Remembering Imperfectly: Bridging the Past and Future Through Yiddish-American Folk Song Recordings

Zeke Levine, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Purchase College, State University of New York[1]

DOI: 10.36950/sjm.42.7

Keywords: Yiddish, Jewish, Yiddish-American folk song, folk singing, sound recording, American Folk Revival, ethnography, ethnomusicology.

Abstract: *In the liner notes for the 1957 Folkways Records release* Jewish Children's Songs and Games *ethnomusicologist and performer Ruth Rubin explains that Yiddish songs offer a vehicle for visiting the Old World of the Ashkenazi nineteenth century, an evocative claim that reveals mid-twentieth century American investments in the Yiddish folk song tradition. This article investigates the role of Yiddish-American folk song recordings in mediating the music of the past for future generations of listeners. I argue that ethnographic recordings and commercially released folk LPs in the mid-twentieth century United States represent the preservationist impulses of the period, which themselves colour and shape the performances on the recordings.*

Introduction

Zol zayn, az ikh boy in der luft mayne shleser,
Zol zayn, az mayn got iz in gantsn nito,
In troym iz mir heler, in troym iz mir beser,
In kholem der himl iz bloyer fun blo.

("Maybe I am building castles in the air
Maybe my God does not exist at all
But in my dream things are brighter and better for me
And the sky is bluer than blue".)[2]

So sings Michael Fox, the son of Yiddish speaking Holocaust survivors, while strumming a nylon string guitar as part of a field recording session with ethnomusicologist Ruth Rubin. The note on the tape log reads, "World War II. Papernikov. With his guitar. Learned from his mother. Remembers imperfectly; sings it again, and remembers".[3] Indeed, Ruth Rubin coaches Fox through his singing and also through his memory, prompting "I wanted you to go back further in your memory, I wanted you to go back to see whether you remember anything from your early, early childhood […]". On the tape, Rubin acknowledges her relationship with Fox, whom she taught in a class on folk culture, recalling that the last time they attempted to record his performance, 'traffic noises' cluttered the sonic capacity of the tape, making necessary their present recording session.

This moment of performance, of remembering, of dreaming, of connecting to past generations while preserving musical heritage for the future directs us to think about the affordances of sound recording within the realm of mid-twentieth century Yiddish-American folk song.[4] This article investigates the

1 ezekiel.levine@purchase.edu
2 Mlotek 1972.
3 Fox 1967.
4 Levine 2024. I have previously mobilized the construction "Yiddish-American folk song" to draw attention to the character of Yiddish language folk song in the twentieth century United States. While Yiddish-American folk song may include songs

This work is licensed under a CC BY 4.0 license.

role of sound recording technologies in mediating between the past and present, between memory and nostalgic imagination, and between Yiddish culture and the American Folk Revival, focusing on both ethnographic field recordings and commercially released LPs, which each represented efforts to preserve Yiddish musical folk culture in the mid-twentieth century United States. I argue that these Yiddish-American folk song recordings present a sonic portrait of the Yiddish past that was coloured and shaped by literary and theatrical imagination, prevailing standards of folkloric authenticity, and the unreliability of memory. The ethnographic and commercial recordings that emerged in this period, then, reveal not merely a corpus of Yiddish language folk songs, but a set of attitudes and beliefs surrounding Yiddish culture and its transmission from the past to the future.[5]

At first glance, academic folklore and the recorded music industry may appear at odds. After all, ethnomusicological initiatives sought to record supposedly authentic examples of folk singing, attempting to preserve music and sound that was unmarred by the polluting influence of industrial modernity. Commercially released Yiddish folk song LPs in the twentieth century United States, on the other hand, leaned heavily on instrumental and vocal conventions borrowed from the popular Yiddish theatre as well as the guitar-centred aesthetic standard of the American Folk Revival. However, I contend that these two strains were consistently entwined, forging a Yiddish-American folk song tradition indebted to a range of folkloric, theatrical, literary, and ideological influences.

The present discussion focuses on the specific context of the post-WWII period in the United States, during which the form and function of Yiddish morphed quickly as a result of the Holocaust, upward mobility and assimilation among American Jews, and the burgeoning influence of the State of Israel and the Hebrew language.[6] The evolution of Yiddish in the mid-twentieth century United States accompanied broader trends in the Jewish-American re-imagining of the past and positing visions of the future. Among the landmark contributions to the resulting corpus was Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski's 1952 *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, which sought to describe the daily life of Eastern European Jews living in a pre-modern *shtetl*.[7] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her introduction to the fifth edition of *Life Is With People,* describes the book as "a turning point in the relationship of American Jews to their Eastern European past".[8] She notes, however, "several vexing problems, among them the identification of East European Jewish culture with the *shtetl*," challenging the romanticized and imprecise definition of the *shtetl* furnished by Zborowski and Herzog, specifically the imagined "isolation, self-containment, and homogeneity," of the *shtetl*.[9] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provides a model for a critical evaluation of mid-twentieth century reflections on the Ashkenazi Jewish past, showing how these projects were informed by the historical context in which they were created.

