
Transmigrations: Wolf Krakowski's Yiddish Worldbeat in its Socio-Musical Context

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INTRODUCTION: THE LAST YIDDISH BLUESMAN AND THE MUSICIAN OF LUBLIN

I LOVE Wolf Krakowski. His legendary CD *Transmigrations*¹—the first example of Yiddish worldbeat—is my favourite. I admit this freely, although I am by day a tenured full professor of Western classical music who swims in the sea of assimilation, Jewish self-loathing, and politely restrained antisemitism that is mid-western academe and for whom this confession might be received as ranging from eccentric to foolish to professionally risky. But, as the 1929 Michalesco recording says, ‘A yid bin ikh geboyrn’ (‘I was born a Jew’).² Jewishness defines me whether I like it or not (and I do) and *Transmigrations* speaks to and for our generation of North American Jews like nothing else, whether we know it or not (and we should).

Wolf is one of my dearest friends. A copy of *Transmigrations* and the stream of Krakowski–Lubet email that flowed constantly between Northampton, Massachusetts, and Lublin kept me sane while I was living in Poland in 1999. Lublin, a Jewish ghost town, was home to the great Romantic composer–violinist Henryk Wieniawski, a personal hero, a nineteenth-century Jewish Jimi Hendrix who, like Wolf, was a man of eclectic tastes and strong popular cultural sensibilities.

It was also, of course, inspiration to I. B. Singer. Isaac Bashevis Singer Street is a single, empty block facing the ‘New Jewish Cemetery’, by far the worst-kept Jewish cemetery or memorial I saw anywhere in Poland, in the shabbiest part of town. If my woefully inadequate Polish served me right, the word *żydowski* protrudes accusingly from any sentence it inhabits; one of my futile attempts to enter the cemetery was met with ridicule by a couple of toughs in a manner that strongly recommended my swift retreat. Majdanek is a suburb of Lublin. Its western border is a

¹ Wolf Krakowski, *Transmigrations* (Kame’a Media, 1996); rereleased on the Tzadik label in August 2001. A second CD, entitled *Goyrl* (‘Destiny’) was released by Tzadik in July 2002.

² ‘A yid bin ich geboiren’, *Dave Tarras: Yiddish-American Klezmer Music, 1925–1956* (Yazoo, Miss., 1991).

forest of tiny dachas whose owners must somehow have arrived at some kind of peace with the 125,000 Jews murdered there. I will never understand.

This is the context in which I lived and taught Jewish contributions to American musical culture in 1999 at Marie Curie-Skłodowska University. Prior to that time I had negative interest in east European travel, regarding the region almost exclusively as Holocaust Central, hardly a unique feeling among Jews. I was recruited, on the basis of my teaching prowess, rather than any particular subject, to apply for an exchange professorship in Lublin. My Polish colleagues invited me on the condition I teach Jewish music, an interest I had hitherto pursued as an artist and scholar, but never in the classroom.

Although not exactly by design, it is probably best I do not teach Jewish music at the University of Minnesota. I hold all things Jewish sacred and find it emotionally wrenching to share them with those, usually composition students, who do not and are merely seeking novelty, or who relate to Judaism through their Christianity. By contrast, my Polish students and colleagues, all devout Catholics or at least intimately familiar with others' devotion, respected my sacred space in a way that made sharing what I hold dear surprisingly less problematic and much more pleasurable than it had ever been at home.

My residency was extremely successful. I made numerous wonderful friendships with Polish colleagues and students who were anything but antisemitic. But being a solitary, thoroughly exposed, even celebrity Jew, charged with representing his people and faith to a non-Jewish public in a city at once so Jewish and Jewless, was among the most emotionally draining experiences of my life. I owe much of my spiritual sustenance in that challenging time to Wolf Krakowski.

JEWIS IN (CYBER)SPACE

At the time of writing Wolf and I have not met and have spoken by phone only occasionally. Yet we regard ourselves as dear friends—a testament to the Internet in general and email in particular. If virtual, the Internet is also a most natural instrument of Jewish community. It is the nexus of contemporary secular Ashkenazi music, if not all Old World Ashkenazi culture which—tightly bounded by Israel, Orthodoxy, assimilation, and antisemitism—occupies, more than ever before, no physical space of its own.

Jewish life has been virtual for a very long time, in ways both awful and elegant. There is Diaspora—*golus*, Israel without place. But there is also Torah, Written and Oral: Israel as conversation with God. For me, the most life-affirming representation of Jewish virtuality is the Passover Haggadah, whose declaration that 'in every generation, every man must think of himself as having gone forth from Egypt' defies both space and time.

Wolf found me on the Internet. The most important web site for *klezmer* and

other secular Jewish musics is Ari Davidow's KlezmerShack.³ Davidow also maintains the listserve World Music from a Jewish Slant.⁴ In the absence of significant electronic or print media or an ongoing presence in important performance venues (despite the widely touted worldwide Jewish dominance of all major media, governments, and financial institutions), these two adjoining cybershtetls with their one-man *kehile* (council), neither a musician nor a Yiddish speaker but a maven of *mebkayt*, assume great importance in our little world of Yiddish music.

