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Laughing and Crying with David Krakauer

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I have been a fan of David Krakauer for more than a decade. He first got on my radar as an ace player of contemporary music and then at some point I stumbled into one of his klezmer gigs, which made me hear klezmer in a whole new way. His recordings have been the soundtrack to both parties in my home and late evening winding down. And being the voracious record collector and concertgoer, I thought I knew all there was to know about David Krakauer. But after spending an afternoon with him I learned everything from musical arcana (what a krecht is and the difference between Albert and Boehm system clarinets) to personal trivia (he went to my high school and first heard klezmer from a window overlooking Zabar's). His is a world-wide real New York story!

-FJO

How Serious is Klezmer?

FJO: Many of your titles sound like there are jokes embedded in them. And of course, [Mickey Katz](#), the public face of klezmer for a whole generation, was equal parts musician and comedian. Is this serious music? Is it music to have a good time with? Or is it a little bit of both?

DK: Serious music. I'm 2000 billion percent serious. I think it's serious music with humor. I always want to tell a story with my music. I want it to have a point of view, to mean something, but I'm 100 percent serious. But I think people can have fun and dance. Talk about one of my great heroes, [James Brown](#), or [Duke Ellington](#). Yeah, you can lose yourself in delirium. You can be having a great time. But also the music makes you think.

FJO: So is the right place to hear this music something other than sitting in a concert hall? Or should you be on your toes?

DK: It's always fun when people sit in a concert hall and then at a certain point something happens and they get up and groove. So it's nice to have both. I once was playing in Krakow, Poland, in a big concert at a Jewish culture festival and we were sitting around drinking and eating. Then suddenly some of the musicians in the festival started playing. I got up. I started to play. I played from like one in the morning 'til five or six and I completely went into a trance. The whole room was dancing. I was leaning on people, dancing, swaying, I went out of my body.... Playing Jewish music has been one of the great journeys. I had no idea. If you told me back in 1987 that this would have happened, I wouldn't have believed it.

FJO: You grew in New York City and were trained in music here. Where did you first hear klezmer? Where did it come from? At the time you were growing up, this music wasn't around.

DK: In a certain sense, finding klezmer music was an amazing blessing for me. It's such a long story. When I was at the [High School of Music and Art](#), I was playing classical and jazz at the same time. I was studying with Leon Russianoff, but I was also hanging out with [Anthony Coleman](#), who was my best friend. He had a band and we did jazz repertoire way before jazz repertoire was "in" with people like Wynton. We were doing [Monk](#) tunes, [Earl Hines](#), Duke Ellington stuff, and Anthony's originals. That was my dual training. And then I went to college. I started really centering on classical music. I had a crisis of confidence with jazz. I was afraid that I had nothing to say. What could I do after [Coltrane](#), [Coleman Hawkins](#), [Charlie Parker](#), [Sidney Bechet](#), [Louis Armstrong](#)? These were my great heroes. I stopped playing jazz but I was still improvising and experimenting. After I went through [Sarah Lawrence College](#), [Paris Conservatory](#), and [Juilliard](#), I started freelancing in New York and was playing with a lot of new music groups like the [Da Capo Chamber Players](#), [Continuum](#). [Speculum \[Musicae\]](#) would give me a call now and then... I was doing all that stuff and I would also occasionally get a call to go down to [CBGBs](#) and honk my face off, so to speak.

The first time I really heard klezmer was in about 1979. I was listening to a lot of Greek music and Turkish music. I was looking to find different sounds on the clarinet. I was hearing five or six different clarinet styles and I'd never heard anything like this before. I heard a concert of one of the great old European masters, [Dave Tarras](#). He was making a little bit of a comeback. It was a double bill. [Andy Statman](#) was playing with Zev Feldman on the [cimbalom](#) and Marty Confurius on the bass.

And then, I lived on 80th Street and Broadway overlooking [Zabar's](#) and used to hear this klezmer music waft up to my window. And ultimately, I started playing with some of those musicians. So suddenly my jazz background and listening to all these amazing Turkish and Greek and Albanian players came together. I felt like I had found a musical home. I could write my own music. I could be an interpreter, as I was with classical music. I could be an improviser... I thought it would be really fun to play something that was connected to a part of myself that I hardly knew about. I think it was more this tremendous curiosity about that. When my grandparents came to America, they shut that door and I opened it.

