful worship, often expressed in song and dance, including the spiritual melodies called *niggunim.* In the United States (where adherents transplanted themselves during and after the Holocaust), Hasidism offered a healing, inclusive message for alienated Jews. Its strong egalitarian message spoke to the anti-elitist sentiments that have dominated American culture since the 1960s. As for the Hasidic call to joy, my teacher Cantor Sherwood Goffin has noted that "Jews used to come to synagogue to cry"—but in a largely benign America that has changed. *Niggunim* are fitting vehicles, both musically and emotionally, for the celebratory spirit of the age.

One charismatic singer played a crucial role in inspiring a new generation of *niggun* makers. As a child in Berlin and Baden, a spa town near Vienna, Shlomo Carlebach (1925–94) was saturated with traditional Jewish religious music. After he came to America in 1939, he immersed himself in various Hasidic communities and absorbed something of the folk-revival scene in New York City's Greenwich Village. Carlebach had a gift for luminous melodies that conveyed yearning and joy, sweetness and exultation, all at once. Singing with a guitar, an instrument unheard of until then in Jewish religious music, he inspired many others to set both traditional and original verses to their own new melodies. His influence would fuel what musician David Nulman calls "the democratization of Jewish music" in our time.

The renaissance of Jewish liturgical folk music has not been without controversy. "Any damn fool can get complicated," remarked Pete Seeger in praising Woody Guthrie. "It takes genius to attain simplicity." With respect to Jewish music, at least, others have often had a different opinion. The decline of art music in the synagogue, and the parallel rise of folk music, has been a source of distress for some (but not all) cantors, composers, and other guardians of the Jewish art music tradition. For them, folk music simply cannot achieve what has been justly called the "aloof beauty" in the work of, say, the early-17th-century Italian Jewish composer Salomone Rossi or the 19th century's Salomon Sulzer of Vienna.

There may always be a time and place for the ethereal music of Rossi and other classic Jewish composers, as for the works of modern Jewish composers working in a more formal style. But as stated in the mystical commentaries of the *Zohar*, when the Jewish people leave their final exile on the way to their (and everyone's) final redemption, they will leave, as they left Egypt, singing. I believe Jews will need not only our cherished musical traditions of old, but some of these enchanting new melodies as well. In the words of the medieval Jewish teacher Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg, "If you cannot concentrate in prayer, 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."