In 1995 I introduced myself on the web site as, among other things, an author who had reviewed Yiddish music recordings for the journal *Ethnomusicology*. Having read my posting, Wolf sent me *Transmigrations*, requesting a review.

YIDDISH WORLDBEAT: REGGAE OF AGES

At the time I ignored Wolf's request. *Transmigrations* struck me as wrong for *Ethnomusicology*; it was neither archival nor an attempt to revive with fidelity a historical style. When reviewing *klezmer* revival recordings for this journal, I always tried to balance my enthusiasm for innovative post-modern bands with the journal's scholarly mission. I sensed that Wolf's self-proclaimed Yiddish worldbeat lay beyond the pale of *Ethnomusicology*.

Yet even prior to hearing the album I was excited by the prospect of a New Yiddish fusion music, a 'Jewision', that boldly went where even John Zorn and the Klezmatics had never gone. The album makes one contemplate the ontology of Jewish music as little else can. If only for that reason—there are many others—it must be taken seriously. That it was a first, remains unique, and combines many apparently disparate elements, invites the label 'experimental', although it is anything but abstruse or self-consciously avant-garde.

Definitions of Jewish music are elusive and contested. Debates may focus on which parts of the Jewish soundscape, such as chanted prayer, are 'music',⁵ but are more typically framed by what musics are Jewish. I doubt broad consensus will ever be reached, particularly regarding secular music, which lacks the imprimatur of sacred text or religious praxis that wield authority over the Jewish identity even of heretics and non-believers (whose Jewish peoplehood is still largely defined by their association with and even response to a creed to which they do not adhere). Still, lines are rarely clear or fixed between sacred and profane in Jewish life. After all, the Ashkenazi instrumental dance genres that are central to what is now called *klezmer*, the mainstream of contemporary Yiddish secular music, had their genesis in the wedding ritual which celebrates one of Judaism's most sacred commandments.

Transmigrations comprises principally secular songs, although these are at times referenced, as is nearly unavoidable in chronicles of Jewish life. Two songs,

³ <www.klezmershack.com>.

⁴ <jewish-music@shamash.org>.

⁵ A. Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions* (Detroit, 1992), 75–80.

'Shabes, shabes' and 'Zol shoy'n kumen di geule' ('Let the Redemption Come'), are traditionally devotional, if non-liturgical. The songs that address the Holocaust and other Jewish suffering pose basic spiritual questions that Jews must ask, though not in formal prayer.

In determining any music's Jewishness, lessons from the sacred repertoire of Judaism may be applied. On utilitarian grounds, all settings of sacred Hebrew texts for use in Jewish worship are Jewish music. This principle extends to all Yiddish song, since Jewish languages are tools of Jewish community. This includes all twelve songs on *Transmigrations*.

Two of my mentors in Jewish music, the cantors Morton Kula and Max Wohlberg, while flexible in such matters as harmony and rhythm, insisted that sacred Jewish melody retain appropriate traditional *nusekh*, or mode.⁶ While *nusekh* is a principle of sacred music, grounding in modes of Ashkenazi prayer, however intuitive, resulting in appropriation of melodic motifs of the synagogue, also lies at the heart of Yiddish vernacular music.⁷

Transmigrations—an album of Yiddish folk songs and works by Yiddish theatre and literary artists, its melodies forthrightly Jewish—is a product of this environment. Yet the album defies expectations of Yiddish song in broader aspects of style. Simply put, it's a rock album. More accurately, it combines influences of guitar-driven popular musics of the post-Second World War English-speaking world: 1960s counter-culture rock and folk-rock, hard-edged country, and reggae, with a nearly ubiquitous female chorus rooted in gospel and rhythm and blues. Blues is a subtle, yet pervasive, inspiration. This marriage of eclectic sources is harmonious and grooving, wedded under a *khupe* of Yiddish melody. The cantors who mentored me would be pleased.

But if my teachers would have sanctioned Krakowski's rebirthing of these great Jewish songs, I initially did not. My first response to Yiddish worldbeat was excitement at the concept but hesitation about the product. I was not at once convinced of a successful merging of musical worlds. Jews in *golus* have always absorbed their neighbours' musical practices. It is unlikely that much other than shofar-blowing—if that—is uninfluenced by Diaspora. The music Jews make may be unparalleled in its breadth of influences. In terms of historical precedent, then, *Transmigrations* seemed perfectly natural, neither new nor alarming. Intuitively, though, I was struck that Krakowski's 'Jewsion' differed greatly from others I had embraced with pleasure and affection.

⁶ A mode may be regarded as a set of characteristics, usually melodic, that identify a genre or style. The defining elements of the blues offer a familiar example of modality.

⁷ See J. Frigyesi, 'The Historical Value of the Record *Maramaros*', notes to the CD *The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania* (Hannibal, Mo., 1993).

EAST SIDE STORY: THE AMERICANIZATION OF JEWISH MUSIC

Other *golus*-tinged eclecticism of North American Yiddish music emerged from more organic, communally nurtured, decades-long interactions between Jews and other urbanites. Henry Sapoznik's 1992 CD anthology *Dave Tarras: Yiddish American Klezmer Music, 1925-1956*⁸ chronicles over three decades of eclectic musics once simply called 'Jewish', modelled on operetta, musical comedy, Tin Pan Alley, and swing, yet grounded in *nusekh* and traditional Ashkenazi idioms. These infusions of light classical music and Jazz Age glitter are less assimilation than expression of the aspiration to enhance Jewish social status through absorption of stylistic intricacies of western Europe and the American 'Golden Land'.