The Laws of Klezmer

DK: When I started playing klezmer music, I decided to do it for myself, for fun, as a kind of musical hobby, to learn more about my own Judaism. I think I was feeling a little bit like something was missing. I was doing all this stuff—playing in orchestras, the [Martha Graham Ballet](#), the [Aspen Wind Quintet](#) (which had won the [Naumburg Award](#)), and all these new music groups. All this was great but I was feeling that the improviser, the composer, that side of me had been buried. Klezmer was a way to get back in there. But first I was really just learning the tunes, learning the style, the phrasing, the ornamentation, the laws of the music... And then about eight months later, the [Klezmatiks](#) heard about me. So I started playing with the Klezmatiks: [Alicia Svigals](#) and [Frank London](#). The three of us made a crazy energy. And, of course, a great singer, Lorin Sklamberg, David Licht on the drums and Paul Morrisett on the bass. But it was with the front-line melody instruments that there was a special kind of instrumental synergy going on that was quite wild.

FJO: So what are these laws of klezmer?

DK: Any music has rules. So, for example, if you hear somebody playing jazz and it doesn't swing, the rules of jazz are being broken. It's not the music; it doesn't have the right feel. And the same is true with klezmer. It's a real specific sound: trills, ornaments, ways of phrasing. It's hard to actually describe in words. You know the famous Louis Armstrong quote: "What is swing, Mr. Armstrong?" "If you don't know what it is, don't mess with it." It's like listening to a language. You listen to language tapes over and over and over and you find the knack of how to do it.

FJO: Well, the word klezmer means musician or music, so whatever those guys who were called klezmers played was klezmer music, and they played a lot of things...

DK: Yes, klezmer actually means vessel of song, exactly. I think that for the eastern European Jewish mind, klezmer music was the music that was in their particular village, what was played for weddings. Certainly there were [Romanian Gypsy musicians](#) playing. They might play a Jewish wedding if the leader was Jewish. And then there might be Jewish musicians, but the leader was a Rom, so they knew each other's repertoires and there had to be cross-pollinations.

FJO: You mentioned trills and various ornaments and a feel or a groove that the music has. Are there specific instruments that have to be part of klezmer, the same way the hardcore bluegrass people say if there isn't a banjo or a mandolin in the band, it isn't bluegrass? Like, for example, you probably couldn't have a bluegrass saxophone quartet...

DK: I would say obviously the clarinet and the violin are very closely associated with klezmer music. But I don't have a violinist in my band and my good friend Alicia Svigals doesn't have a clarinetist in [her band](#). But I think it's more about the connection to cantorial music. There's the cliché that klezmer music laughs and cries at the same time. Where that cliché is coming from in a way is that there's this happy celebration and dance music. There's this delirium, this wonderful ecstatic feeling. And yet, for example, an ornament called a krecht (a little sob), the notes in between the notes, that's so much coming from the sound of the cantor. And in Jewish life, especially in small towns, the synagogue was part and parcel of that everyday existence. You lived for Shabbat. The whole week you were just heading toward Shabbas and going and hearing the cantor. So, obviously the wedding music had to have that.

FJO: You say notes between the notes. To me, you're talking about [microtones](#) here...

DK: It could be microtonality. But also little sobs, little escape tones [*sings*]. To me, if it doesn't have that, it isn't klezmer. The essential thing in klezmer music is the doina: the rhapsodic, non-metered improvisation form. Interestingly enough, it's a kind of a cross between Romanian shepherd song and cantorial singing. But there are some scholars of cantorial music who say in fact, [that though] people think it was the klezmer musicians who were influenced by the cantor, there were cantors who were checking out the Romanian musicians to get their influence for how to sing the [chazzanut](#), the cantorial music. So I think definitely it goes back and forth. And when you hear great doina playing, that's part and parcel of klezmer music. You cannot separate klezmer music from doina. It's sort of like in jazz. If jazz doesn't have a blues flavor to it, to me it isn't jazz. I really think that every great jazz player that I love, every record that I love, has blues in it. It's soaked in the blues. And klezmer music is soaked in doina.

