

Bagels and Bongos: Locating American Klezmer in the 1950s

Lonnie Miller



Abstract: Klezmer, traditional Jewish music, is widely imagined in two periods: pre-World War II and post-1970. Very little attention has been given to the space in between these two periods. This article sheds light on klezmer during this dormant period, problematizing the idea of a klezmer “revival” and reframing the timeline of Jewish music. It looks at data from the recording industry in the United States to survey the musicians, instruments, and musical styles present in klezmer records produced in the 1950s and form a picture of how the style was transmitted from the previous generation of musicians. Three recorded klezmer pieces are used as case studies, exemplifying three different trends in klezmer music at the time: old-fashioned nostalgic music (“Bessarabian Dance” from Freilachs For Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs And Other Celebrations recorded by Murray Lehrer and Dave Tarras), genre-blending dance music (“Mazeltov Merengue” in Bagels and Bongos recorded by the Irving Fields Trio), and parodies of popular American songs (“Sixteen Tons” in Mish Mosh recorded by Mickey Katz). Surveying these sources reveals an abundance of vibrant klezmer music drawing from multiple sources and serving multiple purposes in Jewish communities of the 1950s. Klezmer has been, from its inception, a style that incorporated local non-Jewish music styles, catered to the commercial market, and adapted to specific events and purposes in the community. The perceived death of klezmer in the 1950s was in reality the natural continuation of this process, as klezmer musicians incorporated new American music styles and adapted to playing in dance halls and on commercial records. An “Americanized” piece of klezmer music is no less authentic for its incorporation of other American cultures. The evolution of American klezmer was continuous through the 1950s, carrying klezmer from the arrival of the European-influenced genre in America to the modern scene of pop, funk, and electronic klezmer bands.

The popular history of klezmer music in America imagines two distinct periods: a golden age before World War II, and a triumphant revival beginning in the 1970s. Very little attention has been given to the space in between these two periods, in the 1950s. Some claim that the klezmer genre fell entirely out of fashion in this period due to Jewish efforts towards musical assimilation. Others believe that although 1950s klezmer has fallen out of our modern cultural consciousness, the klezmer music produced during this time was rich and vibrant and held the seeds of the 1970s revitalization. Here, I will attempt to locate klezmer during its dormant period in the 1950s, call into question the idea of a klezmer “revival,” and attempt to reframe the timeline of Jewish cultural music to allow for multiple facets of authentic cultural expression.

Klezmer, from the Hebrew *klei zemer* meaning “vessel of song,” can refer to both the musical style and to the musician playing it. It has existed in some form in Eastern European Jewish communities since the 1400s, and it has long been considered a vital part of Jewish weddings and other life cycle events, a foil to the more somber religious elements of the ceremonies.¹ European klezmer music had a consistent core repertoire across the continent, which included Jewish dance tunes like the *freylekhs*, *sher*, and *khosidl*, as well as ritual tunes which served specific purposes in religious ceremonies. Other klezmer repertoire varied by location, as the musicians borrowed styles and subgenres from the local culture, adopting the *bulgar* and *hora* in Romania, the *kozachok* in Ukraine, and the waltz and polka in Central and Western Europe.²

Klezmer was brought to America in the waves of Jewish immigration from the 1880s to the 1920s. The genre flourished in the Lower East Side of New York during this period, along with other elements of Yiddish culture, theatre, and art. When immigration to the US was halted in 1924, Eastern European culture including klezmer stagnated and began to decline due to a lack of incoming immigrants to the community.³ The decline in “traditional” klezmer continued through the Great Depression, when the demand and compensation available for musicians plummeted across America, and into World War II, as male musicians were drafted to fight or play in military bands.⁴ After World War II, American Jewish culture experienced a massive shift towards assimilation and upward mobility. As socioeconomic divides grew within the Jewish community, the new generation wanted to distance themselves from their parents’ immigrant status.⁵ Klezmer, according to popular history, fell by the wayside as a casualty of this assimilation.

