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## The Valley of the Dry Bones

*The Presence and Perseverance of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in Country Music and Bluegrass*

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores Jewish contributions to, and influence on, the country music and bluegrass genres, arguing that there have been four key phases of Jewish-country interaction and that in recent years country and bluegrass Jews have taken a largely religious and liturgical turn as singer-songwriters in these genres. The first sections of this article identify several important stages of interaction, beginning with a phase between the 1940s and 1960s when Jews challenged antisemitism and sought assimilation and acceptance, a period in the 1970s when iconoclasts such as Kinky Friedman and Shel Silverstein came to the fore and substantially reshaped country music, and a phase from the 1980s to early 2000s when an instrumental-focused klezmer-bluegrass fusionism was central to constructing a Jewish-country identity. A longer, final section explores the more recent, religiously-themed country and bluegrass of performers such as Mare Winningham, Nefesh Mountain, and Joe Buchanan, and argues that Jewish country and bluegrass has taken an important liturgical turn. **KEYWORDS** music history, race and ethnic studies, subcultures

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In his most recent book, an autobiographical memoir and inquiry into the musical history of Detroit, ethnomusicologist and klezmer specialist Mark Slobin offers a glimpse at the fraught relationship that many Jews of his generation had with country music. As a child in the 1950s, he and his brother adored Tennessee Ernie Ford's version of "Sixteen Tons," the coal miner's lament written and originally recorded by Kentucky-to-California transplant Merle Travis; however, he confides his brother saw it more as rock 'n roll than country and that it was "our only connection with the music of white Southerners." Later as a teen, he developed a similar relationship with country's kindred dance form, square dancing, which had "local resonance in Detroit" due to antisemite Henry Ford's championing of it as an alternative to what Ford deemed "degenerate urban forms like jazz." For Slobin, it was partly fun—"putting on my cowboy or flannel shirt and jeans." But it could also prove a source of alienation. "Once I was invited (to a square dance) by a girl at Ligett, the ritzy prep school, and I felt awfully out of place in terms of both class and ethnicity."<sup>1</sup>

Slobin's experiences with roots and country music touch on both the romantic appeal that the traditional music of Appalachia and the West and South held for young Jews, but also the ways in which the music and its surrounding culture could be alienating. Though Slobin would ultimately move toward klezmer and other musical traditions, his memories

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1. Mark Slobin, *Motor City Music: A Detroiters Looks Back* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 29–30, 47.

of this era certainly resonate with the experiences of the many Jewish Americans who choose to become more involved in country and associated genres, such as bluegrass, over the past century. For American Jews, country, bluegrass, and similar kinds of music could prove places to test out and innovate in (think Bob Dylan's innovations in *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*) or lifelong professional choices (for figures such as Kinky Friedman and Henry Sapoznik), but the larger culture of such kinds of music could be extremely unwelcoming, to say the least.

Jews, of course, do not play a dominant artistic or creative role in Nashville's Music Row or in contemporary bluegrass production. Nevertheless, just as Jews, at less than two percent of the U.S. national population, have formed an important but small sub-culture in the American body politic, Jews to some degree have helped shape Nashville and the bluegrass industry. At first this role was largely relegated to non-performing, behind-the-scenes support for some of the genre's leading superstars, but, as strictures loosened, a few key figures have emerged as performing and songwriting stars. Jewish musicians operating outside of Music Row and mainstream bluegrass production, on the other hand, have found innovative ways of combining elements of these two genres with traditional forms of Jewish music, such as klezmer, sometimes finding national acclaim for their hybridizations. More recently, a small group of musicians of religiously-oriented Jewish music have begun to find growing audiences for liturgically Jewish country music in synagogues and other Jewish and non-Jewish spaces.

Jewish interaction with, and production of, country and bluegrass in fact has been robust enough to start compiling a timeline that begins with an early era of assimilation and contested acceptance then moves to a period of ethnic pride and rebellion and then a more recent focus first on creating a fusion of traditional Jewish and rural American music and ultimately toward more explicitly religiously oriented music making. Starting in the 1940s, several Jewish participants in country culture established themselves on the scene but either kept their religious and ethnic identity partially under wraps or played important but behind-the-scenes roles as promoters and managers. In the 1970s, more outwardly Jewish writers and performers—iconoclasts such as Shel Silverstein and Kinky Friedman—came to the fore, enriching the mainstream country genre in particular by breaking down lyrical and topic restraints as Silverstein did or brazenly taunting anti-Semites with a barbed but also comical lyrical expressions of ethnic Jewish identity as Friedman did. By the 1990s, many Jewish performers, especially from within the world of instrumental bluegrass, returned to the roots of both rural American and Jewish European genres by combining elements of traditional Jewish music, such as klezmer, with bluegrass and traditional Appalachian sounds, largely emphasizing their identities as ethnic and cultural Jews. Since 2007, however, a new group of Jewish country and bluegrass performers have made a more full-fledged liturgical turn, developing first an audience mostly in Liberal Jewish congregations (Reform, Conservative) as means of expressing Jewish religious sentiment and illuminating elements of prayers, psalms, and the Shabbat service, and then later reaching out to non-Jews and a larger body of fans devoted to the music. This essay will briefly chart early developments and the rise of Silverstein, Friedman, and the klezmer-bluegrass fusionists, but will focus in more detail on the more recent liturgical turn as evident in the more straightforward but also more

religious-themed country and bluegrass music of Mare Winningham, Nefesh Mountain, and Joe Buchanan.

### EARLY ACCEPTANCE AND ASSIMILATION

Early on, there were a few Jews who appeared on stage, such as fiddler Maurice Blumen, who appeared on the Grand Ole Opry in the 1940s as member of the band Cousin Wilbur and His Tennessee Mountaineers, but Jews typically played an important but largely behind-the-scenes role in country and bluegrass until the 1960s. One would be hard-pressed to overestimate the contributions of figures such as King Records founder Syd Nathan and brothers Joachim Jean and Julian Aberbach, who operated the Hill & Range song publishing outfit in the 1940s; producer Paul Cohen, who promoted rising stars such as Patsy Cline and Kitty Wells in the 1950s; and manager Saul Holiff, who helped orchestrate Johnny Cash's rise to legendary status.<sup>2</sup> In fact, country music's signature look, the rhinestone Nudie jacket, owes much to the designs of first Nathan Turk and then later Nudie Cohn, Jewish immigrant tailors, originally from Eastern Europe, who worked with immigrant Mexican tailors, such as Manuel Cuevas in Southern California, to develop and popularize the bold shiny, satin-stitched western ware that dominated the field for decades.<sup>3</sup> Known for his prolific use of rhinestones, Nudie Cohen (born Nutya Kotlyrenko) combined elements from the two worlds he lived in within his designs and even his personal dress. His personal jewelry collection included, for instance, a gold chain featuring Jewish pendants, such as the Hebrew letters that form Chai ("life"), mosaic tablets, and a Magen David (star of David) along with Christian and gentile pendants, such as a cross and Italian horn.<sup>4</sup> His Ukrainian roots were evident in the extensive floral embroidery Cohn placed along the sleeves of the jackets he made for country stars, a design element that seems especially influenced by densely stitched embroidery on Ukrainian men's embroidered *vyshyvanka* shirts and on the festive *Keptáree* waistcoats and blouses that Ukrainian brides wore on their wedding day.<sup>5</sup> Other designs, such as his frontier and western Americana motifs and glittery-stars and-stripes outfits for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, stress the degree to which country music Jews of this early period stressed their Americanness in their contributions to the field.<sup>6</sup>

Though Americanism was frequently on display as a means of fitting in, these early figures, like Cohn's necklace, often negotiated a fine line between outwardly expressing Jewish religious and ethnic identity and keeping it under wraps. Apparently, they did so for good reason. In her pioneering 1998 survey of Jews in country music in the journal *Southern*

2. Stacy Harris, "Kosher Country: Success and Survival on Nashville's Music Row," *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1998): 112–16; Greg Evans, "The Cincinnati Sound," *Cincinnati Magazine*, June 1986, 74–75.

3. Peter La Chapelle, "All That Glitters: Country Music, Taste, and the Politics of the Rhinestone 'Nudie' Suit," *Dress*, 28 (2001), 4–5, 7.

