

## A week in the life of She'koyokh Klezmer Ensemble

A fantastic band, conceived and born at JMI KlezFest SOAS University of London

Article by Geraldine Auerbach, director of the Jewish Music Institute, in conversation with the band's accordionist Jim Marcovitch and fiddler Meg Hamilton. *Written spring 2006*

The amazing and talented members of She'koyokh (meaning 'good on you mate' – or more literally 'may you have strength') come from diverse musical and cultural backgrounds, but for the eight members, the vibrant mix of Jewish Klezmer and Eastern European sounds is the long-term constant in their lives. As Jim, the band's founding accordionist says, 'It is our bread and butter and for the last five years we have become like a big family, **playing, gigging, busking and touring this music around the world**. It has provided, for all of us, a window onto a whole rich musical and Jewish arena – and a window into it for so many others across the country'.

Just now, in March 2006, She'koyokh has spent ten intensive days in Somerset and Devon, as a chosen band of Yehudi Menuhin's *Live Music Now!* scheme. 'We were given a wonderful house in Taunton as our base - with ten bedrooms and a big open fire' says Jim, explaining that they were the resident band to coincide with the touring **Anne Frank exhibition**. Splitting into two groups of four musicians each day, they visited a total of nearly **40 schools** of various kinds, from special needs to posh and private. Jim says: 'It was amazing to see how autistic children react and really enjoy klezmer music and a joy to have 200 kids getting stuck into a frenzied but orderly Odessa Bulgar swaying and stepping to our music'.

They also did four workshops in **prisons** and young offender's centres and even found time for their favourite pastime: busking – this time in Taunton market. (Later, when they bought fresh trout for dinner they were booked for the **fishmonger's wedding**). Also under the Live Music Now! scheme, in November 2005, She'koyokh introduced Jewish music to schools, colleges and community centres in Northern Ireland including a performance at the synagogue in Belfast.



The band members first met up at the inaugural **JMI KlezFest** at SOAS University of London in 2001. Whether self taught (like Jim) or conservatoire trained (like Susi), they all felt akin to the music from the word go and core members were thrilled to be chosen by Louise Taylor to be part of her JMI Millennium Award and M.Mus project to set up a **Klezmer band at SOAS**.

Jim says, 'We had the most superb grounding in weekly sessions with the legendary teacher and clarinettist Merlin

Shepherd and at the end of that year we were already invited to play at SOAS Graduation. We have never really looked back'. Even though Louise left London to work in Newcastle, Meg, another KlezFest (and Trinity College) graduate and JMI Millennium Award Scheme winner, joined the band as fiddler and things just seem to have snowballed with sell-out gigs at such diverse places as **Glastonbury** and the **Royal Academy** of Music.

They acknowledge having been inspired afresh at each of the subsequent JMI KlezFests in London where they regularly top the bill at the bandstand in Regent's Park. They had their **South Bank debut** in November 2004 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in a JMI Jewish Culture Day premiering Rohan Kriwaczek's concerto 'Nostalgia's Own End'. Since then the band has travelled to France, Spain, Brazil and India. She'koyokh toured **Eastern Europe** for the second time last year stopping off in Krakow to perform in the Jewish Cultural Festival and in the Czech Republic to be recorded on National Radio.

They enjoyed a blissful fortnight in **California** where they travelled en masse to be at band member Ben's wedding on a mountainside in the Sierra Nevada near Lake Tahoe. They also performed at the Ashkenaz Berkeley's Club for Eastern European music, and did their favourite thing again – busking – this time in San Francisco, and even played on a sailing boat in the Bay.

Back in the UK, their regular beat, when the weather is good, is busking in Portobello Road and markets in Hackney, Greenwich and Columbia Road, where with superb artistry they magically weave together the flavours and rhythms of **Klezmer, with Balkan, Bulgarian, Greek and Gypsy music**. They also find great demand for their CDs and are regularly approached for bookings to perform at parties and weddings, and not only Jewish ones – people seem to find the spirit of the music for a Jewish wedding **good for all nuptials.....**

Their most illustrious wedding gig to date was at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire where they spent three days filming for a mixed faith celebration as part of **ITV's 'Fat Friends'** series. Jim says that they have also been asked to play at a Catholic funeral.

Of the recent tour Jim says, 'I was surprised to find that when you go into a prison, as we did at Dartmoor and Exeter, the inmates, who hail from all over the world and with all sorts of things going on in their heads, are so very happy to learn a klezmer song and dance. They seem to be amazed and amused to realise that they had just learned a Chassidic Jewish tune. Many have never met a Jew before.

'We really developed a good atmosphere in the prison. We started off by playing them some Klezmer tunes then proceeded to the dance of the 'machutonim' (in-laws) which has foot stamping and gesticulating and lots of energy which they loved. Then we taught them the special Jewish 'misheberach' scale and got the **prisoners to create a song** based on those scales. The Prison Officers were delighted with the good effect that our work had on their prisoners – seeing them engaged with the activity, working as a team, letting off steam and finding joy in a tough and dull life'.

She'koyokh now has a new and special song created with the Exeter prisoners, the words written by a young Polish inmate. He wrote about the She'koyokh session in the prison, but the poetry is universal. It could be a Holocaust song or a song about a lost love. It goes like this:

Yesterday I was alive  
Yesterday the melody was true  
Yesterday under the sky  
The golden smiles were like the tunes  
The river of my mind was far away from here  
The rainbow inside my head was dancing around me  
I could feel freedom and I was like a king.

That's the way the band members feel too .....

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**She'koyokh Klezmer Ensemble members** are:

Susi Evans	clarinet
Meg Hamilton	violin
Jim Marcovitch	accordion
Ben Samuels	mandolin
Robin Harris	trombone
Matt Bacon	guitar
Oliver Baldwin	bass
Frazer Watson	percussion

*She'koyokh Klezmer Ensemble's **summer schedule** in 2006 included a tour in Norfolk, concerts at Bush Hall, the Spitz and the Salisbury Festival. They appeared at Iford Manor in a glorious Italianate Garden in Bradford on Avon near Bath in the Iford Arts, Midsummer Jazz Festival on 10 June 2006.*