

A Jewish Odyssey

1. Chava Alberstein & the Klezmatics Israel/USA "Di Goldene Pave"

2. The Burning Bush United Kingdom "Rad Halaila"

3. KlezRoyam Italy "Fel Shara"

4. Zohar USA/Morocco "Shabbat Medley"

5. Ofra Haza Israel "Rachamim"

6. Uzca USA "Kona Hora"

7. The Klezmer Conservatory Band USA "Meron Nign"

8. Janet & Jak Esim Turkey "Ija Mia Mi Kerida"

9. Consuelo Luz Chile/Cuba/USA "Las Estreyas"

10. Finjan Canada "Dancing on Water"

11. Fortuna Brazil "Shalom Aleichem"



Roots of Jewish culture stretch back to the Middle East, which was the starting point for the odyssey of the Jewish people. For more than 2,000 years, Jews have lived amidst a great variety of cultures and their music has absorbed influences from Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Americas and more. Over time, Jewish music has become a cross-cultural blend of expressions that reflects the range and diversity of the Diaspora.

While Jewish music is extremely varied and clear boundaries can be difficult to define, there are three main categories. *Ashkenazi* includes European styles such as klezmer. *Sephardic* is primarily the music of Jews from the Mediterranean including Spain, Portugal, North Africa, Greece and Turkey. *Mizrahi* is the music of Jewish communities that were based for thousands of years in Arabic countries. There is also Israeli popular music, which incorporates all of these styles as well as Western pop and folk music.

Derived from the Hebrew word for "German", Ashkenazi referred originally to Jews who settled in Europe's Rhineland valley and northern France in the 9th century, but it now includes most Jews of Northern and Eastern European descent. The Yiddish language is a hybrid of German, Hebrew and various Eastern European languages and was the common language among Ashkenazi Jews for many years, although its prevalence has diminished due to assimilation. Still, Yiddish remains an important part of musical expression.

The best-known type of Ashkenazi music is klezmer, a word that is derived from the Hebrew words *kley* (instrument) and *zemer* (song). Klezmer's rich history extends back hundreds of years, when it developed among Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (Poland, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Balkans, etc.). Itinerant klezmer musicians would wander from town to town, enlivening weddings, *bar*

mitzvahs and local celebrations with their fast-paced dance tunes. Subtle echoes of Jewish music's ancient Middle Eastern past can be heard in klezmer, but it is the influences of Eastern European folk music and gypsy music that are most evident. Originally string bands, the violin led early klezmer ensembles, although the clarinet also became an important solo instrument.

Faced with economic hardships, ceaseless discrimination and abuse, European Jews began emigrating en masse to the United States in the late 19th century. They brought their music with them, and in the early part of the 20th century klezmer music thrived in New York City and other Jewish enclaves. The music soon began incorporating local influences such as swing, foxtrot and Dixieland.

After a long decline in popularity, klezmer has experienced a revival as a new generation of Jewish musicians seek to re-discover their cultural heritage. The music has been given a new vitality as groups like The Klezmatics, The Klezmer Conservatory Band and others have mastered traditional styles while developing contemporary arrangements. The modern klezmer revival has breathed new life into this ancient art form, while keeping it an active, creative tradition rather than a museum piece.

Sephardic Jews can be found primarily in Mediterranean countries, and they are largely descended from Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492. The word Sephardic is derived from the Biblical *Sefarad*, which probably referred to the Iberian Peninsula, where modern-day Spain and Portugal are located. The Jewish community thrived in Spain for hundreds of years, developing a rich cultural legacy that was influenced by the Spanish and Moorish societies that shared the land. In 1492, the Catholic monarchy gave the Jewish community a choice: either convert to Christianity or be forcibly expelled. Countless thousands of Jews left Spain, and spread out across the Ottoman Empire heading towards Morocco, Turkey, Greece and

other Mediterranean countries. The language of the Sephardic Jews, called Ladino or Judeo-Spanish, is based on the medieval Iberian languages Castilian, Catalan and Galician-Portuguese, blended with elements of Hebrew, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, and more recently with bits of Italian, French and modern Spanish.

Sephardic music reflects the rich legacy of thousands of years of cross-cultural interaction. Elements of medieval Spanish music are evident alongside Middle Eastern rhythms and melodies, as well as Greek, Turkish and Moroccan instrumentation and influences.