FJO: Fortunately, the blues never really disappeared, but the whole klezmer revival and its aftermath first began as a way to revisit the past and reconnect to what was essentially a lost tradition.

DK: At the time of this first [klezmer revival](#), I think a lot of klezmer was about learning from the old records, from the old players, interviewing, listening and reconstructing. Bands like the [Klezmorim](#), [Kapelye](#)...

FJO: These early revival groups were just about reviving the old repertoire...

DK: [Andy Statman](#) was part of that. He was basically copying the old records note-for-note. Not completely, but he basically played freilachs and horas.

FJO: But now, Statman's a real experimenter. What the klezmer revival morphed into, and what has made it so exciting from a new music perspective, is that it's a real hotbed for experimentation. Some of it's really wild stuff. This seems really contradictory. It's looking back and going to new places at the same time...

DK: I think we're in an amazing time for this music. It's amazing to feel so connected to a really, really old tradition and yet feel at the same time that one is able to do stuff that keeps the music vital and keeps it moving forward.

Klezmer in Europe & America

FJO: So, how far can you go? You've incorporated samplers, funk beats, one album you did has Latin drummers... In Europe, there was this cross-cultural pollination you just described with Rumanians, Hungarians, Poles. Here you're now doing this cross-pollination with jazz and funk, salsa and hip-hop. Are there kinds of music that wouldn't work blended with klezmer?

DK: I think that's a really hard question to answer because at a certain point it's very intuitive. Right now I'm in the middle of a very interesting and stimulating collaboration [with a guy who] uses the name "[So Called](#)." He lives in Montreal. He's remarkable. He's not just a DJ: he has a sampler and a sequencer and he makes beats. He's not just saying we're gonna make a house beat and play some klezmer on top of it. He's an accordionist. He sings in Yiddish. He's deeply committed to klezmer music. I'm 48 and he's 27, so it's a real cross-generational collaboration. He's been making beats since he was 15 years old, so he's actually been making beats for quite a long time. As much as he loves house and hip-hop and all of those kinds of forms, he's also deeply into klezmer music. He and I will discuss a little trill or an ornament on some old Dave Tarras record that he worships, or Aaron Lebedeff and [Moishe Oysher](#). That place that he's coming from makes the music have that connection. If you lose that connection then it loses its meaning.

My new record is continuing the collaboration with [So Called](#) and [Klezmer Madness](#). It's probably going to be called *Superstitious Devices*, *Bubbermeises* and so we're continuing to do stuff with the beats but going further. We're also doing a crazy version of "Rumanye, Rumanye," this slager Yiddish theater classic, but we do it really dark and slow. The words are about how everybody in Romania drinks wine and eats pastrami and anybody who kisses his own wife is out of his mind; it's a happy land. Aaron Lebedeff's recording from the '20s or '30s is unbelievable, so powerful and joyous. But it's hard to copy that. Where do you go from there? Some people have done some nice versions of it in the klezmer revival. It wouldn't be my thing, but I've always secretly wanted to sing that song. So I sing it, but we have this dark version. The image is like, "Oh, America's always going to be a free country. No fascism." And then there's a dark underbelly. We left to do the recording on November 3, 2004, and we were all in a really pretty shitty mood, and I think that was pretty powerful. Doing this song where there's this image of Romania, but there's corruption and poverty, horrible infant mortality rate, Ceausescu, dark awful things, difficulty and tragedy...

FJO: Now, if you took a traditional klezmer audience and presented them with something like this, would they acknowledge it as klezmer? Who is your audience?

DK: It's really mixed, ranging from really young people in their 20s or even younger, little kids, on to people in their 80s. And there are interesting reactions. This one woman came up to me in France. She was in her mid 80s and she said, "I'm a Polish Jew. I grew up with this music. I fled to France when the Nazis came. I was hidden during the war and I survived. I knew this music; it's where I came from. When I saw the electric guitar and the drums, and I was ready to hate your music. But then you played and you convinced me and I loved it." Here was a person who listened with an open mind and open ears. I think my music is not forbiddingly academic or anything, but sometimes people talk about it as though it is: "Oh, my God, he's so radical!" I'm just trying to make music that's stimulating and fun and kinda crazy and wild. So this woman really heard it. I wrote a piece called "Love Song for Lemberg/Lvov"—Lemberg is where my grandfather came from and it's a beautiful Austro-Hungarian city—so I start off with an Austrian/Eastern European/Central European waltz and suddenly it erupts into a screaming doina with a lot of noise. And with each one of the interruptions, it gets louder and louder and more and more intense. It's like the screams of the Jewish dead. There's a lot of emotion and a lot of rage.