4. Nudie's daughter, Jamie Cohn, posted a photo of his chain and pendants on social media, 14 April 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/NudiesRodeoTailors/posts/10157696046490769>.

5. Compare the *vyshyvanka* and *Keptáree* in Natalia Kalashnikova and Galania Pluzhnikova, *National Costumes of Soviet Peoples* (Moscow: Planeta Publishers, 1990), plate 33, 56–59, 207, with outfits in the Country Music Hall of Fame and the private Nudie suit collection of San Diego collector Thomas Sims.

6. La Chapelle, "All That Glitters," 5, 6, Holly George-Warren and Michelle Freedman, *How the West Was Worn* (New York: Harry A. Abrams, 2001), 82.

*Jewish History*, journalist Stacy Harris noted that antisemitism was still very prevalent in the Nashville scene as late as the 1960s, when the New York-based American Guild of Authors and Composers (AGAC) tried to establish an outpost there to represent songwriters and advocate for better compensation. The AGAC (originally the Songwriters Protective Association) had been founded in New York in 1931 by Jewish songwriters such as Billy Rose, Irving Berlin, and Jerome Kern, and continued to have a significant portion of Jewish leaders. Nashville songwriters refused to work with organizers “because they were Jews,” longtime non-Jewish performer and songsmith John D. Loudermilk told Harris.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, gentile superstars could help buck such trends. Fiddler Gene Lowinger, who speaks in his memoir of his Jewish New Jersey upbringing, notes the warm reception bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe gave him when he became a member of Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys in the mid-1960s. When Lowinger mentioned he might be late for an Opry appearance because he was attending services at a Nashville synagogue, Monroe mentioned his interest in Jewish music.

He said he knew the music used a lot of minor sounds and that since it was such old music it must be full of “ancient tones.” This was a phrase Bill was fond of using.

Monroe later asked Lowinger to accompany him to services at the same synagogue.

He had his eyes closed, his chin raised, and he looked as though he was absorbing the atmosphere around him. At the end of service, Bill and I greeted the rabbi and shook hands. Bill thanked him for the music and said, “I really liked the songs, I’m gonna find a way to use some of those notes in my music.”

Years later, after Lowinger had left the Blue Grass Boys, he ran into Monroe who insisted he grab his fiddle and play with him a version of Monroe’s tune “Lonesome Moonlight Waltz.” “You’d like it,” Monroe insisted. “It has a lot of Jewish notes in it.”<sup>8</sup>

#### KINKY AND SHEL: THE RISE OF THE ICONOCLASTS

Prominent Jewish performers, such as Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, and Simon and Garfunkel, of course, played leading roles in the folk revival of the 1960s, where interaction with more traditional country and bluegrass was somewhat limited to influences and isolated techniques. As the 1960s pressed on, one might argue that folk star and generational phenomenon Bob Dylan—outwardly Jewish, although sometimes Christian-identifying—perhaps opened the doors to more interaction between Jews and country culture in 1966 and 1967 with his country-influenced *Blonde on Blonde* and *John Wesley Harding* albums and in 1969 with the release of his *Nashville Skyline* album of secular country songs, all recorded in part with the city’s traditional session musicians. Country singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson even credits Dylan with helping introduce country music to a larger and younger audience and

7. Harris, “Kosher Country,” 113–14; Bill Williams, “Friendships Balking Recruitment Drive in Nashville, Says AGAC,” *Billboard*, 6 April 1968, 3. Country songwriters instead established their own looser trade organization, the Nashville Songwriters Association, in 1967. Loudermilk eventually helped overcome that resistance and brought the AGAC, by then called the Songwriters Guild of America, to Nashville officially in 1983.

8. Gene Lowinger, *I Hear a Voice Calling: A Bluegrass Memoir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 30–31

reshaping institutions like the Grand Ole Opry. “Dylan brought along his rock fans to country music and showed it respect,” Kristofferson said.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, among songwriters associated with more mainstream conceptualizations of Jewishness and Judaism, folk music, especially the “urban folk” popular among young people, made much more of a mark than country and bluegrass. Most prominent among those combining urban folk and traditional Jewish themes and melodies were Debbie Friedman, whose feminist congregational folk music combined Jewish prayers and melodies with new styles and arrangements, and Sholomo Carlebach, who blended 1960s folk influences with traditional Jewish and Hassidic themes and melodies.<sup>10</sup>

By the early 1970s, Jewish identity became more outwardly visible in country music circles with the arrival of a couple of noteworthy iconoclasts, performer Kinky Friedman and songwriter Shel Silverstein, both of whom established formidable reputations within and without the country music field and used “subversive humor” to challenge the country music field. Friedman, who grew up on a central Texas ranch that also served as a Jewish summer camp, began to make a name for himself with his outrageously named band, Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys. Mixing sarcasm with strong songwriting skills, Friedman used self-deprecating humor and satire to poke fun at racism and antisemitism in such recordings as his own “They Ain’t Making Jews Like Jesus Any More” and his cover of “Asshole from El Paso,” itself a parody of Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee.” Popular among the songs in his repertoire is “Ride ‘Em, Jewboy,” a song that likens the Holocaust survivors to cowboy heroes and that became a favorite of Nelson Mandela while he was languishing in prison in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Vanguard A & R rep Dave Wilkes argues that Friedman’s album sales in the early 1970s were significant, only exceeded on the label by superstars Joan Baez and Country Joe and the Fish.<sup>12</sup>

While Kinky Friedman remained the best-known Jew on stage and in the recording studio for decades and later attained fame as a mystery writer and politician, Shel Silverstein became the best-known songsmith even if, like Kinky, he also worked in other fields, such as illustrating and writing children’s literature. One might also argue that modern country music wouldn’t be modern country music if it wasn’t for the numerous hit songs of Silverstein, who started out writing for Loretta Lynn but is probably best known for his writing credits on top country hits such as “A Boy Named Sue,” “Tequila Sheila,” and “Marie Laveau.” Silverstein, who grew up in Chicago and whose name marked him pretty undeniably as Jewish, generally kept away from Jewish topics in his country songwriting, although he alluded to them sarcastically in an early self-recorded folk offering, “Folksinger’s Blues (1962),” which teases “young and white and Jewish” folkies for

9. Kathleen McKay, *Bob Dylan: Intimate Insights from Friends and Fellow Musicians* (London: Omnibus Press, 2010), ch. 8.

10. Margolit Fox, “Debbie Friedman, Singer of Jewish Music, Dies at 59,” *New York Times*, 11 January 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/arts/music/11friedman.html>; Natan Ophir, *Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Life, Mission, and Legacy* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2014), 79–90.

11. Bryan Stone, “Ride ‘em Cowboy: Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewish Mystique,” *Journal of Jewish History* 1 (1998): 23–42.

12. Mary Lou Sullivan, *Everything’s Bigger in Texas: The Life and Times of Kinky Friedman* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Backbeat Books, 2017), 85.

singing about topics they reputedly had never experienced, such as chain gangs, coal mining, and “hard rambling and hard gambling.” One might argue, however, that the subversive gender-bending and grotesque humor of “A Boy Named Sue” and “Marie Laveau” connected Silverstein (and similarly Kinky Friedman) to a strong tradition of Jewish comedic wisecracking that had at least some roots in the history of Jewish participation in vaudeville and burlesque, Yiddish theater, comic book production, and stand-up at urban comedy clubs and the “Borscht-belt” Jewish summer resorts in the Catskills and Poconos, which arose at mid-century to cater to the needs of Jews who were excluded from goyish spas and summer camps.<sup>13</sup> “A Boy Named Sue” emerged, of course, as one of Johnny Cash’s biggest hits, remaining number one on the *Billboard* country charts for five weeks and spending two weeks at the number two position on the pop charts before earning Silverstein a Grammy for best country song.<sup>14</sup>

Later joining Friedman and Silverstein in the 1980s and 1990s were other Jews, including songwriters such as Michael Kosser and Pam Belford, record producer Richard Landis, and Ray Benson, lead singer of the popular western-swing revival band Asleep at the Wheel, who is outward about his Jewish identity but does not incorporate it into his music.<sup>15</sup> Famed hip-hop and rock producer Rick Rubin perhaps should be added to this list for his extensive work in the late 1990s and early 2000s with Johnny Cash, most notably his producer credits on Cash’s genre busting 2003 *Hurt* album.<sup>16</sup>