The third major strand of Jewish music is less distinct and often is categorized as part of Sephardic music. Mizrahi literally means "Eastern" and it refers to the Jews who lived among the Arabic cultures of Yemen, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and as far east as India. The main language used in Mizrahi music is Hebrew, although songs in Arabic are also common. Mizrahi music has come into its own recently in Israel, and artists such as Ofra Haza have become immensely popular. The music has a decidedly Middle Eastern flavor in its instrumentation, rhythms and melodies. Although often lumped together, Mizrahi music has a different historical and cultural background than Sephardic music. For example, there are no Spanish influences or use of Ladino.

A Jewish Odyssey includes songs that reflect a bit of the wide variety of Jewish music, but it is only a small taste of these diverse cultures. Few of the artists on this compilation are traditionalists, although all have been inspired by the Jewish music's deep history. Every element of the exotic melodies, instruments, rhythms and lyrics serve as landmarks along the long historical and cultural road traveled by the Jewish people.



Chava Alberstein & the Klezmatics "Di Goldene Pave"

(artist: hah-vah song: dih golden-eh pah-veh)

This song teams one of Israel's most popular singers with one of America's leading klezmer bands. Revered in Israel, Chava Alberstein has been compared to Joan Baez, Mercedes Sosa, and other populist divas who have explored the depths of love, loss, peace, oppression and hope in their music, and have become icons of their generation. Born in Poland, Alberstein and her family moved to Israel when she was four years old. She was discovered at the age of seventeen after performing on a live variety show in Jaffa, and signed to the newly formed CBS Israel. Alberstein has recorded over 45 albums, many of which have gone gold or platinum, and she has won just about every award imaginable for her ceaseless efforts to explore the Jewish spirit through music.

Founded in 1986 in New York City, The Klezmatics are one of the most popular and creative klezmer bands in the United States. They have introduced people to the joys of Yiddish music, while helping spearhead a revival of interest and support for klezmer among the contemporary Jewish community. Rather than following a pure, preservationist tact, their eclectic and avant-garde style has helped maintain the vitality of the music by taking it in entirely new and often unexpected directions. The Klezmatics have worked on projects with a wide range of artists, including the Moroccan folk ensemble the Master Musicians of Jajouka, rock band Ben Folds Five, poet Allen Ginsberg, and violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman. They collaborated with Mr. Perlman on the critically acclaimed *In the Fiddler's House* project, which included two albums and an Emmy Award-winning PBS Television special.

"Di Goldene Pave (The Golden Peacock)" was composed by Alberstein and arranged by The



Photo by John Kuczala

Klezematics. The lyrics are derived from a Yiddish poem by Anna Margolin (1887-1952), a radical Russian-born poet who emigrated to America near the beginning of the 20th century. "The golden peacock has flown, flown off / And night's opened its eyes of gold / Bright one of mine, go to sleep / I was the fiddle and you were the bow / Tense one of mine, go to sleep."

The Burning Bush "Rad Halaila"

(song: rahd hah-LIE-lah)

The Burning Bush is Britain's leading Jewish music ensemble. They explore all aspects of Jewish musical expression, especially klezmer and Sephardic music. Since their sell-out debut concert at London's South Bank, they have performed to packed houses at major festivals and cultural events throughout Europe. They also broadcast for the BBC and have appeared in a number of TV documentaries, feature films and commercials.

"Rad Halaila (The Night is Strong)" is based on a traditional Hassidic melody, with Hebrew lyrics by Ya'kov Orland. "The night is strong / And our song pierces the sky / Hora, return to us seven-fold / For your festivals and songs we still have strength / Return to your children / One thousand generations have embraced you / Come back and we shall dance in a circle / Because our journey has no end / Our heart is one from here to eternity."



Courtesy of ARC Music

KlezRoym "Fel Shara"

(artist: klez-roy-eem song: fel sha-rah)

KlezRoym is Italy's top Jewish music ensemble, taking their inspiration from Eastern European, Sephardic and Middle Eastern sources and blending them with elements of Italian folk music, jazz and cabaret. The Jewish community in Italy is the oldest in Europe, having survived largely uninterrupted for over 2,000 years. Italy's Jews were widely accepted into the mainstream Christian culture of Italy, at times when this was not the case in other parts of Europe. This changed during World War II, when a large number of Italian Jews were deported.