Sheila Jelen echoes this approach in her investigation of post-war literary ethnographies, which she describes as "salvage poetics." Jelen defines, "salvage poetics are a series of framing devices wherein primary cultural materials in the form of text or image are mediated, translated, explicated, personalized, and/or valorised in an effort to create an accessible description of a lost culture. Salvage poetics represents a marriage of aesthetic and ethnographic impulses".[10] I draw on these valuable frameworks and perspectives, considering how the preservationist ethos of Yiddish-American folk song was situ-

derived from Eastern Europe, I focus on the ways in which these songs were understood, interpreted, and performed in the American context.

5 Schrire 2016. Dani Schrire's compelling reflection on Jewish ethnography similarly interrogates the relationship between modernity and the past, folklore and literature, and technology and memory.

6 Shandler 2008: 13–27. Jeffrey Shandler describes a turn to "postvernacular Yiddish", in which Yiddish took on a predominantly symbolic role, particularly in Jewish-American culture.

7 Herzog and Zborowski 1952: 22–27. The authors of the book describe the methodology of their study as including both interviews with informants who migrated from Eastern Europe to New York City, and films, literature, and other cultural creations.

8 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: ix.

9 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: xii–xiii.

10 Jelen 2020: 1. Jelen explains: "What I do in this study is try to understand the role played by a variety of different hybrid texts—or texts that exist on the border between the literary and the ethnographic." (Jelen 2020: xvii).

ated within the larger cultural sphere of mid-twentieth century Jewish-American culture. This period coincided with the advent of the long-playing record in 1949, which afforded unprecedented curation of musical materials not only through longer track listings, but by pairing sound recordings with artwork and liner notes. In sound, text, and visual art, LPs portrayed an undifferentiated "Yiddish folk song" that signified the supposedly lost world of the pre-modern Eastern European *shtetl*. As Abigail Wood notes, "the first principal change in general attitudes to Yiddish song after the Holocaust was the consensual expansion of the 'folk' represented by the Yiddish song canon to include the full compass of the Yiddish cultural world and all examples of Yiddish song".[11] Long playing records, then, not only reflect mid-twentieth century technological innovation, but the evolving concept of Yiddish folk song in this period.

This article is centred around the figure of Ruth Rubin, a leading folklorist and collector of Yiddish language folk songs as well as a performer of Yiddish songs in the twentieth century. Through Rubin, I argue that intergenerational cultural transmission is shaped by both imagined and historical understandings of the past as well as the opportunity for preservation afforded by sound reproduction. Rubin's field recordings from 1946-1970, motivated by notions of authentic folklore in vogue during the twentieth century, preserved an impressive corpus of songs, the investigation of which yields insights on the ethnographic process in this period. I pivot, through Rubin, to commercially produced Yiddish language folk LPs. Rubin recorded several of these herself, and maintained an intimate connection with both the Folkways record label and the larger American Folk Revival scene.[12]

While there are many other notable ethnographers who engaged with Yiddish folk song, among them I.L. Cahan, Joel Engel, Moshe Beregovsky, and Sofia Magid, Ruth Rubin is unique as both a folklorist and prolific song interpreter and performer. Likewise, Rubin is unique among performers of Yiddish folk song, merging her extensive field work with her performance practice, both on stage and on recordings. Rubin emerges, then, as a particularly vital figure in the history of mid-twentieth century Yiddish-American folk song whose life and career embody the entwined enterprises of Yiddish musical ethnography and folk song performance on record.

I bolster the discussion of Rubin's work with several other examples of Yiddish folk song recordings from the 1950s and '60s which further amplify the entangled impulses of folkloric authenticity and literary imagination. Ultimately, this article seeks to draw together the swirl of temporalities engaged by sound recording technologies, underscoring the ways in which the full scope of Yiddish-American folk song in the critical period of the 1950s and '60s mediated the past, present, and future.

Sound Recording and Yiddish Ethnography

Yiddish folklore in the twentieth century was facilitated by novel technological innovations, including sound reproduction technologies which allowed ethnographers to record the speech and song of their interlocuters. Jonathan Sterne has theorized the sociological and historical underpinnings of sound reproduction in this period, seeking to uncover how the development of recording technologies around the turn of the twentieth century was "shot through with the tensions, tendencies, and currents of the culture from which they emerged, right on down to their most basic mechanical functions".[13] Sterne provides a compelling analytical lens that highlights the technological medium itself within ethnographic initiatives. In particular, he describes how sound reproduction devices as technologies of preservation

11 Wood 2013: 53. Where scholars such as Lukin 2022 and Khazdan 2022 have meticulously outlined the minute distinctions between Yiddish song genres, as well as folklorists' conception of these genre distinctions, in this article I largely accept Wood's contention that the received tradition of Yiddish folk song downplayed these details, particularly in the case of "Yiddish folk song" LPs.

12 Rubin wrote several articles for the American Folk Revival publications People's Songs and Sing Out! For further perspectives on the ideological, musical, cultural, and social context of the American Folk Revival, see Cohen 2022; Filene 2000; Lieberman 1989; Reuss 2000.

