



For Release: March 10, 2015
Video/Photos/Tracks available

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New Album from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music Reveals Roots of the Jewish Folk-Rock Phenomenon

When most people hear the words “folk rock service for the Sabbath eve,” one name will come to mind. That is name is typically not [Raymond Smolover](#). Yet, before there was Debbie Friedman, before Craig Taubman or Rick Recht or any of the myriad folk-rock oriented singer-songwriters of Jewish liturgical music, there was Raymond Smolover. In the 1960s, Smolover composed and produced two folk-rock synagogue services—[Edge of Freedom](#) and [Gates of Freedom](#)—that (unbeknownst to him at the time) foreshadowed a sea change. The Milken Archive’s rerelease of these recordings (the fourth installment in the Milken Archive’s [Volume 15, Swing His Praises: Jazz, Blues, and Rock in the Service of God](#)) offers a unique window to an early effort of using popular music to reach out to young people.

Now 91, Smolover served as cantor and music director for 44 years at the Jewish Community Center/Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains, New York. A respected pedagogue, Smolover was part of the opera department at Tanglewood in the 1950s (where he nearly got Leonard Bernstein to compose an opera for him) and served for several years with Max Helfman at the Brandeis Camp Institute (a Jewish Tanglewood of sorts). For more than thirty years he was the executive vice president and placement director of the American Conference of Cantors, the Reform cantorial association.

Smolover was also a driving force behind the creation of a considerable body of new Jewish music. In addition to the two services featured on *Edge of Freedom—Gates of Freedom*, Smolover founded the Opera Theatre of Westchester, which commissioned, performed and toured several Jewish-themed chamber operas in the late 1950s. Smolover often starred in the operas and wrote their libretti. (Excerpts from one of these operas were recorded by the Milken Archive and are available in Volume 16, *Heroes and Heroines: Jewish Opera*.)

As he explained in an oral history session with the Milken Archive (available at <http://www.milkenarchive.org/voices/view/33>), Smolover was first inspired to venture into “religious rock” by hearing his son’s Bob Dylan records played at home. “He’s

davening (praying), very often, in some of his music,” Smolover remarked of Dylan. “It’s almost *recitative* in parts.” He expounded further in the preface to the published edition of *Edge of Freedom*: “I realized after almost twenty years of teaching [our children] the sound of my God, that I must listen to the sound of theirs.”

The recordings of *Edge of Freedom* and *Gates of Freedom* feature Smolover in the cantor role, accompanied by traditional rock band instruments, several acoustic instruments, and a chorus drawn from the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), which sponsored the recording. The liturgy is sung in both Hebrew and English. Recorded in 1968 and 1970, both services reflect the musical spirit of the era without sounding contrived or factitious.

As with any proper sacred service, the music evokes a range of moods and emotions. Thus, while the opening “*L’kha dodi*” from *Edge of Freedom* (a Sabbath eve service) might conjure images of bandstands and psychedelic lights, the subsequent “Lighting the Sabbath Candles” is slow and reverential. The “*Sh’ma yisra’el*” conveys an appropriate sense of urgency. The trumpet motive on “Sermon” connotes a shofar and the chorus echoes repeatedly: “Freedom: All men were born to be free.” The “Kaddish” from *Gates of Freedom* (a Sabbath morning Torah service) is sung in Hebrew to an accompaniment of guitar, organ, bass, drums, and youth chorus. It is followed by the slow moving “The Earth is the Lord’s” which, with its jingling bells and sitar accompaniment, evokes images of a bead-curtained Torah ark and whiffs of incense.

From our current vantage point, Smolover might appear to be more of an instigator than he ever hoped he would be. In his oral history session, he lamented the “takeover” of the folk-oriented approach to Jewish liturgical music. “I feel kind of guilty,” he said. Guilty because his goal was to write something that spoke to the times and added to the tradition. “You don’t take over,” he said. “You add.”

Founded in 1990 by philanthropist Lowell Milken, the Milken Archive of Jewish Music reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America. The Archive’s virtual museum www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

For information or interviews, contact media@milkenarchive.org.

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