The Klezmatics, the most eclectically post-modern *klezmer* revival band, rejuvenated that tradition with rock, jazz, and worldbeat influences of their native New York. Reviewing their 1992 *rhythm + jews*, I observed that

For all their diverse influences, the Klezmatics' sound is a seamless, essentially emic fusion. The sources from which they draw are native to the musical world of American Jewish intellectuals of the 'boomer generation'. Jewish interest in both Middle Eastern and American vernacular culture is both strong and long-standing enough for their imprint upon contemporary klezmer music to seem entirely natural.⁹

With emendations to accommodate generational difference, the same applied to the great clarinetist Dave Tarras. For the Klezmatics, though, the aspiration is no longer upward mobility, but cultural autonomy as American Jews, diasporites who do not require Zion for self-definition. Tarras was the musical heart of Jewish America; the Klezmatics are the revival's bright children. Both exemplify larger socio-musical movements; they are perhaps different moments in a single process.

I first heard *Transmigrations* as juxtaposing disparate, unrelated, Yiddish and American musical elements. The mix seemed a stretch: rural American, Jamaican, Latin; things one would instantly classify as un-Jewish. Yet every incursion of Diaspora music and culture (provisionally) accepted into Jewish life must once have seemed peculiar and met resistance. Jewish reggae or outlaw country are arguably far more natural—and less toxic—than German Lutheranism's influence on the music of Reform Judaism. Given the many genres born of Diaspora contacts and the great and varied successes of 'mainstream' Jewish musicians, what is finally unnatural about Krakowski's interpretations of Yiddish song is not his chosen path of rough-hewn Anglo-African American vernacular, but that he has had to go it alone.

Or has he? The 'conversion experience' through which I came to advocate Wolf's music occurred not through listening to *Transmigrations*, but through our

⁸ (Yazoo, 1991). The music is accompanied by Sapoznik's essay 'Dave Tarras: Father of Yiddish-American Klezmer Music'.

⁹ *Ethnomusicology*, 39 (1995), no. 2, 340-3.

first extended exchange of email, which began on Davidow's listserve and quickly went private. Wolf and I were engaged in the sort of ultra-heated debate that non-Jews are often shocked to see occurring among people who regard themselves as friends. Topics ebbed and flowed, as we finally arrived at our mutual admiration and passion for the work of Lenny Bruce. Bruce was the epitome of the outlaw social critic, a recurrent figure in much of the world's history and lore, from Gandhi and King to *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*¹⁰ and *The Signifying Monkey*.¹¹ Recognizing Bruce as the Jewish exemplar of the tradition—and acknowledging the outlaw nature of *golus* in general—and hearing Wolf as he hears himself—as Bruce's musical *doppelgänger* (a few decades removed)—as Yiddish outlaw compatriot of Bob Marley, Willie Nelson, and Jerry Garcia—all this made beautiful sense. Allowing once more for generational difference, Lenny Bruce himself said it best in his classic 'Jewish and Goyish': 'Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish.'¹²

Wolf Krakowski's *Transmigrations* is outrageously Jewish.

Earlier, better times for Yiddish culture spawned art song, opera, musical comedy, popular song, jazz, dance genres, folk song, and liturgical traditions. Much was undertaken; everything seemed possible. That Wolf may be the one true Yiddish rocker owes not to eccentricity, but to that ultimate aberration in Jewish life and Yiddish culture, the Holocaust. That Wolf has no peers owes much to the devastation of *yidishkayt*, all but replaced by the diverse, flourishing culture of Israel, Zionism, and modern Hebrew.

But globalization means that physical proximity is no longer the criterion for influence or even community. Were Yiddish thriving now, its song would surely include rich responses to rock, hip hop, everything, everywhere.¹³ Its artists would feel less if any need for the *klezmer* revival which currently dominates secular Jewish American music. *Transmigrations*, uninfluenced by past or present *klezmerim*, would have been made with few if any changes had the *klezmer* revival never occurred.

BEYOND KLEZMER: DOS LEBN IN AMERIKE (LIVIN' IN THE USA)

The son of Polish Holocaust survivors, born in Saalfelden Farmach Displaced Persons' Camp in US-occupied Austria, raised in Eskilstuna, Sweden, and Toronto,

¹⁰ A tone poem by the composer Richard Strauss portraying the great trickster of German folklore.

¹¹ A reference to the West African legend that is the title of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s magnum opus on the literatures of African peoples (New York, 1989).

¹² W. Novak and M. Waldoks (eds.), *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York, 1981), 60.

¹³ See K. Malm, 'Music on the Move: Traditions and the Mass Media', *Ethnomusicology*, 37 (1993), no. 3, 339-52; M. Slobin, 'Micromusics of the West: A Comparative Approach', *Ethnomusicology*, 36 (1992), 1-87.