13 Sterne 2003: 8.

became central to anthropological and folkloric studies at the turn of the twentieth century, identifying, "the American anthropologists who first used sound recording in their work often explicitly justified it in terms of the phonograph's potential to preserve the voices of dying *cultures*".[14] Sterne enters into the discussion the concept of the "resonant tomb," arguing that one primary affordance of sound recording is the ability for sonic preservation beyond the death of the utterer.[15] Here, sound recording allows the voice to transcend individual or community death, available to be heard by future generations of listeners.[16]

Extending Sterne's approach to the field of Yiddish ethnography in Eastern Europe in the first years of the twentieth century, one notes that the scientific exactness afforded by sound recording is tied to the recognition of disappearing traditional folkways in Eastern Europe, which was bound up with anxieties about modernity and the cosmopolitan influence on supposedly pure folk traditions. Sh. An-sky is among the best-known ethnographers of Ashkenazi lifeways, dedicating himself to not only to documenting folklore during his ethnographic expeditions in provincial Ukraine from 1912 to 1914, but to transforming his findings into evocative fiction.[17] Though Sh. An-sky was not the first ethnographer of rural Ashkenazi life, the scope of his ethnography, as well as his later reflection on and use of folklore materials in his literary work offers a productive entry into the sphere of European ethnography of Yiddish language folk materials at the turn of the twentieth century. An-sky's conjuring of a space "*tsvishn tsvey veltn*" ("Between Two Worlds") the original title of his play *The Dybbuk*, evokes the potential for transgressing accepted boundaries of time and space.[18] For An-sky, the timing was crucial. He noticed waves of emigration from traditional Ashkenazi homes, as state violence against Jewish communities grew, and as economic opportunities in Russia were stripped by the government. Gabriella Safran identifies An-sky's clear motivations, as he wrote:

> There is no people that has talked about itself as much and knows itself as little as the Jews, [that] for many years now there have been endless debates and passionate fights about the essence of Jewishness, folk culture, nationalism, the great spiritual heritage […] but still in fact one encounters among Jews neither serious interest in Jewish culture, not concern about its preservation and further development, nor any conscious striving to study the national worldview and the national particularities of the Jewish people.[19]

An-sky's ethnography, then, amplifies Jonathan Sterne's thesis within a particular context, highlighting the role of sound technology as bound up with a range of societal and historical tensions surrounding the fate of Eastern European Jewish culture. An-sky's ideological mission, spanning folklore and left-wing politics, is facilitated by the contemporary ability to technologically freeze tradition for future use. Crucially, however, Gabriella Safran observes, "When he wrote about studying the peasants, An-sky spoke for methods that preserved their stories in a maximally authentic form, but when he produced his own folkloric stylization, he had no compunction about borrowing from any available source."[20] An-sky's dual role as an ethnographer and as a writer introduces the tension between folkloric preservation and generative imagination that echoed through the twentieth century.

14 Sterne 2003: 311.
15 Sterne 2003: 287.
16 While Jonathan Sterne's framework is particularly vital for its tying together sound reproduction technology and folklore, with particular attention to intergenerational transmission, and thus centred in this discussion, there is a substantial body of scholarship surrounding the advent of sound reproduction technology. See Chanan 1995; Gitelman 2006; Kittler 1999 [1986]; Wehliye 2005.
17 See Rechtman 2021 [1958]; Walden 2009; Safran et al. 2006; Safran 2010; Deutsch 2016; Bronner 2022 for more details about Sh. An-sky, including his political activism, his ethnography, and his writing. For an analysis of the wider field of Yiddish ethnography at the turn of the twentieth century, see Gottesman 2003.
18 An-sky's fascination with traditional folk belief inspired this seminal work, in which two fated lovers find themselves entwined when the would-be groom dies and assumes the form of a *dybbuk*, a wandering soul that inhabits the body of his beloved. The play was adapted in a number of different forms across a number of languages.
19 Safran 2010: 192 (quoting An-sky).
20 Safran 2010: 112.

Ruth Rubin

Ruth Rubin was born Rivke Rosenblatt in Montreal in 1906. She grew up in a multilingual environment, speaking Yiddish in the home and French and English in school. She supplemented her public-school education as a student in the I.L. Peretz Folk Schule, where she was exposed to the richness of modern Yiddish culture, including a visit from noted Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem shortly before his death. Rubin moved to New York City in the 1920s, where she continued to surround herself with key figures in the Yiddish linguistic and cultural movement, including Chaim Zhitlowsky and Max Weinreich. While she was immersed in the dynamism of contemporary Yiddish culture, Irene Heskes notes in her short biography of Rubin, "from the beginning, Ruth Rubin's approach had always been that of an American folklorist", involved with American Folklore Society and counting figures such as Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger as colleagues.[21] Assessing Rubin's characterization as an American folklorist dedicated to Yiddish folk song reveals her crucial position in this discussion, pointing to Rubin's role in conceptualizing, recording, and performing a distinctly Yiddish-American folk song tradition.

Through her lectures, books, and recordings, Ruth Rubin demonstrates a commitment to the lullaby as a symbol of the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. In her landmark *Voices of a People,* Rubin writes passionately:

> During the nineteenth century, however, there was no dearth of lullabies, both as spontaneous expressions in the simplest structure, created at the cradle side, and as poetic creations of more literary origin, current among the folk. These modern cradle songs include a variety of forms, motifs, and moods and sincerely reflect the patterns of life which were prevalent at the time.[22]

She frames the genre historically, explaining, "it may be that the chapter of anonymous Yiddish lullabies ended with the close of the nineteenth century. Yiddish cradle songs, however, continue to be written by Jewish poets and composers during the twentieth century, both in Eastern Europe and America, and wherever Yiddish speaking Jews settled".[23] Note that Rubin's attention to the lullaby engages the relationship between the lived experience of pre-twentieth century Ashkenazi communities and the literary creations that crafted a particular image of those communities.

