

SCOTTISH GROUP MEETING

June 3 2017

Mickey Katz: Clown or Klezmer?. David Bleiman gave a fascinating presentation about the clarinet player Mickey Katz, asking the question whether he could be considered a serious klezmer musician.

David explained that klezmer is a Yiddish contraction of the Hebrew words *kley* for instrument and *zemer* for song. David's grandfather grew up in the city of Lemberg in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia (now the Ukrainian city of Lviv) and probably heard Old World klezmer music as played at weddings and other events. As an example of this music, he played part of a Zonophone issued in 1911 of H I Reissmann, with an accompanying fiddler, singing *Der Badchen (The Jester at a Marriage)*.

Mickey Katz was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1909 and was not raised in the Klezmer tradition, although he became aware of traditional melodies when attending the Yiddish theatre in Cleveland. His other main influences were classical music and jazz, and as a young jobbing clarinetist in New York, played whatever earned him a living, including klezmer music of the sort played at weddings and bar mitzvahs. In 1930 he joined the Maurice Spitalny band in Cleveland and often did the comedy bits in stage shows with the band. Now many people think of Katz mainly as a clown and his 1960 album cover shows him presenting himself as 'Mickey Katz: the Borscht Jester'.

His big break came when he joined Spike Jones in the 1940s and David played 'Cocktails for Two' where he can be heard doing 'glugs' and other comical sounds. He left Spike Jones in 1947 after being refused a pay rise and struck out on his own to take a significant role in the way Jewish traditional music burst out into the jazz and popular mainstream. This had been largely triggered by the success of *Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen* in the late 1930s and we heard Benny Goodman's version.

David went on to play many examples of Katz's repertoire with its mixture of Yiddish comedy and jazz influences, including *The Wedding Samba, Duvid Crockett, Come On-A My House, A Schmo is a Schmo, Bugle Call Rag, and The Draidel Song*, a well as others from his non-comedic instrumental Capitol album 'Mickey Katz Plays Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Brisses' (A bris is the circumcision ceremony). David contended that many of these give a strong indication that Mickey Katz did wish to be a serious Klezmer musician, founding the music on the old world klezmer tradition but developing it with jazz musicians from a Jewish background into a kind of 'Yiddish swing'.

Ken Jobling