Wolf resides in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wife, the Yiddish vocalist Fraidy Katz. A truly native Yiddish speaker, his singing sends a thrill of authenticity straight to the hearts of co-linguists, for whom artistic truth is manifest in the use of a timelessly eloquent vernacular. While enamoured of Yiddish song from childhood, Krakowski never internalized the traditional dance rhythms of *freylekh*, *bulgar*, or *sher*. A late twentieth-century Anglo-North American, Wolf's heart beats to 'blues-based rhythm music', anything (good) played with steel-string guitars in the English-speaking world.¹⁴

Thus, passion for Yiddish song, which, as Henry Sapoznik observes, Wolf understands culturally and linguistically as few of his peers,¹⁵ is coupled with discomfort with the 'smiley-face' *klezmer* revivalism he fears is more performed than felt.¹⁶ Armed with great Yiddish songs from beyond the *klezmer* revival repertoire, *Transmigrations* rages against the legacy of the Holocaust on behalf of the culture Hitler couldn't quite destroy. With the Lonesome Brothers, a kicking, altogether empathetic band, Wolf rocks an Ashkenaz struggling for survival on a few web sites and the leavings of JCC budgets hell-bent for Zion.

Characteristically modest about his post-modernization of Yiddish song, Wolf refuses to call himself anything more than an 'arranger'. I regard his transformation of the musical environment in which these melodies reside as nothing less than recomposition. He transforms his material to the same magnitude that Aaron Copland recast the Shaker hymn 'Simple Gifts' in his ballet *Appalachian Spring*. Their respective methods, however, result in very different sociocultural statements. Copland took the plain-spoken melody and placed it into a medium associated with social prestige and economic power. This required not only developmental methods of Western art music, but filling in 'awkward' melodic gaps in the original hymn, now often 'corrected' Copland-style even by professional 'folk singers'.¹⁷ Hearing a Shaker rendition, one senses how Copland and others, embarrassed by the 'missing teeth' of this poor relation, 'improved' it with classical music's equivalent of cosmetic dentistry,¹⁸ recalling Julia Roberts's made-over working-class heroines in the films *Pretty Woman* and *Erin Brockovich*.

Wolf wears his proletarian past and present proudly. Previous recordings of the songs on *Transmigrations* are full of schmaltz. I do not mean the emotionality that links cantorial singing to Horowitz to Hendrix (as attractive to the pink-haired as to the blue-),¹⁹ but the melding of simply harmonized vernacular music (in this case,

¹⁴ Two exceptions among Wolf's favourites, Jose Feliciano and Willie Nelson, play nylon-string guitars.

¹⁵ H. Sapoznik, *Klezmer! From Old World to Our World* (New York, 1999), 253.

¹⁶ See e.g. the 1995 PBS documentary *In the Fiddler's House*.

¹⁷ e.g. the Armstrong Family's version on *The Wheel of the Year: Thirty Years with the Armstrong Family* (Flying Fish, 1992).

¹⁸ In musical terms Copland fills in skipped passing notes.

¹⁹ On the relationship of rock to the Romantic tradition in classical music, see S. Frith, *Music for Pleasure* (New York, 1988).

Jewish melody) to such large gestures of Western art music as lush orchestration, classically trained voices, and four-part choral texture.²⁰

When art music notions of elegance are grafted onto folk or popular miniature forms minus classical music's thematic development, the result is 'easy listening', the dominant aesthetic of white American popular music of the McCarthy 1950s, continued in the industry's self-censoring propagation of such non-talents as the 'anti-Elvis' Pat Boone. 'Jewish' too was prone to the 'vanilla' sound. Yaffa Yarkoni, popular Yiddish singer of the 1950s and 1960s, used Johnny Mathis's arranger, Glenn Osser, for her string orchestrations. (Jewish writers, arrangers, and promoters such as Osser were ubiquitous in early rock.)

Among the most familiar schmaltz is classic Motown: string-based orchestration, immaculate vocal harmony, and studied choreography. Early Motown's visual signature included formal evening wear and big hair (on women). Motown even schooled its artists in elegant on- and off-stage deportment in its 'finishing school'.²¹ Not at first overtly political, Motown's images of African American affluent beauty, widely televised, embodied hope and possibility.²²

LIKE A ROLLING *SHTEYN*

In contrast, Bob Dylan, musical herald of white (largely Jewish) support of the civil rights movement, employed wrinkled shirts, faded jeans, blue notes, an orchestra of one, and attempted working-class deportment (often countered by cryptic high-art lyrics). Like jazz-influenced George Gershwin, Dylan was a crucial mediator of African American and European-American idioms.²³

Despite the importance of Dylan's songs, his performance may have been even more influential. Charles Keil's theory of 'participatory discrepancies' (PDs) argues that 'Music to be personally involving, must be "out of time" and "out of tune",'²⁴ "out of time and out of tune" only in relation to music department standardization and the civilized worldview, of course'.²⁵ Music needs slight (or, like Dylan, not-

²⁰ For a discussion of 'Jewish harmony', see A. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York, 1967). In *Folk Song Style and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1968), Alan Lomax cites vocal timbre as a most unchangeable marker of a music's cultural origin. Thus, despite Jewish melody and harmony, an 'operatic' vocal quality might identify a performance as Western art music.

²¹ See e.g. the 1995 WGBH (Boston) documentary *Rock 'n' Roll*.