FJO: Of course, the disappearance of klezmer music in Europe was another byproduct of the Holocaust.

DK: Because of the Holocaust, because of Stalin, and because of assimilation in general of the entire diaspora, the music and the culture got lost and shoved to the side.

FJO: We probably wouldn't have any remnants of this original klezmer music if it weren't for musicians who emigrated to the United States and made [recordings here](#). So in a strange sense, klezmer is actually an American music in the same way that salsa is...

DK: Klezmer has become an American music but at the same time when I go to Europe, people say: "We are so happy that you are coming here and playing European music." So there's a perception in Europe, and it's true, that this music belongs to the European tradition as well. It's always that interesting thing of people being fascinated by Jewish culture in Europe when there are so few Jews left in Europe now. It's kind of a gap in the European soul. That's how I see it. They're looking for something to fill that gap. "We had Jews here. We had Jewish culture. It was important to us." And then, Americans are coming back with it... It sort of goes both ways. I find it really amazing to come back and play Jewish music, especially in places like Poland, Germany, France, where horrible anti-semitic acts were perpetrated. "We came to America, and look at what happened to it here." That's really cool...

FJO: What did happen to it here?

DK: It took on influences like it did everywhere else. People sometimes have said to me, "Is your music like *Yiddish Melodies in Swing*?" There's this album that Dave Tarras played on. It's swing versions of klezmer tunes. But it's absolutely not! There was a sort of swing setting, but it was like cut and paste. You paste the klezmer musician on top of this. If you look at this swing music compared to 1938 Count Basie, it's pretty lame. It's just a functional Muzak-y arrangement of swing. We've come to a point now where klezmer musicians have heard enough American culture, they have enough James Brown running in their blood, Coltrane, Charlie Parker, etc. etc., so that when the influences are picked up, it's not just a cut and paste. It's a much more organic kind of synthesis.

FJO: It's interesting though, because you're talking about this as Jewish roots music from people who came here from Eastern Europe. Charlie Parker and Coltrane weren't Jews!

DK: But they were Americans and that's something that for me, listening to that music, that's in my blood. From like age 11, I was sitting and listening and studying their music deeply.

Klezmer and Being Jewish

FJO: Something that has come up in this discussion when you described getting into this music was learning more about Judaism and reconnecting with your Jewish roots. How much of this music is tied to cultural and religious connections? How important are those connections for the listener? I love klezmer but I'm not Jewish. I'm reminded of the old commercial from the '70s that said you don't have to be Jewish to like Jewish rye...

DK: Levi's Rye Bread! I'm not religious at all.

FJO: None of it was about getting religious?

DK: No, it had nothing to do with religion. But, on the other hand, going to these places and playing concerts in Brooklyn...there was this huge pocket of [Yiddish speakers](#), not just [Hasidic](#), people who were children of garment workers, middle or working class Jews who were Yiddish speakers. And this was astounding to me. I had no idea.

FJO: Did anybody in your family speak Yiddish?

DK: Well, my grandparents spoke Yiddish to hide things from my parents. So my parents had a smattering, so I have a [smattering of words in my vocabulary](#).

FJO: Well, everyone who lives in New York City does. I do too!

DK: Exactly. But probably I might have a couple more than the normal New Yorkese, but not many... Another early introduction in the early '80s was when I played this opera by [David Schiff](#) called [Gimpel the Fool](#). That had three short runs, three years in a row. It was basically a long weekend at the [92nd Street Y](#). It was a three performance hit, and then "see you next year." I did an opera by [Bruce Adolph](#) too at that time about a Jewish singer/actor during the Stalin period who was purged. This was also a kind of tease and introduction. And when I started playing klezmer, it felt so familiar to me. It feels so natural. I just felt like my grandmother taught me her vocal inflections, the way she spoke.

FJO: So do you need that family background to play this music? How significant is it?