"Fel Shara" is a traditional Sephardic love song that effortlessly blends five different languages (Ladino, Italian, French, English and Arabic). The languages shift in mid-phrase, switching between English and French or Italian and Arabic from one word to the next. The song is a perfect example of how both the music and language of the Spanish Jews came to absorb, over the centuries, the musical traditions and languages of the different countries where they settled. The ethereal voice of KlezRoym's lead singer, Eva Coen, adds an air of mystery to this entrancing piece. "She was walking down the street," sings Coen, "The girl with the dark eyes / Her face shining like the moon / Illuminated the boulevard / I wanted to speak to her but she abused me / You know that I love you so much / I will await you all night long / Until the sunrise / And every morning afterwards / Until the triumph of our love."



Photo by Paolo Soriani

Zohar "Shabbat Medley"

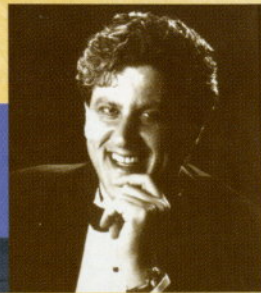
(artist: zoh-har song: shah-BAHT medley)

Avant-garde pianist Uri Caine (pictured on left) is the driving force behind the Zohar project, a cutting edge exploration of traditional Sephardic music and contemporary jazz and other modern influences. Born and raised in Philadelphia and currently based in New York City, Uri Caine was influenced by artists like Herbie Hancock, Oscar Peterson, Cecil Taylor, Glenn Gould and other creative geniuses of the piano. His parents played Israeli folk music and Yemenite and Moroccan Jewish music at home. While he has been a leading figure on the New York music scene, working in various forms of classical, electronic and jazz, Caine has also regularly explored the music of his Jewish roots. He worked with clarinetist Don Byron on a well-received album of new arrangements of the work of klezmer pioneer Mickey Katz. His collaborator on the Zohar project is Sephardic/Moroccan singer Aaron Bensoussan (pictured on right). Bensoussan studied the Sephardic liturgical tradition with his father and other master musicians in Morocco. He now lives in the United States, and has brought Sephardic music to synagogues and concert halls around the country.

Uri Caine named this project after a classic 13th century text of esoteric Jewish mysticism, or Kabbala. It was especially popular among Sephardic Jews who, after their expulsion from Spain, turned to the *Zohar* as a guide for mystical speculations.



Courtesy of Knitting Factory Records



Ofra Haza "Rachamim"

(artist: oh-frah hah-zah song: rah-hah-meem)

Ofra Haza was one of the most successful Israeli artists of all time, both at home and abroad. Born in Tel Aviv in 1959, Haza's parents were immigrants from Yemen, and she and her eight siblings were surrounded by traditional culture and music of Yemenite Jews. The Jewish community in Yemen was able to maintain its traditions more purely than those in other parts of the Diaspora. Music is a central element of Yemenite culture, and many popular Israeli singers are of Yemenite origin. Songs are performed on any possible occasion: weddings, funerals, and ceremonies both public and private. The voice has become a central element of Yemenite Jewish music because the Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula largely banned musical instruments.

Haza's professional career began when she was just 12 years old, after the founder of an important theater group discovered her. Haza released her first solo album when she was 19, which was an immediate success in Israel. In 1985, Haza released her first international album, *Yemenite Songs*, a collection of interpretations of devotional poetry written by the 17th-century rabbi, Shalom Shabazi. The album was very successful and helped establish Haza as one of the leading figures in world music. It was a twist of fate that helped bring her recognition in the mainstream, however, when Eric B. and Rakim sampled her voice on the now classic hip-hop track "Paid in Full." Not long afterwards, her song "Im Nin Alu" reached Number 1 in the German Pop charts for nine straight weeks and topped the European Pop charts for two weeks. Her success led her to be signed by



Courtesy of P.O.W.

Geffen Records with whom she released a number of crossover pop albums. Her 1992 album *Kiryah*, which was produced by Don Was, received a Grammy nomination for Best World Music Album. Her exotic voice was tapped for numerous soundtracks and special projects, including DreamWorks's international hit film *The Prince of Egypt*. In early 2000, Haza was admitted to a hospital to treat a mysterious illness. She passed away on February 23, 2000 for what turned out to be AIDS-related complications.

While Ofra Haza was adept at slick, well-crafted world beat with a contemporary flavor, on "Rachamim" she returns to her roots. "All the men in the Neighborhood / Look at me / They say "you're as pretty as a painting" / Like the sunset / And they all try to catch me / And they all want me / But I only ask for / Rachamim / They all whistle for me from the window / I don't hear a thing / My heart is like a telephone / Which has a broken line / It is busy for months / No connection, no lines / Oh Rachamim, when will you spread upon me / Your compassion / Then we'll go out to the street / Hugging like a pair of doves."