²² Oprah Winfrey has spoken of the importance to her youthful self-esteem of seeing the Supremes on television.

²³ Some of the white folk singers most identified with the civil rights movement and with Dylan's songs, like Joan Baez and Peter, Paul, and Mary, were little influenced by black music. Perhaps this lack of cultural common ground was an early indicator of the fragility of the coalition. Rock, much of it British, deeply assimilated African American influence.

²⁴ C. Keil, 'Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music', *Cultural Anthropology*, 2 (1985), no. 3, 275-83.

²⁵ C. Keil, 'The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: An Update', *Ethnomusicology*, 39 (1995), no. 1, 4.

so-slight) variances in tuning (blue notes), rhythm (swing), and nuance (wobbling, cracking voices, and amplifier distortion), to vibrate with life. Dylan imported PDs from the blues into Anglo-American folk tradition.²⁶ Given the contrast between the music of 1960s white and African American progressives—white Blues People,²⁷ African Americans refusing the blues—small wonder the alliance was so fragile.

The music of the 1960s was as formative of Krakowski as the lyric poetry of the world the Holocaust destroyed: Dylan, the Grateful Dead, outlaw country, reggae, gospel-driven Stax-Volt/Atlantic R & B, and the blues singers then new to white audiences. Neither Motown nor schmaltzy Yiddish music—both born of rising expectations and attempts to claim a piece of the mainstream, though not quite to join it—is in the mix. Wolf's eclectic influences are pure urban working class, a flat rejection of post-Second World War Jewish suburban flight.

Jews were born to rock: from Lieber and Stoller, Phil Spector, and Allan Freed to Carole King, Dylan, Simon, Kiss, and Phish. Wolf Krakowski embeds Yiddish melody in the PDs of the New World's struggling class. He rocks, reggae, R & Bs, and rhumbas—sometimes in several grooves at once. That the Lonesome Brothers are Wolf's Band of Goyim²⁸ is irrelevant except in so far as their obvious dedication to *Transmigrations* is all the more righteous. Confronted with Yiddish song, a band more fluent in the Old Country grooves Wolf eschews might have got it—or wanted to get it—wrong.

The women's chorus on *Transmigrations* is another matter. Their American accents and textbook diction distinctly contrast with Wolf's native fluency and Łódź accent.²⁹ Alan Lomax's theory of cantometrics observes that a culture's organization of singing voices reflects its social order.³⁰ But Yiddish worldbeat is the music of Wolf's utopia only, his imagined community where Yiddish (and that language's only worldbeat vocalist) rocks and rules. In soul music a single-sex, usually female, chorus signifies sexual prowess. Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' is the paradigm. This sexual dynamic operates in *Transmigrations*, as Wolf, centre-stage, the power and the glory, is backed by a chorus that has learned his tongue to amplify what he says. Here is a welcome, timely reversal of Woody Allen–Jerry Seinfeld–*Mad About You*–*Bridget Loves Bernie shikse*–lust constructions of Jewish masculinity. As they caress his seering Yiddish vocals, the women also lend irony and empathy in the great Yiddish literary tradition, creating a wash of macho posturing that

²⁶ The African Americanization of many Jewish musicians does not imply that Jewish music lacks PDs. One of the clarinet virtuoso Naftule Brandwein's best-known pieces is 'Der heyser bulgar' ('The Hot Bulgar'): *heys* is what PDs are about. Despite *klezmer*'s low-status origins, Jews embrace their musical roots through ethnicity rather than class.

²⁷ A reference to the classic book on jazz *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1983) by Amiri Baraka (Leroy Jones).

²⁸ A reference to Jimi Hendrix's (all black) Band of Gypsies.

²⁹ I thank Michael Steinlauf for this observation.

³⁰ Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*.

can never be taken as entirely literal in a historical context of Diaspora ambivalence and powerlessness.

ONE JEW'S BLUES

While *Transmigrations* has been widely praised within and beyond the Jewish community,³¹ its first widely seen review was less than kind and fomented much rancour in our little cybershtetl. On his web page Ari Davidow took Wolf to task for commemorating the Holocaust with defeatist laments, while avoiding songs of overt resistance.³²

Davidow didn't get it. Simply stating the nature of the crime, these laments—'Varshe' ('Warsaw'), 'Friling' ('Springtime'), 'Yeder ruft mikh zhamele' ('Everyone Calls me Zhamele'), and 'Blayb gezunt mir, kroke' ('Fare thee Well, Kraków')—were acts of defiance and courage. Words suited to soapboxes fare less well as song. Compare Barry McGuire's 'Eve of Destruction' or Sgt Barry Sadler's 'Ballad of the Green Berets' to Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' or Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit'. Recalling Exodus, the spiritual 'Go Down, Moses' assails black slavery with no direct reference to it in over twenty verses.

In Ben Zion Witaler's 'Varshe' melodic and rhythmic contours depict struggle almost viscerally, a fatigue that refuses to capitulate to exhaustion or worse. Phrases are short, declamatory, almost breathless. The melody rarely moves in anything but the smallest intervals, mostly consecutive scale steps in a very narrow range, usually falling. Returns to the main (tonic) note are frequent; the singer never gets very far. Short phrases are often repeated, sometimes slightly varied; despite adversity, the struggle for life goes on. No white-flag-waving, Witaler's lyrics scream injustice, recall the complex beauty of old Varshe, Venice of *yidishkayt*. And then the chorus dares to prophesy not just a Jewish quarter or a large Jewish population, but that a Jewish city will rise once again.