The next we typically hear of klezmer is its “revival” in the 1970s, during the rise of American folk music. Jewish Americans, now comfortably assimilated

¹ Hankus Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community in Twentieth-Century Jewish Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 51

³ Yale Strom, *The Book of Klezmer: The History, the Music, the Folklore*. Vol. 1st (Chicago, Ill: Chicago Review Press, 2002), 144.

⁴ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 51.

⁵ Strom, 146.

and relatively safe from stigmas around expressing Jewish identity, became interested in their own folk traditions, and turned to old klezmer records of the 20s and 30s.⁶ Musicians already deep in their careers rediscovered old repertoire and “reinvented” klezmer, putting creative, new-age spins on it.⁷ Neo-*klezmerim* like Henry Sapoznik, Peter Sokolow, and Sid Beckerman founded an annual retreat called Klezkamp to teach and inspire new klezmer musicians, and neo-klezmer thrived throughout the 80s and 90s, and even into the 21st century.⁸

A closer look at the status of klezmer in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, however, problematizes the idea of a klezmer “revival.” The term implies a broken link in the lineage of klezmer, but in reality, klezmer musicians built on their predecessors’ traditions of assimilating music styles from other cultures and adapting to the needs of their community. In this way, klezmer’s development can be traced across trends through the nebulous middle of the 20th century to emerge intact on the other side.

The connection between these two periods in klezmer’s history is evident from the direct line of apprenticeship between the key players in each period. Historically, *klezmerim* in Eastern Europe came from families of musicians, who often married into other musical families and passed their knowledge of the genre on to the next generation of performers.⁹ Although the bloodline of klezmer in America was no longer a genetic one, the most famous klezmer musicians learned directly from their predecessors. Bandleaders would often train their band members on the job, giving them the musical, linguistic, and cultural tools to access the music.¹⁰ Some of the most prominent branches in this lineage are illustrated in Fig. 1 in the appendix, connecting 1920s klezmer greats to the founders of Klezkamp and Klezkanada, another similar organization for teaching new *klezmerim*.

As new musicians were initiated into klezmer tradition, the tradition itself was molded and shaped by the musicians and the community they served. Klezmer musician and scholar Hankus Netsky notes that, at this period of history, the creativity of musicians and the changing needs of the Jewish American community both played a role in klezmer’s evolution: “individuals stretch the rules according to their creative abilities, but [...] it is the community that primarily initiates the need for innovation.”¹¹ As Jewish American culture underwent significant shifts in the mid-20th century, klezmer musicians and their protégés innovated accordingly to provide for the changing needs of their community. This innovation included a rebranding of sorts: even as early as the

⁶ Hankus Netsky, “An Overview of Klezmer Music and Its Development in the U.S.” In *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, 47:5–12 (1998), 10–11.

⁷ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ Hankus Netsky, “Jewish Wedding Music in the Neo-Klezmer Era”. In *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding*, ed. Inna Naroditskaya, 191–207 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019,) 194.

¹¹ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 14.

turn of the century, Jewish musicians in America did not call themselves *klezmerim*. The term tethered them to their immigrant status, as well as to negative depictions of klezmer musicians in traditional folklore. Jewish musicians “used the term only as a derogatory way to refer to those whom they felt could not adapt to the demands of the contemporary American music scene.”¹² Instead, they called themselves *musikers*, a more generic Yiddish term for musicians. The self-proclaimed American *musikers* were often classically trained and aspired to professional music careers, as compared to the earlier generations of *klezmerim* in Eastern Europe, who learned their repertoire by ear and often took other jobs to support their music.¹³

Because of these stigmas within the community, the word “klezmer” was rarely used in American music publishing and advertising before the “revival.” Instead, bandleaders often came up with more sophisticated-sounding terms for their musical groups: for example, Abe Elenkrig’s Hebrew Bulgarian Orchestra¹⁴ and Joseph Cherniavsky’s Yiddish-American Jazz Band.¹⁵ Netsky considers this disdain for *klezmerim* “an ironic turn of events, since many of these same musicians had been considered models of versatility while in Europe.”¹⁶ In fact, many *musikers* displayed the same versatility and adaptability to local music styles as their forebears. The only difference was that the former adapted to modern American music, the latter to the styles of the Old World that American Jews were leaving behind.

