

Talking like a real Yiddish speaker

The other day, I met a friend I had not seen for a couple of weeks. For a month before that, he had a strange and strained expression on his face. But, every time I saw him and asked how he was, he gave me that artificial smile and said, “Fine, couldn’t be better.”

So, this last time, when I asked him how he was and he said, “Don’t even ask,” I was intrigued.

What had happened?

“You don’t want to know,” he said.

“No, really, I want to know. What happened?”

“You remember how every time you saw me and asked me how I was. I said, ‘fine.’”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I started to answer the same way in Yiddish and my Yiddish-speaking friends became concerned. They told me that, since the publication of Michael Wax’s book, *Born to Kvetch*, answering ‘fine’ to the question, ‘How are you?’ indicated some fundamental malaise. So I went to see our other friend, the Yiddish-speaking psychologist.”

“So?”

“So, when I walked in and he asked, ‘How are you?’ in Yiddish and I answered, ‘fine,’ also in Yiddish, he got this strange expression on his face and said, ‘That can’t be right. No Yiddish speaker can answer that way and mean it. You must be repressing something.’”

“‘What do you mean?’ I said.”

“He looked me square in the eye and said, ‘Think! Did you ever used to answer that way? Listen, come in and lie down on my couch and we will explore this further.’”

“And what happened?”

“Don’t rush me. You want to know or not?”

“OK, OK.”

“So, we go through the greeting exercise again and again. I say ‘fine’ and he says, ‘really, everything’s fine? What about your kids?’ So I start saying I have lovely kids and I love them and really they are wonderful and I am fine even though they wrecked my car last week, I can’t complain, although now that you mention it, it bothers me and, oh God, why do I have such careless kids?”

“The psychologist says, ‘Good, that’s a little better. And how is your lovely wife?’”

“And I say that my wife is great and beautiful and so generous and everything is fine and he says, ‘Really, everything is fine?’ And I say, ‘Well, I was disappointed that my wife burned the meatloaf to a crisp, but, hey, I like the burned taste and the fact that she has maxed out the credit card on clothes doesn’t really bother me, but, damn it, why can’t she watch what she spends? And whoever thought that a modest girl could turn into such a spendthrift. And why did I have to be blessed with a wife who cleans out my bank account? Oy vey!’”

“So, then psychologist says, ‘Now we’re getting some place. And how is your clothing business?’”



Humour me, please

Rubin Friedman

“And I say, ‘My business is fine. My partner is a great guy, everything is fine and last month profits were up and costs were down and everything would be super except my partner absconded with all of the money and all of the merchandise and now I don’t even have a pair of pants to wear! That ganef! He should grow like an onion with his head in the ground and his feet in the air! Oy Gevalt un Geshrigen!’”

“So the psychologist says, ‘Now you’re getting back to normal. You’re in great shape!’”

“So how do you feel?” I asked.

“Feel? How do you think I feel? I feel like I am in great shape – the shape you’re in when you’re run over by a truck!”

I smiled and said, “Now you’re talking like a real Yiddish speaker!”

From fusions of klezmer with bluegrass and jazz to an edgy classical cellist

The three excellent CDs featured this time around range from Margot Leverett’s delightful klezmer and bluegrass fusion, to the klezmer-jazz mixture of the Klez Dispensers and the edgy classical music of Kristina Reiko Cooper.

Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys

2nd Avenue Square Dance
Traditional Crossroads
klezmermountainboys.com

One of my favourite klezmer CDs in recent years has been Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys, a 2003 album that teamed Leverett, a great clarinetist who was a founding member of the Klezmatics, with four musicians – fiddler Kenny Kosek, mandolinist Barry Mitterhoff, guitarist Joe Selly and bassist Marty Confurius – rooted in bluegrass, but very much at home with klezmer music.

Could a fusion of klezmer, Jewish music rooted in Eastern Europe, and bluegrass, string band music developed in the American South after the Second World War, work? The answer is a resounding yes. Leverett’s clarinet mixes beautifully with the stringed instruments in a set that weaves klezmer and bluegrass tunes in and out of each other. In both the old country and the new, klezmer musicians have intermingled with musicians from many other genres and come up with marvellous new ways of playing Jewish music and redefining Jewish music.