Witaler's powerful lament is Krakowski's tour de force. After a brief instrumental introduction the opening lines haltingly proclaim lost love as surely as any blues:

In hartsn do ba mir brent a fayerl	In my heart burns a flame
Af dem vos iz avek—	For that which is gone— ³³

The laboured tempo slows further to a series of stop-times; the band halts as vocals lament. Perhaps *Transmigrations*' most moving gesture is a litany of Warsaw places:

³¹ I. Johansson, review, *Djembe* (Copenhagen) (Oct.–Dec. 1998), 43–4, and id., 'Musik som mame-loshn', *Judisk Kronika* (Stockholm) (1998), 22–3; R. Kafrissen, 'The Last Yiddish Bluesman', MS, 1998; S. Rogovoy, 'Beyond the Pale: Wolf Krakowski's Shtetl-Rock', in his *The Essential Klezmer* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), and id., 'A Blues for Yiddish', *Der paken-treger* (Winter 1998), 8–9.

³² The review currently on Davidow's web site, dated 21 Sept. 1997, is a revision, following protests from Wolf and others about the original review's vitriol.

³³ Trans. Wolf Krakowski and Fraidy Katz.

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Krokhmalne un di nalevke,	Krochmalna and Nalewki,
Un di smotshe un di lazhinke.	And Smocza and Łazienki.

Wolf intones these lines in rhythm: dirgelike, short, narrow-ranged, descending repeated riffs echoed by the chorus, rhythmically out of sync with themselves and the band, spoken, then sung. Chaos, were it not so evocative of a city of ghosts: an extreme, unique PD, expressing this textual moment, rare in rock, though typical of the avant-garde choral writing of vintage Penderecki. Later, stop-time continues; the chorus coalesces into a rhythmic unit, forthrightly supporting the lead vocal for the duration.

Two more lines litanize, the subject now the variety of Jewish types who inhabit Warsaw streets:

Khsidimlekh, negidimlekh,	Hasidim, rich men,
Tsienistelekh, bundistelekh.	Zionists, Bundists.

Witler makes use of the Yiddish diminutive *-lekh* in naming these subjects. Its use can be either endearing or contemptuous—like so much of Yiddish, it can go either way—and is certainly intended to evoke folk character in the midst of great lyric sophistication. The total effect is one of head-nodding, world-weary irony.

Next, harmony changes briefly on *gekemft* (struggled), a verb implying motion, ending the litany:

Gekemft dortn gor on an ek. Struggled there without an end.

Here, Krakowski forges a powerful conceptual link to two Willie Dixon blues, 'Hoochie Coochie Man', best known in the performances of Muddy Waters:

I got a black cat bone
 I got a mojo too
 I got the Johnny conkeroo
 I'm gonna mess with you³⁴

and 'The Seventh Son', whose performance by Mose Allison is legendary:

I can tell your future, it will come to pass,
 I can do things to ya, make your heart beat fast,
 Look in the sky, predict the rain,
 I can tell when a woman's got another man.³⁵

As in 'Varshe', stop-time, a single repeated chord on the most basic beats, supports a litany, a standard formula at the beginning of numerous blues choruses. Here, as often, the list signifies masculine power. For Waters, this is represented by the possession of powerful charms, for Allison a soothsayer's magic powers. But in Krakowski's 'Varshe' signification, the proclamation of attitude and strength occurs in the lines following the litany. In the analogous place Waters declares him-

³⁴ *The Best of Muddy Waters* (Chess, 1958).

³⁵ *The Seventh Son* (Prestige, 1973).

self the Hoochie Coochie Man, Mose Allison, the Seventh Son. Witler's signification is gender-neutral, unrelated to sexual prowess:

Ikh vil probirn fargesn haynt	Today I will try to forget
Vos hot tsu dir geton der faynt	What the enemy did to you

Stop-time resumes, although, as the text changes to full sentences, voice and violin obbligato, conveying activity, abandon riffs for rhapsody. Real harmonic motion finally ensues with the first real contrast in mood, a call to action:

Un zogn itst tsu dir	And saying now to you
Mit bitokhn	With faith
on a shir	without an end

which continues in the refrain:

Varshe mayn, du vest vider zayn	Warsaw mine, you will once more be
A yidishe shtot vi geven.	A Jewish city as before.
Varshe mayn, du vest vider zayn	Warsaw mine, you will once more be
Ful mit yidishn kheyn.	Filled with Jewish grace.

By now it is clear that the singer is signifying truly extraordinary power, the ability to restore a vanquished Jewish city, a Jerusalem—the messianic task itself.

In the two Willie Dixon examples cited here, and in many other blues, litany occurs at the top of the chorus, over static harmony. In 'Varshe' Wolf uses the harmonic stasis early in the song to the same effect: recitation of attributes over a repeated chord to amass power. The actual declaration of strength takes place not in the litany of 'Varshe', but in the lines that follow. Wolf modifies the blues strategy to fit Witler's composition. 'Varshe' becomes blue only through Wolf's recomposition. Wolf discovers this affinity as only one steeped in that great American vernacular idiom can.