These musicians’ aversion to the word “klezmer” may be a key reason that klezmer music seems to disappear during this period in history. In order to unveil its hidden lineage, it is vital to be able to identify klezmer recordings in the mid 20th century without a moniker. Although an exact definition is difficult to pin down and ultimately unproductive given the shifts in klezmer throughout the centuries, there are several key components that identify the genre as it has been understood since at least the 19th century. At a base level, klezmer is “instrumental music, understood to be ‘good-time’ music—lively, most often associated with celebrations like weddings, and inextricably tied to dance.”¹⁷ Klezmer bands most often have two sections of instruments: a rhythm section keeping time with a strong duple meter, and a melodic line, often of a solo instrument in a high octave. Klezmer tunes are usually written in Jewish modes, which include prayer modes from religious services, like *Mi Sheberakh* and *Ahava Raba*. Klezmer performances are grounded in an existing melody, not in improvisation. However, it is a core tenet of the genre to vary the melody each

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ Strom, *The Book of Klezmer*, 155.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158.

¹⁶ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 33.

¹⁷ Mark Slobin, “Klezmer Music: An American Ethnic Genre.” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16; 34–41 (1984,) 35.

time it is played using tempo changes and musical ornaments.¹⁸ Some of the most iconic of these ornaments are the *krekhits*, a wailing groan, and the *kneytsh*, a sobbing catch in the note, both of which imitate cantorial vocal styles.¹⁹ Trills and slides are also employed to give each repetition of the melody a rich, varied sound.

Building off these base components, klezmer musicians enriched their repertoire by adopting elements from innumerable local music styles. The history of klezmer is one of co-territorial innovation, and its life in early and mid-20th century America was no different. Early in klezmer's American recording history, the "Oriental fox trot" genre arose, combining klezmer with popular American music. As klezmer blossomed, it developed significant crossover with Black American music, and the genre began to trade style elements with jazz. The popular Yiddish jazz song "Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn" was a favorite in 1930s Harlem,²⁰ and Artie Shaw's "The Chant" in 1939 combined the traditional klezmer wedding tune "Khosn Kale Mazeltov" with the jazz standard "St. James Infirmary," drawing out parallels in the melodies.²¹ The 1950s and '60s saw a continuation of this crossover with American music and the introduction of a number of distinct trends, including old-fashioned nostalgic music, genre-blending dance tunes, and parody songs.

The most straightforward of these is nostalgic music, exemplified by "Bessarabian Dance," played by Murray Lehrer and Dave Tarras on the record *Freilachs For Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs And Other Celebrations, Vol. 1*.²² Dave Tarras (1897-1991) was a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant whose prowess in clarinet and klezmer composition earned him wide acclaim. Tarras's career lasted from the 1920s all the way into the 1980s,²³ which allowed many musicians from various points on American klezmer's timeline a chance to study with him directly.²⁴ Although he was a great innovator in the klezmer genre, many of Tarras's recordings, such as this collaboration with Murray Lehrer, are marketed as authentic, nostalgic old-time Jewish music. The liner notes of the album claim that it provides Old World nostalgia to the older generation of Jewish Americans, but every element of the album sleeve's design complicates this claim. The notes are written in English and modern Hebrew, but not Yiddish; the illustration on the album cover depicts an 18th century Jewish wedding not in Eastern Europe but in Italy; and once again, the term "klezmer" itself appears nowhere on the record sleeve. Further complicating the matter, the liner notes cite a notably non-Jewish

¹⁸ Peter Sokolow, *Peter Sokolow's Oral History*, interview by Christa Whitney. (Brooklyn, NY: Wexler Oral History Project, 2013. Digital video.)

¹⁹ Hankus Netsky, "American Klezmer: A Brief History," in *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, edited by Mark Slobin, 13-23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 14.

²⁰ Netsky, "An Overview of Klezmer Music," 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²² Murray Lehrer And His Orchestra and Dave Tarras, *Freilachs For Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs And Other Celebrations, Vol. 1*. (Request Records, c. 1958. LP.)

