

Window on the Work: Evolving Traditions



In 1978, Frank London and I were in a Third Stream class at the New England Conservatory of Music, learning to play the jazz standard *All the Things You Are*. The goal was to explore the music as a vehicle for improvisation, rather than attempt to make it sound traditional. Frank still uses that approach: he borrows music to make it his own. I remember he was interested in world music long before that became popular, playing in bands ranging from salsa and jazz to Eastern European and rock. Later, when I formed a Brazilian band, he contributed arrangements and joined us in gigs around Boston. After college, when many of us migrated to New York, Frank London found work playing trumpet for Jewish weddings. In fact, one summer night I danced to his brass band at a friend's wedding in Brooklyn, celebrating with grooves from the hora to the samba.

Interview with Frank London

Conducted by Janet Grice

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Janet: Where did you grow up, and was there klezmer music in your early environment?

Frank: Long Island, New York, and no, no klezmer. I'm a third-generation American Jew, very much a working-class, suburban kid. I grew up with rock and roll, which was my music of choice. In the '60s, even in the synagogue I didn't hear distinctly Jewish music. I lived a Jewish life, a Reformed Jewish life, but there was no Yiddish. And, klezmer music came out of the Jewish group that spoke Yiddish. Those two words are really intertwined, throughout everything—klezmer and Yiddish.

Janet: When did you first become interested in klezmer music?

Frank: In the late seventies in Boston. After high school I spent one year at Boston University, then went to the New England Conservatory. At that time, there was a real desire among American Jews to hear something that connected them to their ethnicity.

Janet: And when did you begin playing the trumpet?

Frank: I was in fourth grade.

Janet: Did you study classical music?

Frank: Not intensely, although I was in the Long Island Youth Orchestra. My grounding is totally in improvisational music. The only reason I have chops is because I trained to play what I could hear. My trumpet teacher would make me listen to different trumpeters and say, "just listen to the technique."

The person who turned me around was a French horn player named Brother Ah, during my year at Brown. Brother Ah's teaching was about awareness of sound and I think that is at the root of everything, listening and creating simultaneously, analyzing what makes

something sound a certain way. This is important to the way I learned klezmer, and to the way I learned all other music. I read music and study scores, but I learn music and musical traditions by listening to them. And when you're listening to them, you're not only learning notes, melodies, and rhythms—all of which are important—but you're also learning *forms*, the timbres that the players produced traditionally; you're learning the authentic sound of a tradition, and what technique you must have to achieve that sound and repeat it whenever you want it.

Everything is in hearing a music, and that is especially important to me since I want to be able to blend into such diverse musical experiences. A musician must have a huge technique to be able to produce different sounds at will and physically integrate a certain style.

In Boston, I played trumpet in salsa bands, Haitian bands, Balkan bands, classical orchestras, brass quintets... because the trumpet is part of all those.

Janet: It is certainly part of jazz. When did you start playing jazz?

Frank: In the high-school jazz band, but that year at Brown University, that's really when I started getting insanely into jazz. My wife cracks up, because I don't know any pop songs from the '80s. That's when I was discovering jazz and klezmer. I was trained in jazz at New England Conservatory, and then I started studying with Charlie Banacos. Hours and hours of practice.

Janet: How did that influence your approach to klezmer?

Frank: That question is a paradigm for everything. There are two ways of answering it. There is the specific way—my jazz training affects my klezmer, but the more general answer is that everything we hear and play, as musicians, affects everything else that we play.

Janet: Did jazz give you any kind of methodology or approach that you might have applied to klezmer?

Frank: My approach to learning is not specific to jazz. It consists of listening and transcribing, paying closer attention to minute details, to phrasing, to ornamentation. We learn classical music that way as well.

As for jazz in my klezmer music, someone at a Klezmatics concert said: "No one wants to hear jazz mixed with their klezmer," but that person would have loved to hear *Bei Mir Bist Du Schön*, which is part of the swing tradition. So I realized that the problem wasn't jazz mixed with Klezmer; it was the *kind* of jazz we mixed with klezmer, post-1965 jazz.

