

Klezmer in Canada, East and West a Review Essay
George W. Lyon

Finjan. Crossing Selkirk Avenue. Fat Uncle Records FUR 003.
Fat Uncle Records, 60 Rupertsland Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2W 2M8

The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band. Flying Bulgar Recordings. 1990. FBR CD 001

Agada. Flying Bulgar Recordings. 1993. 90 Ilford Road, Toronto, Ontario, M6G 2H5. FBR CD 002

The Klezmer revival was bound to happen, once the event which some Yanks are calling the Great Folk Scare of the Sixties began to lead musicians and audiences away from the various frathouse trios and quartets into an investigation of just which lonesome valley it was you had to walk all by yourself; it turned out not always to be the same one in which Tom Dooley was hanging. For some southerners, the study of banjos, ballads and blues was an investigation of one's own roots; for others, it meant some sort of dislocation.

How peculiar that dislocation might be was best indicated by Bob Dylan's satiric "Talkin' Hava Negeilah Blues," which is said to have been an impromptu response to an inappropriate request from an unlucky audience member. What most of us didn't know for that brief time was that Dylan was in fact a not-so-nice Jewish boy named Zimmerman. Hmmm. In the post-McCarthy era, the multicultural songbag pioneered by Pete Seeger and others of the various socially conscious circles Seeger ran in had become so uncool that even Jewish folksingers didn't want to be identified with them. How long has it been since Joan Baez sang "Dona Dona Dona"?

By the late Seventies, revivalists had realized that it wasn't just Appalachian and African Americans who had roots, and, starting (I believe) with the California band, the Klezmorim, Klezmer bands were springing up all over, sometimes featuring Jewish old-timey banjo players who'd looked homeward, sometimes comprised of musicians who'd learned their trade in other idioms.

and even occasionally Gentiles who loved the music. Canada has produced a number of very fine such revival bands, two of whom have current issues that are worth looking at in some detail.



The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band, led by trumpeter David Buchbinder, has had a number of illustrious members pass through its ranks as members and guests in its six years, including our Society heroine (and one of my own!) Anne Lederman. Other continuing band members are Laura Cesar, bass, Allen Cole, piano and accordion, John Lennard, drums and percussion, Martin Van de Ven, reeds, and Allan Merovitz, vocals. Like most of contemporary Klezmers, the band is careful to cite its lineage, particularly the great clarinetist, Naftule Brandwein, whom they refer to as the Jewish Jimi Hendrix. The relationships between the revival groups and the old timers might in fact be a subject of interest. Interviewed in the Yarmouth (Nova Scotia) *Vanguard* (August 7, 1992), Buchbinder claimed that there had been "no backlash from conservative elements toward the opening up of klezmer music." He told the paper, "To them, we're so outside [it doesn't matter]."

They also give outsiders important hints about what this music is all about: "One of the central ideas of the Hasidic movement was that the connection to the infinite could best be

experienced by participation in ecstatic music and dance," the notes to their first recording tell us, and anyone who's ever read the Song of Solomon will quickly realize that Judaism is not one of your religions that denies the flesh.

The Bulgars are long on ecstasy. If ecstasy is too much for you (I know some Protestants — the sort of folks who've been taken in by what Ishmael Reed calls the Wallflower Order in his novel **Mumbo Jumbo** — who just can't take it...), they are also long on just plain fun. Anyone who thinks that the intelligent recreation of old time music precludes the proverbial good time hasn't heard this band. But "fun" is too small a word for this experience. Introducing the Bulgars' second disc, Michael Wex puts this pleasure in a social context: "Despite massive efforts to shmaltzify it into irrelevance, Yiddish is the primordial language of Hip, the original sidelong glance at European culture.... Yiddish has constituted a deliberate refusal of 'whiteness' for nearly a thousand years now, and it's been an embarrassment to white-thinking Jews, left and right alike, since the day it sprang into being. Try to imagine an army in Yiddish; then try to imagine Lenny Bruce without it." Again, Reed's allegorical study of the Wallflower Order reminds us that "whiteness" is a social construct, which represents the antilife forces of Europe, neither exclusive to "white people" nor universal among them, those who'd rather Make War, Not Love. (Or for whom the distinction isn't always that clear....)