Writing in the American Folk Revival publication *Sing Out!*, she describes the lullaby within the musical folk process, detailing the origins of the song "Shlof Mayn Kind". She identifies the author as the "Father" of modern Yiddish literature Sholem Aleichem. Despite the literary origins of the song, she asserts, "his lullaby 'Shlof Mayn Kind' is known to every Yiddish-speaking community in the world and became a folksong before it became known that Sholem Aleichem was the author".[24] Rubin's clarification points to an understanding of folk song as communal cultural property, regardless of provenance. Sholem Aleichem, in addition to penning a number of iconic and lasting works, was a creative and ideological supporter of Mark Warshawsky, a songwriter whose works resonated throughout the twentieth century, but who received pushback for the seemingly artificial nature of his songwriting. Upon the release of Warshawky's first songbook, Sholem Aleichem engaged in a series of published debates with Joel Engel—the ethnomusicologist and musical interpreter who accompanied Sh. An-sky on his folkloric expeditions. Ruth Rubin summarizes Engel's approach to folklore:

> Defining folk songs as 'the songs which the people sing and which have come down to us either from unknown authors of long ago or which have been created before our very eyes (anonymously) but have become popular thanks to their folk character both in tune and text,' Engel maintained that Warshawsky's songs did not fulfill either of the above conditions.[25]

21 Heskes n.d.
22 Rubin 1973 [1963]: 29.
23 Rubin 1973 [1963]: 42.
24 Rubin 1959: 21.
25 Rubin 1959: 22.

Rubin reprints a great deal of this tense historical exchange in her *Sing Out!* article, highlighting the opposed positions of literature and ethnography.[26] She describes:

> generations have grown up on Warshawsky's "Oyfn Pripetshek Brent a Fayerl" [sic] […]. Hardly a Yiddish songster appearing during the past 59 years, but included several of his songs. And still the battle of 'folk-songs vs. popular songs vs. songs of literary origin vs. songs in folk style' rages on […]. In defending the creative efforts of his close friend, Sholem Aleichem was also defending Warshawsky's natural optimism, his earthiness, his lilting tunefulness, his true interpretation of various moods of his people. In Engel's arguments, Sholem Aleichem saw the cold position of the 'objective' scholar, who in reality removed himself from the real life and suffering of the people.[27]

James Loeffler outlines the intergenerational impact of Warshawsky's works, concluding, "more than mere calculated imitations of children's music, songs such as "Oyfn pripetshik" functioned as mediation devices between past and present, conjuring up musical reveries in which a lost place (the traditional *shtetl*) was conflated with a lost time (the early years of childhood)".[28] Rubin's article is revealing, outlining a debate on Yiddish folk song authenticity while offering a gesture of reconciliation: the literary and ethnographic spheres need oppose each other; the public, as receivers of literary culture, fold literary creations into community practice, resulting in a dynamic folk musical process. Yiddish folk song, then, is continually shaped by the prevailing desires of those that receive the tradition. That Rubin stages this tension around the lullaby—an expression of memory and intergenerational exchange—affirms a sense in which the stakes of folk song are nothing less than the fate of a people's culture through history.

Memory on Tape

For Ruth Rubin, the intergenerational communication facilitated through folk song emerges as one of its great powers. Rubin's archive of field recordings, digitized in 2018 by YIVO, affords an intimate listening to the very moment of musical memory being committed to tape. In various instances, Rubin's interlocutors, singing songs recollected from their childhood years, stumble and search for the right word or the correct melody. This scene marks a particularly important aspect of the Yiddish-American folk song movement. Where ethnographers like An-sky, Y.L. Cahan, and later Moshe Beregovsky rooted their folklore in Eastern Europe, Rubin's ethnography is invested in North American Yiddish speakers reaching to the past to recall Yiddish songs of their youth. Situated in the immigrant experience, these recordings preserve not only the musical and textual details of a wide corpus of Yiddish folk songs, but also the relationship of mid-twentieth century American Yiddish speakers to the past, present, and future of Yiddish culture.

For example, Sol Reinstein, recorded in New York in 1962, introduces a performance of the song "In Yor zeks un zibetsik" ("In the Year '67") by explaining, "this song must be about a hundred and thirty odd years old, it was one of the songs I heard from my mother as a baby, and that was almost sixty years ago. Where she picked it up, I don't know, but this was one of the lullabies…".[29] In this recording, Reinstein enacts a memory of his childhood, committing to tape a psychic reach across time. Here, it is important to note that Rubin's rather rigid criteria for folk authenticity, and her authoritative position as ethnographer, were internalized by her interlocutors, as Michael Fox, the singer and songwriter who introduces this essay, recalls.[30] In Sol Reinstein's testimony and performance, we hear not only the act

26 Though this exchange has been analyzed by scholars such as Abigail Wood 2013 and Itzik Gottesman 2003, I cite Rubin's text not only to go directly to her perspective on folklore, but specifically to frame that perspective within the cultural apparatus of the American Folk Revival.
27 Rubin 1959: 26.
28 Loeffler 2010: 165.
29 Reinstein 1962.
30 Fox 1967.