Janet: Does that mean that there is improvisation in your performances?

Frank: Traditionally, there's no improvisation in klezmer music. As a form, it is closer to Celtic music, where the emphasis is on melody and on the style and ornamentation of the melodies. A great player will play the melody on each repeat, do different ornaments, and

expand the theme into variations, but not into improvisation. One of the first things the Klezmatics did was add improvisation, but not necessarily jazz improvisation. We started by adding more "open-modal" improvisations on a jazz background maintained as the basic music language. We rarely use bebop or altered harmonies, nor is the Klezmatics rhythm section a jazz rhythm section. The Klezmatics play more like salsa players, improvising on one chord. So the jazz elements tend to be post-1960, either modal or energy or motif. Among the first recordings of Klezmer music is a 78 [rpm] from around 1912, of the Yiddisher Charleston and the Yiddisher shimmy. This makes it clear that for at least as long as recordings have existed, musicians have mixed klezmer with popular local music.



I was inspired by a producer I met, who had a vision of folk and traditional music that would grow and be relevant and express a modern sensibility. He was not interested in the idea of just replicating. So he encouraged musicians such as the Klezmatics to do their own thing. Klezmer bands at that time studied old recordings and copied them. We began composing our own songs, doing arrangements of traditional songs, and expressing our views in our music. The Klezmatics first album was called *Schweig ist Tod—Silence Equals Death*—which was the Act Up slogan at the time. It resonated on many levels: we always had a gay consciousness, a Jewish consciousness, a humanist consciousness, and a political consciousness.

Janet: Does being Jewish affect one's affinity for Klezmer music?

Frank: Let's put it this way: music comes out of a people (Jews), out of a time (19th century), out of a place (East Europe, a shtetl), which was one of the highest points in our long history. A time of intense poverty and oppression, yet an amazing cultural, intellectual, religious, or anti-religious time—a complex time.

The klezmer music comes out of that culture, which had a unique language. There was Yiddish, the code language, besides the vernacular, and the musicality comes from the linguistic expression. It also comes from the religious expression. It's a very unique music, right on the border between the East and the West, so we can hear "modal" influences in it, Eastern Makam influences, harmonic influences from the West, Balkan rhythms. We hear unique rhythms and dance forms.

Spirituality, too, is really important in Jewish music in general. There was a movement that started in the mid-1700s by a man called the "Balsham Todt," "the master of the good name." It's the Hasidic movement, and this was the birth of Hasidism in Eastern Europe. The Hasidic idea is that God can be approached not only through study and prayer, but through joy, through singing and dancing, as long as they are focused on God; that there's spirituality in music and in dance. The Hasidim have a lot of songs of deep, spiritual tenderness, which they call "nigunim." "Tisch nigunim" is a tradition where people sit around a tisch—a table—bang on the table, and sing "Devegas nigunim," very slow, long melodies. "Devegas" means "spiritual concentration," and to learn a really long melody by

ear, they get into intense concentration that's like a meditation. Part of the function of learning these melodies is ecstatic meditation, or a ritual practice.

These melodies are musically related to klezmer. It's just that klezmer, by definition, is instrumental and "nigunim" are, by definition, vocal. We have many examples of klezmer melodies that are also "nigunim," and vice versa.

So, to answer your question, if you're Jewish, and you want to express your Jewishness in a very ethnically distinct, powerful way, it's all there in klezmer music. It can be used for praying, because the prayer melodies are related to the secular klezmer melodies. If someone is looking for a nostalgic mood, klezmer has got it in spades. But the experience is there if you're not Jewish also. And if you're Jewish but not interested in Judaism, the experience is there as well. This music is simply a great music to play.

Janet: What was its original role in the community?

Frank: It was the music for celebrations. Klezmer, by definition, is instrumental music, the instrumental music of the East European, Ashkenazi, Yiddish-speaking Jews. Since it is, for the most part, forbidden to play instruments for religious occasions in a synagogue, it is heard mostly at the weddings, and the wedding is a very, very important part of the community life, probably the biggest celebration outside of the religious holidays.