Stacy Harris noted that the arrival of more Jews did not necessarily mean antisemitism abated in sites of country music production, such as Nashville.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, star performers running the ideological gambit from Cash, who endorsed the more liberal Al Gore Jr. for president in 1988, to Charlie Daniels, in his more strident recent years as a conservative public figure, have publicly embraced Jews and Israel, often exhibiting a mild, tolerant form of Christian Zionism that reserves respect for Jewish culture and beliefs.<sup>18</sup> This embrace, however, has not always meant Jews were entirely welcomed or treated as theological equals. Jonathan Holiff, son of Johnny Cash manager Saul Holiff, argues in a 2012 documentary that though Cash loved Israel and appreciated his father’s efforts to make him into a star, he was often quite callous when it came to Saul’s Judaism, demanding that he, for instance, play the Jewish high priest Caiaphas who conspires against

13. Lisa Rogak, *A Boy Named Shel: The Life and Times of Shel Silverstein* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 2–4, 8, 61–62; “New Album Pays Tribute to Shel Silverstein,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, 3 July 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128214655>.

14. Rogak, 92–93.

15. Ruth Ellen Gruber, “Towering over the country western scene,” *JTA*, 25 September 2008, <http://jta.org/news/article/2008/09/25/110551/benson09252008>.

16. Russell Hall, “Rick Rubin Q and A,” *Performing Songwriter*, issue 79, July/August 2004, <http://performingsongwriter.com/rick-rubin/>.

17. Stacy Harris, “Kosher Country: Success and Survival on Nashville’s Music Row,” *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1998): 113–14.

18. Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* (New York: Warner Books, 1976), 193; Johnny Cash, with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 308–12; Charlie Daniels, *Never Look at the Empty Seats: A Memoir* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 171–74.

Jesus in Cash's 1969 film *The Gospel Road*.<sup>19</sup> One might also note that Daniels's recent memoir spends an entire chapter praising Israel and Jewish culture, but only after the memoir spells out Daniels's understanding of Jesus as a figure who rebelled against legalistic Jewish authorities who followed the letter of religious law but "ignored the spirit of repentance and fairness." That belief has often been linked to the Christian concept of legalism, which many Jewish scholars reject as a mischaracterization of Judaism's emphasis on fulfilling *mitzvot* (commandments, good deeds, and prohibitions).<sup>20</sup>

This is not to say that the genre is free of the kind of conspiratorial scapegoating that marked the diatribes of Henry Ford back in the 1920s. In 2004, Jewish British comedian Sasha Baron Cohen shone a light perhaps on latent antisemitism in a controversial and contested incident in which he tricked patrons of a country bar in Tucson, Arizona, into singing along with antisemitic verses composed by his famous Kazakhstani Borat character.<sup>21</sup>

### SONGS OF OUR FATHERS: KLEZMER-BLUEGRASS FUSIONISM AND INSTRUMENTALIST REDISCOVERIES

Though Kinky Friedman, Silverstein, and Ray Benson certainly had an impact on modern country, only in recent decades has there been a concerted emphasis on expressing, not just Jewish identity, but also Jewish religious practice in country song, Jewish Bluegrass, or "Jewgrass," often largely instrumental, predates this religious turn but was an important development because it allowed a substantial number of Jewish musicians and songwriters to begin to more completely feel a sense of ownership toward country and bluegrass and served as a launching pad for performers to take on more religious themes, as evidenced in the recordings of Mare Winningham in the mid-twenty-oughts and, more recently, the national attention brought to the bluegrass band Nefesh Mountain. In the past few years, more straightforward country artists, such as Joe Buchanan, have found ways to infuse religious practice with contemporary and neo-traditionalist takes on mainstream country music, in his case, especially Texas traditions. Those involved in this recent spiritual turn have not been relegated to one single Jewish identity but come from a variety of backgrounds, including both Liberal (Reform and Conservative) and Orthodox forms of Jewish practice. Included in their ranks are also converts, women, and couples who find meaning in using country, bluegrass, and associated genres to express their sense of religious identity.

Perhaps the earliest pioneers of the "Jewgrass" subgenre were several male instrumentalists: celebrated mandolinists David Grisman and Andy Statman, who eventually ended up collaborating on the influential 1995 "American style" klezmer album *Songs of Our Fathers*, and the more scholarly oriented Henry Sapoznik. All three were widely associated mostly with other genres (jazz for Grisman and klezmer for Statman and Sapoznik) but had come to these traditions after experimenting with bluegrass and traditional American rural musics

19. Jonathan Holiff, dir., *My Father and the Man in Black*, documentary, New Chapter Productions, 2012.

20. Daniels, *Never Look*, 161–70; David Novak, "Avoiding Charges of Legalism and Antinomianism in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Modern Theology*, 16 (2000): 275–91.

21. Nathaniel Popper, "Comic Pushes Limits in Antisemitic Sing-along," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 13 August 2004, <http://www.forward.com/articles/5116/>.

in the 1960s and 1970s. Grisman, Statman, and Sapoznik have also continued to fuse traditional Jewish music with bluegrass, country, and other roots genres at various times throughout their careers.

David Grisman, a jazz, rock, and bluegrass musician who grew up in a Conservative Jewish household, experimented first with American roots music and bluegrass in the early 1960s and then moved on to work in the rock world by collaborating with Jerry Garcia on the 1970 Grateful Dead album, *American Beauty*. Grisman, who eventually opened his own Acoustic Disc label, which offers everything from jazz and bluegrass to klezmer and blues, began exploring klezmer in part because of his association with Andy Statman, a mandolin student of his in the late 1970s who wanted to further explore Eastern European Jewish musical traditions. Much of Grisman's work since has been within boundaries of jazz, but he has continued to produce occasional bluegrass albums (including *Songs of Our Fathers*) as well as prominent bluegrass contributions such as "Dawggy Mountain Breakdown," which served as theme music for NPR's popular *Car Talk* program.<sup>22</sup>

Statman, an Orthodox Jew and member of the New York folk scene of the 1970s, came to prominence as a member of the bluegrass band Country Cooking, which often infused its music with jazz and rock. Statman sought out Grisman as a mentor when learning mandolin but eventually switched to klezmer clarinet and continued playing both genres. Considered an important figure in the emergence of the early fusionist-oriented "newgrass" subgenre, Statman (with his Andy Statman Trio) was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship in 2012 for his contributions to klezmer and bluegrass.<sup>23</sup> Since 1979, Statman has consistently incorporated Jewish religious themes into his largely instrumental repertoire, including many of his bluegrass-klezmer hybrids, mainly through his use and adaptation of melodies associated with holy days, Shabbat, and other services, as well as Hassidic *deveykut niggunim*, devotional melodies that, when sung, are associated with repetitive nonsense syllables (yi-yi-yi, bam-bam-bam, etc.) used to access a spiritual or prayerful state. Statman's experimentations are definitely not outside of Jewish tradition as *nigginum* have borrowed and adapted from contemporary sources since at least the 1700s.<sup>24</sup>

Henry Sapoznik, a musician, preservationist, and promoter who has combined klezmer and American folk influences throughout his career, has been particularly active in promoting the legacy of early country string band legend Charlie Poole. Sapoznik in fact had

22. "Mandolin-playing duo plucks tunes from Jewish past," *Jewish News of Northern California*, 16 June 1995, <https://www.jweekly.com/1995/06/16/mandolin-playing-duo-plucks-tunes-from-jewish-past/>; James Sullivan, "Dawg Days," SFGate, 2 October 2001, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Dawg-days-David-Grisman-daughter-makes-film-2872172.php>.

23. James C. McKinley Jr., "Andy Statman, a Brooklyn Virtuoso, Receives Heritage Award," *New York Times*, 19 June 2012, <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/andy-statman-a-brooklyn-virtuoso-receives-heritage-award/>.