DK: I can only talk for myself. I think there are many, many amazing non-Jewish klezmer players. I don't think that's a prerequisite. Just like I don't think you have to be African American to play jazz. But I do think that for me personally, there was a certain kind of cultural connection that connected me in a certain way. It was helpful for me, like African Americans playing jazz or funk, growing up with certain references. It gives you a solid grounding. I think America now, we're just swimming in our own culture. There are so many things going on, so the actual background of who you are and where you grew up isn't necessarily a pre-requisite.

FJO: You have these weird cultural displacements all around the world like European bluegrass bands. Their accents aren't quite right when they sing but they play really well. In Japan, there's an [all-Japanese salsa band](#). There's a [Finnish tango group](#).

DK: There are klezmer groups all around the world now too...

FJO: Do they get it? Can they get it? So much of music grows out of language, even the way you mentioned how klezmer connected you to the way your grandmother spoke. Can you learn the language without being steeped in it?

DK: I think it's all about being yourself. For me, if I were to play in a klezmer band that tried to replicate late-19th century klezmer, I may as well not even play klezmer. That to me would be such a lie. I'm not drawn to playing classical music on period instruments either. It's not to say that's a lie; some people really like that. Some people like reconstructions of 19th century klezmer music. I see the whole klezmer revival as a bigger picture. You have experimental bands; you have bands that reconstruct a classical klezmer. I think everything can co-exist. But I think it's about who you are. There might be a band in Japan playing bluegrass music, but wouldn't it be great to mix traditional Japanese music with bluegrass? Sometimes people don't think out of the box. They think, "Well, we like bluegrass music, so we'll just reconstruct what we hear on the records." My mantra is: "Don't reconstruct. Do what you need to do to learn the music, but be yourself. Do something original."

Performance Practice

FJO: Aside from the significance of individual interpretation, western classical training in a way is about being true to a score of the music of the past. The period instrument movement is the ultimate manifestation of that. The score is the law. Now, you continue to work with a lot of composers. [Paul Moravec](#) whose piece featuring you won the [Pulitzer Prize](#). You just mentioned David Schiff and Bruce Adolphe. They all write notes on a page and expect them to be played. Yes, there's room for interpretation. But, you're realizing their work. That's a very different aesthetic.

DK: I think the work I do with composers is really different than my klezmer work, although with a few composers there's been a blending. There are a few people who've done a successful synthesis of klezmer music and classical music. Composers I've worked with who've done great work are [Betty Olivero](#), [Osvaldo Golijov](#).... Recording *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* with the [Kronos Quartet](#) is one of the great experiences of my life. It wasn't written for me. It was written for [Giora Feidman](#) and then I inherited the piece and started playing it with the Kronos and other groups. This piece is a masterpiece. It has really managed to find the folk music form and synthesize it with totally notated music.

FJO: So there's no improvisation in it?

DK: Well, he wrote that it is for "klezmer clarinet" and string quartet. It's not for "clarinet" it's for "klezmer clarinet." That, in and of itself, gives me the license to add the notes between the notes, the little sobs, the krechts, the glissandi. I do add some ornaments that are stylistically appropriate. And Golijov says, "David, you never play it the same way twice." That's always my goal, to be fresh with it every single time.

FJO: A "klezmer clarinet" also has quite a different tone quality than a classical clarinet. It's much closer to an early jazz sound...

DK: My models from about age 11 were the great New Orleans players: Bechet, [Johnny Dodds](#) and [Barney Bigard](#), so I was always after a weirder sound. Not like [Benny Goodman](#) or [Buddy DeFranco](#),

even though I admired their playing. It was not the sound I was looking for. I was looking for a stranger, edgier sound... dirty and doing more interesting timbral things. Before I started getting into klezmer and while I was freelancing as a classical musician, I was always trying to make the [Boehm system clarinet](#) sound like an [Albert system](#) clarinet. So I was doing these weird fingerings.

FJO: Could you explain the [difference between these two systems](#)?

DK: It's just a different fingering system, but whenever you hear any of the old jazz players, any of the Greek players, the klezmer players, they were all playing Albert system clarinets. I think it was this guy [Buster Smith](#) who taught Charlie Parker, who said if you wanted tone, you went for the Albert system; if you wanted facility, you went for the Boehm system. The Albert system is a little-bit stranger to finger, but it has a really woody tone to it, something about the way the bore was shaped...

