

04 Jun 2007, 00:00

## Daniel Kahn interview in Exberliner Magazine

This is an interview published in the June issue of Exberliner magazine, the english language expatriot magazine of Berlin. Check it out online at <http://www.exberliner.net/verbatim.php?action=inthisissue>

# Six million Germans!

## Musician Daniel Kahn on his radical approach to klezmer and exploring his Jewishnes in Berlin



By Anette Stührmann

'Six million Germans! Six million Germans!' chants a chorus over a backdrop of vigorous klezmer. The song is a macabre homage to Jewish partisan Abba Kovner, leader of the underground Jewish group Nakam ('Revenge') which aimed to kill Germans by poisoning the water supply to avenge the Holocaust directly after the Second World War. The mix of a bouncy traditional instrumental style with a radical cabaret approach to German-Jewish history is typical of Daniel Kahn's music - which he calls *Verfremdungsklezmer* - playing on Brecht's notion that art must create an 'alienating' effect that triggers self-critical reflection amongst the audience.

The 29-year-old Jewish songwriter, singer and stage actor from Detroit moved to Berlin in 2005. Here, he quickly became an integral part of the local folk and klezmer scene, soon forming his own group, *The Painted Bird* - inspired by the grotesque Holocaust novel of the same name by Jerzy Kosinski.

Last year they recorded their CD *The Broken Tongue* - an album of full-on klezmer songs in English and Yiddish, even with a Brecht song in German ('Ballad of the Jew's Whore Marie Sanders'). Kahn tours and performs relentlessly, but EXBERLINER caught up with him to discuss how it feels to be a Jew in Berlin and why he sings in Yiddish.

### **Why do you sing Yiddish? Did you grow up with the Yiddish language?**

Not at all. I grew up as a Jew. I went to Hebrew school. But I was very specifically not taught Yiddish. I just think that the songs are great. There's a rich canon of Yiddish poetry and Yiddish songs. I'm engaging with them as an interpreter. I'm trying to make them personal. I also think that the idea of singing Yiddish and then translating it, and then singing it in English translation in a context where people speak neither language as their first language is very cool. It doesn't have to do with religious orthodoxy.

### **I would have connected the Yiddish language more with Europe and Germany before the war and the Holocaust.**

That's why I sing a song without a translation sometimes - because I know it's almost German. But I still don't know the language entirely. I am working on it. And I am gonna hopefully get better and better. I have only been singing it really for the last few years. And really seriously for only about two years. It took a while for me to realize that I am entitled to sing in Yiddish and that my entitlement has nothing to do with my identity. It has to do with my interest. It has to do with my imagination.

### **What do you mean by entitlement?**

The language belongs to everybody. I don't have to grow up as something. The idea of authenticity in music is extremely reactionary and problematic. That has predicated a lot of bad ideas, the idea of authenticity as a commodity, as something that can be quantified. The only authenticity that I am interested in is a personal authenticity, an authenticity of intention rather than whether or not somebody is a real Jew, a real whatever. It's perverse the idea that I would be entitled to compose and sing a song like 'Birkenau' simply because I am Jewish. I wasn't there. I am not a Holocaust victim. We are all entitled to it. It's a fictional perspective, it's art. The first time as I was at Auschwitz, I had a long argument with this orthodox Jewish kid from England. He said: 'Why are you here? Did you have family who were killed here? Are you Jewish?' I said: 'Yes I am Jewish. But I am not here because I am Jewish. I'm here, because I am responsible for this place. I am just as responsible for this place as any young German is. We are all responsible for understanding it. And for making sure that it doesn't happen again as it is happening right now several places in the world.'

### **Why did you come to Berlin in the first place, was it to get into the klezmer scene?**

I got into klezmer before I came here. And my interest in coming to Germany was not primarily to be involved in klezmer. By the way, I associate a lot of what we are doing more with rock 'n' roll than any other type of music. Klezmer is just one musical language I insert. The fact that I am putting Jewishness into my music, it's kind of like 'why shouldn't I?' as it is a part of who I am. Jewishness is something that has always been important to me, but it has never been primarily a part of my art. It didn't become something public until I came here. And I didn't expect it to.