24. Encouraged by such prominent figures in Judaism as the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Hasidic Judaism), *niggunim*, whether devotional or not, have often taken on the melodies of decidedly non-Jewish sources, including Austrian waltzes, Russian and Hungarian folk songs, and even the French *Marseillaise*. "When, G-d forbid, there is an evil decree by idolaters against (the Jewish people)," famed rabbi and philosopher Nachman of Breslov taught, "It is good to sing the melody of the same idolaters who are oppressing them." Other Hasidim even argued that the songs of non-Jews and outsiders contained kabalistic "divine sparks," which could be released and returned to their proper place in the universe by singing or performing such songs in a Jewish devotional context, David Biale et al., *Hasidim: A New History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 215–16.

originally hoped to focus on old-time American music, the banjo and fiddling he knew from old 78s, but started contemplating klezmer when North Carolina fiddle and banjo legend Tommy Jarrell confronted him about being a Jew. “Don’t your people got none of your own music?” Jarrell asked after mistakenly offering him a hearty breakfast of bacon. After discovering the work of 1920s klezmerist Abe Schwartz, Sapoznik switched to tenor banjo, an instrument more suited for klezmer.<sup>25</sup> Sapoznik went on to make numerous recordings of old time, bluegrass, and klezmer, most recently his 2017 album *Banjew*, which features secular Eastern European Jewish instrumental music, such as *doinas*, alongside old-time American fare like “Mississippi Sawyer.”

Inspired by figures Statman and Sapoznik, the fusionist band Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys entered the fray in the early 2000s. Founded in part by a member of the 1980s-era klezmer revivalist band Klezematics, Leverett and her band came to bluegrass from a klezmer angle rather than starting out as students, like Statman and Sapoznik, of old time and bluegrass music. In 2003, the band put out an album of mostly instrumental, secular Jewish music—*bulgars* (music for circle dances), *shers* (music for squares), and Yiddish folk melodies, the kind of non-religious Jewish music that one might have heard played in the early twentieth century at a Jewish wedding, but infused with bluegrass influences.<sup>26</sup>

#### COUNTRY MUSIC JUDAISM: THE LITURGICAL TURN IN JEWISH COUNTRY AND BLUEGRASS

It wasn’t, however, until the first decade of the twenty-first century that the attempt to wed Jewish, religious-themed lyrics more fully with traditional Appalachian and country music elements really came to the forefront. None of these performers, at least so far, are in a position to rival the impact that Friedman, Silverstein, Benson, and perhaps clothing designer Cohn have had on mainstream country or Grisman and Statman have had on bluegrass. However, they have developed a following mostly among Jewish congregants and religiously active Jews who are drawn to country and bluegrass. They also have attracted secular and non-Jewish audiences.

#### MARE WINNINGHAM

Mare Winningham, the actress most widely associated with her role in a 1980s John Hughes film, was an early leader who not only wrote her own non-instrumental Jewish religious songs but also interpreted traditional Jewish prayers with her own melodies. Though primarily known for her acting, Winningham’s vocal talents came to public light in her 1995 role as a folk singer in the award-winning film *Georgia*, and she has put out four albums, mostly of her own material, with musical influences ranging from jazz-inspired folk to country pop.<sup>27</sup> Winningham, who grew up Catholic in Granada Hills, California, rose

25. Henry Sapoznik, interview by Mark Rubin, originally published in *Banjo Newsletter*, <http://www.markrubin.com/published/sapoznik.html>.

26. Ari Davidow, review of Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys, *Traditional Crossroads*, in Klezmer Shack, 23 November 2003, <https://www.klezmershack.com/bands/leverett/kmb/leverett.kmb.html>.

27. Danielle Berrin, “Actress Mare Winningham brings ‘Jewgrass’ to Arkansas,” *Jewish Journal*, 16 August 2007, [http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/actress\\_mare\\_winningham\\_brings\\_jewgrass\\_to\\_arkansas\\_20070817/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/actress_mare_winningham_brings_jewgrass_to_arkansas_20070817/).

to fame by playing Wendy Beamish in 1985's *St. Elmo's Fire* and in appearing in such 1990s projects as *Wyatt Earp* and television's *George Wallace* (for which she won an Emmy). She converted to Judaism later in life after her children were grown and she was in an existential crisis. In 2001, she had visited a science museum exhibit on the creation of the world and decided then that G-d did not exist. "But that night, I had the most remarkable dream, which told me, 'If you're going to reject something, at least find out what it is you are rejecting,'" she recalled. That dream convinced her to take a course on Judaism at Conservative-aligned University of Judaism in Los Angeles because Jews, she reasoned, were the ones who "started the one-God thing." Winningham found she appreciated Judaism's focus on questioning and on being in struggle with the divine, and in 2003, she officially converted.<sup>28</sup>

Much of Winningham's songwriting has been personal, but her third album, 2007's *Refuge Rock Sublime*, ploughed new ground by combining her interest in Judaism with strong elements from bluegrass and country as well as lesser influences from the 1960s era folk she had long embraced. The album's title track invokes imagery in Tehillim 71:3 (the 71<sup>st</sup> Psalm) that envisions G-d as a sheltering rock. It includes tracks that are contemplations on biblical figures, such as Moses and David, but its stronger points are its interpretations of Hebrew prayers, reflections on Jewish traditions of prophecy, and its revealing personal declarations about uncertainty and faith.

The album begins with "The Valley of the Dry Bones," a number that leans heavily on veteran bluegrass performer Tim Crouch's fiddle and Winningham's backwoods vocals. The song explores Jewish prophet Ezekiel's vision in the Torah about bones and skeletons being reassembled and incarnified by G-d as a means of gathering in, and redeeming, the Jewish people from violence and persecution. "Only you know, Lord" the song intones in chorus, reminding listeners of Judaism's emphasis on the divine, rather than humans, as a source of miracles. This theme of the gathering-in, and of the restored wholeness of the Jewish people, carries throughout the album and returns again at the end of the album with Winningham's version of "Hatikvah," the famous poem by Naftali Herz Imber that became the Israeli national anthem. Winningham sings in Hebrew (with the traditional Samuel Cohen-Giuseppe Cenci melody of the anthem) to the accompaniment of Crouch's mandolin and fiddle. Other tracks deal with Winningham's personal struggles and her attempts to find solace through a very Jewish emphasis on tradition, moments of transcendence, and religious practice. Winningham brings considerable vulnerability and humor to the album's penultimate song, "A Convert Jig," which she performed for a Hanukkah special on cable's Jewish Life Television network and which talks about the challenges of learning Hebrew, keeping Kashrut, and knowing when to tip your toes and bow during the Amidah and other prayers. The frankness of her lyrics combined with her unvarnished, yearning soprano recalls at times similar facets in other courageous singer-songwriters of country and bluegrass, such as Iris DeMent and Loretta Lynn. The album did not break the charts in country and bluegrass fields but was noted in the

28. Naomi Pfefferman, "Journey to Judaism," *Jewish Journal*, 24 June 2004, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/9784/>.

*Los Angeles Times* and up-and-coming digital media, such as *Jewcy*, as well as the more traditional Jewish press in Los Angeles and New York.<sup>29</sup> In 2008, Winningham performed songs from the album on a nationally televised PBS special, *Lights! Celebrate Hanukkah Live in Concert*, along with non-country Jewish performers, such as Dave Koz and the Klezmatics.<sup>30</sup> *Refuge Rock Sublime*'s biggest impact, perhaps, involved the way it connected with individual listeners. "I've said this a number of times," wrote Jewish music blogger Jack Zaientz of Winningham's work, "but I longed for this sort of thing when I was a teenager. I longed for some strong musician and song-writer to sing about things I cared about. I never got it then, but it's starting to happen more often lately."<sup>31</sup>

By 2009, interest in Winningham's brand of lyrical Jewish country-bluegrass, the klezmer-bluegrass instrumentalism of earlier artists, such as Grisman and Statman, and other bands, such as the all-Orthodox bluegrass band Sinai Mountain Boys, had grown to such proportions that Smithsonian.com ran a lengthy piece analyzing the subgenre. The article focused in particular on bands such as Margot Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys, Lucky Break, and the Zion Mountain Boys.

Among them are New York City Jews who grew up during the 1960s folk revival, orthodox Jews who sing Hebrew prayers set to bluegrass melodies and klezmer musicians who infuse their music with Appalachian fiddle tunes. These lovers of the banjo, the fiddle and the mandolin have found a uniquely American way to express their Jewish cultural identity and religious faith.