Unlike some of the earlier klezmer revivalists, the Bulgars include a healthy sampling of vocals. The temptation for anyone offering what is hoped to be a popular interpretation of any idiom is to leave off the songs, especially if they're sung in a foreign language. (I do wish they'd given a translation of whatever virtuoso vocalist Allan Mercovitz is up to on the song "Der Rebbe Elimelekh." I know that humor can't be translated, especially if some of it's improvised —

but, damn!, that cat's having a lot of fun and I'd like to know a bit more about it than that the *rebbe* has finished his prayers and is calling for his musicians.) It's the vocals that always give outsiders a hard time, whether it's the intense screech of a Delta bluesman or the full-throated holler of Grand Opera (not to mention the twang of the Opr'y!). But song is at the core of all traditions, and if you don't get that, you just don't get it.

Mercovitz's voice is a powerful instrument, well used, and in conjunction with Lederman's soaring violin, in "Yom Lid," he makes a very moving statement about loneliness and independence. I don't know the musical histories of all of the Bulgars, but their press releases (let alone the variety of styles they perform in) make it clear that many of them have had what we call "training," which has all too often meant "training in European classical music" (or, to use Wex's term, "whiteness"), which, since music was thought to be universal (i.e., European music was universal, and anyone who didn't appreciate it was deficient), was deemed to be sufficient to allow people to be able to perform lesser musics at will. Listen to Yehudi Menuhin trying to swing with Ravi Shankar or Stephane Grappelli, and you'll soon figure out why that doesn't work. The Bulgars are demonstrating that a new generation is able to find ways to put many different kinds of training to good use.

Since the band's members were all trained first in other fields, their interest in musical miscegenation doesn't surprise. On their first, eponymous disc, they modestly presented two items that expand the tradition and show its relationships with other musical languages. One of them came into being when Buchbinder was attempting to develop a few new changes on a traditional tune, "Baym Rebn's Sude," and discovered that he'd come up with something rather different from the original, which he entitled "On Sunday the Rabbi Stretched Out." (It doesn't take a detective to figure out where *that*

came from.) It begins as a fairly standard klezmer dance but is quickly reframed by Laura Cesar's bass solo into a clave rhythm, over which the band lays a top line that could have come off a Jack DeJohnette lp from the 70s; Buchbinder has room to stretch *himself* out over a comfortable comp, until Lederman eventually introduces a repetitive riff that brings it all back to the old home for a finale.

In his notes to the finale of that first recording, "Alle Brider," Buchbinder disingenuously claims, "This is a Yiddish folk tune in which we discovered a hidden merengue." Well, now, I think maybe they put it there. No matter. Klezmer music *has* been interacting with the musics of other places for a long time. Buchbinder mentions the possibility that Brandwein introduced at least one Turkish rhythm into Klezmer music. Jewish and Gypsy musicians were preferred for many gentile functions throughout eastern Europe in the old days, just as black players were often welcome at all sorts of social events in the U.S. when they could not come as guests. Consequently, people like Mance Lipscomb and the Mississippi Sheiks ended up with items like "Shine On, Harvest Moon" and "Wabash Cannonball" in their repertoires — and sometimes they even came to *like* these songs! As Buchbinder notes, Turkish rhythms might be rather like Caribbean ones, as the various scales and modes that entered into Jewish tradition ultimately may be related to some of those that ended up in the blues by way of Africa and Ireland; it's not surprising, then, that American Jews became jazz heroes. Klez's loss became jazz's gain in Benny Goodman and Mezz Mezzrow (yeah, I know... may klez's loss was klez's gain in some cases!) ... nor is it surprising that when African American jazzmorim like Dizzy Gillespie had the chance to hear Jewish liturgical music, they recognized a common soul.

In their most recent release, *Agada*, the Bulgars offer even more expansion of the klezmer genre; that is, more tunes involve some sort of fusion

and they are stretching the Latin Jazz elements which they blended into a couple of tunes on the first disc. "Cooking Bulgar(s)" demonstrates the aptness of the pun in their name; these Bulgars do cook, both traditionally and experimentally, as when they develop the Middle Eastern rhythms in the percussion section or swing out into a rumba. I can't think of any Canadian group, in any genre, that seems so rhythmically sure and impressive. "Bulgar Blues" begins with a walking bass solo, followed by a muted blues lead somewhat mindful of Miles Davis's blues era, but quickly turning a lot funkier, and then, before you realize it (the chops are quicker than the ear), it's a freilach. "Agadot" takes the international influence even further, beginning with a taste (probably an imitation) of the south Indian vocal percussion syllables, chanted, I assume, by drummer John Lennard. This is duly followed by an exciting solo on the drum kit, which cuts out, leaving the horns to pick up on the same rhythm for a dance tune written by Buchbinder. Lennard enters the proceedings briefly when the band gets cooking, drops out again for an accordion solo by guest performer Yossi Abramovitch, returns again for the big ending.