### **Why did it become public?**

Because I am not hiding my Jewishness. I need to have a place to put these feelings. If I didn't put it into work, it would eat away something somewhere else. On the other hand, I have been drawn to klezmer music ever since I lived in New Orleans. I fell in love with the music. And I met this guy Alan Bern. He is the musical director of 'Brave Old World'. He sublet me his apartment in Berlin. And my friend who plays bass moved here at the same time in the spring of 2005. I didn't plan to sing in German, I didn't plan to sing in Yiddish. I planned to sing my own material. I had just made a record that had more to do with Neil Young. But when I traveled to Poland, a lot came back to haunt me. I had started rereading Jerzy Kosinski's novel, and I was totally inspired by the klezmer revival, by its context here in Europe. I went to the Jewish music festival in Krakow, and I had this idea to create a band. I didn't form this band to fight a battle against Hitler or the Russian tsar. I am interested in fighting battles within myself.

### **But your lyrics focus on the Holocaust.**

Yeah, that haunts me a lot. But it haunts me a lot not only because of what it was, but because of what it is. I think the human animal learns very, very slowly, if at all. The idea that if you don't learn from history, it will repeat itself, I think that it is a misconception. History repeats itself constantly, all around us. We are the same animal that we were thousands of years ago. But history is not one thing. There are people on different sides of history. It's like a lot of people make apologies for certain historical institutions. Because they say there is historical relativism. Slavery was part of normal life in the 18th century in America. So you can't blame people for not questioning it. This is an extremely cynical and reactionary attitude towards history.

As long as there has been property, there has been slavery, and as long as there has been slavery, there have been slaves. And as long as there have been slaves, there have been people who felt that slavery was categorically immoral and have fought against it. Our attitude in saying that they didn't know right from wrong, that is bullshit. Yes, of course, I am haunted by the Holocaust. I am disturbed by people who aren't. And I am even more disturbed by people who think that it is only the job of Germans and Jews to be haunted by the Holocaust. Especially other Jews who think that the only reason I would be interested in the Holocaust is the fact that I am Jewish.

### **If history repeats itself all the time anyway, what is the use of analyzing, discussing and remembering the past?**

We have to accept the questions that are part of the debates, and that there is no answer to these questions. No matter how many Yiddish songs anybody sings, it's not gonna bring anybody back to life. It's not gonna revive the culture in any way. I like questions. It's like we are singing this song 'Six Million Germans' that I just wrote. I don't know if it has pissed anybody off so far, but if so, they haven't told me about it. People seem to really enjoy it. Because it raises questions. About the innocent victim status of Jews. About the culpability of average Germans in the Holocaust. About the relationship between the experience of the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel. These are questions that interest me. But I am not interested in hearing any answers because they are probably not gonna measure up to what's in the questions. I mean, somebody stormed out of my gig when we were playing in Kreuzberg, this is great ... We were playing the song 'Birkenau'. Before that he turned to my friend and he said, 'I thought this was supposed to be like Tom Waits, somebody told me it was like Tom Waits, what is this klezmer shit?' And then I was singing about 'Arbeit macht frei', and he stormed out. I think it's great. If people come expecting something, and then they don't get that.



### **Why did you write the song 'Six Million Germans'?**

One of the more famous poets in Israel was also a famous resistance fighter, Abba Kovner. Just right after the war, he just wanted to kill six million German citizens. And the question is, what was going on in his mind?

### **Well, he wanted revenge. Isn't that understandable, considering that he had lost family and friends?**

That reminds me of a rabbi sermon I was overhearing in Auschwitz. He was teaching kids that the Holocaust was a message from God to assimilated Jews. The amount of bullshit that people exploit that history for, it's ridiculous. On every side. In every community. They cope with it in ways that benefit them the most. It usually has to do with economics. There is nothing more totally beneficial than a simplistic assessment of complex historical processes, which paints one entire people as completely evil and one entire people as completely innocent. What are we supposed to learn from most narratives of the Holocaust? That bad people kill good people? All that this makes possible is for everybody to identify with the absolutely good people. And then everybody they hate become the Nazis. You see this all over. You have Nazis, you have abortion Nazis, you have Israeli Nazis, you have Arab Nazis, you have Islamo-fascists. Everybody is a Nazi. It's part of the problem thinking about things this way.