In the piece, Leverett noted in particular the historical circumstances that Jews and Appalachian people share.

They've been driven out of their homes, have lived hard lives, and have used music for strength. There's the same homesickness in Jewish folk songs.

This did not mean though that the worlds of bluegrass and country were easily broached by Jewish musicians. Jerry Wicentowski of Lucky Break pointed out in the article that it is not easy to make Hebrew lyrics fit bluegrass melodies because the language is sharp, and it is difficult to create a twang when singing. "Structurally, it's hard to put the stress on the right syllable," Wicentowski said. Others mentioned that scheduling conflicts between bluegrass festivals, which were often held on the weekends, and Judaism's requirement of rest on Shabbat made it difficult for many musicians to build a following outside of Jewish circles.<sup>32</sup>

29. Berrin, "Actress Mare;" Anne Marie Welsh, "Mare Winningham, deep in the heart of Tennessee," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-winningham6apro6-story.html>; Peter Bebergal, "From Brat Packer to Jewish Cowgirl," *Jewcy*, 22 August 2007, [http://jewcy.com/post/from\\_brat\\_packer\\_to\\_jewish\\_cowgirl](http://jewcy.com/post/from_brat_packer_to_jewish_cowgirl).

30. Harriet Barovick, "A Brief History of Pop Culture Hanukkah," *Time*, 22 December 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1868359,00.html>.

31. Jack Zaientz, "Mare Winningham's Refuge Rock Sublime," *Teruah Jewish Music blog*, 19 June 2007, <http://teruah-jewishmusic.blogspot.com/2007/06/mare-winninghams-refuge-rock-sublime.html>.

32. Jen Miller, "Jewish Bluegrass," *Smithsonian.com*, 23 September 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/jewish-bluegrass-142370768/>.

## NEFESH MOUNTAIN

Jewgrass and religious-themed roots music did not really even begin to break through to the mainstream, however, until April 2018, when *Rolling Stone* awarded the band Nefesh Mountain with a top spot on its “Ten Best Country and Americana Songs of the Week” and a review few professional musicians would pass on:

Bluegrass band Nefesh Mountain, led by singer Doni Zasloff and her multi-instrumentalist husband Eric Lindberg, perform old-time Appalachian mountain music yet also weave their shared Jewish heritage into their material, singing some lyrics in Hebrew. Like a blanket passed down as a family heirloom, the results are warm and comfortable, and their 21st century approach never overshadows those old-world traditions. “The Narrow Bridge,” from their lovely and refreshingly eclectic LP *Beneath the Open Sky*, features acoustic legends Jerry Douglas, Sam Bush and David Grier, and its message, never more relevant in these turbulent times, suggests that love and hope are there to be found. You just have to know where to look and listen.<sup>33</sup>

This review and subsequent press surrounding the album created a situation where the couple-led band, which had focused mostly on congregational music for Reform and Conservative synagogues and on appearances at fundraisers and Jewish summer camps, were beginning to reach not just Jews, but fans outside of this traditional religious and ethnic base.

Nefesh Mountain’s lead singer, Doni Zasloff, grew up active in the Jewish communities of Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, reading “Torah at 9 years old, and . . . wrapping tefillin in sixth grade.” After studying theater at Brandeis and NYU, Zasloff began performing as “Mama Doni,” a singer-songwriter of Jewish children’s music, in 2007. Zasloff’s partner on stage and in real life, Eric Lindberg, a self-described “Bluegrass geek,” grew up in Brooklyn and New Jersey, the son of a Jewish mother and convert father from rural Georgia. He studied jazz, guitar, and bluegrass at the Mason Gross School of the Arts and joined Zasloff’s children’s band in 2010.<sup>34</sup> While on the road together, Zasloff and Lindberg fell in love, married, and began experimenting more with bluegrass.<sup>35</sup> “Both of us were introduced to Jewish prayer from the earliest stages of life,” recalled Zasloff during our 2019 interview. “We both grew up singing the Sabbath prayers and holiday blessings with family and around the dinner table, for example, and as the years went on were introduced to many other prayers and their accompanying melodies through school and Hebrew school. Many of the melodies, be it Nusach (prayers with a specific melody) or other more specific prayers that we heard in synagogue had a lot of the ‘Old World’ feeling in them which, of course, we were both influenced by.”<sup>36</sup>

33. “Ten Best Country and Americana Songs of the Week,” *Rolling Stone*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country-lists/10-best-country-and-americana-songs-of-the-week-tyler-farr-tenille-townes-and-more-628084/nefesh-mountain-the-narrow-bridge-628130/>.

34. Johanna R. Ginsberg, “Jewish Fiddlers of Another Kind,” *New Jersey Jewish News*, 2 January 2019, <https://njjewishnews.timesofisrael.com/jewish-fiddlers-of-another-kind/>.

35. Rea Bochner, “Nefesh Mountain Captures the Sound of Appalachia and the Soul of Judaism,” *Tablet*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/253671/nefesh-mountain-captures-the-sound-of-appalachia-and-the-soul-of-judaism>.

36. Don Zasloff, interview by Jessica Hutchings, 2 September 2019.

On the surface, the band's name, Nefesh Mountain, is simply "Soul Mountain," a phrase that invokes important mounts in Judaism—Sinai, Zion, the Temple Mount. The use of the English here however also links that tradition to the role of bluegrass and country music's venerated mountains of home—Clinch Mountain, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and so on. The "Nefesh" or "Soul" component of the name denotes the band's Jewish spiritual focus, but the name also invites listeners to make associations with the popular conception of "soul" as a metonym for African American music and, perhaps, the notion that a "white soul," a lyric-focused music of great feeling, arose as blacks and whites traded musical influences in Appalachia and the South. The word *Nefesh* itself is a Hebrew word, one of several that are used to describe aspects of the soul. Medieval Jewish philosophers Sa'ida Gaon, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Maimonides (among others) identified it as the vegetative part of the soul as opposed to the Ru'ach, the animal soul, and the Neshamah, the higher, intellectual portion of the soul.<sup>37</sup> Kabbalists later went so far as to explain it as the "breath," the central core of an individual that all humans share and which gives all humans spiritual potential. "Nefesh is the first element found in an individual," argues modern-day scholar Simcha Paull Raphael, "it comes into being at the moment of birth, and vitalizes all psycho-social activities."<sup>38</sup> As a name, Nefesh Mountain might signify a starting point for beginning one's spiritual journey.

In 2016 in their self-titled first album, Nefesh Mountain delivered a mix of Jewish-inspired music and lyrics coupled with an Appalachian and bluegrass sound. One notable song combines "Heiveinu Shalom Aleichem," the Jewish prayer and folk song about bringing in peace, with fiddle, banjo, and modern lyrics about doubt, anxiety, and fear in the contemporary era. Nefesh Mountain adds repeating refrains: "These are the times for the restless." Zaslloff and Lindberg sing a soulful melody and let us know that this, too, shall pass but that it is *belief* that people, in these times, cannot live without. In another song, "Mi Chamocha" the duo take a prayer based on a biblical passage in which the Ancient Hebrews rejoice after having crossed the Red Sea and connect it with fiddling and interludes of *niggunim*.

References to biblical characters and themes that would be well-known to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim audiences, including the stories of Noah and Moishe (Moses), appear in "River Song." Two other songs "Esa Einai" and "Adonai Guide Me?" stand out as having complex musical elements blending bluegrass sound with a hint of the Jewish melodic tradition. "Esa Einai," is sung in both Hebrew and English and includes the lyrics: "I lift my eyes to the mountains/where does my help come from." Though the song uses the Hebrew word for G-d, "Adonai Guide Me?" could speak to any person of faith (Jews have many Hebrew names for the One G-d, and Adonai—lord—is one of them). This song is a prayer

37. Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Rowman and Littlefield 2009), 278. Some traditions emphasize the soul as being divided into five parts.