"High Noon in Volgograd" features Van de Ven duetting with himself on bass & B♭ clarinets, as well as some beautiful and subtle variations, moving in and out of traditional klezmer licks and outside influences and structures, some of them extremely Outside (it's no surprise that Buchbinder cites Ornette Coleman in the liner notes). One of the most impressive aspects of this band is that when they integrate non-traditional ideas into klezmer music, they manage to avoid the corny old rave-up improvisatory structure which rock and roll players diluted from classical Indian music; I can think of at least two records made by American klezmer groups which feature at least one item of nothing but acoustic rock with an oriental flavour, one of them led by Andy Statman, a marvelous mandolinist and clarinetist who ought to know better.

There are more east Indian sounds in the introduction to "Spirits," in which Allen Cole uses the accordion to back up the clarinet somewhat in the manner Hindustani singers use the harmonium. When the whole band clicks in, the accordion has a more European role; don't take that to indicate that the tune stays in Europe long. It's more like a trip on the Orient Express, and if that conjures up some happy memories of trashy movies as well as authentic ethnomusicological explorations, that's what I had in mind, and maybe the Bulgars did, too.

In "Sumkinda Hora," Buchbinder, Van de Ven, and Cesar drop the fusion mode and arrangements and show what three highly trained and energetic musicians can do without a score, not incidentally demonstrating how thoroughly they've absorbed the traditional elements of klezmer. Many years ago, I told a friend who knew only a bit about classical European music what I was learning about jazz, namely that it was largely improvised and depended upon the talents of the musicians at hand, not upon the genius of dead masters. Her response was to worry about times when the present genius wasn't up to snuff. Though at the time I didn't have an answer for this, it later became obvious to me that here again we have the Wallflower Order speaking. Klezmerim, like blues and jazz musicians, and players of all stripes of vernacular music (not to mention the masters of improvisatory classical traditions of India, Iran, and elsewhere) have long demonstrated the individual capabilities of human beings, offering what I take to be concrete proof of the legitimacy of democracy.

The Bulgars' most extended trips outside the tradition are taken on Laura Cesar's arrangement of "Bukoviner Freylakhs" and "Vus Vet Zayn," which Buchbinder "conceived, adapted and arranged," though it sounds like a rather collaborative effort. My first reaction to the freylakhs is unsure. I am sure that the detour is intelligent and well-played, but it is a detour, and I'm not entirely convinced that it's satisfying. It

sounded like three minutes of what McCoy Tyner and Randy Weston used to take a half hour to accomplish back in the 70s; even in the jet age, some places take a while to get to. Or, to put it another way, if you had your chops set for hummus and someone handed you a really well made pizza, you might have problems.

I first listened to "Vus Vet Zayn" a week after Frank Zappa's death, and I sat still for a moment in memory of the old near-Master, who's clearly not forgotten. "Vus Vet Zayn" is a sort of freak-out, in the tradition of such items as "Help, I'm a Rock" and "The Return of the Son of the Monster Magnet" on the very first Mothers lp, on which Zappa showed that dada could find a home in North America. The original of "Vus Vet Zayn," which they describe as a "darkly ecstatic Chassidic song," is the takeoff point for Michael Wex's recitation:

The world to come will be set up
like a steambath if God lived in Paris.
.....
No more numbers, no more measures,
No rulers, yardsticks or flux —
Satisfaction can't be scored
When there's no more needs to fill.