SJM-NF 42 (2025), S. 115–128.

of memory, but specifically an act of memory mediated by both the position of the recording technology and the recording ethnographer.

Among the highlights of Ruth Rubin's field work are the many performances of "Unter Kind's Vigele", known by a variety of other names, which each allude to a child's crib, under which, in most versions, sits a "klor-vays tsigele", a pure white goat. For Rubin, this song more than any other highlights the folklore process. She touted the song, emblematic of the lullaby generally, as expressing the intimate concerns of Ashkenazi folk life.[31] In a 1978 lecture-recital, Rubin introduces the song "nisht nor a viglid, es shpiglt op a lebn—an alt lebn—fun yorhunderter… ikh vel zingen mayn varianten ir kent zingen ayer variant" ("Not simply a lullaby, but a reflection of a life—an old life—from centuries ago… I will sing my variant, you can sing your variant").[32] Rubin's preamble is illuminative. Not only does she hold this song up as a model case of Yiddish folk song, but she invites the audience to search their memories for their connection to this song, and to celebrate the variety of versions that underscore the organic folk process.

Recorded at a family summer camp in Patterson, NY in 1956, Pauline Cohen performs her version of the song, titled "Oy, unter mayn kinds vigele" ("oh, under my child's crib").[33] Twenty-three seconds into the one-minute recording, Cohen pauses an otherwise confident take, and mumbles "let's see if I can get it right […]". The performance of Cohen's song retains the meaning and melody consistent with most versions. However, the pause at 0:23 captures an important moment of acknowledgement. Cohen, understanding that the recording freezes her performance in perpetuity, collects her memory to "get it right." The recording as time capsule demands, in Cohen's estimation, the correct performance. Pauline Cohen's performance affirms Jonathan Sterne's assertion that,

> Sound recording is understood as an extension of the art of oratory—a set of practices that depended heavily on the persona and style of the speaker and relations between speaker and audience. But, in this oratory, the construct of audience undergoes a wild permutation—the medium itself is the audience. Phonography marks both a sociospatial network and a sociotemporal network, where one time could potentially speak to (if not with) another.[34]

In another example, Basya Axelbank performs her recollection of the song along with her brother Lazar. In their "Intern kinds vigele" ("under the child's crib") the siblings play off each other's memories of childhood.[35] Around the thirty-seven second mark, the two begin to stumble, cobbling their performance until it reaches an organic conclusion. In the final seconds of the recording, Basya says "ikh hob fargesn, ikh farges" ("I have forgotten, I forget)." In another revealing moment, the process of memory—and of forgetting—is preserved on tape. These instances of recorded memory—or lack thereof—shine a spotlight on the mediating role of technology and ethnography in the intergenerational exchange of musical tradition. This highlights the role of sound reproduction technology, which interrupts the dynamism associated with the folk process by committing an authoritative sonic statement to tape.

Recording Ruth Rubin

In addition to her work as an ethnographer, Ruth Rubin sang as a recording artist on both the Oriole and Folkways record labels. Examining the relationship between Rubin's field recordings and her albums opens up the relationship between aesthetics, authenticity, and the chain of musical transmission

31 See Lukin 2019 for an analysis of the Ashkenazi lullaby, including an analysis of the "klor vays tsigele" trope. Metzger 1984 identifies that this lullaby was popularized by Avrom Goldfaden in his 1880 operetta *Shulamis*, pointing to the ongoing exchange between folklore and the theatre stage.

32 Rubin 1978.

33 Cohen 1956.

34 Sterne 2003: 308. Here, Sterne posits the role of ethnographer and technology in dictating the form of the recorded performance.

35 Axelbank 1957.

that characterize the intervening role of sound preservation and reproduction technologies within the folk music industry. Extolling Rubin's 1950 songbook and accompanying Oriole Records release, Betty Sanders writes in *Sing Out!*: "To help the material really come alive, Miss Rubin has also released two albums of songs on records that lift the songs from the printed page and transform them into something real. Thus we are given a glimpse of the true style that is inherently Jewish folk song".[36] Sanders' claim reflects a prevailing sentiment in the American folk scene that searched for and privileged 'authentic' interpretations and performances.[37] Here, Rubin's commercial folk LPs are received and transmitted as authentic and true reflections of the Yiddish folk song tradition, without acknowledgement of the ways in which Rubin's performance was itself shaped by the social, political, and cultural context of the mid-twentieth century United States. Crucially, however, Sanders' highlights the vitality of Rubin's folkloric ethos. If recording technologies afforded a "resonant tomb", in Jonathan Sterne's formulation, Ruth Rubin insists that Yiddish culture is not dead but remains consistently living through continual re-imagination and re-interpretation.