38. Raphael, *Jewish Views*, 280; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: New American Library, 1978), 157. It is important to note that the soul is seen as a unity with three aspects, and the soul worked to bridge the relationship between the higher spiritual realms and the physical world and body. Thus, the soul works with and through and is connected to both the body and the eternal life force. Later kabbalists would add two more aspects of the soul—Hayyah and Yehida—that represented aspects of the soul that only certain people were able to reach according to the Gershom Scholem. They reflected the highest levels of "intuitive cognition."

calling out to G-d for healing, love, and guidance. The music unfolds in a slow lilting manner that reflects the sentiments of the words. Other songs on this album stay more closely aligned with traditional uses of Jewish melodies and folk rhythms, such as singing repetitive sounds, in *niggunim*, to impart spiritual meaning.

Other songs such as “Modeh Ani” draw from a traditional Jewish practice that delineates a rhythm to each day by outlining prayers to be recited at three points: morning, afternoon, and evening. “Modeh Ani” is a prayer recited daily by Jews upon waking in the morning. The Nefesh Mountain version of Modeh Ani takes the traditional morning prayer and sets it to bluegrass music. Their rendition is primarily sung in Hebrew, with English words interspersed into the lyrics to act almost as a translation but not quite. The prayer is:

*Modeh anee lefanecha melech  
chai vekayam, she-he-chezarta bee nishmatee b'chemla,  
raba emunatecha.*

I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign,  
for restoring my soul to me in compassion.  
You are faithful beyond measure.<sup>39</sup>

Not easily translated into English, the word *Modeh* simultaneously encapsulates the acts of admitting, acknowledging, and thanking. The term *Jew*, “which comes from the Hebrew *Yehudim*[,] is directly related to the same root as *modeh*[,] which is *hoda'ah*.”<sup>40</sup> In many ways Jews are historically tasked with the collective and individual process of admitting religious failures, acknowledging the blessings and presence of the Almighty, and thanking G-d for blessings and the gift of the Torah, which serves to guide Jews toward their best selves. Nefesh Mountain employ their own words to impart a translation of the main sentiments of the prayer. “Let us say thank you. Restore my soul. Let me be free and keep me grateful.” This refrain is easily understood by people of many faith backgrounds. It’s simple but powerful message again follows in the bluegrass tradition by appealing to a universal spiritual message and linking that to the sounds of bluegrass. Interestingly, although Nefesh Mountain songs use many Hebrew words in their lyrics, they do not always pronounce the words in perfect Israeli or classical Hebrew fashion. In an interview on Israel’s Kan television network, Doni Zasloff was asked about this and responded that she feels that since she is American it would make sense that she would sing the songs in an American accent.<sup>41</sup>

It was through Nefesh Mountain’s second album, *Beneath the Open Sky*, that the music received a wider audience and more critical acclaim from the bluegrass world. Writing in *Tablet*, an influential online Jewish magazine, Rea Bochner was among the first to grapple with the meaning of the album. She wrote that it invoked the feeling that many Jews have toward bluegrass music: they love the music but sometimes feel alienated from it. Bochner

39. Prayer is listed in Hebrew in *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2002), 1. Transliteration derived from “Modeh Ani: What and Why,” Chabad website, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/623937/jewish/Modeh-Ani-What-and-Why.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/623937/jewish/Modeh-Ani-What-and-Why.htm).

40. Tzvi Freeman, “Modeh Ani: How to Get out of Bed in the Morning,” Chabad website, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1466224/jewish/Modeh-Ani.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1466224/jewish/Modeh-Ani.htm).

41. *Jewish Country*, program on KAN Israel Television, air date 21 March 2019.

noted that “the deep, church-based spirituality of bluegrass music wasn’t *my* spirituality. I could relate with the message in many ways, but in others, I remained one step removed.” She went on: “That is, until I heard Nefesh Mountain, the husband-and-wife team of bluegrass musicians from Montclair, New Jersey, who infuse their down-home music with Jewish liturgy, phrases from the Torah and psalms. . . . Not only was their music sublime; these people were singing to *me*.”<sup>42</sup> *Their Appalachian sound is true to its bluegrass roots, Bochner argued, but the messages have Jewish spiritual meaning. Bochner quotes Zasloff:*

The way that so many of us connect is through music and song. The sound of bluegrass is so authentic and pure, it’s the perfect match with what we were trying to say in these prayers. There are styles of bluegrass that are upbeat and have so much ruach. It’s the ultimate celebration, because you have to get up and dance. It also has a lonesome, mountain-y sound, [which reflects] the pain we all feel—especially as Jews.<sup>43</sup>

Outside the Jewish world, the band began getting considerable press as well, particularly from *Bluegrass Today* columnist John Lawless, who argued that the band was “finding fans from both within the Jewish cultural scene and the bluegrass world, opening up each audience to the other” during their performances.<sup>44</sup> Zasloff noted in an interview with us that the band tends “to be inspired mostly by musical forms that grew out of the western fiddle tradition with origins in Scots-Irish and Scandinavian forms that made their way over to America to form tradition Old-time music and eventually bluegrass.”<sup>45</sup>

“The Narrow Bridge,” another song on *Beneath* that perhaps has received the most attention, fuses bluegrass melodies with lyrics based on Jewish motifs and Hebrew prayer and song. The song begins slowly with Lindberg’s banjo and accomplished bluegrass musician Sam Bush’s mandolin, while Zasloff sings in English of a frozen mountaintop, a landscape that seems as cold and forbidding as those found in songs from traditional American folk and bluegrass repertoire, such as “Young Charlotte,” which features a young woman freezing to death. But the lyrics are imbued with Jewish prayers, sayings, language, and meanings, which in this case stem from a Jewish tradition that sees the whole world as a narrow bridge and reminds its listeners to not despair.

That Nefesh Mountain might combine the traditional Jewish sentiment about the hardships of life with lyrics evoking a frozen, perhaps Appalachian, wasteland is not out of step for the band. Just as bluegrass often draws on gospel music, Nefesh Mountain draws on Jewish spirituality for its underpinnings. The duo are conscious that they are reshaping notions both of what it is to be an American Jew and of what constitutes Jewish music *and* bluegrass.

42. Rea Bochner, “Nefesh Mountain Captures the Sound of Appalachia and the Soul of Judaism,” *Tablet*, 22 January 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/253671/nefesh-mountain-captures-the-sound-of-appalachia-and-the-soul-of-judaism>.

43. Bochner, “Nefesh Mountain.”

44. John Lawless, “Bound For The Promised Land from Nefesh Mountain,” *Bluegrass Today*, 7 June 2019, <https://bluegrasstoday.com/bound-for-the-promised-land-from-nefesh-mountain/>.

45. Zasloff, interview by Jessica Hutchings.

I think to be doing “Jewish bluegrass,” we’re quite literally being authentic to what we know and who we are. A lot of people will immediately try to stereotype Jewish music as klezmer music, even when say we play this music they’ll say, “Oh, are you like, klezmer-y?” No! We’re not. Yes, my great-grandmother lived in Poland, but I don’t, so that’s not authentic to me.<sup>46</sup>

Zasloff and Lindberg noted that though they feel their band is the first to come into “the secular Bluegrass/Roots music community with Jewish culture, tradition, and spirituality,” they are “not exactly clear yet whether our music is fully accepted into this world. To be sure, though, we *have* had a *lot* of support from many areas of the Bluegrass and American worlds over the five-year period as a band.” Zasloff lists Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, and Tony Trischka among their supporters. “We have also had support from inside greater organizations behind the roots music world, such as Americanafest, the Folk Alliance International, and the IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association). One of our hopes is that our music will bring the Jewish World closer to the secular musical world of Americana, and that people who are not as familiar with Jewish Heritage and Culture will feel closer to that as well.”<sup>47</sup>

The lyrical underpinning of “The Narrow Bridge” is “Gesher Tzar Me’od,” a well-known Hebrew song written in the 1960s by American-Israeli Rabbi Baruch Chait that is still performed today in Jewish camps and congregations all over the United States. The lyrics of Chait’s song, however, stem from a much older saying of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov that the “whole world is a narrow bridge, and the essence is not to be afraid.”<sup>48</sup> Nefesh Mountain’s “The Narrow Bridge” highlights Nachman of Breslov’s original Hebrew words in an interlude in the middle of the track, using Zasloff and Lindberg’s own melody. The saying then is enveloped by their own interpretive lyrics about snow-topped mountains and modern-day experiences of “troubled times,” which begin and end the song. Zasloff and Lindberg are not the first, however, to set those basic lyrics—“Kol ha’olam kulo Gesher tzar me’od Veba’ikar lo lifached k’lal” (The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is to have no fear at all)—to a new tune.<sup>49</sup> The same lyrics were also popularized, although with a different melody, as an Israeli Jewish folk song in 1982, by an Israeli singer of Yemenite heritage, Ofra Haza, known as the “Israeli Madonna.”