It’s been five years, but Leverett’s second collaboration with the Klezmer Mountain Boys has finally been released and the wait has been worth it. The new album, *2nd Avenue Square Dance* picks up where the first one left off as it moves seamlessly from bluegrass standards like Bill Monroe’s “Stoney Lonesome” to traditional klezmer fare like “Boreasca.”

The CD features a number of stellar guest musicians interacting with the band. They include guitarist Jorma Kaukonen of Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna fame, legendary bluegrass singer Hazel Dickens and innovative banjo virtuoso Tony Trischka.

Kaukonen’s electric guitar playing brings rock and blues influences to several tunes, including “Electric Kugel,” a piece he co-wrote with Leverett, while Dickens shines on “Little Moses,” a traditional bluegrass song about the baby found by the pharaoh’s daughter who grew up to lead his people from slavery to freedom.

There are also several pieces without the Klezmer Mountain Boys that feature Leverett collaborating with such artists as fiddler Darol Anger and Klezmer Conservatory Band-leader Hankus Netsky.

This album is already as much a favourite as its predecessor.

The Klez Dispensers
Say You’ll Understand
The Klez Dispensers
klezdispensers.com

On their third album, the Klez Dispensers offer up an enjoyable program centred on Yiddish theatre songs and their own original tunes in the klezmer-jazz tradition of old-to-new-world masters like Dave Tarras.

Although their previous release was primarily instrumental music, about half of this set throws the spotlight on singer Susan Watts, whose jazz-inflected vocal highlights include a swinging version of “Oy Mame” and a torchy rendition of “Sheyn Vi Di Levone.” Violinist Amy Zakar and bassist Heather Chiscaden Versace add their voices to Watts to fill out the Andrews-Sisters-sound needed for an uptempo rendition of the almost-inevitable “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” that ends the CD.

Five of the Dispensers contribute original material. Pianist Adrian Banner’s “Ray Charleston” combines elements of klezmer, swing, bop and blues into a sweet amalgam, while trumpet player Ben Holmes’ “Millville Freylekh” is a delightfully celebratory dance tune. Clarinetist Alex Kontorovich’s “Sirba” is a tour de force for his own solos and the band’s ensemble playing.

But perhaps the real highlight of the CD is “Goldenshteyn Sirbas,” a medley of traditional tunes from the repertoire of



Music

Michael Regenstreif

German Goldenshteyn, the late Eastern European master of traditional Jewish music, who brought a living repertoire of previously unheard old world klezmer tunes to North America in the 1990s. The Klez Dispensers do his legacy proud.

Kristina Reiko Cooper
Stone and Steel
Linus
kristinareikocooper.com

Stone and Steel by cellist Kristina Reiko Cooper, the co-artistic director of the Israel Chamber Music Society and a professor of music at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is a stunning classical album with a rock edge. Working with pianist John Novacek and drummer/percussionist Satoshi Takeishi, Cooper displays extraordinary technique whether on a quiet baroque pieces like “Dido’s Lament” or an instrumental arrangement of an aria from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*, or bowing with wild abandon on composer John Dowland’s “George Whitehead’s Allemand.”

The album’s high point comes in the title track, “Stone and Steel,” an 11-minute contemporary piece composed for Cooper by Patrick Zimmerli, that shifts through many moods and classical styles before coming to its jazz-influenced conclusion.

Music note: This year’s Canadian Folk Music Awards ceremony was held November 23 in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and two of the awards were won by CDs covered in this column. **The Sisters of Sheynville**, an all-woman band from Toronto steeped in the Yiddish-swing music of the 1930s and ‘40s, won the Vocal Group of the Year award for their CD, *Sheynville Express*. And **David Buchbinder’s Odessa/Havana**, a group that plays a fusion of klezmer and Afro-Cuban jazz, won the World Group of the Year award for their album, *Odessa/Havana*.