KLEZMER PIONEERS
EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN RECORDINGS
1905-1952
By the time the earliest examples of Yiddish music featured on this anthology were released before 1910, the recording and marketing of Jewish recordings had been going on for a decade.

Before 1870 there was neither a workable method of recording nor even a viable popular Yiddish culture to record. The emergence of a secular Jewish culture and the beginnings of recorded sound exist in parallel. Although there had been generations of cantors, klezmorim and homey folk singers, popular entertainment did not exist as a profession in the traditional Jewish world. It was the emergence of the non-religious Haskalah ("Enlightenment") and, later, Socialist and Jewish nationalist movements in Eastern Europe that began to loosen the once narrow social and religious restrictions within the Jewish community. Entertainment, without ties to religious or ritual events, slowly began in increasing numbers of Jewish communities. One prominent pioneer, Abraham Goldfaden, is credited with being the father of the Yiddish theater as a result of his Jewish musical playlets presented in the public wine cellars of Jassy, Rumania in the 1870s.

Goldfaden’s canny mix of familiar and foreign musical motives aided otherwise unknowing audiences in gaining a greater appreciation of the musical cultures outside of their local Jewish communities. And, as it happened, a melange of familiar and foreign items was also the goal of the emerging record companies.

It was Thomas Edison’s cylinders that made the recording and distribution of sound possible, but it was the development of flat disc recordings by the German-Jewish émigré Emile Berliner that made recording a true mass market industry. Though no great advocate of Jewish culture, the assimilated Berliner — more than the anti-semitic Edison — understood the potential market that Jews represented, and issued Jewish recordings in the U.S. and in Europe by the mid-1890s.

When Edison opened his offices in western Europe to record and distribute cylinders, Berliner’s London-based Gramophone and Typewriter Company (GëT) had already set up portable recording studios in diverse cities of eastern Europe, like Warsaw, Czernowitz, Lemberg (Lvov) and Vilna, all rich centers of Jewish life. GëT succeeded in recording and distributing
The rotogravure section of the Jewish Daily Forward periodically ran pictures of klezmer bands from back home. This one was taken somewhere in Russia and ran on March 4, 1925. (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)

The recording of non-Jewish material by artists like Dave Tarras and Abe Schwartz meant in many cases that they would also have to assume ethnically appropriate noms-des-disques, like “D. Tarski” (Polish) or “Alexander Negru” (Rumanian) in order to complete the cultural border-crossing. Tunes like Abe Schwartz’s “Ai Raci Ku Ne Draci” (7) or Michael Vitezazul’s “Doina un sinha” (11) could be aimed at the Rumanian trade while maintaining an obvious Jewish appeal.

By 1930, virtually all Jewish-American recording activity came to a Depression-induced halt, and wasn’t resumed for nearly seven years. Jewish recording took a nosedive for other reasons, too. First, the passage of restrictive anti-immigration laws in 1924 cut off the flow of performers and audiences alike from the Old World. In addition, first-generation Americans showed a decided preference for strictly American entertainment, turning their backs on what they considered “green” (foreign). Finally, the rise of radio established a new and formidable competitor to the recording as an entertainment medium.

Many small, local low-power stations sprang up to reach non-English speaking audiences. In New York, for example, by 1935 there were over twenty stations with Yiddish programming reaching some 2.5 million listeners.

Though record companies initially struck back at radio and barred the broadcasting of records, recording artists like the Bobriker
9. JOSEPH CHERNIAVSKY AND THE YIDDISH-AMERICAN JAZZ BAND  
Kalle benetzts un a freilachs (The Bridal Serenade and Congratulations) 3:08  
Sam Beckerman and another — 2 cornets, Dave Tarras — clarinet, Chaim Ehrlich — trombone, Lara Cherivensky — piano, Hyman Milrad — tuba, Joseph Helfenbein — drums, with 2 violins, 2 saxophones, banjo and bass. New York, 16 November, 1925.

10. KANDEK'S ORCHESTRA  
A liederga honga (A Lively Honga) 3:14  
2 cornets, 3 violins, piccolo, clarinet, trombone, piano, tuba and drums. Camden, NJ, 9 July, 1925.