In 1957, Ruth Rubin collaborated on an LP of children's songs with Pete Seeger, a central figure in the American Folk Revival. In the album's liner notes Rubin concludes that, "[w]ith the gradual disappearance of Yiddish as a living tongue, among Jewish communities of East European origin in the Western Hemisphere, these children's songs of a century ago are a vivid reminder of a way of life that is no more".[38] This revealing sentiment echoes not only an appeal to the past, but a sobering reminder of the absences of the present. Aesthetically, the album encourages a distinctively Yiddish-American folk musical listening. By pairing Yiddish language songs with accompaniment on banjo and acoustic guitar, Rubin and Seeger present a musical-aesthetic vision of Yiddish-American folk song. The images and values of the past are not transmitted as they were originally expressed, but within a distinctly Yiddish-American mode. Crucially, however, Rubin describes the function of the record, explaining that "many Jewish children have grandparents who came from the old country. The Yiddish songs on this record were sung by such grandmothers and grandfathers when they were children in Eastern Europe. When we sing them now, it is as if we were paying a visit to the little town or village where they were born, in the old country." Despite the modern aesthetic of the performance, the songs serve as psychic transportation out of the contemporary moment and to the imagined *shtetl* of generations ago.

Rubin was not alone in her commitment to folk song as a vehicle for intergenerational transmission. Raasche's 1960 Folkways album *Jewish Folk Songs of Europe* addresses the notion of authenticity, while also evincing a forward looking approach. She writes, in the liner notes,

> The thing most difficult of accomplishment in dealing with Jewish Folk Songs is the adoption of a purist viewpoint. Many songs which we consider without question as being wholly and entirely Jewish both in origin and flavour stem originally from the widest variety of peoples and places… In all their migrations Jews have taken with them their beliefs, their heritage and their way of life, and together with these, their songs and stories. Through the years the songs were tempered by the languages and mores in the locales to which they were brought. […] The interpretation of the songs contained in this recording is strictly in keeping with the way they were taught to me and the way I have always sung them. […] One can probably find without great effort scores of listeners who will dispute the Jewishness of these tunes. […] No matter, our parents and grandparents grew up with them just as we did and we think of them as Jewish.[39]

Here, Raasche frames her performance with a frank and intimate reflection on folk song as facilitating intergenerational communion. The recording itself comes to stand in as a link in the broken chain of cultural transmission across generations.

36 Sanders 1951: 11.

37 Members of the American Folk Revival community continually debated definitions of "authentic folk song", as well as the acceptable practices of singing these songs. Rubin's approach to folkloric authenticity is tied to her participation in this community. For a published collection of these debates, see DeTurk and Poulin 1968.

38 Rubin 1957.

39 Raasche 1960.

Beyond Folkways Records

Folkways was not the only record label to produce and record Yiddish language folk LPs during the 1950s and '60s.[40] Benedict and Helen Stambler's Jewish Collector's Guild, for example, offers a fascinating case study in the relationship between ethnography and imagination. The Jewish Collectors Guild released sixty-six LPs of Jewish music, in genres ranging from cantorial and liturgical, folk song, and theatre music. The Stamblers' archive reveals a dedication to field recordings that allowed for the study of the minutia of musical performance, suggesting an ethnographic impulse.[41] In this regard, the Jewish Collector's Guild is a fascinating case study, representing an effort to translate both the content and ideology of ethnographic recordings to the realm of commercial LPs.[42]

Consider, for example, the 1961 LP *Mordecai Hershman Sings Folk Songs of the Shtetl*, a curated collection of singles originally released in the 1930s. Through the LP track listing, liner notes, and album artwork Hershman is marketed as an authentic link to pre-modern Ashkenazi folk life. In the liner notes to this Collector's Guild release, Benedict Stambler evokes: "The special essence of the *shtetl*, the little Jewish village of pre-war east Europe, comes to life in this group songs, *for it is the folk song that mirrors the soul of the people*" (Italics mine). "No nature images will be found here, for these are songs that grow out of centuries of life divorced from contact with the soil. The songs do not go back earlier than the beginning of the nineteenth century; three are art songs in folk style that were written in the early years of the twentieth century".[43] Note that Stambler frames the *shtetl* in terms of its orientation not only to modernity, but specifically to a life before the rupture of the Second World War. This is furthered by the album artwork: "This scene from *shtetl* life in the cover picture by Jules Halfant illustrates an incident from Sholem Aleichem's Tevye der Milkhiger". Here, the relationship between actual and imagined folk life is elided, presenting the album in both its ethnographic as well a symbolic orientation.

The 1960 release *Isa Kremer Sings Yiddish Folk Songs*, another collection of previously released singles, focuses on the perspective of young women in the imagined *shtetl*, playing out dramas of romance, tradition, and child-rearing across the LP's fifteen songs. Despite the suggestion of distance from the realm of art music, these albums share a performance aesthetic rooted in the Yiddish theatre. In each case, the vocalists' performance is accompanied by highly arranged instrumental textures. Though there exists a suggestion of primitivism, the presence of art music links these performances to the dominant mode pre-War Yiddish-American folk performance, as well as suggesting the continued influence of Yiddish theatre. I pause to consider the gendered aspect of these album performances. It is consistent with the Stamblers' fascination with cantorial and Hasidic music that Mordecai Hershman, a cantor, would be held as a bearer of traditional Eastern European religious life—emerging as a direct descendant of the old-world liturgical presence. Kremer, on the other hand, is positioned in the role of mother, responsible for transmitting the songs of her female forebears to her children and grandchildren.