A new litany begins each chorus of the Waters and the Allison, in strophic blues form. While the harmonic structure of 'Varshe' permits this gesture only once on a large scale, the chorus includes shorter lists over single chords. Short litanies supported by long-held chords are italicized:

<i>Unter grininke beymelekh</i>	Under little green trees
<i>Veln moyshshelekh un shleymelekh</i>	Moyshsheles and Shloymeles
Lebn un shtrebn azoy vi frier.	Will live and dream as before.
<i>Fabrikelekh, melikhelekh,</i>	Factories, workshops,
<i>Khadorimlekh un shilekhlekh</i>	Schools, and synagogues
Vider oyfboyen veln mir.	We will build up once again.

Even factories and workshops—seemingly everyone and everything—are diminutive in 'Varshe'. The suffix drags each word out: buildings levelled, loved ones pulled kicking and screaming to their deaths.

Witler provides each diminutive a held chord and a repeated melodic riff, while Wolf makes us care about these images as one who feels every word. He wails on

beymelekh (trees); the longing is palpable. Words may speak of rebuilding, but the music behind them is pure pain and deep blue.

A 'Dylan' moment begins the second chorus:

Khokhme un kultur	Wisdom and culture
Tsu hobn aza yur.	May we have such a year.

The words are not cryptic like Dylan's—neither surreal nor lacking in linear sense—but they are self-consciously heady and a paradigm of Yiddish multivalence. Wtler references intellectual life but in folklike, sing-song rhythms. *Tsu hobn aza yur*—literally, 'to have such a year'—is more typically ill-wishing than well-wishing ('You should have such a year'), the kind of inversion that abounds in Yiddish. To experience these multiple, potentially contradictory, layers is to be overwhelmed. (Howlin') Wolf belts them out with attitude, a cognitive dissonance one can almost taste. That Jews love both irony and vinegar is hardly coincidence.

The multi-instrumentalist Jim Armenti plays both violin and guitar on 'Varshe'. The opening violin embodies Ashkenazi place. A wonderful fiddle lick closes the litany, descending in torrential rhythmic free-for-all. The scale is Jewish, the energy jukejoint. It evokes the recitative of the *klezmer doina*, but also Doina Washington. With drums and percussion, it is the kind of anti-cadence, more like a ten-car pile-up than a final resolution, that ends countless jazz, blues, and gospel performances.

Armenti's move from violin to guitar later in 'Varshe' epitomizes the meta-narrative of *Transmigrations: yidishkayt* infused with American energy. When the text describes old Warsaw, violin is the 'ethnic' colour of choice. Later, a refugee, armed with his new home's national instrument, electric guitar, calmly threatens to reclaim the city and restore its former Jewish glory. The guitar break recalls the vocal riffing of the verse, though filigreed, dreamlike. Armenti's solo climaxes with bent and blue notes, used for the first time, PDs creating an emotional peak that transcends words, finally releasing the rage smouldering in Wtler's text.

Wolf turns 'Varshe', a lament for a murdered Jewish city, into a vision of what should have been: a Yiddish music that trades east European etiquette for American attitude. Wolf has absorbed not only the surface of the blues, but its most profound poetry, melding two great but marginalized cultures' insistence on survival in the face of evil, as if 'Go Down, Moses' were held to a musical mirror, its timeless cry for liberation from every Egypt now in Yiddish, grooving from right to left.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY *FREMDE* (OUTSIDERS)

The myriad complexities of 'Varshe' illuminate *Transmigrations'* other songs. While poetic (professionally crafted lyrics versus folk songs) or historic (Holocaust versus other periods) are possible taxonomies, a musical classification is most natural and useful.

'Varshe' exemplifies the songs I characterize as 'blues': mournful, slow, driven by improvisatory instrumentals with a profusion of bent notes and syncopations. Most of these pieces, like most blues (but unlike 'Varshe'), eschew the women's voices.

The folk song 'Regendl' ('Little Rain') is notable for call-and-response: Armenti's multi-tracked mandolin, tenor sax, and guitar trade licks with Wolf and each other. Witle's 'Alts geyt avek mitn roykh' ('Everything Goes up in Smoke') contrasts with 'Varshe' in its formal simplicity: strophic, entirely in tempo, harmonically straightforward as a twelve-bar, three-chord blues. Wolf plays masterfully with intonation and beat; Billie Holiday comes to mind. Armenti's 'acid'-toned guitar evokes Eric Clapton at his 1960s best.

'Yeder ruft mikh zhamele' is Bernardo Feuer's setting of an anonymous poem that bluntly indicts the Nazis ('Somewhere near a fence lies my brother Shloyme murdered by a German'). A blues by virtue of its profound sadness, remarkable even by Jewish standards, it is closer to Askhenazi musical models than anything on the album. With folk-formulaic text ('I once had a dear mother . . . I once had a little sister . . . I once had a little home') and simple strophic structure, it is a slow waltz. Wolf and Armenti, on the 'European-sounding' mandolin with its unbendable strings, stay close to the melody. The relative absence of blues nuance sounds as an inability to resist either tuning system or beat. As close to despair as *Transmigrations* gets, it must be heard in a context of songs of resistance and unrestrained Jewish joy.

