

Wolf Krakowski: Closing the Circle

By Ingemar Johansson

"My mama told me
About great tribulation
The daughter of
A homeless nation
Everyone who survived
Is a sanctification"

Those lines are from "*Head 'Em Off At The Pass*" on the recent CD "*Unbounded*" (Kame'a Media), by poet, singer and guitarist Wolf Krakowski. They are, as is everything else on this album, profoundly personal and contain, like the very music on it, a clue to the inspiration behind Krakowski's art.

The music on "*Unbounded*" may be labelled modern country-blues- Willie Nelson comes to mind easily- but there are also strains of dark original blues that remind you of the fact that this man has played with Mississippi bluesman Big Joe Williams.

Yes, he did. On the whole, Wolf Krakowski has led a life that seems to be extraordinary in the Jewish music world. He is the son of Polish Jews, thus Yiddish is his first language- a fact that cannot be stressed too much. He was born in an Austrian Displaced Persons' Camp called Saalfelden Farmach, in 1947. Shortly afterwards his family migrated to Sweden. Here the Krakowski family (including Wolf's big brother and his younger sister) stayed until 1954, when they went to *=di goldene medine=* (USA/Canada) and settled in The Junction, one of the working-class quarters of Toronto.

Music was an early love in young Wolf's life. In an e-mail interview he tells me: "I developed my musical skills out of the most basic resources- a \$13.00 guitar (my first) and what I could pick up around me over the years. I can still see my mother opening her little purse to pay for it; a lot of money for my family in those days. She drew the line at lessons, though; there was simply not enough money for the \$2.00 weekly fee. Like Proust's madeleines, the smell of that guitar is engraved on my sensorium forever."

Later on he was admitted to McGill University in Montreal without a high-school diploma (because he had run away from home to join a travelling carnival), on the strength of his poetic efforts, and in part due to recommendations of literary well-knowns. He left after two years ("I just did not have the *=zitzflaysh=* (lit: sitting flesh', 'the inability to stay put'), and went on the road again, became a *=luftmentsh=* (person without visible occupation, a dreamer'), worked with blues and folk musicians, helped organize the first Food Co-op in Boston and performed political street theatre with The Stomache Ache Street Theatre, an arm of the world-reknown Bread and Puppet Theatre.

Along with fostering his artistic talents he also, starting as a housepainter, became a

carpenter, doing many home renovations, selling his labor, contracting and later even buying houses to fix up and sell. So you may say that this man and the music which has sprung out of his experiences have street credibility.

As a child of Jewish survivors, the Holocaust has never been far from his thoughts. From early years he plunged deep into Yiddish culture and language. He actually began to document Holocaust survivors as early as 1981, produced the first post-War Yiddish music video, "*Vilna*" in 1991 and in 1994 and 1995 worked for Steven Spielberg, directing and videotaping over one hundred survivor testimonies for *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*.

This all led up to his debut CD in 1996, "*Transmigrations*" (Kame'a Media), a work of unique and outstanding qualities to this writer's mind. "My family lost one hundred and seven people in the Holocaust, and on '*Transmigrations*' I sing to them and they, who were so brutally silenced, sing through me," he tells me. "*Transmigrations*" has met with strong praise in Europe, particularly in Italy, Germany and Scandinavia, but it seems that record companies and distributors in the US are slow to bring this highly-acclaimed and "cult" CD to a wider market.

One reason for this, I believe, is the painful tenderness and grief with which Krakowski handles his material here, which consists of Ashkenazi popular, folk and theatre songs, including several from the Holocaust era, presented in the singer's native Yiddish, the authentic Southeastern Polish dialect, rarely heard on recordings. This is mirrored by the fact that among strong reviews in the press, one reviewer saw "weakness" here and curiously interpreted the songs as giving off a wrong or "dangerous" Jewish image. As if Jewish manhood somehow was disgraced in the Holocaust, because the Jews "lost."

Another reason could be that Krakowski here tries to unite these two traditions: East European Jewish culture and the music of blues-rock-reggae. This may seem appalling to some listeners used to a narrower Jewish music profile in which *klezmer* is predominant, and the marketable status quo. Also, we must not forget the fact that there are considerable tensions these days between Jews and Black racists in the US.

But music is not the property of narrow-minded extremists; it should and could be used as a bridge to greater understanding between people. Yes, to the basic understanding that we are all alike and one. In this respect Krakowski told me an illustrative story of how he once, at the beginning of the klezmer revival heard a musician execute a 'Yiddish blues' as a purt parody. "I couldn't understand why all the wonderful music of both these cultures should be misrepresented in such a fraternity-boy-levity manner."

The thought that he himself should show what one could do with this grew organically. "There is just something about the blues that resonates with me. Don't get me wrong, I can appreciate the East European musical styles, but I don't feel a need to replicate something that was perfect in its time and place, and that cannot, in my opinion, be improved upon; unless, that is, it is transformed."

This is Krakowski, the bridge-builder, closing the circle of the sources of his inspiration.

To my mind, he also closes another circle, the process of Yiddish-speaking composers like George Gershwin and Irving Berlin abandoning Jewish music in favor of American and moreover, Black musical idioms, which further on saw Lieber & Stoller writing for Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan embrace the blues, has now come to a full end with Wolf Krakowski bringing Yiddish itself back to Black-inspired American popular music.

Krakowski handles his material on "*Transmigrations*" with a deep respect. The songs are presented in delicious arrangements which stress, but never overwhelm, the inner qualities of texts and melodies. There are twelve gems of Ashkenazi song on "*Transmigrations*." Among this writer's favorites is the traditional "*Shabes, Shabes*", executed here as a rollicking, rocking reggae, just to mention one.

Krakowski, an expressive singer, has had the good sense to bring the same excellent musicians along on both CDs, the core group consisting of The Lonesome Brothers band where multi-instrumentalist Jim Armenti especially shines; he plays guitar, mandolin, violin, saxophone and bouzouki. The interplay between Armenti and Krakowski makes Lester Young and Billie Holiday come to mind. This may sound exaggerated, but I wish to communicate an impression of extraordinary affinity.

To close the circle, just as Krakowski tries to do in his music, here is his basic message (from "*The Power*" on "*Unbounded*"):

"Everybody got the power
To put an end to strife
Everybody got the power
To live their life
Everybody got the power
To rise above
Everybody got the power
To give sweet, sweet love"

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