Another actor in the field of Yiddish-American folk song was Vanguard Records, and particularly the *Music for Connoisseurs* imprint. Martha Schlamme, a vibrant figure in the American Folk Revival, recorded several albums of Yiddish folk songs for Vanguard, in addition to folk records performed in a number of other languages. Schlamme's second album of Jewish folksongs for Vanguard was released twice, once as *Martha Schlamme Sings Jewish Folk Songs*, Vol. 2 and as *Raisins and Almonds, and Other Jew-*

40 Among the most prolific performers of Yiddish language folk song in this period was Theodore Bikel, who was also a key figure in the American Folk Revival. While there is not adequate space here to evaluate Bikel's contribution to mid-twentieth century folk singing in the United States, see Levine 2024: 174–202 for a protracted discussion of Bikel's performance practice and relationship to Yiddish folk song.

41 Benedict and Helen Stambler Collection (RG1014), YIVO.

42 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002: 149. "The liner notes [by Benedict Stambler] however, also suggest an emerging preservationist sensibility."

43 Stambler 1961.

ish Folk Songs. The liner notes and performance are identical, the only difference is the album artwork. On *Raisins and Almonds*, released not for "connoisseurs" but for the Vanguard "Everyman" series, an illustrated Schlamme looks down upon a crudely drawn *shtetl*. "Connoisseurs" are treated to a high-resolution photograph of Schlamme singing to two children, with a simple hearth in the background. Taken together, the album artwork confirms Schlamme's symbolic function as a singer of Yiddish language folk songs. She stands not only to evoke the imagery of the *shtetl*, but specifically is positioned, like Isa Kremer, in a 'motherly' role. In this presentation, the intergenerational power of the lullaby is visualized in the album's artwork.

Conclusion

Yiddish folk song in the mid-twentieth century United States carried the heavy burden of transmitting Yiddish musical culture of the past to future generations. The example of Yiddish provides a dramatic case study, as the stakes of musical preservation were amplified by the decimation of Yiddish language and culture in the wake of the Holocaust, the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, and the pressures of assimilation and acculturation. Yiddish-American folk song in this critical historical moment was fuelled and shaped by the urgent need for cultural preservation and methods of intergenerational transmission. While a previous generation of folklorists had approached Yiddish folk song with a similar urgency, the technological affordances of tape and the LP, along with social and cultural pressures from the broader Jewish-American community and the American Folk Revival, conditioned the way that Yiddish folk song was recorded, thereby shaping the materials available for future generations. In the wake of contributions from figures such as Ruth Rubin, efforts to revitalize, reimagine, and recontextualize Yiddish culture blossomed in the second half of the twentieth century, and continue to the present day.[44] I intend the present article to draw attention to the entwined roles of technology, imagination, folklore, and the commercial music industry in shaping the ways that Yiddish folk song is transmitted across generations.

While rooted in the specific context of Yiddish-American culture, this article also gestures towards the broader challenge of engaging with the sonic past. As this discussion has highlighted, the mediative process of bridging temporalities itself determines the cultural inheritance transmitted to future generations of listeners. What we receive as folk music is conditioned by the social, historical, ideological, and aesthetic *zeitgeist* within which recordings were made. Because the process of sound reproduction represents a freezing of time, archives of both ethnographic field recordings and commercial LPs provide vital evidence for understanding the mechanisms by which the past, present, and future communicate.

Zeke Levine is an historical musicologist whose research focuses on Yiddish language song and American improvised music. He received his PhD from New York University in 2024, with a dissertation on twentieth century Yiddish-American folk song. Levine is also a translator from Yiddish, having twice been selected as a Yiddish Book Center Translation Fellow. Levine is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor of history and Jewish studies at Purchase College, State University of New York.

Bibliography

Alexander, Phil (2021): *Sounding Jewish in Berlin: Klezmer Music and the Contemporary City*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

44 In addition to the proliferation of Yiddish instrumental and vocal musical festivals, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Yiddish Folksong Project," produced for YIVO, and Itzik Gottesman's "Yiddish Song of the Week," as examples of ethnographic and folkloric projects that followed Rubin. See: Slobin 2003; Wood 2013; Alexander 2021 for analyses of Yiddish instrumental and vocal performance from the 1960s through the present, in both the United States and Europe.

Axelbank, Basya (1957): "Intern kinds vigele", in *Ruth Rubin Collection of Yiddish Folklore* (RG620); Box 2; Tape 42; Track 12, YIVO Institute.

Bronner, Simon (2022): "Jewish Folklore and Ethnology: What, Why, and Whither", in *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology* 1, 1–45.

Chanan, Michael (1995): *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music*, London and New York: Verso Books.

Cohen, Pauline (1956): "oy, under mayn kinds vigele", in *Ruth Rubin Collection of Yiddish Folklore* (RG620); Box 2; Tape 42; Track 3, YIVO Institute.

Cohen, Ronald D. (2002): *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

DeTurk, David and Poulin, Alfred (eds.) (1967): *American Folk Scene: Dimensions of the Folksong Revival*, New York: Dell Publishing.

