

Jewish Arts: Consumers and Producers

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Writing for the **Forward's Arty Semite** blog, Rokhl Kafrissen has **an interesting review** of the **Yeshiva University Museum's** exhibit "**Jews on Vinyl:**"

Unlike most museum exhibits, “Jews on Vinyl” is meant to be heard more than seen. Visitors choose from a handful of listening stations, impeccably set with period appropriate couches and chairs. Here they can sit and browse iPod playlists chosen by Kun and Bennett. Eartha Kitt singing “Sholem”? They have that. The Temptations doing a “Fiddler” medley? Yep. More versions of Hava Nagila than you dared imagine? Oh yes. Scattered on the listening station coffee tables are record covers representing some of the music featured on the playlists, as well as information cards with short blurbs about the artists and songs...

...In some ways I’m the ideal audience for “Jews on Vinyl.” To say I love Jewish music is something of an understatement. My obsession with Yiddish and Jewish music has shaped the last 20 years of my life...

...And yet, I walked out of “Jews on Vinyl” scratching my head as to what the point of the exhibit was, besides being a great way to relax after a stressful day. A good museum exhibit makes an argument. It guides museum-goers through a narrative. It raises questions that disturb the status quo and forces the viewer to examine her own preconceptions...

...The “Jews on Vinyl” exhibit is overwhelming. A huge mosaic of album covers greets visitors at the front. The format of a handful of listening stations, and a very long playlist, means that with more than a handful of visitors to the exhibit, (or for patrons without the patience to sit and listen for more than a few minutes) it’s difficult to get more than a superficial taste of what’s offered. Radically different genres — Israeli pop, Yiddish-Latin fusion, Yinglish comedy — blur together. What does one have to do with the other? Who knows? Why should we care?

This is the problem with “Jews on Vinyl”: it’s partially hydrogenated Jewish history. Jewish culture, and Jewish music in particular, has the radical potential to animate Jewish life today and to turn passive audiences into actively engaged Jewish creators in a way that extends far beyond just music. I’ve seen it over and over at places like Klezkamp and Klezkanada where participants are empowered through their connection to Jewish music. But at the “Jews on Vinyl” exhibit, Jewish music is reduced to just another commodity. And the museum visitor is just another passive consumer, swallowing his or her obligatory dose of vitamin J.

I haven't seen the exhibit itself, so obviously I have no opinion of it, but this last paragraph above is concerned with a general issue which is particularly compelling to me: consuming versus producing. To the **questions I asked last month as J Dub announced its closing** could be added the following additional question: does our idea

of what it means to foster Jewish culture privilege professional cultural products which are to be consumed, at the expense of fostering participation and creation amongs the masses?

Obviously there's no zero-sum game between the two, and consumption of good professional cultural products might be said to be a necessary (though not sufficient) condition to inspire amateur creation / participation. Indeed, if a one or two of the YU Museum exhibit's patrons are inspired by it to make Jewish music themselves, on any level, then a few of Kafrissen's concerns may be a tad misplaced. I imagine that even the broad diversity of styles itself, which Kafrissen felt made the exhibit "blur together" might awaken Jewish music lovers to the fact that Jewishness doesn't have to mean one narrow musical vocabulary.

This issue is as relevant to the arts in general as to the Jewish arts in particular. Before radio became ubiquitous, vastly more people played musical instruments than do so now. When Scott Joplin sold a million copies of the Maple Leaf Rag, it was sheet music he was selling; people would buy the latest hits in order to play them in their parlors. I enjoy and appreciate (many) movies and (occasional gems of) television, but there's no denying fewer people are involved in local theatre as a result of the availability of these media. We should look for a balance, but at present that will mean tipping the balance back toward personal involvement and amateur creativity.

Related: see Stephen Hazan-Arnoff's fascinating idea from **Sh'ma** in 2005: ***A Jewish Artists Service Corps: Creating and Sustaining Community.***