

Wolf Krakowski and Fraidy Katz

By Kim Levis

Wolf Krakowski is a singer of Yiddish songs who refuses to be categorized as a Yiddish singer. He is a man of many worlds, whose albums have topped World Music charts.

Born in the ashes of World War II in a Displaced Persons' camp in Austria, he grew up Yiddish-speaking in Sweden and Toronto, where he went to school in North Toronto with singer/songwriter Bob Snider. He once lived in a Yorkville rooming house where Zal Yanovsky had lived. He read Jack Kerouac and began ramblin' around North America, working the Conklin and Garrett carnival shows across Southern Ontario, roaming between Montreal, the Eastern Townships, Idaho, California, New York, and Boston. In 1982 he met his future wife and musical collaborator, Fraidy Katz, at a 1982 World Congress of Yiddish in Montreal. They now live in an eccentric rambling house with a peaked tower, in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Krakowski's professional musical journeys began in the Sixties. He played in the Original Upper Canada Ragtime Mama Jug band with Mendelson Joe and Daisy Debolt, with Aboriginal Canadian singer/songwriter Willie Dunn, and Winnipeg bar-band and harmonica legend, Don "Stork" McGillivray. His Yiddish blues is greatly influenced by his encounter with Delta Blues legend Big Joe Williams in Montreal.

Krakowski has *khutspe*. In 1969, as a young student at McGill University, he used his student card to gain entry to the John Lennon-Yoko Ono bed-in-for-peace in Montreal and interviewed John Lennon just as Jerry Levitan had done as a youngster. (Levitan's experience was turned into the 2008 Oscar-nominated animation *I Met the Walrus*.) Along the way, Krakowski encountered writer Isaac Bashevis Singer in New York and visited his New York apartment, where he saw his Nobel Prize for Literature.

Krakowski's music incorporates all these influences: from rock to reggae, from tango to Anglo-American Folk, from Mississippi Delta Blues to Yiddish songs written or composed by icons such as Abraham Levin, Max Perlman, and Mordechai Gebirtig.

His first album *Transmigrations: Gilgul* includes Gebirtig's poignant "*Blayb Gezunt Mir, Kroke*" (Farewell My Krakow). Only Gebirtig's lyrics survived the war—the melody of this piece was later composed by Manfred Lemm, a German musician of French Huguenot ancestry, who wrote *Mordechai Gebirtig: Jiddische*

Lieder (Edition Kunstlertreff, 1992).

That Krakowski is a man of many worlds is even reflected in his photograph on the cover of his album, *Transmigrations: Gilgul*. It is the face of an Old World troubadour, or an Indigenous North American Plains warrior. A tiny high-contrast logo of this image is etched on this CD, like a talisman.

This self-taught musician, the son of Holocaust survivors, produced his first album himself with money he made as a videographer working on Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of Shoah Visual History Foundation*. *Transmigrations* was then reissued by the Yiddish avant-

garde maven John Zorn's prestigious label, *Tzadik*, and distributed by Koch International in a couple of dozen countries. His second album, *Goyrl: Destiny*, was produced by Klezmatik's Frank London on the same label. Frank London plays trumpet on this album, while Charles Neville of the Neville Brothers plays saxophone. Brian Mitchell, who played with Bob Dylan and Levon Helm, plays organ on the addictive track *Zingarella*. The wispy blue hues on this piece is a perfect marriage of Yiddish and Southern Soul.

In this World Music tradition, instruments used on *Goyrl: Destiny* include the tsimbl, balalika, mandolin, steel guitar, and dobro. Instruments on *Transmigrations: Gilgul* include: conga drum, tambourine, maracas, claves, doumbek, shakers, and bouzouki. Both albums, as well as Fraidy Katz's album *The Eternal Question*, are backed by guitarist Jim Armenti, bassist Ray Mason, and drummer Bob Grant (on *Transmigrations: Gilgul*) and Tom Shea (on *Goyrl: Destiny* and *The Eternal Question*) who masterfully combine Yiddish melodies with American rhythms. This versatile group is known as the Lonesome Brothers.

Wolf Krakowski's voice itself has a lonesome quality that has been compared to Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen. However, Krakowski's singing is more melodic than the whiskey-gravel voice of Tom Waits, and all-around, he has a better voice than Leonard Cohen. What his voice does have in common with theirs, however, is the elegiac timbre, more like the melancholy of Cape Verde singer Cesaria Evora; Portuguese *Fado* music; the songs of North American Native poet/activist John Trudell, whose family were all murdered at Wounded Knee; or French *chansonnier* Leo Ferre. It is a bittersweet sadness that soothes the soul as it pierces the heart.

Krakowski's wife Fraidy Katz also sings a deep mournful mezzo-soprano on her own album *The Eternal Question*, but when she sings a duet with her husband, for example on *Lomir Trakhtn Nor Fun Haynt* (Let's Just Think About Today) on *Goyrl: Destiny*, her



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bright reedy tones burn through the sadness like shafts of sunlight burning through a San Francisco fog.

Even songs like *Drey Dreydl* and *Yiddishe Maykholim* have somber undercurrents. *Dona Dona* is sung at a slow bluesy tempo. *Kh'vel Shoyn Mer Nisht Garvenen* (I'll Never Steal Again), normally up-tempo, has a simple pared-down arrangement—with hand percussion and steel slide guitar—that has a Mojave Desert feel; it could be on the sound track of the movie *Baghdad Café*. Abraham Levin's *A Shod Dayne Trern* (A Waste Of Your Tears) has a tango undertone in keeping with Levin's time in Argentina. (In 1926 Levin directed a drama circle at the Morris Winchevsky Cultural Centre in Montevideo, Uruguay.)

