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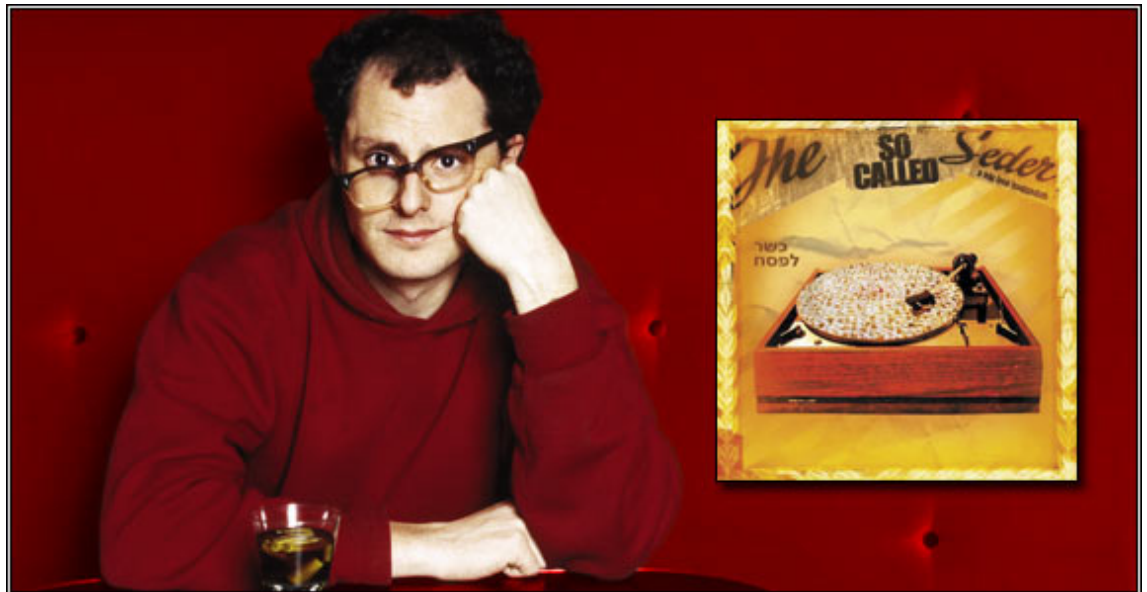
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JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2006:

HERE COMES THE CANUCKS, EH

Forget New York, L.A., or even Tel Aviv. The new hotspot for music of a Jewish sort is just across our border — in Canada.

By Adam Davis



It's often joked that Canadians are 15 years behind the U.S., but when it comes to Jewish culture, they're way ahead of the curve. Higher affiliation rates, lower intermarriage rates, Jewish education is the norm and cultural identity is thriving up there. As evidence, a new slate of young Canadian performers in their 20s have taken up the vanguard of Jewish music, fusing klezmer, hip-hop, punk, and traces of funk. Pack your parka for a trip through the Jewish musical jetstream of the Great White North.

Self-described "uber-nerd" Socalled, aka Josh Dolgin (online at www.socalledmusic.com) grew up outside of Ottawa, Ontario and got his revenge for forced piano lessons by picking up the accordion. In high school he played in salsa, gospel, rock, and yes, klezmer bands, but by his graduation from McGill University, the spectacled, Jew-fro'd Socalled had discovered hip-hop and was crafting beats under his pseudonym.

Though most hip-hop draws on African-American culture, Dolgin realized that it was more about personal history, and to be true, he would need to dig into his own culture for source material. He surfaced with old Jewish records of cantorial, klezmer, and children's music. Socalled's aim was not to make Jewish hip-hop, but create his own sound that reflected his identity.

What evolved was groundbreaking by anyone's standards; a whimsical, beat-driven Passover concept album featuring Socalled's fresh beats, samples, and rapping on the seder in English and Yiddish. Recently re-released by JDub Records as *Socalled Seder: A Hip-Hop Haggadah*, it features rapper Killah Priest, label-mate Matisyahu, and the now iconic album cover image of a round matzah on a turntable.

