

## From DJEMBE Cross Culture ¥ World Music (Denmark)

If you say "Yiddish Music" to people acquainted with so called World Music, you may be more or less assured of the reply: "Ah, you mean klezmer."

However, it's a fact that klezmer today is going through much the same crisis that once made New Orleans Jazz stiffen into Dixieland. Many of today's klezmer musicians lack in improvisational skills and are actually not rooted in that wonderfully modulated, almost shimmering, language that begat it: Yiddish.

Allow me instead to take up the battle for Wolf Krakowski, a guitarist and blues singer from Toronto, Canada, now residing in Northampton, Massachusetts, and firmly anchored in Yiddish. What Krakowski has done with his debut CD "*Transmigrations*" is simply to unite those two traditions: Eastern Jewish culture and the music of blues-rock-reggae. It may sound risky and would have been so in the hands of a less conscious and sensitive artist. That it works out well for Krakowski is of course a consequence of the fact that he is permeated by just these two strains. Yiddish is his mother-tongue, his "*mame-loshn*," as is the tender Yiddish term for it, and modern blues-based rock is his natural musical medium.

In an e-mail interview I have done with him, he tells how he once, at the beginning of the klezmer revival, experienced how a musician executed a "Yiddish blues" as a pure parody. "I couldn't understand why all the wonderful music of both these forms should be misinterpreted in such a way." The thought that he himself should show what one could do in this area grew organically.

"First and foremost, the blues is my music. What have all these mazurkas and bulgars and quadrilles that klezmer is based on to do with my daily life?"

That may sound disrespectful in the ears of a "klezmer-purist", but the fact is that Krakowski handles his material on "*Transmigrations*" with deep respect.

Here we encounter some Ashkenazi popular, folk, and theatre songs from the holocaust era, presented in delicious arrangements which stress, but never dominate the inner qualities of the texts and melodies. By the way, the text of the Ashkenazi songs almost always are deeply meaningful; they may seem simple, but they are more often than not about essential and existential things, just like good blues is.

There are many pearls of the Ashkenazi song-treasure on "*Transmigrations*," and you don't have to hear many seconds of of the opening number of this CD, the traditional ballad "*Tsen Brider*" - "*Ten Brothers*" to grasp that Wolf Krakowski has created something unique. American reviewers have compared his voice to that of Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits, but I think it's all his own. It's strong and tempered, warm and restrained at the same time: filled with deep sentiment, but never sentimental. And he has had the good taste to bring some excellent musicians along, the group "**The Lonesome Brothers**," which recently had a new CD out on Tar Hut Records, where especially the multi-instrumentalist Jim Armenti excels. He plays guitar, mandolin, violin, saxophone and bouzouki on "*Transmigrations*." The interplay between him and Krakowski brings Lester Young and Billie Holiday to mind. This may sound exaggerated, but I wish to communicate an impression of extraordinary congeniality.

All in all: "*Transmigrations*" is klezmer turned into World Beat, and at the same time a slap in the face to historical and musical revisionists of all kinds.

★★★★★

-- Ingemar Johansson