The sadness of *Tife Griber*, *Royter Laym* (Deep Pits, Red Clay) by Shmuel Halkin/Emil Gorovets exemplifies the plaintive hope, emerging from pain, present in of all of Krakowski's work:

Deep pits, red clay
I once had a home.
A good time will come again
And luck will turn also
Pains will be lighter,
Children grow again.

Children will play noisily
At the graves of the holy dead.
By pits deep and full,
So the pain won't well over.

Memories of loved ones are very important to Krakowski. His first album is a memorial to many: relatives who perished at Treblinka, the Lodz ghetto, and Bergen-Belsen; dear friends from his youth who died too young; Big Joe Williams who died at a ripe old age; and John Lennon and Isaac Bashevis Singer whom he admired so much.

Wolf Krakowski himself has many admirers around the world. Toronto singer Honey Novick, who knew him when he lived across the street from her when she was a child, and who moved into his former commune house on Portland Street in the Seventies, says, "Wolf's respect for the culture of *Yidishkayt* before the war brings into the twenty-first century a living document of a world that Hitler tried to kill, but failed."

In his best-selling book *Born To Kvetch* (paperback edition) author and comedian Michael Wex lists Krakowski as one of the best contemporary Yiddish singers .

Itzik Gottesman wrote in the Yiddish *Forverts* (Forward) about a concert at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan: "One of the merits of Krakowski's recordings and performances is the fact that one doesn't hear the same old retread songs; he has sought out and acquired an interesting repertoire."

Ethnomusicologist and professor of classical music at the University of Minnesota Alex Lubet dedicated his last guest lecture at Marie Curie- Sklodowska University in Poland to American Jewish music and focused on *Transmigrations: Gilgul*. Lubet writes in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* (vol 16):

"Wolf Krakowski is outrageously Jewish. Earlier, better times for Yiddish culture spawned art song, opera, musical comedy, popular song, jazz, dance genres, folk song, and liturgical traditions. Much was

undertaken; everything seemed possible. That Wolf may be the one true Yiddish rocker owes not to eccentricity, but to that ultimate aberration in Jewish life and Yiddish culture, the Holocaust.... Were Yiddish thriving now, its songs would surely include rich responses to rock, hip hop."

Transmigrations was included in the Top Ten Records of the Year in Germany's *Folker Magazine* and *Goyrl: Destiny* was Record of the Year on *One World Radio*, UConn@Storrs. Mysteriously, despite this, Krakowski's music has been virtually ignored by CBC, even though it qualifies as Canadian content.

Key to Krakowski's personality and his love of disparate musical styles are his ability to relate to people of many cultures. He tells the story of how he became friends with W. C. Handy Blues Hall of Famer, Big Joe Williams in Montreal. "I met Big Joe in Montreal where he had a long engagement at The Blue Lantern, a hangout of mine. I could understand his thick Mississippi dialect where others couldn't. I carried his guitar, read restaurant menus (yes, he was illiterate) and helped him send money orders home. He had a room above the coffee house where he cooked chicken in his own frying pan, which he packed in his suitcase. We hung out, jammed, and prowled the nightclubs—the Black Bottom, Rockhead's Paradise, and the Esquire Show Bar. We partied together. I spent ten glorious days and nights with him. He had more stamina than I did! He was born in 1899, and I was nineteen; it was in the winter of 1966. Big Joe recorded *Montreal Blues* about this period. He died right around the time I moved south to be with Fraidy."

One online United Kingdom writer who goes by the name Renaissance Man writes of Krakowski's albums, "It is like meeting, quite by chance and completely unexpectedly, a close old friend that you lost contact with more than half a lifetime ago, and discovering that you still relate after all those years." (<http://www.rain-lore.demon.co.uk/Reviews/WolfKrakowski-Transmigrations.html>)

Anyone who takes the time to travel across Krakowski's musical worlds will find the same sense of meeting an old friend.

Krakowski also has an English-language album called *Unbounded*, of all original material. The three Yiddish albums—*The Eternal Question* by Fraidy Katz, and *Goyrl: Destiny* and *Transmigrations: Gilgul* by Wolf Krakowski—all have excellent liner notes, English translations, and biographies of the lyricists and composers. These bios are an adventure in Yiddish history in themselves. *Goyrl: Destiny* includes a glossary of Yiddish terms like *dreydl*, *latke*, and *mameloshn*.

No matter what your *mameloshn* (mother tongue) you will enjoy these albums. Canadians may acquire them through Chapters/Indigo, HMV, and Amazon.ca. In the Greater Toronto area, these albums are sold at Negev Importing at 3509 Bathurst St. and at Israel's The Judaica Centre either at 870 Eglinton Ave. W in Toronto, or at 441 Clark Ave W. in Thornhill. Wolf Krakowski and Fraidy Katz's Kame'a Media web site URL is: <http://www.kamea.com>. ♦

Note: a *kame'a* in Hebrew and Yiddish is a talisman, an amulet, a lucky charm. The "hand" logo is specifically known as a *khamsa* and is common in North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe. A *mezuzah* is a *kame'a*.