One might argue that the continued popularity of this seemingly simple refrain reflects the power of words from the Hasidic tradition that remain relevant today. The Hasidic tradition is a form of Jewish practice founded in the seventeenth century, originally with a populist goal of bringing Jewish ideas and principles to the impoverished and less educated Jews of Eastern Europe. Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, or the “Master of the Good Name,” was the original founder of this movement which sought to bring about a revival of Jewish spirit by

46. Justin Hiltner, “Shout and Shine: Nefesh Mountain from the Inside Out,” *Bluegrass Situation*, 30 April 2018, <https://thebluegrassituation.com/read/nefesh-mountain-from-the-inside-out/>.

47. Zasloff, interview by Jessica Hutchings.

48. Nati Tucker, “Baruch Chait: Broadening the Narrow Bridge,” *Haaretz*, 6 September 2010, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5110098>.

49. “Kol Ha’olam Kulo,” lyrics by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov; tune by Rabbi Baruch Chait, in Jewish Women’s Archive. (Viewed on 20 May 2019) <<https://jwa.org/media/lyrics-to-kol-haolam-kulo>>.

imparting music, parables, and meaningful sayings to Jews suffering under anti-Semitic economic and political restrictions in Eastern Europe. By incorporating new, more emotive forms of worship and by “revealing the esoteric, hidden, and mystical texts of Judaism to the common person,” Hasidism appealed to many disenfranchised Jews.<sup>50</sup> The Hasidic tradition gained popularity, in part, through the charismatic leaders that emphasized folk tales, parables, and poetic sayings that brought the message of Judaism into a more accessible and relatable language. Many Hasidic Jews or Jews from Eastern Europe who were familiar with this movement immigrated to the United States, and later, Israel.

When working on the lyrics for “The Narrow Bridge,” Nefesh Mountain was especially drawn to Hasidism’s and Nachman of Breslov’s perspective that life can be trying and dangerous; the answer is to simply move forward without fear. “We thought it was a beautiful, poetic saying. We turned it into a story and a song relating to the world right now and how it feels troubled and divided.” For Lindberg and Zasloff, this message, birthed in the Jewish world of Eastern Europe that was largely erased by the Holocaust, still resonates in many different ways today.<sup>51</sup>

This negotiation with Jewish identity and attempt to communicate a message about what it is to be an American Jew is a conscious aim of the group. In the album’s last song, “Russian Lullaby,” they pay homage to the music inspired by a generation of immigrant Jews that played a central role in various music genres, including ragtime and Broadway. “Russian Lullaby” was written by Irving Berlin in 1927 and is one example of the hundreds of songs and music that the composer wrote in his lifetime. Berlin immigrated to the United States from Russia as a boy in 1893. His father, a former cantor, was unable to find placement as a cantor in New York and worked in a kosher meat market.<sup>52</sup> His personal and family story represents one example of the complex negotiation of assimilation, Americanization, and Jewish identity experienced by so many Jews, which Nefesh Mountain speaks to throughout their music. Zasloff wanted to record a bluegrass-informed version of this song as an homage to her grandmother. “My grandmother Mildred, who was born in Poland, used to sing that song to my mother. And then my mother—every night—would sing it to me. It always meant so much to me because there’s something so sad and so hopeful, sweet and touching about it. It just felt the right way to end the album.”<sup>53</sup> The song speaks to the immigrant longing for freedom and to bittersweet memories of the Russian homeland.

Other songs, such as “On and On (L’Dor Vador),” find common ground between a Jewish focus on maintaining tradition and continuity between generations and bluegrass’s focus on honoring the craftsmanship of performers from the past. At a summer 2018 performance in Nashville’s historic Station Inn, Lindberg reflected on the relationship between the Jewish emphasis on the importance of a memory and maintaining cultural heritage and the ways in which bluegrass and country fans venerate figures and styles from the past,

50. Jan Feldman, *Lubavitchers As Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 20.

51. Hiltner, “Shout and Shine.”

52. Ian Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America* (Trafalgar Square, 1987), 22.

53. Quoted on official Nefesh Mountain website, About: Beneath The Open Sky, <http://www.nefeshmountain.com/about-bios>.

noting “the generations of beautiful music made on this stage as it was passed on (from generation to generation).”<sup>54</sup> The main refrain in “On and On” is based on the Amidah, a Hebrew prayer said in the Jewish liturgy around the world, which serves as the “central petitionary prayer of every service, recited standing, in heightened reverence.”<sup>55</sup> “On and On” in particular stems from a section of the Amidah called Kedushim, which is one of the most significant parts of a service, requiring a Minyan (either ten men at minimum for Orthodox Jewish groups or ten men and women for more Liberal strains). The section sung by Nefesh Mountain translates as, “We declare Your greatness through all generations, hallow your holiness to all eternity. Your praise will never leave our lips, for You are G-d and Sovereign, great and holy.”<sup>56</sup> In “On and On,” the duo sing the words of this prayer in Hebrew and intersperse it with English lyrics. Rather than being direct translations, the English portions of the song take the core meaning of the prayer and modernize it for varied audiences. “Let us say thank you, restore my soul, and keep me grateful.”

In the wake of the release *Beneath the Open Sky*, Nefesh Mountain continued to play a prominent role in the Jewish and bluegrass communities. After the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the pair wrote “Tree of Life,” a song whose title and text invoked not just the synagogue but a central symbol in Judaism for both resolve and continuity as well the mysticism of the *aggadah* (Jewish legends) and Torah from which the tree narrative originated. The song held out the idea that *chesed*, loving kindness, would triumph over the hate and win out in the end. A subsequent video of Zasloff and Lindberg performing “The Tree of Life” received more than 339,000 views. *Bluegrass Today* argued the song was “a prayer for healing, a beautiful song composed in keeping with their habit of playing Jewish liturgical music with bluegrass instruments.”<sup>57</sup>

## JOE BUCHANAN

Like Nefesh Mountain, Joe Buchanan primarily works as a traveling musician of congregational music, co-hosting Shabbat services with cantors and giving concerts at synagogues, schools, and Jewish camps. Unlike Nefesh and Winningham, Buchanan has not yet branched over into more mainstream non-Jewish venues, such as Americanafest or PBS Hanukkah specials. Buchanan instead uses his music to emphasize his identity as a convert to Judaism and the ways in which the non-bluegrass country music tradition might connect with Jewish thought and practices. Though his first album featured Americana-flavored rock focusing on steel guitar and organ, his more recent material has moved increasingly in the direction of traditional country music influences.

54. Nefesh Mountain, “On And On (L'dor Vador) - Live At The Station Inn,” video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyu3MRtTZOs>.

55. Siddur Sim Shalom, The Rabbinical assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Ny NY 2010. P351.

56. Siddur Sim Shalom, The Rabbinical assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Ny NY 2010. P 37.

57. John Lawless, “The Tree Of Life video from Nefesh Mountain,” *Bluegrass Today*, 1 November 2018, <https://bluegrasstoday.com/the-tree-of-life-video-from-nefesh-mountain/>.

