HANKUS NETSKY

by KEN GORDON

Hankus Netsky is a piano player. A saxophonist. He squeezes the accordion and blows the clarinet with equal parts soul and *chutzpah*, and can if necessary modulate into the key of oboe and English horn. He's a composer and an arranger and, when he jumps onstage, a purple-suited emcee. Netsky's day job is instructor of Improvisation and Jewish Music at Boston's venerable New England Conservatory, where he has mentored musicians such as clarinetist Don Byron – *Downbeat Magazine*'s 1992 Jazz Artist of the Year – and trumpeter Frank London, whose band, the Klezmatics, won a 2007 Grammy award. Since 1980, Netsky has led the Klezmer Conservatory Band (KCB), which has toured the world, recorded ten albums, and even provided music for movies, including the 1991 children's film, *The Fool and the Flying Ship,* narrated by Robin Williams, and the 1989 Oscar-winning *Enemies, a Love Story.*

From 1987 until 1999, Netsky was the unofficial (read: unpaid) producer of Ben Gailing's Boston-based *Yiddish Radio Show*. "I recorded the show, made half the announcements – anything in English that had to be read – mailed the bills, and paid the radio stations," says Netsky. He regularly appears at KlezKamp and KlezKanada, two major gatherings of players and listeners, adult and children, who have an interest in *klezmer* music. He plays improvisational and world music with flautist Linda Chase, does the odd gospel gig, and recently helped out with his twelve-year-old daughter's middle-school musical.

It took a while for people to appreciate the diversity of Netsky's work. Growing up in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia in the 1960s (he was born in 1955), he led marching and jazz bands and arranged and wrote music, which prompted a reporter at his high-school newspaper to ask when he was going to make a choice between, say, classical and jazz. Decades later, he recalls saying that he was a little confused but thought he wanted to do "something with Jewish music." Netsky says the paper ran a photo with a caption saying, "Confused."

Today, the only people who are perplexed about the multifaceted musician are those twentieth-century souls who can't listen to music unless it is carefully labeled and filed in some record-store bin. If you really want to know Netsky, consider the derivation of the word he is almost synonymous with: *klezmer*. The term comes from the Hebrew phrase *k'li zemer*, which means "instrument of song," and this nugget of etymological poetry suggests that Netsky is a conduit between the musical past, present and future. It doesn't matter if he's performing or teaching or writing or arranging – all the activities are of one piece: Netsky's mission to rescue the lost tunes of Jewish history and to drag them into the twenty-first century.

He realized his calling early. In 1972, at the age of 17, he attended The Lighthouse, a summer arts camp in Philadelphia. His counselors put on a play culled from the work of Bertolt Brecht, which contained the line, "I feel like a man who carries a brick around to show the world what his house was like."

On hearing these words, Netsky "just totally lost it" and cried the whole night. "I felt like I had the brick and I needed more. I needed to – you just can't carry a brick around to show the world what your house is like. You have to rebuild the house."

Why such emotion? For Netsky, the survival of Eastern European Jewish music is a highly personal matter. A family affair. His grandfather, a drummer, ran a Jewish wedding band called the Kol Katz Orchestra, and his Uncle Marvin played with a number of klezmer outfits. The young Netsky wanted to learn more. His Uncle Marvin suggested he call his cornet-playing Uncle Sam. To which Netsky's grandmother said, "Don't call your Uncle Sam!" His mother added, "You're not allowed to call your Uncle Sam!"

"So I called my Uncle Sam," says Netsky, "and he invited me over."

Netsky's maternal Uncle Sam regaled his nephew with the true family musical history and played him scores of old records. "The first time we met, he was born in Philadelphia," says Netsky. "The second time we met, he was born in Kishinev." But these sessions weren't simply about kibbitzing and knocking the cobwebs off old Naftule Brandwein '78s. His elders didn't understand Netsky's enthusiasm for their music. "They just were bitter about it," says Netsky. They told him, "That market is gone. This stuff is gone. And you don't want to learn that. There's no reason."

Netsky is, in some ways, avenging himself on a world that tried to bury Ashkenazi culture as quickly as it could after World War II. There were some good reasons Jews wanted to forget the culture of the Old World. The tragedy of the Holocaust was fresh and endlessly disturbing. Many people wanted to sing non-European songs, ones that focused on, say, Israeli strength and independence. Netsky, ever the pedagogue, explains this last desire has its foundations in Abraham Z. Idelsohn's 1927 book, *Jewish Music*. "He basically proclaimed that the only Jewish music that has any value is Jewish music that can be linked to Palestine."