1. a man's name which means "compassion"



Uzca "Kona Hora"

(artist: you-skah song: koh-nah hore-ah)

Marcus Uzilevsky, aka Uzca, has wandered from one creative venture to another throughout his life. Under the pseudonym Rusty Evans, he led a psychedelic rock band in the 1960s that appeared on *Dick Clark's American Bandstand* to perform their hit version of "Midnight Special." He jammed with Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village and toured with the New Christy Minstrels. In the 1970s, Uzca developed a following for his visual artistry, and he was known primarily for his innovative linear landscapes. His work can be found in the permanent collections of dozens of museums. During that time he also recorded several albums for the Folkways label. Born in New York City to Jewish immigrant parents from Poland and Russia, Uzca now lives in Northern California. More recently, Uzca returned to his Jewish roots, using traditional folk melodies and rhythms as inspiration for his own, unique musical expression.

"Kona Hora!" couples violin lines inspired by Jewish melodies with Middle-Eastern percussion. He sings with a lilting, flowing quality in a created language he calls his "spirit language." The spontaneous words of unknown origin have a clear relationship to Hebrew, but Uzca insists they reflect a mystical, universal language that is entirely improvised.

1. hora, a ring dance of Romanian origin



Photo by Arnold Young

The Klezmer Conservatory Band "Meron Nign"

(song: mare-ohn nig-en)

Hankus Netsky, a musician, composer and scholar who wanted to explore and develop the music of his ancestors, founded the Klezmer Conservatory Band in 1980 after discovering that a grandfather and four uncles had been in klezmer orchestras in Philadelphia starting in the 1920s. Until the 1940s, klezmer orchestras flourished in the United States, but as new styles of music became popular and immigrant Jews tried to appear more "American," the klezmer tradition faded.

The Klezmer Conservatory Band played a prominent role in sparking the klezmer revival of the 1980s, and their concerts and recordings helped a new generation discover the creative possibilities and rewards of their grandparent's music. They have recorded a number of well-received albums, were featured in the 1988 documentary *A Jumpin' Night in the Garden of Eden*, as well as other films and soundtracks, and they participated in Itzhak Perlman's *In the Fiddler's House* albums, film and concert tours. As one of the leading representatives of contemporary klezmer music, The Klezmer Conservatory Band has played at some of the world's most prestigious venues and festivals.

"Meron Nign¹ (Tune from Meron)" is a traditional instrumental piece that was arranged by Jeff Warschauer, who is also featured on mandolin. It is an old European klezmer melody, closely associated with the mystical Meron Hasidim of Sfat, Israel, although this arrangement gives it a middle-eastern flavor.

1. *nign*, or *niggun*, an instrumental Hasidic religious melody. *Nigunim* (plural) are also a vital part of the klezmer repertoire.



Photo by Jean Hangarter

Janet & Jak Esim "Ija Mia Mi Kerida"

(artist: janet and jack eh-SEEM song: ee-jah mee-ah mee care-ee-dah)

Constantinople, now Turkey's Istanbul, was a major destination for the Jews who were exiled from Spain in 1492. The then leader of the Ottoman Empire, Beyazid II, is said to have recognized the social, economic and cultural achievements of the Jewish community and scoffed at the Spanish leader: "You call Ferdinand a wise king? A king that robs his own country to enrich mine?" Over 50,000 Sephardic Jews settled in Constantinople's Galata district, accounting for as much as one third of the Jews that had fled Spain. Compared to Europe, where forced conversions, pogroms and daily discrimination against and oppression of Jews was common, the Ottoman Empire was a relatively safe place for Jews, and they were largely able to maintain their language, religion and artistic expressions until the end of the 19th century.

Jak Esim first heard Turkish-Sephardic songs on old Gramophone recordings, which were recorded as early as 1903. As the Jewish community in Turkey was weakened by emigration to Israel and increased assimilation, its musical output declined so much that the last recording of local Sephardic music was released in 1951. Jak Esim along with his wife Janet have become important figures in the research and revival of the rich repertoire of the Turkish Jews. Since the mid-seventies, they have been collecting Sephardic songs in Turkey, recording elderly singers who were among the last living carriers of the tradition.