Buchanan came to Judaism in his thirties after a trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. His wife, the daughter of a Jewish mother and Southern Baptist father who had grown up attending Christian churches in Texas, told him of her wish to be more connected with her Jewish identity.<sup>58</sup> “I’m Jewish, you know’ she said,” Buchanan tells it when performing for an audience, before acting out his incredulosity. Buchanan explained in a 2018 interview with the authors that he of course knew his wife’s mother was Jewish, but was unaware that having a Jewish mother made one *halakha*-ically Jewish from a viewpoint of traditional practice.<sup>59</sup>

Buchanan and his wife gravitated toward Shaar Hashalom, a Houston congregation headed by Rabbi Stuart Federow. The *Forward* describes Federow as a “Reform-trained rabbi with an Orthodox background who runs a Conservative synagogue and sees himself as not fitting neatly into one denomination.”<sup>60</sup> Buchanan found Federow’s message compelling. “You do good because it brings more good in world, not because there is some reward later on,” Buchanan recalled to a later interviewer. “You are not damaged goods. There’s nothing wrong with you. We are meant to struggle. You can see G-d in people and in the world and the way things work, and there is a manual (the Torah) we get to follow.”<sup>61</sup> In 2013, Buchanan formally converted, and Federow recruited Buchanan to play guitar at services. Buchanan built up a following among Jews in Houston and was soon traveling from congregation to congregation performing at Friday evening Shabbat services and giving workshops on his experiences with conversion.<sup>62</sup> In September 2019, he took part in an adult bar mitzvah at Congregation Ner Tamid in Henderson, Nevada.<sup>63</sup>

Buchanan released his first album, *Unbroken*, with production by Saul Kaye, a performer of Jewish-themed blues, in 2015. In the album’s title song, Buchanan speaks of his struggles in trying to reconcile his own perceptions with various teachings he had encountered while hopping from church to church in his youth. In the song, he is particularly critical of the concepts of Original Sin and eternal damnation, arguing that his conversion to Judaism (“choosing to be chosen”) helped him break free from the “chains” of guilt and feelings of spiritual unworthiness he had encountered in his exploration of other traditions. The song speaks to Jewish concepts about the sanctity of a single life, about focusing on doing good in the present rather than for rewards in the afterlife, and about the Passover story of deliverance out of slavery in *mitzrayim* (Egypt). But its lyrics also invoke the kind of exhilaration and open-ended freedom of road songs and western-themed parts of the country music canon ranging from Roy Rogers’s 1944 rendition of the Cole Porter ballad “Don’t Fence Me In” to Roger Miller’s 1965 “King of Road,” and even latter-day hits such as The Dixie

58. Sam Kestenbaum, “Jewish Convert Explores Faith And Belonging Through Country Music,” *Forward*, 17 December 2017, <https://forward.com/news/390094/jewish-convert-explores-faith-and-belonging-through-country-music/>.

59. Joe Buchanan, interview with authors, Henderson, Nevada, 8 December 2018.

60. Kestenbaum, “Jewish Convert.”

61. William Hall, “TeNak Talk,” interview with Joe Buchanan, 4 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhQU32vR3YI>.

62. Buchanan, interview.

63. Authors’ personal recollection, 7 September 2019.

Chicks' "Wide Open Spaces" and Garth Brooks's "Wild Horses." "You're unchained, you're unbroken, you're unbound/so lift your head up high," Buchanan sings on the title track, his voice soaring along to Travis-style finger picking on the guitar.

The album also includes Buchanan's own melodies to traditional parts of the Jewish liturgy, often sung entirely or partly in Hebrew because his tour schedule often requires his singing at congregational services. But even these melodies have a country twist. His version of the traditional Friday prayer "Shalom Aleichem," based on a seventeenth-century poem by Safed kabbalists about the angels welcoming in the Shabbat, features steel and electric guitar in a haunting melody evoking emotional elements that would be familiar to those versed in spectral- or supernatural-themed country standards, such as "Long Black Veil" and "Riders in the Sky."

Though Buchanan describes *Unbroken* as being more Americana with touches of country, his recent work for an album tentatively titled *Back from Babylon*, moves toward "Southern country music and Bakersfield influences" and finds ways to connect Jewish thought and practice with country music tradition.<sup>64</sup> Some of this work, such as his versions of "Hine Ma Tov" and "Lech Neranena," offer country melodies to the Hebrew prayers in the same way as "Shalom Aleichem."

Other new songs, such as "Texas," speak to more personal reflections, such as the way both Judaism and country music consecrate specific places. Geography has always played a central role in country music. The genre historically has been tied to a largely Appalachian and Southern poor white culture that drew from an elastic folk tradition, which allowed old English name places (like Wexford, England, in the folk ballad "Wexford Girl") to be replaced with American equivalents ("Knoxville Girl") and also sought to legitimate itself by signaling and celebrating regional identities (i.e., the Carter Family's reverence for their "Clinch Mountain Home"). This tradition of wearing regionalism on one's sleeve and calling out place names—known to anyone familiar with such classics as the "Streets of Bakersfield" and "Cumberland Gap" or more recent songs like Sugarland's "Down in Mississippi"—is connected in Buchanan's work with traditional Jewish attachment to Eretz Israel (the land of Israel) and Jerusalem (invoked annually at the Pesach seder and in daily or weekly prayers such as the Amidah, the Mussaf, and the Shabbat Torah service). Early on in "Texas," Buchanan acknowledges the centrality of Eretz Israel in Jewish religious tradition, but his emphasis is on how being in nature in Texas also helped him find spiritual wholeness, a theme not too distant from the secular odes to the state offered by co-religionist Kinky Friedman. Mesquite trees and the Frio River, he sings, makes Texas "the holy land to me." "Down in Texas," he sings, "where I discovered a reason to pray."

## CONCLUSION

Though it is true that understanding the history of Jewish participation in country and bluegrass involves identifying key stages—including an early focus on the three As, assimilation,

64. Joe Buchanan, interview.

Americanism, and acceptance; a midpoint era of culturally focused identity and subversive humor; a later period of rootsy rediscovery and klezmer-bluegrass instrumentalism; and a final period of focus on more countrified religious congregational song—there is more to this history than a simple outline of generational differences and the evolution of Jewishness as an ethnic, cultural, and religious identity in the United States. On one level, these transformations could be read as evidence that Jews (in most of these cases Ashkenazi, or European, Jews) are more completely accepted by a wider swath of American society and that Jews have lived long enough with country and bluegrass that it feels like these musics are innately theirs. But beyond that, access and interactions with these genres have made room for other expressions of Jewishness involving gender and geography. Women are now playing a stronger role in explicitly religious music-making and even take the lead in writing and performing contemplative and congregational music. The far-flung hometowns of these performers, too, suggest that more needs to be done to look at the “diasporas within a diaspora,” the movement of Jews outside of traditional Jewish enclaves in the northern East and urban West Coast into the derisively titled “fly-over country” of the Midwest and especially the South and Southwest. With a substantial number of ethnic Jews no longer maintaining synagogue membership or even, at times, identifying as Jewish, the thoughtful and compelling reflections on Jewish tradition by converts, such as Winningham and Buchanan, suggest that more needs to be done, too, to explore those who “choose to be chosen.”

So, what does the future hold for Jewish-country experimentations? A recent article in *Tablet* on “Mizrahi pop,” the fantastically popular dance-oriented music created by Israel’s non-European Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, descendants of the Jews who fled North Africa and the Middle East in the twentieth century, might hold some suggestion:

Mizrahi music’s closest American cousin is country, the only genre where performers can deliver the same earnestness and have the same flexibility to sing about girls, cars, God, America, and their parents. Like country singers, Mizrahi artists have long specialized in songs of the ‘laid low by life and love’ variety, known here as “depression songs.” Mizrahi songs are supposed to express the authentic spirit of the place they’re from without putting on airs, just like country songs.<sup>65</sup>

Will Mizrahi and Sephardic<sup>66</sup> Jewish immigrants to the U.S. find new ways to experiment with American roots traditions as a means of conversing with the klezmer-bluegrass fusionists? Will country and bluegrass ultimately attract new performers and participants among growing subsets of American Jewry, such as Jews of color and LGBTQ-identifying Jews? Will Jewish immigrants to the U.S. from Europe, Mexico, South America, and Israel take to playing fiddle and pedal steel? How will Jewish performers of all backgrounds handle the

65. Matti Friedman, “Israel’s Happiness Revolution,” *Tablet*, 31 August 2015, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/music/193162/israels-happiness-revolution>.

66. Originally from Spain, Sephardic Jews fled the Inquisition to live throughout the Mediterranean and Latin America.

rising tide of antisemitism that strikes not just internationally but now in Pittsburgh and San Diego? Perhaps we should take a note from Mare Winningham and Ezekiel: “Only you know, Lord.” ■

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