Netsky responds to that kind of musical revisionism by offering an impression of Idelsohn's blank-slate approach to musical

history. "So it was like, 'Yiddish theater, nothing; Yiddish folk song, nothing. This is nothing. This is all nothing. This is meaningless.'"

But Netsky, and the music he plays, is hardly bitter. Or if there's bitterness, it's a joyful bitterness, a comical bitterness, a mish-mash of emotions you can hear in the music itself. Just consider the lyrics of "*Di Mechutonim Geyen/Tants a Freylechs*" ("The In-Laws Are Coming/Dance a Freylechs"), from the KCB's album *Dance Me to the End of Love* (2000):

Ot geyt der feter Mindik,
Vos hobn mir gezindikt – shat nor, shat!
Er blozt zich vi an indik,
Shpilt a lidele dem chosen's tsad.
There goes Uncle Mindik,
What did we do to offend him? – hush now,
hush!
He's strutting like a turkey,
Play a song for the groom's family!

The word *klezmer*, Netsky explains, "is a pretty new term. Traditionally, you just call something Jewish music, or you just call it 'music' – if you're Jewish you don't have to say 'Jewish.'" The traditional wedding stuff, songs like "*Chasene Tanz*" ("Wedding Dance"), are a major part of his repertoire, but it "goes alongside the music that you would play in the synagogue or that you would sing in the synagogue. And it goes alongside the music that you would sing around the house: the folksongs and the theater songs and all that."

If you were to meet with Netsky in, say, a conference room at the Newton Centre Library in Massachusetts or at his modest teaching space at the New England Conservatory, he'll talk about cantorial chanting, Chasidic *niggunim* (tunes), the relationship between Yiddish and jazz, the "Yiddish Cab Calloway"; in fact, he recently put on a show featuring the vocal talents of Calloway's grandson, C.B. Calloway Brooks – and even people like John Zorn and the folks he has signed to his Tzadik record label.

Netsky has the soul of both a jazzman and a professor. And maybe a little rabbi, too. He's the kind of guy who wears a leather jacket *and* glasses. When he sits down at the piano, he makes a major jazz face, bobs his head of wavy hair as the music dictates. Doesn't matter if he's doing a concert for a jammed house or playing a few illustrative riffs for a journalist, it's obvious, from a mile away, that jazzy Jewish music courses through Netsky.

Says Theodore Bikel, who worked with the KCB on the 1998 CD, *A Taste of Passover*: "While Hankus is one of the finest all-round musicians, at home in many styles, he is arguably one of the finest klezmer musicians on the American scene. In this type of music he not only excels, he is a fountain of knowledge, a veritable encyclopedia of Jewish repertoire and styles."

Netsky's wide-ranging approach to music applies to his Judaism as well. He says that while many American Jews like things organized – "You belong to synagogue and you belong to the Rotary Club" – he tries not to be rigid in his religious practice. "If I want to go to the Hasidic Center next week, am I suddenly Chasidic? I mean, I do that sometimes. I live two blocks from The Adams Street Shul." Then he ends his riff with a few pungent phrases: "The last thing I would want to do is define myself by a denomination. No, denominations have really killed Judaism."

He sends his kids to a Reconstructionist synagogue, for the education. He attends a Jewish Renewal synagogue called B'nai Or, "for the purpose of having a spiritual, exciting, Carlebach-like experience." He's also drawn to Temple Beth Israel in Waltham, Massachusetts, because he loves the work done by their *ba'al tefillah* (prayer reader). Netsky says that the chanting he hears at Temple Beth Israel "moves me so much that it's like the deepest thing in the world."

When asked about his most meaningful gig, does Netsky dust off a memory of working with legendary violinist Itzhak Perlman (the KCB played in Perlman's 1994 PBS documentary, *In the Fiddler's House,* recorded live albums with him, toured, the whole *shmear*)? Does he reminisce about being the musical director and arranger for Tony- and Oscar-winning actor Joel Grey's *Borscht Capades '94*? Not at

all. Netsky doesn't dismiss the experiences – "they're good projects," he says, "high-profile projects" – but he describes them as "footnotes" in the careers of Grey and Perlman. He says that collaborations "with people who really were from the tradition" are "much more exciting for me."