"Ija Mia Mi Kerida (My Dear Daughter)" is a classic Sephardic song that can be heard in Jewish communities throughout the Middle East and Southern Europe. The lyrics are in Ladino. This version features the haunting acoustic guitar work of Turkish master Erkan Ogur. "Oh, my dearest daughter," sings Jak, playing the role of the father, "Don't rush to the sea / The sea is so stormy / Look out! It will snatch you away!" Janet, as the daughter, responds, "Let it take me / Let it take me to its depth / That I should be feed for the black fishes / That will free me / From the bitter torments of love."

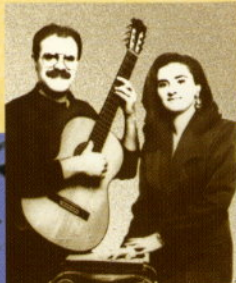


Photo by Birger Gesthuisen

Consuelo Luz "Las Estreyas"

(artist: con-SWELL-oh loose song: lahs eh-STRAY-ahs)

Singer/songwriter Consuelo Luz was born in Chile and raised in Greece, the Philippines, Spain, Italy and Peru. Her Cuban father and Chilean mother raised her as a Catholic, but as she grew older she became aware of Sephardic Jewish ancestry on her mother's side. Her grandfather's Davila family descended from the same Avila family of St. Teresa of Avila, a famous *converso*!. As she learned more about her roots, she discovered traditional Ladino prayers and songs, and has since devoted her life to interpreting this rich repertoire. A local rabbi approached Consuelo and asked her to learn some Ladino prayer songs to sing at a religious service. Since then, she has performed these songs in many different venues, including sold out concert halls, public community events, countless bar mitzvahs, High Holy Days at Temple Beth Shalom in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and at the Jewish Community Center in Havana, Cuba.

Luz lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and during her research realized that some of the *Sephardim* who left Spain for Mexico in the early 1500s also ended up in what is now New Mexico. While Jewish culture has largely been lost over time in this area, some evidence of its influence can be found in local customs. Luz is also a published poet, translator, playwright, actress and co-founder of the Hispanic Radio Network.

"Las Estreyas (The Stars)" is a popular love-ballad from pre-Inquisition Spain. "The stars in heaven, my darling / They shine, but they are not steady / Girl of my heart, my passion is enough / The first time I saw you, my darling / You entered my soul, you gave me / Rays of sunlight, girl of my heart."

1. Jew who converted to Catholicism rather than be exiled from Spain



Photo by Lisa Law

Finjan "Dancing on Water"

(artist: fin-JAHN)

Canada's best-known contributor to the klezmer revival, Finjan is equally adept at interpreting Yiddish theater standards, playing traditional *freilachs*¹, or creating new, klezmer-influenced melodies. Finjan was formed in 1982 in Winnipeg, Ontario, a city that was one of Canada's main destinations for Eastern European immigrants. Winnipeg's North End was often referred to as "Little Jerusalem," although the Jews who lived there were primarily from Poland, the Ukraine, and Russia. Finjan has performed on National Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion* and at numerous venues and festivals throughout North America.

"Dancing on Water" was inspired by a short dance-like melody that appeared on a 1910 klezmer recording.

1. A lively Eastern European Jewish circle or line dance generally played at weddings



Photo by Sheila Spence

Fortuna "Shalom Aleichem"

(artist: for-TUNE-ah song: sha-LOME ah-LAY-hem)

Fortuna hails from the city of São Paulo, Brazil's largest city and the home to a large Jewish community. She had developed a successful career singing Brazilian standards and *bossa nova* classics, and even toured with Brazilian legends Chico Buarque and Toquinho. In 1992 she began having dreams in which exotic gypsy or Spanish women would appear singing songs that sounded medieval or Middle Eastern. She came to understand these dreams after a visit to the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, where she first heard Sephardic music. She immediately recognized the music from her dreams, and decided to devote herself to exploring the music and culture of this long-lost expression of her Jewish cultural heritage. Since then, Fortuna has recorded four CDs of Sephardic songs, and has developed an elaborate stage show that showcases the authentic costumes, dance and music of the Sephardim.

"Shalom Aleichem (Peace Be With You)" is a popular Hebrew song that Fortuna interprets in the Sephardic style. The phrase *shalom aleichem* is usually used as a greeting, but it can also be used to say goodbye, so this serves as a fitting close to this collection. For Fortuna, the song's message of peace recalls a golden age before the Jews and Moors were expelled from Spain, when Christians, Jews and Arabs lived together on the Iberian peninsular in harmony.

"Peace be with you / Angels of the highest, angels of heaven / Of the king of king of all kings / The saint, blessed be he."



Photo by João Caldas



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