Political views and social commentary are found in the vocal tradition, be it theater or the folk songs, but klezmer is by definition purely instrumental music.

Janet: You have played Eastern European, African, and Latin American music. It seems like you have explored the whole world musically. What about these diverse musical styles interests and attracts you, and how does it affect your klezmer compositions?

Frank: I think that what makes my music distinct is not the fact that I use outside influences, but the way I do it.

For instance, on the CD *Jews With Horns*, there's a song whose structure I would call a composition arrangement—which is a mixture of my composing and already extant material. There's a traditional, instrumental klezmer tune, a vocal tune written by Eliza Greenblatt, and some of my writing. Since I'm deep into salsa as a genre, I structurally mimicked one of Eddie Palmieri's compositions.

It's all about choices—what can we learn? What options do we have? As I learn a musical style and study it, the more I can open myself to it the better I can hear these different idioms talking to each other, often not even knowing where they come from. This also allows us to analyze what makes a tradition unique. We don't know something's unique until we contrast it against other things.

Janet: You have been called an experimentalist in crossing and mixing musical genres. What does that mean, and is your version of klezmer a kind of fusion?

Frank: All music is a fusion. I think I'm called an experimentalist because I integrate various traditions consciously, deliberately. When you listen to the difference between the

klezmer that evolved in Poland, as opposed to the klezmer that evolved in the Ukraine and Moldova, the Jewish elements are similar and there is a fusion that speaks of the whole community.

I formed this group, Klezmer Brass Allstars, based on the theory that we live in a global community that is essentially the same as small shtetls, so I could get any of fifty select people in the world, and without even saying a word, we could have a common language, a common style, a common way of playing that works because we've learned the same way, made the same choices, and have the same influences. We just don't live in the same town.

Janet: Are there groups that play straight-ahead re-creations of older klezmer music, more like archival klezmer?

Frank: Yes. There is a band that mimics the sound of a Rumanian band that was recorded in the teens and '20s. They take their repertoire and style. Their goal is to sound as much like the original as possible. Then there is the Klezmer Conservatory Band, which tries to reproduce the American klezmer big-band sound. So when these musicians say, "We play 'traditional' klezmer," I say, "Which klezmer tradition do you play?" Because there are many klezmer traditions.

Janet: Is it because you do not merely recreate an older sound that you call your program "Evolving Traditions?"

Frank: Yes. Just as those repertory bands that came before us did something unique, we hope that we have created our own way of playing the music, which is now becoming part of the tradition. It *is* a traditional learning method to copy your ancestors and your forebears, but it's not a traditional thing to never go beyond that. So, if a tradition is really an evolving combination of various traditions, what *is* distinctly Jewish about klezmer? The style and the ornamentation. What is unique about klezmer is the way the instruments imitate the voice, and the religious vocal singing of the cantors and the chazens, of the Jewish religious singers. That's the root of it.

Janet: You composed and arranged all of the music on the program. What was your process in these different roles?

Frank: For this different program I thought I'd present different works I've done over the years, from different projects. I've done a lot with theater, I've done a lot with dance, a lot of commissions for particular bands, working as an arranger/composer. I very rarely write music that's just for an abstract group of musicians; I always think about the specific musicians who are going to play it.

I know how to arrange in a classical sense, arranging for anyone of a given tradition who knows how to read music. But more often than not I do what's called "arranging by contracting," which is that the musicians I hire bring something particular to the way they're going to interpret the piece.

My technique is one where composition and improvisation, arranging and not arranging, flow in and out of each other, surprising listeners, who can't tell what was arranged, what

was not; what was improvised, what was composed, what was original, what's traditional. When I perform elsewhere with the Klezmer Brass Allstars, we have a repertoire of songs that we know, but we go out without a set list, without music, and we create concerts where we don't know what's going to happen: the structure is totally open-ended and improvised, and each night's show is totally different. It's a reaction to how we feel that night, to the audience.