### **What's your view of Germany trying to come to terms with its history by building monuments like the Holocaust Memorial?**

I think that Germany is doing the same thing that I am doing with these ideas in my music. They are putting them in a place. They are concentrating them in an area that can process them. The Stelenfeld (Holocaust Memorial) functions as a kind of kidney for history. But the problem with it is that it dictates for people an emotional merit. I mean the Jewish Museum and the Stelenfeld, they are fine, but they are part of a conversation that I am not involved in, between Germans and Germans about what Germans did. I like the Stolpersteine a lot more because they are everywhere, they are chaotic. They are in the space itself. People can't expect when they are going to find them. It involves people in their everyday lives. What the Stelenfeld tells me is that questions about this history are unanswerable. And what the Stolpersteine tell me is that questions about this history are always relevant to us personally.

### **Is that the idea of your performances, too? To show that life is chaotic?**

Yes, that's why I call my music *Verfremdungsklezmer*. It's Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. His theatre can be played and seen as if it was happening for the first time. I try to do what Brecht did. I don't lecture people, I'm not an academic. I make the music that I wanna hear. But of course people don't always agree with me on my style. It's like, somebody said to me, 'Isn't it a little tasteless to name your band after a Holocaust novel?' And I said the same thing Art Spiegelman said when they asked him, wasn't it a little tasteless to make a comic book after the Holocaust: 'Actually no, the Holocaust was tasteless.' I mean, it's a balance, and I like that balance. I like going from one side to the other. If my country were not at war where thousands of innocent people are being killed, then maybe I wouldn't have connected with these old songs. Maybe I would be playing something else. It has to be relevant for me. I'm not interested in museum music. Museums are where art goes to die.

### **Are people in Germany crazy about klezmer?**

I think that 10 years ago, that was definitely true. Now, klezmer is being conflated with other styles, with Russian, with gypsy music. What is happening in Berlin is happening in New York also. Any modern music movement, if it's gonna be interesting, it has to be innovative, imaginative. The thing about Yiddish music that draws me to it is that it has to be an innovative and imaginative project because the culture was murdered, so we have to do a kind of Frankenstein thing.

### **Does your identity affect your life in Berlin?**

To a degree it was the first time in my life when I found myself a member of a minority, a really pronounced minority here in Germany. I didn't feel like a minority in America so much because I'm a white guy. The issue of Jewishness would come up, but I wasn't the only circumcised guy around. But then, I don't feel so much overt anti-Semitism in Berlin either. I see processes here, going around the history of racism and oppression, that I don't see in America. There is a national process of shame, of Vergangenheitsbearbeitung. Now we need a Heuteverarbeitung und Zukunftsbearbeitung. Wir müssen alle arbeiten. It's not the whole thing, but it's a process. By the way, nobody knows what a Jew looks like in this part of the world anyway. Also, fascists in Germany have the advantage of not needing the Jew to be their 'other' anymore, they simply transfer it onto other others today, onto the Turks and Africans and Roma.

### **Do you feel stereotyped sometimes?**

A lot of people want a PC society where nobody says what they think. Only in a society where people can be honest will ignorance be overcome. Otherwise it will fester and it will corrupt people from within. I am thankful for when people can open up and offend me. And I am happy to offend anyone who needs to be offended.

### **What is it that offends you?**

I am offended by Nazis. My attitude towards Nazis is pretty non-constructive. Whenever I am riding on a train and I see two NPD kids, all of my ideas of pacifism go out the window and I just want to smash their teeth in, but I don't because it would only make them feel better about what they are doing. I have often thought that if I was ever attacked by a group of neo-Nazi thugs and they beat me to death, if I could say one thing to them, it would probably have something to do with them having chosen to live their lives in a grossly unimaginative way. But it is not just lack of imagination. I guess Hitler was pretty imaginative, wasn't he?

For more information on Daniel Kahn and The Painted Bird visit [www.paintedbird.net](http://www.paintedbird.net) / The Painted Bird perform next on June 1, 21:00, Eschschloraque, Rosenthaler Str. 39, Mitte, S-Bhf Hackescher Markt