Despite the satire in this, it's still an interesting offering in an era proclaiming that Capitalism has ended history in the whimper of junk bonds and food banks. Very pretty, but is it klezmer? It sounds more like a Zappa construction, using klez elements for the collage, rather than doo-wop, jazz, and Varèse. Of course, remembering that Yiddish has always offered a "sidelong" glance at European culture (which now must be extended to North America and toward Judaism itself), we may suppose that the Bulgars intended us to reconsider carefully much about the roots and branches of musical development: parts of Wex's recitation sound like nothing so much as Rap played back at slow speed. (Of course, only the most ignorant of African American culture ever

supposed that Rap sprang full blown from the crack-perverted brains of contemporary urban thugs.) How does one account for the many parallels and similarities of different musics in the world?

I should admit that I am at this stage unconvinced about some of what I hear on the Bulgars' second disc. There's some danger of fusion music degenerating into cheap atmospherics, and I'm not absolutely convinced that the Bulgars will always avoid this danger. "Wiggle Town," which might be the theme music for a romantic film set in the South Seas, comes close, though fortunately their collective tongue never entirely seems to leave their cheeks. I want to qualify my reservations, though, not because I'm afraid to be nasty (God knows I could get testimonials that I'm not), but because these are concerns that I'm yet undecided about. I might, for some people recommend the second disc just because it shows influences they might recognize; it might simply be more accessible than reissues of old 78s or the wonderful album of clarinet/dulcimer duets Zev Feldman and Andy Statman recorded in the late 70s, which might be a bit much for some beginners, though in my experience klezmer music is a relatively easy sell. Then, again, some people probably would probably rather not hear *anything* with a taste of Ornette Coleman or Frank Zappa, much less klezmer, which has often been subject to the shmaltzification Wex mentions. Of course, upon repeated listenings, I may answer all of my questions about this disc in the band's favor. I've already begun to notice that when I put the tapes on and go about my business, for the most part I'm aware only of the brassy vitality of the music, and sometimes I don't even notice whether they're playing a freilach, a merengue, or a foxtrot.

These are very fine musicians, after all, and they exhibit intelligence as well as virtuosity, which is no small feat, in Canada as much as anywhere else. On the one hand, they've earned my trust. On the other, they should have earned

our willingness to meet them on the most profound level they approach us, which may mean making demands of them. But those demands cannot be quickly arrived at. (I've sometimes thought that the **Bulletin** might open its doors to reviews from the vault, for this reason: how does one react, now, to, say, Alan Mills's records from the 50s and 60s, or something a little less hoary, say Eritage or Stan Rogers from the early 80s.) So I'm leaving these as questions.



Some years ago, *Finjan* appeared on a CBC Friday night concert. I remember vividly their demonstration of how Ziggy Elman had created the old Swing Era hit "And the Angels Sing" from a freilach. I wish I had taped it. I don't know how many recordings they have made; **Crossing Selkirk Avenue** is at least their second.

To my ears, much of their work has an older sort of sound than do either of the Bulgar discs. There are probably technical ways to describe the sounds, which I lack. Perhaps it has to do with microphone placement, or with the sorts of mikes and other equipment used. In any event, the group feels more like an ensemble, and this listener at least is less consistently conscious of individual players.

The two groups are bound to sound different anyway, since *Finjan* does not keep a resident drummer, employs regular banjo, mandolin, and guitar for rhythm, and has a female lead singer. I suppose you might say that the Bulgar recordings have more presence than *Finjan* does on this outing, and I suspect that that really means that the recording sounds more like the group would in person. I suppose there's a market for both sounds. It strikes me as very interesting that the rhythmic push of *Finjan* doesn't get lost in this more laidback recording style. This applies to the more "legit" theatre pieces like "Abi Gezunt," as well as the more old fashioned items on the recording. This sort of work, of which *Finjan*

offers several examples, shows one sort of commercial multiculturalism which klezmer has always incorporated.

"Bosphourous Freilach," as its name implies, works out the Oriental connection to klezmer music, featuring Daniel Koulack's five-string banjo, frailed, no less! And some bizarre rhythms for the poor old merrywhang: you aren't supposed to be able to frail syncopated 6/8! "Greenhorn Blues" isn't a blues at all, but a mixture of Roumanian and North American fiddling styles and phrases, including, alas, "Orange Blossom Special," which I have been trying to live out the rest of my life without hearing again.... Some Monday night leftover stews are simply less successful than others.

