

**Presentation title:** *Tzadik Ka-Tamar Yifrah : Radical Jewish Culture and the Future of Jewish Music, by Daniel Scheide*

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## **Description**

Since the early 1990s, Jewish music has undergone a burgeoning revival and a drastic transformation. While being grounded in klezmer, hazzanut and other traditional sounds, today's Jewish music is being informed by free jazz, avant-grade composers, hardcore punk and a wide variety of other outside influences. At the forefront of this movement are recent MacArthur Genius grant winner John Zorn and his record label, Tzadik. This talk will be a brief introduction and overview of one of the most exciting developments in modern Jewish culture.

Tzadik Ka-Tamar Yifrah : Radical Jewish Culture and the Future of Jewish Music

Daniel Scheide

In the past 15 years or so, Jewish music has been going through an incredible transformation and revitalization. I'd like to talk to you about a movement within contemporary Jewish music called Radical Jewish Culture and because we have a limited amount of time, I'd like to focus on the central figure of that movement, John Zorn.

John Zorn was born in 1953 in Queens, NY. His mother was a professor of education at New York University, and his father was a hairdresser; they were secular Jews who were very determined to raise him as a blank slate with no connection to his Jewish heritage. He says "My parents were brutal when it came to eliminating the past." <sup>1</sup>

As a child, his first significant encounter with music was the film "Phantom of the Opera" where he was exposed to organ music. He tracked down the organ works of J.S. Bach and taught himself to read music. From this starting point, he proceeded to study the works of contemporary and avant-garde composers, Stravinsky, Ives, Stockhausen, Ligeti, John Cage, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Lee Beeber. [The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk.](#) (Chicago : Chicago Review Press, 2006).

He attended the United Nations School. Here he studied with the very underrated Spanish-American composer Leonardo Balada. Zorn also briefly attended a Protestant school where he encountered anti-Semitism from his classmates while at the same time receiving flack from his Jewish neighbors for going to this school.

He attended Webster College, now Webster University, the only school that would accept him with his less than stellar grades. Just to give you an idea of his musical aesthetic at the time, at Webster, he was working on a thesis studying the work of composer Carl Stalling, composer for the Warner Bros. cartoons.

Zorn was only at Webster for a year and a half, but his experience there was very significant to his later work. He walked into a record store on Delmar Blvd. I mention this only because I purchased my first John Zorn album at a record store on Delmar. He asked the guy for the weirdest music he had. The record store clerk presented him with the music of Anthony Braxton, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, many of the greats of the free jazz movement. At Webster, he studied with Oliver Lake, a major free jazz artist who co-founded the St. Louis art collective the BAG, Black Artist's Group. This organization, as well as the similar and better known Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago, were to have a lasting influence on Zorn's work. What I think is significant, perhaps, is that all of these artists that I've mentioned were making very abstract, complex music, but they were doing so within a specific cultural context, in this case an Afro-centric one. Perhaps this had some influence on his Jewish music.

Because John Zorn is so prolific and his music is so diverse, I'm only going to briefly mention some of his early work and then focus primarily on his Jewish music. Drawing both upon the free jazz artists he discovered in St. Louis and the avant-garde classical composers he had studied in his youth, he developed and became well-known for a series of 'game pieces', improvisational works based on a very complex set of rules. Let's listen to a bit of the best known of these works, Cobra.<sup>2</sup>

Ok, I know what you're thinking, "Hey, this guy's pretty good. How come I don't hear him on a major record label?" Well, actually, at this point, he was signed to Elektra/Nonesuch Records, where he put out a number of successful albums, tributes to Mickey Spillane<sup>3</sup>, film composer Ennio Morricone<sup>4</sup>, and an album of compositions by jazz great Ornette Coleman in a speed metal style<sup>5</sup>. Zorn was becoming known for his eclectic tastes and ability to work within a great variety of musical genres. His relationship with Elektra/Nonesuch did not last for very long,

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<sup>2</sup> The recording used in this presentation was from a 2000 BBC Radio 3 documentary. [Downtown Avantgarde. Soho Music Gallery.](#) BBC Radio 3, London, England. 1 July, 2000. The most popular recording of Cobra is Zorn, John, [Cobra](#), New York, Tzadik, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Zorn, John. [Spillane, Two-Lane Highway, Forbidden Fruit](#), Los Angeles, Nonesuch, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Morricone, Ennio, [The Big Gundown : John Zorn Plays the Music of Ennio Morricone](#), New York, Nonesuch, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Coleman, Ornette. [Spy Vs. Spy](#). New York, Elektra, 1989.

however. There was a dispute, not about the music, but the album art, some of which was particularly violent. Zorn refused to compromise and left the label.

