THEODORE BIKEL
SINGS JEWISH FOLK SONGS
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ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY FRED HELLERMAN

For some time now it has been a debatable point as to whether or not I have the right to
call myself a folk singer. For after all, a folk singer is one who sings the traditional songs
of his own people. Language, customs, geography and even religious tradition forge a nation's
folk songs and folk singers. Where then, do I myself stand, singing as I do the songs of vari-
ous nations in their language? How can I be a Russian, French or Scottish folk singer all at
the same time? The songs may sound authentic in my mouth—as Russians, Frenchmen, or
Scots often tell me—but nevertheless I sing of what I learned only; not of what I was born
to. You may call me a singer of folk songs, or a folk-songs singer.

This album, however, constitutes the exception. Here I do sing of my own people's
heritage, in words that were my own family's usage and with melodies I knew even before I
could say words at all. In these tunes lie not only my childhood memories, steeped in nost-
algia, but also a cool consciousness of background, family tradition and, let me admit it,
pride. For we are proud Jews, my family and I, proud and stubborn. Neither my father nor
my grandfather—who I remember well, though I was but a child when he died—were ever
rich nor very well-to-do; but when we sat down to celebrate the Seder at Passover, we be-
came kings and princes. There was a spiritual wealth and a wealth of melody that inevitably
surfaced at such times and it made up for any lack of material riches.

My grandfather, Reb Shemih Bikel, was a pious Jew though not by any means an
orthodox one. In fact, he was downright unorthodox; an asker of questions and a reader of
"forbidden" books. A man who thought with logic and argued with the heart. quick tem-
pered as all the males in my family. An interesting man and, what is more, an interested one.

My father is, on the face of it, very much a twentieth century man. As a believer in
modern thought and modern philosophies, he no doubt presents to the casual acquaintance,
a picture of a typical European intellectual. But that is only skin deep. There is a very emo-
tional Jewish soul lurking there which needs no provocation at all to show itself. In fact, a
line from a song suffices and my father pours forth a veritable feast of Jewish melodies.

I am describing my family in such detail because they are the very source of the mate-
rial in this album; because it helps to understand that for us the essence of Jewishness lies
not in religion but in tradition; because I am to a great extent a product of that tradition;
and frankly, because I like to talk about them.

As for myself, if I were to try and find a definition of myself as a Jew, it would be a
somewhat complex one. For I find that as a religious believer I am a failure; as a disbeliever,
however, I fail much more drastically. The one leaves me utterly dissatisfied, the other empty.
Thus I am neither a pious Jew, like my grandfather, nor, like my father, a conscientious one;
but I am a conscious one. To me, my people's past is very real, and both our languages—
Yiddish and Hebrew—a living source which will not dry out in my house while I am alive.

The festivals shall be kept and the songs shall be sung. I am, for want of a better word,
a committed Jew. Committed to the sanctity of Judaism, to its ethics, to the sense that where
we stand someone has stood before; and to the sadness-within-joy and joy-within-sadness
that pervades our soul and our song.

This is the first album of Yiddish folklore I have recorded. I do not intend it to be my
last. There are many more songs, some of great poetic beauty, some of artistic and literary
value, maybe more so than the songs contained on this record. But as I sat down to think
about material and started to remember my younger years and the lift of the songs as they
first came to me, I decided to subordinate literary and poetic considerations and give prefer-
tence to early memories and impulse.

Fred Hellerman is responsible for the orchestration on Side One. I wish to express my
gratitude and appreciation to him for the good taste and subtlety that mark his work. He
remained true to the origin of the songs and there seemed to be a genuine understanding
between us and a respect toward each other and the material we worked with. In one in-
stance only did we take liberties, namely in the song Di Vren. This is a comic song telling
of the horror felt by a Lithuanian Jew when confronted with this new-fangled invention, the
railroad train. We felt it could stand the irreverence of train noises and such; so we decided
to go to town even at the peril of being expelled from the faith. Since A Souden is a dia-
logue song we thought it not inappropriate to have a voice other than mine take the part of
the inquiring student.

There are several accents prevalent in the Yiddish tongue. I have tried to keep them
uniform in the main, digressing only when rhyme demanded the use of a different pronuncia-
tion ("tsz" instead of "zsa", for example). A complete pronunciation guide is included as part
of the accompanying texts and translations inside the record jacket.

Most of the songs are commonly known folk songs. A couple, however, I have never
heard sung outside my own family circle.

THEODORE BIKEL

Theodore Bikel's other ELEKTRA albums include More Jewish Folk Songs (EKL-165);
Folk Songs from Just About Everywhere with Geula Gill (EKL-161); Songs of a Russian
Gypsy (EKL-150); Folk Tales of Israel (EKL-132); A Young Man and a Maid with Cynthia
Gooding (EKL-109); An Actor's Holiday (EKL-105); and Bravo Bikel (EKL-175).

production supervisor JAC HOLZMAN, COMPLETE TEXTS ENCLOSED

THE ELEKTRA CORPORATION
665 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022
THEODORE BIKEL sings
JEWISH FOLK SONGS

1. DER REBE ELIMELECH
2. DI YONTVE DIKE TEYG
3. SHA SHTIL
4. DI BAN
5. KUM AHER DU FILOZOF
6. DI MEZINKE
7. A SUDENYU
8. ACHTSIK ER UN ZIBETSIK ZI

Orchestra conducted by Fred Hellerman
Arrangements by Fred Hellerman
THEODORE BIKEL sings
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1. DI MAME IZ GEGANGEN
2. MARGARITKELECH
3. MU ASAPRU
4. LOMIR ZICH IBERBETEN
5. HOMENTASHN
6. A CHAZN OYF SHABES
7. REYZL
8. TUMBALALAYKA