The album's last 'blues', Max Perlman's philosophical and imagistic 'Ven du lakhst' ('When you Laugh'), uses chorus. Its familiar message, 'laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone', is represented quite literally: women's voices, here, then gone, simple but effective. The complexity of Perlman's lyric ('The old actor . . . leafs through all his old newspaper clippings') evokes the jazz side of the blues and Armenti rises to the occasion with tenor sax responses and a concluding solo. Ending with an instrumental solo is a motif Wolf uses often.

If 'Varshe' epitomizes Yiddish blues, its multivalence and density recall 'A Day in the Life' from the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*, an album *Transmigrations* resembles in stylistic breadth and conceptual depth. Wolf's other Beatles song is 'Blayb gezunt mir, kroke', Manfred Lemm's setting of Mordechai Gebirtig's posthumously discovered Holocaust lament. While bluesy, most striking is Wolf's inclusion of a 4/4 bar in a waltz, a metre change which evokes 'All You Need is Love', 'Martha, My Dear', and 'We Can Work it Out'. The latter's accordion is what lends French *chansons* sophistication—think Piaf and Breil; it is rendered in 'Kroke' by Armenti's mandolin.

The one other metre change, a 2/4 bar in the introduction to the 4/4 'Her nor, du sheyn meydele' ('Listen, Pretty Girl'), sparked by Daniel Lombardo's percussion, heats up a Latin, Santana type of groove. This folk-song duet with Fraidy

Katz has a 'love conquers all' theme remarkably similar to the Klezmatics' 'Di sapozhkelekh' ('The Boots').³⁶

Shmerke Katsherginski and Abraham Brudno's 'Friling', a tango, needs no additional Latinizing. A dance genre well known to Jews at the time of the Holocaust, its erotic possibilities now bubble with despair ('I wander the ghetto from alley to alley and cannot find any rest. My beloved is gone. How can I bear it?'). Reggae accents and blues guitar heat the irony to boiling.

Transmigrations would suffer without four truly exuberant songs. Samson Kemelmakher's 'Yidishe maykholim' ('Jewish Foods') is pure fun, a discourse on holiday cuisine cast as 1950s rocker, complete with Junior Walker-like sax solo. Three high-spirited rock anthems, driven by the sexual tension between Wolf and his soul sisters, distributed in first, fifth, and final positions on the CD—beginning, middle, and end—are pillars of power that function as strategically timed messages of hope to sustain us through the jeremiads. The anthems are similar in form and feel, but remarkably different in tone. 'Tsen brider' ('Ten Brothers') and 'Shabes, shabes' are simple and touching folk songs. The former, a pitifully bitter lyric, counts backwards as each brother dies until one remains. It rocks hard; the music spites that text. 'Shabes, shabes' is naive and idyllic. 'Zol shoyn kumen di geule' is a sophisticated yet joyous discourse on redemption by Shmerke Katsherginski and Rabbi Avraham Kook, containing the album's most complex harmonies.³⁷ Power is expressed here quite differently from the blues-based litany of 'Varshe'. The choir, as noted, provides sexual tension; the band rocks hard and fast. Armenti ends each anthem with searing, limitlessly inventive, multiple-chorus guitar solos. Hendrix here meets hasidism: signification, through guitar heroics, meets the *nign*, melody sans lyrics, ascending spiritually beyond the point where words fail, to religious ecstasy. These long jams are not the free-form essays of Cream or the Grateful Dead. Maintaining the song's harmonic structure is how Wolf keeps it Jewish; he holds text, tune, and *tam* (taste) always in mind, no matter how fervently phantasmagoric the devotions become.

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

Having previously covered Jewish musicians in the American 'mainstream', I dedicated my last lecture at Marie Curie-Skłodowska University to explicitly Jewish music, and especially to *Transmigrations*. I knew it would both surprise and captivate my students. I first thought to choose songs that would inspire the least incredulity and challenge. I had often dealt with questions beyond either my knowledge of or patience with the theological chasm that lay between my students'

³⁶ Recorded by the Klezmatics on *rhythm + jems* (Rounder, 1992).

³⁷ Adrienne Cooper's version, a languorous art song with piano, on *Dreaming in Yiddish* (self-produced, 1997) is also quite effective and should be heard.

miracles and Maimonides. I was tired, ready to go home. Still, something told me that playing it safe was no way for a Jewish teacher to say goodbye to students, colleagues, or the martyred dead all over Poland for whom I'd spent every available minute saying Kaddish. Besides, a pedagogy worthy of the rock of ages must shake, rattle, and roll. I chose my tunes accordingly.

'Shabes, shabes' was an easy pick. It rocks hard, its sabbath theme easily explained in a country where the word for Saturday is *sobota*. 'Zol shoyn kumen di geule' was intended to inspire questions about differing notions of salvation. Finally, 'Varshe', so my Polish friends would hear a two-fisted Holocaust blues that literally hit home. Although I intended the message for all in attendance, I recall thinking that this tonal tower of Jewish toughness was my way of telling the rude boys who always sat in the last rows that I'd be back. And next time I wasn't coming alone.