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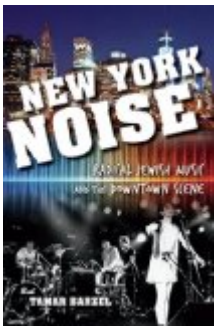
Tamar Barzel. *New York Noise: Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Scene.* Profiles in Popular Music Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 328 pp. $28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-01557-0.



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"Was the music of the RJC (Radical Jewish Culture) moment—particularly at its most abstract and esoteric—'Jewish music'?" asks ethnomusicologist Tamar Barzel, introducing a central question fueling her ethnography of "Jewishly identified" music in New York's Lower East Side avant-garde music scene during the 1990s (p. 15). *New York Noise: Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Music Scene*, published by Indiana University Press's Profiles in Popular Music series, addresses the emergence of a postmodern musical consciousness that pushed the boundaries of existing ideas about Jewish music through the aesthetic language of experimental sound in late twentieth-century artistic innovation in New York City—with lasting resonances in Europe as well.

Barzel's inquiry lends itself to no easy answers, and fittingly, she avoids the unsatisfying task of trying to provide them, instead aiming to render the complexity of what she calls a "moment" rather than a "movement" in experimental Jewish music in an analysis of the circulating discourses, performance practices, and recordings of notable musicians on the scene (p. 5). Her musician-centered ethnographic study of the social, cultural, and artistic meanings of a new kind of Jewishly identified music—which challenged established notions of how, when, and under what circumstances music can be identified as Jewish—highlights the ways in which, within a "crisscrossing network of different music scenes," these musicians could address concerns that resonated with them as downtown experimentalists: how to "write new music that was Jewishly identified and yet also in keeping with their other work—unconventional, experimentalist, and wide-ranging" (p. 3). Barzel's attention to the years of 1992 to 1998 brings into focus a six-year period during which the scene came to life, but whose impact, Barzel notes, did not simply come to an abrupt end.

Marking the 1992 festival for Radical New Jewish Culture in Munich, Germany, as the beginning of the RJC moment, Barzel discusses a pivotal period of artistic activity during which musicians "produced provocative new work while engaging discursively with the personal and conceptual is-

sues it raised" (pp. 3–4). For many participants, the festival engendered a "mutual recognition about an aspect of identity whose significance, and indeed existence, had so far gone largely unacknowledged in their creative lives" (p. 4). John Zorn, composer, saxophonist, and figurehead of RJC, curated the event and also premiered his programmactic octet ***Kristallnacht***, initiating a moment of reflection on experimental sound and its connection to postmodern Jewish life. Unlike the klezmer revivalists who began turning to the "usable past" to reinstate East European Ashkenazic klezmer music, folk life, and folk music as potent markers of Jewish identity, the New York experimentalists "insisted on articulating a radically personal Jewish musical voice" that was detached from the nostalgic connections to Jewish musical memory that the klezmer revivalists fostered (p. 6). The sounds emerging from the RJC moment drew instead from and constructed in its wake such idioms as "neo-klezmer, hardcore and acid rock, neo-Yiddish cabaret, free verse, free jazz, and electronic sound canvases" (p. 2).

As Barzel discusses, the Lower East Side played an important role in facilitating the RJC moment, placing RJC in a wide panorama of musical activity in New York City in the 1990s before sweeping changes to music scenes after 9/11 and the widespread appropriation of social media in the 2000s. Simultaneously the home to jazz, free improvisations, punk rock, classical composition, New Wave, and later No Wave, "punk's avant-garde incarnation," the Lower East Side also occupied an important place in American Jewish history and Jewish collective memory (p. 18). The "downtown scene" that grew out of this neighborhood in the 1990s—referenced in the title of her book—evokes "not only the musical production that happened amongst Zorn and his frequent collaborators, but also downtown's other crisscrossing musical networks" (p. 21). Both sociological and musical in its impact, she argues, the multiple influences converging in the downtown scene, including rock and jazz, intersected with the neighborhood's "multi-layered past" in its "dense city blocks and streetscapes," in which musicians "brought into sight a particularly diverse American-ness" (pp. 27, 59). Like the neighborhood itself, RJC musicians embraced conflicting and colliding sound worlds while adhering to an adamant refusal to be singularly coherent, playing and performing a Jewishly identified experimental music in now historic New York City performance spaces such as the Knitting Factory and CBGB.

In chapter 1, "Jewish Music: The Art of Getting It Wrong," Barzel frames her study around such key concepts as overarching historical narratives and definitions of Jewish music. By arguing that "listening as a creative act" fostered a consideration of "Jewish resonances" in Jewishly identified music, she shows that listening practices began "opening up a conceptual space in which to apprehend suppressed, repressed, or silenced voices" (p. 45). Barzel demonstrates how RJC became a social and artistic space to explore Jewish identity beyond institutional Judaism and organized American Jewish social and religious networks—that is, RJC supported a musical community for Jewishly attuned listening, which enabled musicians to reflect on their largely secular and nontraditional Jewish upbringings. She documents how Jewish artists attended to questions of identity to "suggest new perspectives on the notion of Jewish music itself" while risking the possibility of what musician Anthony Coleman calls "incoherence" in order to reflect on deeply personal issues as a "shared endeavor" (pp. 54–55).

Chapter 2, "Breaking a Thick Silence: A Community Emerges," extends this discussion, focusing on the personal stories of individual musicians who connected to the RJC moment and the issues they addressed about their Jewish selves that began to emerge in their music. These topics include explorations of the legacy of the Holocaust, the politics of race in the United States, gender, sexuality, "cultural gaps," and other "histori-

cal discontinuities" (p. 64). As Barzel notes, many musicians who participated in the RJC moment "were the grandchildren of European immigrants, third-generation American Jews who had come of age in the 1950s and 60s" and whose families, more or less and in different ways, "had traded wider social acceptance and a greater freedom to self-define for a certain amount of cultural forgetting" (p. 63). This phenomenon, she argues, supplied these musicians with a certain level of curiosity to "explore the Jewish relevance of their own experimental idiom" (p. 62).