There's no identification of the clarinet lead on Myron Schultz's composition, from which the recording takes its name, "Crossing Selkirk Avenue," but I assume it's Schultz himself. He fairly squeezes out the notes, giving the tune more than a mouthful of passion; this tune is another that goes through a lot of changes, including a few bars of Fats Waller's "Christopher Columbus." The tune pays tribute to the group's Winnipeg roots, which go back now half a century in the families of some members. It's not all that easy to hear the differences between the aural culture of Manitoba Jewry and that of, say, Toronto or Cleveland, but I do believe I hear a few more Ukrainian tunes amidst the Polish and Roumanian quotes. Perhaps someday they'll figure

out a way to get some Andy deJarlis into the fun.

On this recording, Finjan doesn't offer anything as intense as do the Bulgars. The updated verses to the 1920s hit "I Wanna Fellow (Ich Vill a Chusin)" poke fun at the continuing versions of what used to be called the Battle of the Sexes. But the song only pokes; it doesn't prod. The "darkly ecstatic" "Vus Vet Zayn," suggests that, had the Bulgars taken this item on, they'd have drawn a little blood. Shayla Fink's vocals, heavily aspirated consonants aside, are rather smoother and less dramatic than Allan Mercovitz's. Kinzey Posen, who handles some of the group's vocals, has a very deep, rich baritone, and could probably blow the Bulgar singer off the stage, though his voice perhaps lacks some of Mercovitz's flexibility. All of this is intended as description, not criticism.

Generally, Finjan seem to be rather less adventuresome than the Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band. It would be oversimplifying it to say that they "play it safe" or "are more traditional" than the Bulgars, but they when they travel beyond the traditional klezmer borders, they go to fewer places, and they take fewer pains to advertize that they've left the home turf. They seem to be longer on collective improvisation. Though they name soloists on most cuts, the information is often not particularly helpful, since the solos don't always stand out and, besides, the star soloists aren't always the only ones doing interesting things.



All three recordings reviewed above are available from the Society's Mail Order Service, in cassette or CD format. Two other cassettes by Finjan (**From Ship to Shore** and **Where Were You ... Before Prohibition**) may also be ordered. Following are some other relevant titles from the catalog. The Service does not currently offer any reissues of the older musicians; I have lost track of what's available and what's ceased to exist since CDs have eaten up the record market. The Society can order Folkways recordings on cassette, which means that you can surely still get Henry Sapoznik's fine anthology **Klezmer Music 1910-1942** (FSS 34021). Other than that, I'd suggest that you write The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

1048 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, USA, 10028; they may be able to give you current discographies.

Anne Lederman. **Not A Mark In This World**. TG057C.

This is an anthology of different musics from Canada, including one song from the Yiddish theatre, sung in Yiddish and in translation.

Gerineldo. **Gerineldo**. MC002C.

De Fiestas Y Alegrias. MC001C.

---. **Me Vaya Kappara**. MC009C.

Since they represent the Sephardic traditions of Spain and North African rather than the Ashkenazic traditions of eastern Europe, Gerineldo cannot be said to represent either klezmer music or Yiddish culture. I've included these items in case one thing might lead a reader to another....

The Original Balkan Jam. **Just Off The Boat**. MC006.

---. **Red Tape**. MC005C.

As far as I know, the Jam was the first Canadian klezmer group to record. As their name suggests, they include klezmer music along with other eastern European genres. **Just Off The Boat** is a delightful record, perhaps lighter in spirit and sound than the other groups — they're a quartet, for starters: Finjan is a sextet and the Bulgars usually number at least that many, though, as I've noted, they occasionally break down into smaller performance groups for certain items.

The Romaniacs. **Ethno-Fusion**. CA077C.

---. **World on Fire**. CA108C.

The Romaniacs, as their name implies, are not to be taken too seriously. I don't remember a single genuine Klezmer tune on the first tape, which is the only one I've heard. But, again, as their name implies, they cover a lot of eastern European turf in their manic roamings. They're all fine musicians, even if they do fart around a great deal.



As was customary at country dances, each dance would consist of two ordinary rounds and one short round. At the end of the short round Ernie would yell, "O.K., folks, that's all." Thus they became known as the O.K. Orchestra, a name they have always used.

Many Trails Crossed Here (Oyen, Alberta)



We would drive to dances with a team and bobsleigh, but it was fun, and we always had a good time even if we did get dumped out in the snow once in a while at four a.m.

Hazel Carpenter, **History of Lomond and District** (Lomond, Alberta)