Deutsch, Nathaniel (2016): "Thrice Born; or, Between Two Worlds: Reflexivity and Performance in An-sky's Jewish Ethnographic Expedition and Beyond", in *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*, ed. by Jeffrey Veidlinger, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 27–44.

Filene, Benjamin (2000): *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Fox, Michael (1967): *Ruth Rubin Collection of Yiddish Folklore* (RG620); Box 2; Tape 68–9, YIVO Institute.

Gitelman, Lisa (2006): *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, Boston: MIT Press.

Gottesman, Itzik Nakhmen (2003): *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland*, Detroit: Wayne State Press.

Heskes, Irene (n.d.): "Ruth Rubin: A Biography", in *YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*, <https://ruthrubin.yivo.org/exhibits/show/ruth-rubin-sound-archive/who-was-ruth-rubin/irene-heskes-s-biography-of-ru> [26.10.2025]

Jelen, Sheila E. (2020): *Salvage Poetics: Post-Holocaust American Jewish Folk Ethnographies*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Khazdan, Evgenia (2022): "The Folk Song of the Ashkenazim: The Problem of Genre Definition", in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 40/2, 58–88.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara (1995): "Introduction", in *Life Is With People*, ed. by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, New York: Schocken Books, ix–xlviii.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara (2002): "Sounds of Sensibility," in *American Klezmer: It's Roots and Offshoots*, ed. by Mark Slobin, University of California Press, 129–173.

Kittler, Friedrich A. (1999 [1986]): *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, English Translation*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Levine, Zeke (2024): *"When We Sing Them Now": Investigating Yiddish-American Folk Song*, 1933–1963, PhD dissertation, New York University.

Lieberman, Robbie (1989): "*My Song Is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–1950*, Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press.

Loeffler, James (2010): *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lukin, Michael (2019): "The Traditional Yiddish Lullaby as an East-Ashkenazi Phenomenon", in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 33, 133–188.

Lukin, Michael (2022): "At the Crossroads, The Early Modern Yiddish Folk Ballad", in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 40/2, 105–142.

Metzger, Eva (1984): "The Lullaby in Yiddish Folk Song", in *Jewish Social Studies* 46/3,4, 235–262.

Mlotek, Yosl and Chana (1972): *Mir Trogn a Gezang,* New York: Workmen's Circle Education Department, <https://yiddishsongs.org/mir-trogn-a-gezang-favorite-yiddish-songs/> [26.10.2025]

Raasche (1960): "Liner Notes," in *Raasche, Jewish Folk Songs of Europe*, LP, Folkways Records.

Rechtman, Abraham (2021): *The Lost World of Russia's Jews: Ethnography and Folklore in the Pale of Settlement*, translated by Nathaniel Deutsch and Noah Barrera, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.

Reinstein, Sol (1962): "In Yor Seks un Zibitsik", in *Ruth Rubin Collection of Yiddish Folklore* (RG620); Box 2; Tape 63; Track 3, YIVO Institute.

Reuss, Richard A. (2000): *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957*, Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press.

Rubin, Ruth (1957): "Liner Notes", in *Ruth Rubin and Pete Seeger, Jewish Children's Songs and Games*, LP, Folkways Records.

Rubin, Ruth (1959): "Sholem Aleichem and Yiddish Folk Songs," in *Sing Out!* 9/3, 12–26.

Rubin, Ruth (1973 [1963]): *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rubin, Ruth (1978): "A Literary-musical evening with Ruth Rubin", in *Lecture-Recital Recording*, Oct. 14, 1978, Jewish Public Library of Montreal.

Safran, Gabriella and Zipperstein, Steven (eds.) (2006): *The Worlds of S. An-Sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, Stanford: Stanford University Publisher.

Safran, Gabriella (2010): *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-Sky*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sanders, Betty (1951): "Ruth Rubin Presents Jewish Folk-Songs" in *Sing Out!* 2/5, 12.

Schrire, Dani (2016): "Ballads of Strangers, Constructing 'Ethnographic Moments' in Jewish Folklore", in *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, ed. by Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 322–346.

Shandler, Jeffrey (2008): *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Slobin, Mark (2003): *Fiddler On The Move: Exploring the Klezmer World*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Stambler, Benedict (1960): "Liner notes", in *Isa Kremer Sings Yiddish Folk Songs*, LP, Boca Raton, Florida: Collector's Guild.

Stambler, Benedict (1961): "Liner notes", in *Mordecai Hershman Sings Folk Songs of the Shtetl*, LP, Boca Raton, Florida: Collector's Guild.

Solomon, Maynard (n.d.): "Liner notes", in *Martha Schlamme, Jewish Folk Songs*, LP, New York: Vanguard Records.

Sterne, Jonathan (2003): *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Walden, Joshua (2009): "Music of the 'folks-neshome': 'Hebrew Melody' and Changing Musical Representations of Jewish Culture in the Early Twentieth Century Ashkenazi Diaspora", in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 8/2, 15–72.

Weheliye, Alexander G. (2005): *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Wood, Abigail (2013): *And We're All Brothers: Singing in Yiddish in Contemporary North America*, Surrey: Ashgate Books.

Zborowski, Mark and Herzog, Elizabeth (1952): *Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, New York: Schocken Books.