In chapter 3, and at the center of Barzel's book—both figuratively and literally—Barzel situates the contributions of composer, saxophonist, and figurehead of RJC John Zorn, credited with coining the term "Radical Jewish Music" (p. 3). Barzel's lengthy discussion of his creative work and his organizational role in sustaining RJC by founding a record label devoted to experimental Jewish music (Tzadik) and opening a performance space to feature these creative engagements (the Stone) firmly establishes Zorn's importance within the RJC project. As a result, Barzel prominently features a thorough and in-depth musical analysis of two key compositional projects significant to the RJC moment: ***Kristallnacht*** and ***Masada***. ***Kristallnacht***, an album composed of seven different shorter pieces, each addressing the fracturing of Jewish life surrounding the 1938 "Night of Broken Glass" and the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust is, as Barzel argues, "unique in Zorn's oeuvre ... both in its programmatic scope and for the scale and immediacy of the events to which it alluded" (p. 87). By utilizing sound frequency charts, musical transcriptions, and tone row analysis, she provides substantial and "concrete evidence of the way Zorn makes musical references on a structural level, not only a stylistic one" (p. 107).

Unlike ***Kristallnacht***'s historical specificity, Barzel argues, the ***Masada*** project relies on historical ambiguity represented in a series of ritual symbols and iconography to convey the idea of a Jewish sound that fulfills an "ancient" obligation, following a spiritual impetus to enable art with the power to "heal the world," based in the idea of ***tikkun olam*** (p. 122). She writes, "beginning in 1993 with the advent of his post-bop quartet, Acoustic Masada, he launched his first sustained compositional foray into jazz, conventional (head-solo-head) song form, and melodic lyricism—that are collected into three 'Masada Songbooks': ***Book I*** (1993–1997), ***Book II: Book of Angels*** (2004), and ***Book III: The Book Beriah*** (2014)" (p. 87). In this chapter, Barzel does her most impressive musical analysis work as she delivers an insightful and provocative analysis of both compositions and their role in Zorn's emerging Jewishly identified music project. For nonspecialists, this will be a challenging chapter, and for specialists, perhaps the most engaging.

Chapters 4 and 5 extend Barzel's discussion of the diverse forms of artistic engagement embodied by RJC musicians. In chapter 4, Barzel introduces the work of the band God Is My Co-Pilot, or GodCo, a duo of guitarist Craig Flanagin and vocalist Sharon Topper who formed in 1990. Barzel notes how Topper and Flanagin established an "un-idealized, even confessional context" for Jewishly identified music as a post punk, No Wave band that embraced a "riot grrrl," queercore, feminist aesthetic to confront queer invisibility and to provide social critique on normative values in gender and music (pp. 146, 152). Barzel argues that Flanagan and Topper's approach to the performance of deconstructed folk songs, reimagined from an "outsider perspective," brought into focus the "imperfect transmission of Jewish songs from one generation to the next" and drew out the notion of performativity in the imagination of folk culture (p. 146). Chapter 4 provides an extended reflection on the issues of gender, sexuality, and performativity addressed by God Is My Co-Pilot and the resultant questions about masculinity and

femininity that ultimately emerged in the RJC moment.

Chapter 5's focus on music and memory calls attention to the seeming contradiction between downtown artists' "aesthetic detachment" or the "detachment of contemporary artists from the cultural sources of the sounds they manipulate into art objects" and the narrative-driven, place-specific creative projects devised to "engage the Jewish resonances of their own memories and experiences" (pp. 183, 190). In this chapter then, Barzel points to the work of vocalist Shelley Hirsh and pianist Anthony Coleman in expanding the musical vision of RJC to address the tension between RJC artists' apparent disinterest in the usability of traditional Jewish music as a "template for their new work" and their creation of a conceptual space for remembering or for engaging the notion of memory—a "memory space," which Barzel theorizes as a "nowhere place" (p. 182). As Barzel argues, these musicians were able to develop "two of the most striking, and strikingly different, musical responses to the idea that 'people should write from their own memory—their own memory and their own desires, and not from some collective memory.... To differentiate between what they actually remember, and what they're being told they remember'" (p. 191). This chapter very effectively highlights musicians' responses to enduring questions about Jewish musical authenticity and the cultures of memory at the intersection of the problematics of heritage industries and the politics of taste in discourses and practices of Jewish music.

One of the book's primary strengths is Barzel's detailed musical analysis and her obvious talent for creative and engaging sound writing that is satisfying and stylish in its ability to capture the auditory realm of experimental sound and the listening experience of RJC. While parts of her book may be somewhat inaccessible to non-music specialists, Barzel provides plenty of socio-historical contextualization to root her wider discussion of the role of Jewishly identified music in the downtown scene in New York City in the 1990s. Moreover, her inclusion of audio clips available on the publisher's website provides a soundtrack for critical listening, which is both practical and necessary. The book is expertly detailed in its musicological analysis; however, some specialists may wonder why, after noting her attendance and participation in concerts, conversations, dinners, and debates that took place throughout her research, Barzel did not include extended ethnographic passages describing these activities. Nevertheless, Barzel convincingly demonstrates how "the music of the RJC moment demands our attention—not because it solves the conundrum of how to define Jewish music, but because it changes the nature of the question" (pp. 16–17).

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