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Milken Archive of Jewish Music introduces online multimedia volume
Volume 15
Swing His Praises—Jazz, Blues, and Rock in the Service of God

Think of Jewish liturgical music – the music of the synagogue, of the High Holidays and the Sabbath service – and many words come to mind. Words like "majestic," "stirring," and "meditative."

But words like "funky," "bluesy," or "swingin'?"

Well, let's be honest: not so much.

Yet based on the evidence presented by the Milken Archive, perhaps they should. Exhibit A: Volume 15: "Swing His Praises," a collection of sacred works that owe as much to blues, rock, and jazz as they do to the grand traditions of the cantor and the synagogue choir.

The roots of this sacred-secular fusion lie deep in American popular culture. The folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s encouraged the likes of Shlomo Carlebach ("The Singing Rabbi") to set liturgical texts to simple, folksy melodies. By the 1970s, the pervasive influence of rock and roll had led groups such as the Diaspora Yeshiva Band to give traditional prayers and Hassidic *niggunim* a rock makeover. And even jazz musicians were known to give Jewish liturgical tunes the occasional workout in their own hip idiom – witness "Folk Songs for Far Out Folk," arranged by jazz cellist Fred Katz.

Kurt Weill was the first composer to seriously attempt something along these lines. His *Kiddush*, commissioned in 1946 by New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, recalls those great concert settings of Negro spirituals from the early 20th century by composers like Harry T. Burleigh; at the same time, it calls to mind such blues-drenched works of musical theater as *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess*.

It took nearly 20 years for Weill's experiment to become a trend. By then, a new generation of progressive rabbis had come to see jazz, rock, and blues as a means of reaching younger congregants. And they had before them the example of the church, which had already made considerable strides in dressing Christian liturgy in the vestments of secular music—a topic that Neil Levin, the Archive's music director, addresses in his "Introduction to Volume 15." (Consider, for example, the sacred concerts of Duke Ellington, or Lalo Shifrin's Grammy Award-winning Roman Catholic jazz mass.)

If the church had taken the lead, however, the synagogue soon caught up. Despite occasional charges of sacrilege by more traditionally minded types – one prominent rabbi

warned, "Let those who wish to 'rock the cradle of the Lord' beware lest they rock the Lord out of His cradle" – the mid-to-late 60s saw an efflorescence of Jewish liturgical music by composers who were eager to incorporate vernacular American styles, and highly adept at doing so.

It didn't hurt that the African-American music they tended to draw upon had more than a little in common with traditional Jewish music. Both, for example, employ improvisation (the best Eastern European cantors improvised as freely as jazz soloists), and both make use of call-and-response – whether between cantor and choir, or between blues singer and backup band.

Few works epitomize that musical kinship better than Charles Davidson's ... *And David Danced Before the Lord*, the first complete *kabbalat shabbat* and Sabbath eve service to combine melodies drawn from traditional Hebrew liturgy and biblical chant with jazz and blues. As a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary's H.L. Miller Cantorial School, one would expect Davidson to be expert in the biblical cantillation motifs that run through the work. But who could have guessed that he would have such a deft touch with jazz? "*Shir hashirim*," for example, opens not only with a lovely vibraphone solo, but with piano and flute obbligati that could have come straight out of a late-night jam session. By the time we get to "*L'kha dodi*," the idea of having an operatic tenor fronting a jazz quintet during Shabbat services seems entirely normal – a testament to Davidson's deep understanding of both genres.

Dave Brubeck showed the same talent for musical bilingualism in his epic *Gates of Justice*, a piece that was explicitly intended to help repair the fraying relationship between blacks and Jews at the tail-end of the 1960s. Hoping to illustrate just how much the two groups shared in terms of both musical culture and fundamental values, Brubeck juxtaposed cantorial melodies with the sound of the black church ("Except the Lord Build the House"). Yet he also fused the kind of artful counterpoint and orchestration one would expect from a "straight" composer ("Oh, Come Let Us Sing") with his own inimitable style as a jazz pianist ("Shout unto the Lord"). Much the same can be said for *The Commandments*, a work whose emphasis on peace, justice, and the sanctity of life stems from Brubeck's experiences as a soldier on the battlefields of World War II. In an extended oral history video contained in the Archive's "Voices" section, Brubeck and his wife Iola discuss the creation of *Gates of Justice* and its relationship to the theme of universal brotherhood. The "Videos" section, meanwhile, contains Brubeck's own explanation of how he came to write *The Commandments*, along with recording session footage for both works.

Interestingly, there are times when Jack Gottlieb's *Psalmistry* recalls the work of Brubeck's classic 50s-era quartet, with its tricky meters, piquant harmonies, and cool alto saxophone. (At others, Gottlieb combines distorted electric guitar with the driving orchestral percussion one associates with Stravinsky and his fellow neoclassicists.) Yet there are more contemporary echoes to be found in Volume 15 as well.

Jonathan Klein's *Hear O Israel*, for example, speaks a dialect of swinging, 60s-era jazz – highly chromatic, harmonically ambiguous, yet melodically appealing – that continues to dominate the art form today. Indeed, on a selection like "Bar'khu," the ensemble resembles nothing so much as a burning modern big band. Astonishingly, the version of *Hear O Israel* presented here was stitched together from two recordings made 25 years apart. The first, from 1967, was made by a group that included pianist Herbie Hancock and bassist Ron Carter, both of whom were members of the Miles Davis Quintet at the time. The second, from 1992, involved four singers and a jazz sextet that included Boston-area trumpet legend Herb Pomeroy.

Similarly, Gershon Kingsley's *Shabbat for Today*, with its synthesized score, grew out of an early electronic music scene that continues to inform virtually all contemporary pop music. Commissioned in 1968 by a rabbi in New Jersey who wanted a new Friday evening service specifically geared "to the younger generation," Kingsley responded with a work for cantor, mixed choir, and rock band that was denounced immediately by some as sacrilegious. Reworked as a piece for vocalists and Moog synthesizer – Kingsley was an early adopter of that instrument, and a pioneer in the realm of electronic music in general – it went on to gain wide acceptance.

Today, Kingsley's work, and that of his colleagues, stands as a reminder of just how radical these early experiments in merging traditional Jewish liturgical music with more contemporary sounds really were – and how delightful, as well.

To view this volume online and download related media, please visit:

<http://www.milkenarchive.org/volumes/view/15>

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