FJO: Are people still making those instruments?

DK: Yeah. In fact, I saw Duke Ellington in the early '70s and [Russell Procope](#) was playing with him and he was playing a modern Albert system. That's what he liked to play.

FJO: So nowadays, do you play both types of instruments?

DK: No. I've always played the regular Boehm system clarinet, but I always try to make it sound like an Albert system by using strange fingerings to get different timbral things going.

FJO: Now, there've also been composers who have given you space to improvise. [John Musto](#) when he wrote the Sextet, left room in there for a cadenza that's entirely up to you. I remember you performing this with a 102 degree fever. By the end of it, the whole audience had a fever! It was so hot...

DK: That was fun. We were talking about a cadenza and Musto said, "Why don't you just make something up. Start here and end there." The difference is he was really giving me the license to create my own little composition in the middle of his composition.

The Compositional Process

FJO: What about your own compositions?

DK: I'm a pretty unschooled composer. I write klezmer songs. And, working with the band, I'm an arranger in the sense that I'll say, "Let me hear that crazy sound there." So I'm like a collagist in terms of composing, not a pen and paper composer so much. But I work with improvisers. I give them directions, but then they take it and make it happen.

FJO: I really love your "alt(dot)klezmer" and I've heard two very different recorded versions of it. How did you put that together?

DK: It was actually composed in a taxicab on the way to a session with the Klezmatics. We were doing film music and I really wanted to have something in there. So I thought I better write something. Alicia Svigals had said just improvise a doina and this'll be for the film. She said the film was about a woman's family who had a red house that they were going to put some dopey aluminum siding on. It was kind of a

strange documentary. Red house no more. It was supposed to be very sad so I played [*sings*]. So I'm in the cab thinking, "I wrote that thing. Maybe I should be thematically consistent, so [*sings*]." Maybe I could use the old form of the chosidl [*sings*]. So I wrote it down and brought it to the band. But then on *Live in Krakow*, I'm playing with an amazing group of improvisers—Michael Sarin, Will Holshouser, [Nicki Parrott](#), Sheryl Baley—these are people that you give them some material and they just go with it. The band has become really adept at taking little bits of material and just doing open form improvisation. So we had the thing, it's four short parts—A, B, C, D—and then we go.

FJO: But the thing that's exciting to me about that piece is how that klezmer melody works so well with a sort of hip-hop groove underneath it, but you didn't conceive of it that way.

DK: In the beginning, I conceived it as a khosidl, using that old dance rhythm...

FJO: So, in terms of what constitutes a composition, do you write these things out as leadsheets and everyone works off of that or is it done by ear? How does the group learn the material?

DK: Basically I write out leadsheets, but sometimes it's just by ear. Like, one tune I'm really proud of right now which is called "Tribe Number 13" where I took [a klezmer scale](#) and then I fragmented it [*sings*] and did very pointillistic things. I think it's [Zorn's](#) favorite piece of mine. He said, "Yeah, 'Tribe Number 13,' that's cool!" And then I was thinking I wanted to combine a klezmer bulgar with a blues. It's a 6-bar piece not an 8-bar piece so if you double-timed it, it would be a 12-bar blues. And then the chord structure is based on the blues, but doina-esque, so I'm kinda referring to klezmer scales and klezmer forms and then trying to set it in new ways. Another tune I wrote, "Klezmer à la Bechet" uses the turkische. But then I thought of Bechet's rhapsodic style and rubato on top of it and that's how that tune was created.

FJO: So in terms of how your music is interpreted. Are there other groups doing your music at this point?

DK: Now and then. There's a guy in Berlin named [Paul Brody](#) who took "Klezmer à la Bechet" and made something else out of it. He calls it "Klezmer à la Bechet" and he gives me composer credit, but he really made a new piece out of it. I'm happy and flattered, but it really isn't like him covering that tune. He chopped it up and did his own thing. That's good. I'm glad. But no one has really grabbed on to these things. The next step for me is to publish a songbook.

FJO: But you wouldn't want anybody doing "Period Instrument" David Krakauer...

DK: Probably not!