Theodore Bikel, for instance. "If I had to pick a concert that was the most exciting, it would probably be playing with Theo at the Berkeley Jewish Music Festival in 2005."

Netsky also mentions German Goldenshteyn, a now-deceased klezmer clarinetist from Moldova. Goldenshteyn stayed at Netsky's house for a week in the summer of 2001 and did some workshops with Netsky and his students at the New England Conservatory. Goldenshteyn told a lot of stories, which put some oral history to the music. "I really felt like I was doing something then," Netsky says.

But he's just as jazzed about imparting musical traditions to his students. Ask about his students and he's like a proud papa passing out photos of the kids. Here's fiddler Lily Hinley; there's trombonist Daniel Backsbrug; and just look at clarinetist Michael Winograd.

"It is Hankus's innate, informed and passionate ability to understand what someone needs to hear and to provide them with this that makes his teaching skills legendary," says Klezmatics trumpeter Frank London. "It doesn't feel like hyperbole to say that Hankus's influence was one of the major causes of the renaissance of new Jewish music in the last twenty-five years."

The renaissance, of course, had to do with Jews getting in touch with their roots. In the same way Irish-Americans turned to Celtic folk music, Jews rediscovered the musical world of their grandparents.

Netsky's own role was sort of accidental. He formed the KCB while teaching at the New England Conservatory. In 1980, he put together a band comprised mostly of NEC students for what was to be a single concert. The crowd went absolutely *meshugge*, wild.

Ingrid Monson, a former student of Netsky's and a founding member of the Klezmer Conservatory Band – she's now the Quincy

Jones professor of African-American Music at Harvard – says that being in the original KCB involved quite a bit of back and forth between the band and its founder and musical director. In the course of listening to the scratchy old recordings, Netsky and the other band members would sometimes disagree about "what was *really* on the '78s," she says, and then reconstructs the scene: "Hear that! Hear that!"

And of course, new students come into his class each September – ready to learn, ready to argue, ready to play. Just like their teacher.

Which is to say that Netsky is profoundly driven. "I don't give up, at all," he says. "That's the main thing. My wife would say, 'Ridiculously stubborn.'" And ridiculously hardworking. He talks about his course load at the New England Conservatory, which involves teaching five days a week, as a "twenty-four hour workday," which, when you add in all the performing and recording, probably isn't too far off the mark.

He's also working on a digital Jewish music archive project with Florida Atlantic University and the Dartmouth Sound Archive. "Recordings are a major way that the Jews have documented their cultural history in the twentieth century. Some kinds of Jewish recordings – cantorials, especially – have been fairly well-preserved, but others have been sorely neglected and there's a very limited time window for doing something about it."

When asked about his goals, he says that the archive – not performance or composition or even teaching – is extremely important. "I really want to help to build a Jewish musical, a Yiddish – especially a Yiddish music archive, an Eastern European Jewish musical archive." He doesn't know how long the project will take; he only knows he's totally committed to it.

Also important is his recently assumed role as the vice president of Education at the National Yiddish Book Center, which he began in fall 2007. As part of his work there, he has been forging collaborations with other organizations involved in the rescue of Yiddish culture and he initiated the Discover Project, a cultural rescue

project whose aim is not only to preserve, but to "bring alive again, get into circulation again" the works that are rescued, such as music that's been lost or neglected. He notes that time is of the essence in this work. "There's a huge Yiddish revival now. People are starting to notice that it's gone, and we have to be really busy to get after it while it's still there to collect," he says.

Exhausting. And yet, all this work seems to invigorate him. At his first interview for this profile, Netsky said he was on "half-sabbatical," which he explained was "the only reason I'm here." Later, he managed to pencil in interviews at his school and at Peet's Coffee House in Newton Center. Between doing his various jobs and obligations, carpooling his two daughters, and grocery shopping, he's a busy guy.

Netsky says he feels most fulfilled when he can make music and preserve the Jewish tradition at the very same time, as when he works with his Uncle Marvin at the big yearly KlezKanada festival.

"We're teaching my grandfather's tradition," he says. "We're really teaching the stuff that I grew up not hearing. And my uncle remembers it all and he can still play it. And he plays it the same way. And getting that down is very important."