Now, while most people date Zorn's interest in Jewish music to 1992, there were actually a few interesting pre-cursors. In the mid-80's he formed a trio called Slan with guitarist Elliot Sharp and drummer Ted Epstein. He billed the group as the first all-Jewish heavy metal band. (Whether or not this is true, and whether or not their music would be considered heavy metal is debatable). The original name for the group when they first played at a festival in Austria was ZOG. In case, you don't catch the reference, in Neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic circles, the term ZOG means "Zionist Occupied Government."

One of Zorn's most popular projects was the band Naked City. This was a supergroup of musicians that could switch between musical genres every few seconds. On the album *Radio*, there is a tune called 'Metal Tov', in which they fuse klezmer and heavy metal music.<sup>6</sup>

In 1992, Zorn began to explore his Jewish roots in earnest. There are a number of factors that lead to this new artistic path. There was the death of his father. There was also a search for his own identity. Zorn has always been obsessed with Japanese culture. He is fluent in Japanese and for a period of about 10 years, he would spend 6 months out of the year in Japan. At this point in his life, however, he felt that he done everything he could to fit into a culture that would not accept him.

He had also recently worked on a project with the great blues musician Albert Collins.<sup>7</sup> While he had a very positive experience with the older musicians, some of the younger musicians that he had recorded with viewed him as a 'cultural imperialist' and he started thinking about his own heritage.

He also has mentioned encounters with anti-Semitism. He says that he had never really considered his Jewish identity until he had visited Germany where he had felt conspicuously Jewish.<sup>8</sup> He had also been involved in hardcore punk music at the time and had encountered anti-Semitism among these musicians.

His first Jewish-themed project was *Kristallnacht*, inspired by the Nazi attacks of Nov. 1938.<sup>9</sup> Zorn's piece combines chamber music with electronic music, music concrete and klezmer. The liner notes include a warning label: "CAUTION: Never Again [the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement] contains high frequency extremes at the limits of human hearing & beyond, which may cause nausea, headaches & ringing in the ears. Prolonged or repeated listening is not advisable as it may result in temporary or permanent ear damage." Let's take a listen to that.

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<sup>6</sup> Naked City, *Radio*, Tokyo, Avant, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Zorn, John. *Spillane, Two-Lane Highway, Forbidden Fruit*, Los Angeles, Nonesuch, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> *Downtown Avantgarde. Torture Garden*. BBC Radio 3, London, England. 15 July, 2000

<sup>9</sup> Zorn, John. *Kristallnacht*, Tokyo, Eva Records, 1993.

Later that year, Zorn was asked to curate a music festival in Munich. Along with guitarist Marc Ribot, he decided to build the festival around the theme of what he would call “Radical Jewish Culture”. The performers included a group of Jewish musicians from Downtown NY’s jazz scene as well as rock star Lou Reed and performance artist Laurie Anderson.

At this point, while exploring his Jewish identity, Zorn was thinking about his next project. As I think you can tell by now, he is a very experimental, avant-garde artist. I haven’t even talked about the really weird stuff. He had explored the outer limits of what music could be, what could he do next? So he decided, to write melodies!

He gave himself a challenge: to write 100 melodies in a year. He set a few ground rules for himself. First, the tunes would not be for any specific instrumentation. They could be played by any instrument. Second, they could not exceed 5 staves of music. And third, they would be limited to two modes, or scales, associated with Eastern-European Jewish music, the Mi-sheberakh and Ahavah Rabah scales.

Just to give you a flavor of these modes, if you take the major scale and flat the second note, you get the Ahavah Rabah mode. If you take the minor scale and raise the fourth degree, you get the Mi-sheberakh mode. Now before the ethnomusicologists jump all over me, there are variations on these modes in different contexts and cultures, but you get the basic idea.

He wrote 100 tunes in a year, followed by another 100 the following year and some more after that. This collection of tunes was called the Masada songbook.

He formed the Masada quartet to perform this music. This consisted of bass, drums, trumpet and Zorn on alto saxophone. If there are any jazz fans in the audience, this particular instrumental combination will, no doubt, ring a bell. It immediately brings to mind the Ornette Coleman quartet which pioneered free jazz. By now, it’s a little bit of a cliché to describe Masada as Ornette Coleman meets klezmer. But while it is an over-simplification, I think those are two strong influences of this music.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the Jewish character of the melodies, the titles of the tunes are all in Hebrew. Also, what is interesting is that when Zorn performs with this group, he wears tsitsit.