11. MIHAL VITEAZUL  
Doina un tuba. Bach, 1905.

12. ALEXANDER OLSHANEWSKY UND ZEIN ORKESTER  
Ein kik af dir (One Glance At You) [fox trot] 3:15  
2 trumpets, 1 trombone, 2 alto saxophones, 1 tenor saxophone, 5 violins, piano, tuba, banjo, drums. New York, December 1929.

13. ABE SCHWARTZ ORCHESTRA  
Tantz-A-Freilachs (Dance a Freilach) 2:27  
Shloimke Beckerman — clarinet, with cornet, violin, trombone, piano, bass and drums. New York, ca. October 1923.

14. JOSEF SOLINSKI  
Orientalische Motive II 3:05  
Violin solo with piano. Warsaw, 5 August 1908.

15. KANDEK'S ORCHESTRA  
A laiederga honga (A Lively Honga) 3:14  
2 cornets, 3 violins, piccolo, clarinet, trombone, piano, tuba and drums. Camden, NJ, 9 July, 1925.

16. MISHKA ZIGANOFF  
Odessa-Bulgur 3:22  

17. NAFTUE BRANDWEIN'S ORCHESTRA  
Der heisser (The Hot One) — tartar dance 3:05  
Naftule Brandwein — clarinet, Sam Spielman — trombone, with violin, piano and drums. New York, 17 July, 1924.

18. ISRAEL J. HOCMAN'S JEWISH ORCHESTRA  
Bessarabian chosid 1  (The Hassid from Bessarabia) 5:00  
Cornet, clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, trombone, piano, brass bass and drums. New York, October, 1923.

19. JOSEPH MOSKOWITZ  
Doina 3:06  

20. BELF'S RUMANIAN ORCHESTRA  
Bessarabian hora 2:57  
Violin, clarinet and piano. Bucharest, 1908-10.

21. ART SHRYER'S MODERN JEWISH ORCHESTRA  
Mit der kalel tseunen (Dancing with the Bride) 5:07  
Art Shryer — cornet, with violin, clarinet, trombone, piano, brass bass and drums, Gustave Guttmann — vocal. New York, ca. 16 April 1924.

22. DAVE TARRAS  
Dem trisker rebbin's chosid 3:13  
Clarinets solo with trombone, piano and bass. New York, September 1923.
“WEDDING IN OPATOW CIRCA 1934” © 1992 by Mayer Kirshenblatt (b. 1916) Opatow, Poland
Acrylic on canvas. Used with kind permission.

“What a happy occasion! Whether you were a relative or not, you felt good. Besides, everybody knew everybody else.

There was one top hat in town. It was called a tisinde. Every groom who wanted to look elegant borrowed the hat.

The red chair in the corner is my grandmother’s. My grandfather bought a two-seater sofa and the chair from a nobleman’s estate at an auction sale. It was not in the best condition. The springs were popping out. The whole town borrowed it for the bride to sit on. Isu buzens di kale.

Before the festivities started, all the guests were assembled and the gifts that everyone gave to the bride and groom were called out. The family of the bride, a pair of silver candlesticks; the family of the groom a Chanukah lamp; the grandmother of the bride, a featherbed; the sister of the bride, a feather pillow, etc. Other household items were usually assembled for the bride in her trousseau.

After announcing the presents, refreshments were served. The favorite drink was licorice dissolved in water and in Yiddish was called lakritsh vaser. I never liked it, and I still don’t.

“The band struck up the music and the dancing started. At the ceremony, they played traditional music. For the dancing, they played contemporary music – tangos, waltzes, polkas, mazurkas and sometimes kolomikas.”

- Mayer Kirshenblatt, Toronto, 1992
The rare recordings featuring in this collection are a real link with a vibrant tradition of a previous generation. With no sense of “posterity” or “preservation”, those early musicians simply played what they hoped their community wanted to hear. What for the recording companies was a disposable commodity to be sold in an ethnic market has, in the intervening years, emerged as an historic musical matrix of a culture and tradition which until recently existed mainly in memory. The revival of interest in the study and performance of klezmer music in the last two decades means that these recordings, made by artists born in the 19th century who recorded in the 20th, will continue to have great meaning well into the 21st.

—from the enclosed notes by Henry Sapoznik

PRODUCED BY HENRY SAPOZNIK AND DICK SPOTTSWOOD.