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FIDDLER THEY AIN'T

The Rabbinical School Dropouts and Balkan Beat Box are two Jewish bands that give the word 'eclectic' a run for its money.

by Adam R. Davis



Few have done for Jewish music as have Tzadik Records founder and legendary jazz saxophonist John Zorn. Best known for the Middle Eastern meets Lower East Side squonking of his ensemble Masada, he is decidedly unorthodox, which makes his being the most prolific modern Jewish music producer around even more astounding. His label's Radical Jewish Culture imprint features some of the finest and most artistically adventurous acts in the Jewish genre. Most are denizens of the New York jazz scene, which during the mid-1990s adopted klezmer as the basis for collective hipness.

The quirkiest, most enjoyable on the label, however, hails not from Orchard Street but by the shtetl of Long Beach, California. Reverent toward their sources, but irreverent in tone, they are the Rabbinical School Dropouts. Their careful arrangements combine elements of traditional klezmer with a creative and wicked humor that whips Frank Zappa, Sun Ra, and Spike Jones into a batter of Eastern European, Balkan, and Middle Eastern melodies.

Now based in San Diego, the ensemble found its way to Jewish music accidentally. While the older two attended UCSD, musical brothers Michael, Hank and Jon-Jon Friedmann began The Amazing Colossal Band, a play on the fact that they had as many as 12 members performing, several of them on miniature and toy instruments. Their intricate compositions inexplicably leaned toward the neo-phrygian and freygish modes upon which Middle Eastern, southeastern European, and much Jewish music are

...based upon which include Eastern, Southeastern European, and Hasidic Jewish music are based. Soon playful Jewish song titles snuck into the repertoire, and before long, the ensemble adopted one such title as their band name.

But unless the words 'esoteric space' precede it, calling the Rabbinical School Dropouts a klezmer band is a misnomer. Though they have familiarized themselves with its motifs and forms, a cacophony of bassoon, Indian tablas, theremin, bass, clarinet, oboe, trombone, saxophone, electric guitar and jazz drum kit indicates that they are more accurately an experimental music collective that draws on, nods to, and perhaps only because of our prior experience with that peculiar Ashkenazi musical form is described as, klezmer.

The swinging exoticism of "Dung Gate," the opening track on their most recent album, *Cosmic Tree* has a pleasant mandolin and clarinet juxtaposition, while "Sweet Beat" has more jump than Turkish coffee in the morning. To contrast, the contemplative "Warp to Level Three" introduces an enchanting melody on a toy piano over a bass hand percussion and tablas as if set in some Tunisian desert oasis. When the ethereal oboe strain kicks in, the Dropouts morph into the late Sun Ra and his Arkestra. Before things get too odd, they jump into "Solarium Khosdil," crossing a particular klezmer form and mild funk with a gorgeous piano solo. It is the Dropouts' most elegant blend of groove, improvisation, and arrangement that is their true hallmark.

The overall sound is akin to the whacked-out Cantina Band in the first *Star Wars* movie and they're about as catchy. This is klezmer hijacked by the *Animaniacs*; intelligent, humorous and done to the extreme. You'll be hard pressed not to get up and dance, and after all, that was the point of klezmer in the first place: dance music for parties.

THAT SEEMS TO BE THE THOUGHT behind another ensemble whose roots lie around the world from Long Beach to the equally odd backstreets of Tel Aviv. Israeli expatriates Tamir Muskat and Ori Kaplan started out with passion for ethnic music, discovering klezmer at an early age. Each used it as a springboard for discovery of Ukrainian and Bulgarian music, respectively, and after arriving in New York City, the two found themselves at the epicenter of Manhattan's underground music scene. They were in the same orbit as Ukrainian/Gypsy Punk Cabaret act Gogol Bordello, whose leader Eugene Hutz is now a movie star. Saxophonist Kaplan performed with Gogol for a while, and together with percussionist Muskat, paired with Hutz for a side project known as Jewish-Ukrainian Freundschaft.

Together with fellow Israelis, the pair formed Balkan Beat Box, a collective that is truly pan-Mediterranean in sound. It's a party to be sure, and the way to truly experience Balkan Beat Box, if you can't attend one of their wild circus-like performances, is to get your hands on a copy of their new self-titled release, distributed by JDub Records. Over programmed beats and sampled multi-cultural sounds like slide whistles and roosters, Kaplan and trombonist Dana Leong lay down Serbian horn lines. Against the sound of folk song chanting Bulgarian women, bassist Itamar Ziegler (from Pink Noise) produces thumping dance grooves and vocalist Tomer Yosef bangs on pots and pans while shouting in Hebrew. Elsewhere, guitarist Jeremiah Lockwood (from Sway Machinery) furiously belts out a faux-Chazanut before launching into a Tom Watts-like Yiddish rant over what seems to be a Romanian military march.

Bizarre? Yes. Incongruent? Not so much. Balkan Beat Box's mish-mosh reflects the band's influences, and an intricate interplay and cross-cultural experience that reflects a sensibility equally as Balkan. It's nobody's music and it's everyone's at the same time; a bastard stepchild whose visionary sound combines electronica and ethnicity in a way uniquely Jewish.

Yet at the same time, both Rabbinical School Dropouts and Balkan Beat Box transcend the Jewish label. Their music is not religious in nature, but it is inextricably linked to and rooted in the Jewish experience. They embrace Jewish forms and modes, but more often use them as jumping off points for further exploration and creative expression.

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Often the best elements of Jewish culture, and hence its music, was that it borrowed the choicest bits from surrounding cultures, fusing it to some unexplainable essence of being the eternal other, the Ivri. And so it should come as no surprise that no matter how many boundaries or oceans we Jews cross or how far we wander geographically or anthropologically, be it Sarajevo, Long Beach or the Lower East Side, we always tend to arrive back at where we started, at our funky, booty shakin' Jewish roots. ■

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