²³ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 33.

²⁴ See Appendix.

genre as a prime source for nostalgia at celebrations: “For the older generation, the step that is universally familiar and with which all are most comfortable is the old-fashioned waltz. When those insidious strains are played in three-quarter time, the years melt away.”²⁵

Almost as incongruous as the waltz is Lehrer and Tarras’s inclusion of the *bulgar* genre from Bessarabia, a region of Eastern Europe which is now part of Moldova. Scholar Yale Strom explains how the *bulgar*, “a minor genre in the Old World klezmer rooted in Bessarabia, ... came to be synonymous with American klezmer by the 1940s,” brought to popularity by Tarras, who preferred it over the more simple, religious core repertoire.²⁶ Originally called the *bulgarish*, meaning “in the manner of Bulgaria,” the dance genre originated in the early 19th century. It is rhythmically distinct from core klezmer repertoire in its use of triplets and an oft-used syncopated pattern of eighth-note/quarter-note/eighth-note.²⁷ From Bessarabia, the *bulgarish* was brought by *klezmerim* to Eastern Ukraine, and then to America, where it became a core klezmer dance genre; it “attained its final shape in New York City between 1920 and 1950.”²⁸ Many musicians contributed to this new form of the *bulgarish*, now called the *bulgar*. Dave Tarras was one of the key players, composing many *bulgars* with a new structure that eventually replaced the old-world *bulgarish* songs.²⁹ In the American version of the genre, the first section of the tune is in a major key, which sets it apart from the minor openings of *freylekhs* and other core repertoire. Earlier American *klezmerim* like Naftuli Brandwein followed with two sections in either minor or Mi Sheberakh, a Jewish mode with a raised fourth. Tarras, on the other hand, often maintained a major key throughout the whole tune.³⁰

The track “Bessarabian Dance” on *Freilachs For Weddings...* is emblematic of a Tarras *bulgar*. The main features of the song still root it in the klezmer tradition: a duple meter, distinct rhythm and melody sections, and significant ornamentation. Other elements markedly distinguish the tune from other klezmer repertoire. The chords played by the rhythm section are major throughout the entire song, with the melody line switching between major and Mi Sheberakh modes. The tune is rife with triplets, and the third section displays the eighth-quarter-eighth syncopation unique to the *bulgar*. Featuring all the markers of the new form of the *bulgar* alongside Tarras’s uniquely clean style on the clarinet, the piece is an undeniably American product of the mid-20th century. Ultimately, this tune’s claim to nostalgia has little to do with the authenticity of the music or its decade of origin. The Bessarabian *bulgar*, adapted and altered for the American klezmer style, is as far from the core klezmer music of the past as

²⁵ Liner notes from *Freilachs For Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs And Other Celebrations, Vol. 1*. Murray Lehrer And His Orchestra and Dave Tarras. (Request Records, c. 1958. LP.)

²⁶ Strom, 161.

²⁷ Walter Zev Feldman, “Bulgărească /Bulgarish /Bulgar,” in *American Klezmer : Its Roots and Offshoots*, edited by Mark Slobin, 129-173. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

the waltz— but the intent and context in which it is presented on this album is far more important than its provenance. Upon the album's release, the *bulgar*, like the waltz, had already resided in Jewish American spaces for more than 20 years, and had a fond place in the memories of many wedding guests. In their search for nostalgia, Tarras and Lehrer present music that older generations of Jews would be familiar and pleased with. They are serving the desires of the community, unbound by the linear history of the music.