In 1995, Zorn founded his own record label, Tzadik. One of the largest series on this label, is the Radical Jewish Culture series, and we’ll come back and discuss it a little later. But, one of the first releases on this label was a recording called Zohar by the Mystic Fugu Orchestra.<sup>11</sup> The liner notes reveal a photo of this group, two old men with white beards and talitot, identified as Rav Yechida and Rav Tzitzit.

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<sup>10</sup> The recording used in this presentation is Masada, Alef, Tokyo, DIW, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Mystic Fugu Orchestra, Zohar, New York, Tzadik, 1995.

So we have a recording of harmonium and vocals, some prominent record hiss, maybe a little too prominent, that has the appearance of an older recording. Well, it turns out that Rav Yechida and Rav Tzitzit are none other than Japanese vocalist Yamatsuka/Yamatanka Eye, a frequent Zorn collaborator, and Zorn himself. Zorn says that he wanted to create a work that listeners might mistake for a turn of the century Jewish recording.

Now, what is the point of all this? Any guesses? The key lies in the title of the work, *Zohar*. This refers to the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the Book of Splendor which is the central text of Kabbalah. Who wrote the Zohar? This is a gross over-simplification, but the *Zohar* is traditionally attributed to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, but many later scholars believed that it was in fact, a forgery by Rabbi Moshe de Leon in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This idea of passing your own work off as something older was the inspiration for this work.

Now, of course, the history of the Zohar is a great deal more complex than that, but what's important for our discussion is Zorn's perception of the Zohar and how it influenced his work.

He then formed another ensemble to perform the Masada tunes, Bar Kokhba. This is the kindler, gentler, John Zorn. Adding strings to a jazz ensemble, we hear soft and beautiful renditions of this music, recalling the exotica albums of Les Baxter in the 1950's and 60's, who gave ethnic music a big band, easy listening feel. <sup>12</sup>

Zorn formed another group to perform the Masada tunes called Electric Masada. <sup>13</sup>Complimenting Zorn's saxophone with electric guitar, organ, bass, laptop, two drummers and percussion, it is largely modeled after the electric music of Miles Davis, Bitch's Brew era, Agarth, Pangea, etc. as well as the more jazz influenced work of rock guitarist Carlos Santana.

There is also the Masada String Trio, comprising of violin, cello and double bass that plays this music. <sup>14</sup>

Well, one theme that I noticed running through these references to Jewish history, in Masada, Bar Kokhba, etc. is defiance. With Masada, Bar Kokhba, these events and individuals are involved in rebellion and revolt. Critics like to be clever and point out Zorn's name. In German, it means Anger. And Zorn can sometimes be a pretty angry guy through his music.

Zorn has also done a lot of film music, for independent films and documentaries. To date, he has scored 5 documentaries on Jewish themes.

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<sup>12</sup> Bar Kokhba, *Bar Kokhba*, New York, Tzadik, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Electric Masada. *50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration*, vol. 4, New York, Tzadik, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Masada String Trio, *The Circle Maker*, New York, Tzadik, 1998.

John Zorn is also involved in the world of contemporary classical music. He has written four string quartets, one entitled Kol Nidre<sup>15</sup>. I hear some influence of the European ‘mystic minimalists’, such as Arvo Part & Henryk Gorecki, etc.

Just when we thought that we weren’t going to be getting any new Jewish music out of John Zorn, he surprises us again. In 2004, within only a few months, he composed over 300 more Masada tunes. Various artists in a wide variety of musical genres have been recording these tunes under the series “Book of Angels.”

In 2006, he was awarded a MacArthur “Genius” grant. And most recently, in February of 2008, Zorn premiered his setting of Shir ha-Shirim, with Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson narrating, accompanied by five female voices. I haven’t had an opportunity to hear this work yet, but not long after the premier of the setting of this ancient love poem, the 2 narrators, Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson got married, so I figure it’s pretty good.

Also, just 2 weeks ago, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco began presenting a series of sound-pieces curated by John Zorn. Zorn’s Aleph-Bet Sound Project, inspired by the Hebrew alphabet are sound pieces by various composers to accompany the Museum’s unique skylights.

Zorn’s Radical Jewish Culture series on his Tzadik label, along with other artists working in the same vein are creating a broad and diverse movement. John Zorn writes about the boundaries of the series: “I do not and have never espoused the idea that any music a jew makes is jewish music, nor do I not pretend to be the sole arbiter of what is jewish or what is not. There have been occasions when the jewish content of the music delivered has been unclear, or even non-existent. My role as executive producer in these instances has been to question the artist. If the answer is simply “I’m jewish—this is what I’m doing—that makes it jewish music”—the project is rejected, returned to the artist to do with as they wish. If they can articulate a well thought out response and their sincerity and honesty is clear and unquestionable—I go with it—even if I don’t entirely go with the program. Arguably, some projects have been more successful than others, but in retrospect all have been interesting, honest and worth repeated listening.”<sup>16</sup>

What I find so interesting about these artists is that through them we can see the full gamut of the Jewish experience. It includes Jews of all stripes, religious, secular and every gradation in between, Jews of all ethnic backgrounds and as you might imagine, there is a wealth of musical genres being represented.