Dolgin has also appeared with Montreal klezmer quartet Shtreiml (online at www.shtreiml.com), a deceptively traditional name for an ensemble crossing klezmer with the jam band sound of Blues Traveler. The band is led by Jason Rosenblatt, whose rare talent is playing diatonic harmonica chromatically. Rosenblatt honed his skill with harmonica master Howard Levy, best known as the harpist of the Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, and put his skills to use playing jazz, klezmer and even Turkish music, employing the harp's note bending and joyous runs to great effect.

While on faculty at KlezKanada, a folk-arts festival dedicated to klezmer music, Rosenblatt met trombonist bandmate and now wife Rachel Lemisch. She hails from the famed klezmer dynasty of Iasi, Romania and has performed with the Klezmer Conservatory Band and Frank London's Klezmer Brass All Stars.

Shtreiml has released two albums, *Harmonica Galitzianer* and the more recent *Spicy Paprikash*, that will appeal to any harp or jam band fan. The latter features a personal favorite, "Nign," actually a Chabad melody for Avinu Malkenu that showcases Rosenblatt quite well.

Another Montreal quartet has a very different take on the Eastern European tradition. Black Ox Orkestar (online at www.cstrecords.com) is a haunting ensemble with no brass or sass. Theirs is a stark, bleak post-war klezmer from beyond the iron curtain that survived socialism and Stalinism. *Ver Tanz? (Constellation)*, a collection of Yiddish songs, is Black Ox's debut album. Their raw delivery of life's futility under Soviet oppression emanates from personal and collective memories of pain and human suffering. The political slant and brooding tone make clear this isn't the fun klezmer we often think of. This music invokes bitter cold, empty stores, long bread lines, and cookies stolen out of sheer hunger.

Montreal is the home of Concordia University, where anti-Israel sentiment runs rampant. It is also a multi-lingual environment where Yiddish is still spoken. The band's use of Yiddish follows that latter tradition, but these lyrics follow the former, which when translated lay bare some startling political views.

It's a middle finger towards the Jewish State and an extreme example of revisionism as influenced by campus sentiments. But just as Zionism revived Hebrew as the tongue of Judaism, Black Ox Orkestar revives Yiddish as the language of protest. It is an interesting, if audacious, choice of symbols for those ideologically or geographically left behind by Zionism.

Toronto's Beyond Eden (online at www.beyondedenband.com) could not be more different. Their upbeat approach comes from a spiritual place, but uses funk fusion to deliver a 4,000-year-old message of unity and pride in Israel set to a highly danceable groove. This band delivers contemporary Hebrew and English originals and summer camp song covers with pulsing baselines, sunny harmonies, and hip-hop verses.

The band, founded in 2002 by Jono Landon and Chayim Newman, incorporates hip-hop, reggae, funk, and rock influences. Asked about the band's name, vocalist/guitarist Newman explains, "In the Garden of Eden, man was in a perfect state. Unfortunately, we don't live there anymore. We live outside of Eden ... just beyond Eden."

Newman comes from a traditional observant home, while newly-observant drummer Landon was raised in a Reform home. Keyboardist David Austin has undergone a similar transformation from agnostic metal rocker to Orthodox musician whose thoughtful observance has filtered into the band's songwriting. Guitarist Avital Zemer and Bassist Marc Shapiro hail from secular Israeli and Conservative homes, but while less observant, are no less proud of their band's music and message. The band headlined the New York YidStock Festival last year and is now recording a second album showcasing English lyrics on universal themes easily recognizable to Jewish fans.

Several other exciting Canadian Jewish musical acts exist, including the experimental Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band (online at www.flyingbulgar.com) and Finjan. Both arrived

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flying bulgar klezmer band (online at www.flyingbulgars.com) and Finjan. Both arrived in a wave of klezmer revivalists in the late 1980s and have achieved notoriety and success. But cool new Jewish music from Canada is blowing into the U.S. and, one way or another, it will move and groove you. Will that grooving happen on Shabbat? Not likely, according to Landon, "We still follow Jewish law." ■

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