“Mazeltov Merengue,” on the album *Bagels and Bongos* by the Irving Fields Trio,³¹ explores klezmer music from an entirely different angle. The song exemplifies an intentional, thoughtful cross pollination with another culture's music in America. The tune is a traditional klezmer melody called “Sherele,” after the Yiddish folk dance it traditionally accompanied. However, through changes in instrumentation, ornamentation, and rhythm, Irving Fields transforms the melody into a merengue, a traditionally Latin folk dance. This choice of transformation is far from arbitrary. The Latin dance craze of the 1950s captured the hearts of many Americans, but especially assimilated Jews. Cultural historian Josh Kun theorizes that American Jews of this era engaged in another culture's music to maintain their sense of racial minority without evoking the Jewish immigrant identity they were fighting to escape:

Latin music was not melting pot music for Jews the way jazz had been in the earlier part of the century. It didn't smelt them down into Americans, ridding them of their accents and foreignness and putting American flags in their hands, but returned them to themselves changed - not white Americans yet not the same Jews either.³²

To this end, klezmer and Latin dance music were often placed side by side at Jewish weddings and other celebrations, as the name “Mazeltov Merengue” implies. The song weaves klezmer and Latin elements together in all aspects of its musicality. It features a stripped-down version of klezmer instrumentation, with a rhythm section composed of only piano, snare drum, and bongos, and a melody line carried by the right hand of the piano. These three instruments create a thin, minimalist sound, which focuses the ear on the combined cultural rhythms and instrumentation. The rhythm section opens the song alone, playing a pulsing klezmer-esque duple meter overlaid with a bongo beat that is uniquely Latin. The melody, a traditional *sher*, is played in the Ahava Raba or Freygish mode, a Jewish scale with a flat second, and an occasional sharp sixth in the lower octave. However, the ornamentations on this klezmer melody are based in Latin music and jazz. The melody is adorned with triplet rhythms, syncopation, jazzy accidentals, grace notes, and dissonant harmonies. The single instrument of the

³¹ Irving Fields Trio, *Bagels And Bongos*. Decca Records, 1959. LP.

³² Josh Kun, “Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos, or The Other History of Jews in America.” *Shofar* 23, no. 4, 50-68 (2005,) 66.

piano blends these flavors together into a unified, new sound that is inherently klezmer, Latin, and American.

There is less unity between sources, but significantly more humor in the parody music of Mickey Katz. The American-born Katz (1909-1985) initially had two separate careers as a comedian performing English and Yiddish comedy on the radio, and a musician playing jazz in Spike Jones's band. Eventually, in 1947, he combined the two and became famous for his parody songs of popular American music in Yiddish and broken English.³³ Katz's comedy, which was performed on the Borscht Belt circuit and eventually on his own radio show, centers around language: the humorous exchanges, juxtapositions, and misunderstandings that come with being a Yiddish-speaking Jew in America. Underscoring all of this was Katz's perpetual love for klezmer: "No matter the style and no matter the song, klezmer—that Old World Jewish party music Katz loved to play—just wouldn't melt away."³⁴ Although he released a small amount of unsuccessful traditional klezmer music, his most popular songs were reinterpretations of American pop songs, with a Yiddish and Jewish twist injected into both the lyrics and the music itself.

One such example appears on the album *Mish Mosh*.³⁵ "Sixteen Tons," a parody of a 1940s country song by the same name. The song places klezmer side by side with the bluesy, poppy American folk sound of the original song. The majority of the song is in an unaltered minor key, with a rhythmic walking bass line in place of the traditional klezmer duple meter. This bass line, along with a simple drum beat, forms the minimal rhythm section of the song, while Katz's voice takes the melody, drawing focus to the comedy of the lyrics and his feigned fresh-off-the-boat accent. There are occasional interjections by a fiddle and trumpet in a style somewhere between klezmer and jazz, but otherwise no musical inspiration from Katz's preferred style. This all changes suddenly in an interlude in the middle, where the song suddenly transforms into a full klezmer tune, complete with full instrumentation, duple meter, melodies in Mi Sheberakh mode, *krekhts*, and other klezmer riffs and ornaments. The song returns to its American folk sound for the final verse, before ending with a distinctly klezmer solo trumpet riff. This song illustrates Katz's approach to klezmer not as an ingredient to be blended with other styles, but a separate flavor that can play ironically with other genres within one song. Much like other klezmer musicians and American Jews at large, Katz worked carefully to weave intricate relationships to other cultural and ethnic minorities, variously affiliating with or distancing from them as a means of finding their own place in American society. Just as *Bagels and Bongos* paints a relationship with Latin culture, Katz's music positions American

³³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Sounds of Sensibility," in *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, edited by Mark Slobin, 129-173. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002,) 158-160.

