

ABOUT NEW YORK

# Lifting Spirits With Music Passed Down Through Generations



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Dave Levitt, a fourth-generation klezmer musician, entertains older residents at a center in the Bronx.

By JOSEPH BERGER  
Published: November 30, 2010

When Dave Levitt was 8 and living in North Miami Beach, his parents, musicians who played the Jewish wedding and bar mitzvah circuit, often put him onstage to show off on clarinet and drums. The old people oohed and aahed.

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A sheet of klezmer, the music of Eastern European Jews.

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Mr. Levitt's grandfather Jack Levitt, top left, was a trombonist who honed his skills with the Boibriker Kapelle band.

"Oh, what a beautiful young boy, and so talented!" he remembers hearing.

He's 40 now, and old people still throw compliments his way, but this time the old folks are clients of [Jewish Home Lifecare's](#) daytime program in the Bronx, where Mr. Levitt works as what is called a music specialist.

"I was brought up with an elderly audience," he told a visitor the other day, "and this brings it full circle."

The program's 300 clients, burdened with ailments like stroke, diabetes and flawed hearts, are brought by bus for a few hours of medical treatment, an ample lunch and a frisson of fun. Mr. Levitt is the fun. On piano or trombone, he mingles standards like "Stardust" with Yiddish melodies, some merry like "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen" and some drenched in heartbreak about a lamented love or a vanished village or street. He comes from a culture that knows of vanished villages and streets.

At any session, barely half of the crowd is Jewish, and many of those are relatively recent Russian émigrés unfamiliar with Yiddish. But Mr. Levitt is striving to preserve a four-generation family tradition — klezmer, the music of Eastern European Jews.

Outside of work, he leads a group called the Levitt Legacy Klezmet, but he's no different from many people who let their enthusiasms infiltrate their bill-paying jobs — unite their avocation and vocation, as Frost put it. In fact, every two months, Mr. Levitt brings the Klezmet to the home.

Each time he plays a tune like "Shein vi di Levone" ("Pretty as the Moon"), he's paying homage to his great-grandfather Max Levinsky, a shtetl violinist who emigrated from Ukraine in the 1880s; his grandfather Jack Levitt, a trombonist who honed his klezmer chops with the legendary Boibriker Kapelle; and his parents.

His father was bandleader of the Marty Levitt Orchestra, and his mother, Harriet Kane, its songbird. It was an intermarriage of Bronx and Brooklyn. With rolling eyes and dancing eyebrows, Ms. Kane put across

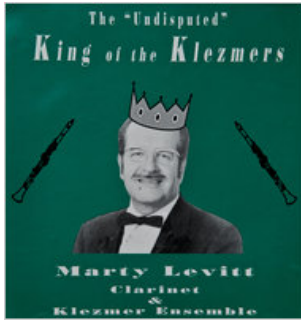
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Mr. Levitt's father, Marty Levitt, "king of the klezmers."

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His great-grandfather Max Levinsky, a shtetl violinist.

numbers like [“Litvak and Galitz.”](#) which mocks a geographic rivalry between more intellectual and more emotional Jews. His parents live on today on YouTube, his father, with horn-rimmed glasses and a spiraling clarinet, and his auburn-haired mother vibrant and frolicsome a year before she died of cancer, in 1985.

It was his father who taught him the wiles of drawing out klezmer sounds — making a clarinet weep, giggle or kvetch, and a trombone groan or sigh. His father also left a trove of memorabilia — including 80-year-old handwritten sheet music — which he tenderly curates to pass on to his children, Ruby, 7, and Quincy, 5.

“When my father died, I realized I had a museum on my hands,” he said.

The Marty Levitt sound is familiar to at least one of the home’s clients, Herbert Wolf, who worked as a trucker delivering mattresses for poolside chairs at bygone Catskills hotels like Grossinger’s. Mr. Wolf is a rumples 79-year-old, riddled with, by his count, eight sicknesses, including cancer in two organs, but his memory is sharp.

“His father was a kibitzer,” Mr. Wolf recalled. “ ‘Do you think it’ll rain if it keeps up?’ he used to ask me, then he’d say, ‘If it keeps up, it’s not coming down.’ ”

It would be misleading to suggest that the crowd of 25 that listened to Mr. Levitt the other day was as fervent as a mosh pit. With all those illnesses, there was a weary, fatalistic air about the room, and as Mr. Levitt performed, some played solitaire or read novels. Everyone was impatient for lunch. But people perked up at a haunting or lively snatch of melody.

Shirley Williams, 78, an African-American grandmother who uses a wheelchair and has been coming to the program since she had a stroke, is familiar with klezmer because she was raised in an “international neighborhood” and her mother worked as a domestic for a Jewish family on Park Avenue.

“I grew up to love Jewish food and culture and songs like ‘Hava Nagila,’ ” she said.

Of course, Mr. Levitt, a man with a dry sense of humor, does not fool himself into thinking he is playing for connoisseurs. But the tug of childhood ghosts invigorates each workday.

“I started being around this demographic when I was a kid,” he said, “and here I am again.”

***Jim Dwyer is on leave.***