A sub-series, called Great Jewish Music is comprised of both the most popular and most controversial recordings on the label.

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<sup>15</sup> Zorn, John, The String Quartets, New York, Tzadik, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> [www.tzadik.com](http://www.tzadik.com)

This sub-series is a group of tribute albums to Jewish composers and songwriters. So far, tribute has been paid to American songwriter Burt Bacharach<sup>17</sup>, glam-rock pioneer Marc Bolan<sup>18</sup>, Israeli songwriter Sasha Argov<sup>19</sup>, Jacob Do Bandolim<sup>20</sup>, founder of the Brazilian choro musical style and controversial French pop star of the 50's, 60's and 70's, Serge Gainsbourg<sup>21</sup>. Contributors to these albums included well-known rock groups as well as the jazz and experimental artists usually found on Tzadik. But this raises an interesting question: Is this Jewish music? The crux of the issue is that he titled the series "Great Jewish Music" rather than "Great Jewish Composers" or something like that and there is no discernable Jewish content here.

Zorn himself addresses the issue.

"It seems important to mention that the name Radical Jewish Culture was chosen with serious deliberation. There is little question that the contributions of Franz Kafka, Mark Rothko, Albert Einstein, Walter Benjamin, Lenny Bruce and Steven Spielberg have all been embraced as central to Jewish culture in the 20th century. The logical question that arises is—is there Jewish content in their work? Well, at times yes, at times no.

The Great Jewish Music series is as much about Jewish contribution to world culture—Serge Gainsbourg in France, Jacob do Bandolim in Brasil, Sasha Argov in Israel—as about any exposition of Jewish culture. "<sup>22</sup>

Something that I find fascinating is the motivations that these musicians have in putting their work into a Jewish context. Now, cynicism has been a Jewish value at least since *Kohelet*, so some of you might suspect that not all of these artists have noble motives. Perhaps you're correct. We live in a very ironic age. In some cases, there is an element of kitsch, making jokes, respectfully and not-so respectfully at the expense of Jewish culture of the past. Perhaps, we should also consider marketing as a factor. Some people may be more willing to pick up a cd if a string quartet is called *Kol Nidre* rather than Quartet no. 3.

John Zorn himself is a big draw. If this is your first introduction to John Zorn as I imagine it is for many of you, you won't be aware of how prominent a figure he is in the world of experimental music. Many musicians have claimed to have exaggerated the Judaic content of their music in order to work with him. Zorn has also been an instigator. Many artists would not necessarily have done Judaic oriented projects if not for his urging.

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<sup>17</sup> Great Jewish Music : Burt Bacharach, New York, Tzadik, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Great Jewish Music : Marc Bolan, New York, Tzadik, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Great Jewish Music : Sasha Argov, New York, Tzadik, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Great Jewish Music : Jacob Do Bandolim, New York, Tzadik, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Great Jewish Music : Serge Gainsbourg, New York, Tzadik, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> [www.tzadik.com](http://www.tzadik.com)

However, I think that most of the artists represented in this movement are quite sincere. It's not like they're becoming rock stars and getting rich from this. Some artists were already steeped in a Jewish environment. Others are using their music as a way to explore their Jewish identity.

The title of my talk, as I'm sure you've noted, is a quote from *Sefer Tehilim*, the book of Psalms. Traditionally, this book was said to have been edited and largely composed by a musician, David ha-Melekh.

**יג** צדיק, בתמר יִפְרֹחַ;  
כְּאַרְזַבְּלָבוֹן יִשְׁגֶה.  
**13** A tsadik, righteous person, and you'll remember that John Zorn's record label is named Tzadik, shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

**יד** שְׁתוּלִים, בְּבַיַת יְהוָה;  
בְּחִצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
יִפְרִיחוּ.  
**14** Planted in the house of the LORD, they shall flourish in the courts of our God.

**טו** עוֹד, יִנּוּבּוֹן בְּשִׁיבָה;  
דְּשָׁנִים וְרֵעַנָּגִים יִהְיוּ.  
**15** They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness;

Jewish music, however we define it, has a very long and fascinating history. But even in its old age, it is still, in part through the music of John Zorn and other Radical Jewish musicians, on the cutting edge of new music.