³⁴ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005,) 50.

³⁵ Mickey Katz, *Mish Mosh*. (Capitol Records, 1957. LP.)

Jewish culture in relation to Black church and soul music. The original lyric of “Sixteen Tons,” written by white American Merle Travis, reads, “Saint Peter, don't call me, ‘cause I can't go.” Katz transforms this phrase into “Lordy, *nem (take) me shnell (quick)* to the Promised Land.” Katz's choice of the phrase “Lordy” is notable, as is his intonation of the lyric with a soulful riff reminiscent of Black church music even as he offers a uniquely Jewish prayer up to the heavens. In Katz's music, soul, jazz, country, and klezmer are not melded together but placed side by side to create a picture of its Jewish audience in an American context.

The contamination of klezmer with other American styles like jazz and rock is often cited as the primary reason for klezmer's “demise” in the middle of the 20th century. However, I believe it can be seen from another perspective, as an authentic continuation of klezmer's co-territorial development throughout the genre's history. Even in Eastern Europe, as closely as they were tied to Jewish life, klezmer musicians sought financial success and catered to a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish audiences in their local areas. According to ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin:

From its earliest beginnings, Eastern European Jewish music [...] was highly eclectic. Audiences expected a broad range of musical styles, as they were conversant with a number of languages and traditions. The skill at selecting items from a rich storehouse of expressive materials was highly valued, and the resulting diversity marks a genre such as klezmer music down to the present.³⁶

European *klezmerim* were used to incorporating local styles into their music when they played in city squares and other public spaces. Upon immigrating to America, they took up the same task in the tenement courtyards of New York. They became part of the clockwork of neighborhood life: housewives would lean out of their windows to listen, tipped the musicians when they could, and even slipped them betting numbers to run to bookies. Living in multicultural tenements, the *klezmerim* learned Italian, Ukrainian, and Slovak music to cater to their diverse neighbors.³⁷ As new generations of Jews grew up in the cultural salad bowl of America, their interest in jazz, rock, and Latin music prompted klezmer bands to incorporate these styles into their repertoire as well,³⁸ producing reinventions of niche genres such as the *bulgar* in “Bessarabian Dance,” cross-cultural celebration music like “Mazeltov Merengue,” and parody songs like “Sixteen Tons.” Throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, musicians like Katz, Fields, and Tarras developed American klezmer, laying the groundwork for the movement of the 70s and teaching the next generation of *klezmerim* to shape klezmer in their own time, in their own image.

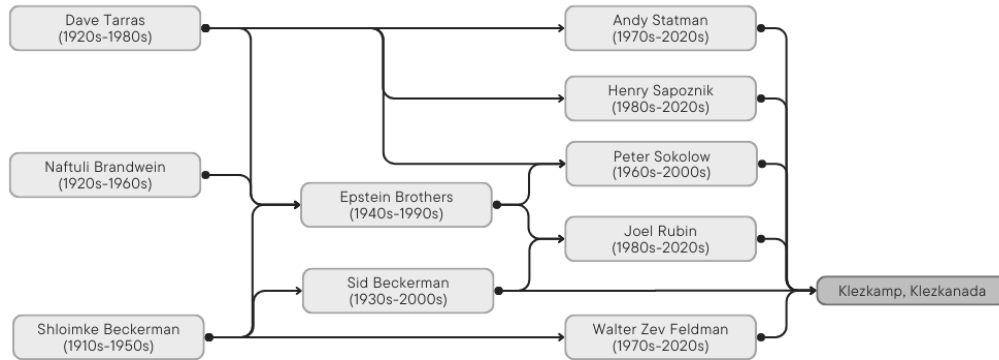
³⁶ Slobin, 35.

³⁷ Strom, 147.

³⁸ Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community*, 53.

Appendix

Fig. 1: Klezmer musicians and their students (with dates they were active)



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