But for the LCI program, I decided to focus on instrumentation. It's basically trumpet and strings, more or less, which is kind of nice, because it echoes back to baroque music. It's an unusual combination. There's a guy named Art Bailey, whose group comprises accordion, mandolin, two violins, and a bass. They're called Art Bailey's Orkestra Popilar. So I said, "Art, let's use your group with me on top of it," and I added percussion. Again, this combination of instruments presents a fusion of traditions from different times and places. One of the earliest recorded, historically notated examples of a klezmer band was a band of fourteen trumpets in a synagogue in Prague; and the original Jewish instrument is the shofar, a wind instrument. Violin, clarinet, tsimbal (which is a kind of dulcimer), and some sort of bass or cello-like instrument, is a common line-up. But we have, from 100 years ago, photos of bands with drums, trombones, tubas, trumpets, flutes, and violins.

In this program, the accordion takes the harmonic role. Plus, we're using the mandolin. That's a pretty unique combination. The rhythm can be played by a violin, like the contradance style, which was very popular in Hungarian dance houses. On the accordion, I think it was created later. The accordion comes up in the 18th or 19th century. It plays a big role in American Klezmer. The drum is a very important Klezmer instrument. In Yiddish, you don't say "with great fanfare," you say, "mit poiken schlemedt," "with drums and trumpets." We're going to incorporate a poik, which is like a big, bass drum, with a cymbal on top. That kind of drum is ubiquitous around the world, because one person can do everything. It's in New Orleans music, it's in the merengue. Our drummer will also have a small kit, which comes out of both the European military tradition and the American Klezmer tradition, with a snare, woodblock, bass drum, maybe a cymbal or two, very small. Then, because I'm also bringing in our Middle Eastern music, we'll probably have some form of hand or "frame" drum.

Janet: Much of your brass music is based on dance or street music. Is any of the music in this program meant for dancing?

Frank: Two or three selections are really straight-ahead dance numbers. The others are meant as concert-hall pieces.

Podolye, Podolye (aka *In the Marketplace, All is Subterfuge*), is named after a region in Moldova, and based on an impression of their music. There's a good Bulgar rhythm. *In the Marketplace* expresses ideas about the marketplace and carnival.

Rakhmones is a very free-form piece. In the wedding ceremony there are certain times when you want very free music, with no steady rhythm. It is suitable for different ritual activities, such as seating the bride.

In the *Golem Khusidl*, I'm bringing in Middle Eastern rhythms and modes.

Shvartz un Vays (Black and White) was an exercise I gave myself: can I write a Jewish song in a twelve-bar blues structure? Again, I used part of a traditional song.

Green Violin Hora could be danced as a slow hora. It could have been a traditional Rumanian tune; I just happened to write that melody for it.

The *Faith Hora* I wrote as a dance piece. So we have a slow hora, a fast hora, a free-meter piece, an Arabic piece—I'm trying to make a concert program that shows a confluence of both the traditional rhythms and the new elements I added.

Then there's the song *Avram ben Shmuel*, which I wrote for my father. In it there are a lot of elements that could be traditional, except that I happen to have written them. Three others—the *Green Violin Hora*, the *Faith Hora*, and *Podolye*—clearly could have been traditional, whereas *Al-osfour al-majnoun* and *Peretz Tants*, though they're still within the tradition, are clearly my compositions. In *Al-osfour* I'm playing with Arabic, Balkan, and Jewish time signatures, throwing back and forth these rhythms—sevens and eights—and exploring how they relate to each other. That's totally original, as are improvisations. And *Peretz Tants* is close to the theater tradition, another important Jewish music tradition, based on the Klezmer folk songs.

Klezmer music, embodied on a concert stage, was often part of the Yiddish theater, and great composers worked with these sources. In *Peretz Tants*, what was fun was taking simple, traditional-sounding melodies and motifs, but modulating them. There's the melody, then three sections later it comes back, this time up a third. That structure wouldn't have existed once upon a time, yet any micro-moment of it, any fractal moment of that piece, could be a traditional song.