

Interview with Myself

By James Stone Goodman, St. Louis

Q: I heard you in concert in St. Louis. I was moved by your versions of traditional material, what are they, Sephardic songs?

JSG: I love Sephardi music, the more Mediterranean Jewish music, North African, Middle Eastern, the more eastern elements of Jewish music, but I am not a collector of tunes from lost communities. Some of the tunes have authentic roots there, some are just loyal to a sound that I love. Many of them I made up in that style.

Q: Is that what you are doing, making up material "in the style" of the originals?

JSG: I learned that one of the characteristics of Semitic Oriental Song as identified by the famous musicologist A.Z. Idelsohn is that it has an improvisational quality, built upon certain modes or scales. So, the relation between my performances and the original modal sources are often remote. I am improvisational in my development of tunes, etc., as you will hear from my Cds, but this is common to this kind of music and long precedes me.

Q: Your stories, of course, are entirely original, no?

JSG: I combine story and texts into the music, what I call "D'var Guitar," a kind of mixed motif of text and music. I write the stories, poems, and such that I integrate into the music. I also experiment with something I call groove poetry, a kind of rhythmic poetry with a solid groove behind it. I am not a collector, I am a performer, so my stuff is personal. But it is all based on traditional sources in ways that probably only I can discern. For instance, one of the versions of Adon Olam that we sing has a wonderful story attached to it that I have written (see Akbar and Adon Olam); that's a good example. People go crazy for this tune, its relation to a tune from Salonika is remote, but I am sure that is where the kernel of the musical idea came from.

Q: Your music has a unique combination of tradition and improvisation as far as I can tell, in some songs I hear Motown in your voice, I always hear Spain in your guitar playing, Morocco in your percussion, jazz in your singing. How do you describe it?

JSG: That's a good description. Like anybody else, I am my influences. I am always a we. All my teachers, inspirations, influences stand with me at every one of my gigs. I am playing a traditionally based music that swings. And I make up stories and poems.

Q: From where did you learn this style?

JSG: My life was altered one afternoon just after Passover in Jerusalem. I had spent a year studying in Jerusalem, I guess I was 27 years old. I went to Jerusalem to study to be a rabbi.

By Passover that year, I had integrated into the local life, I had arrived almost a year earlier, in the summer of '76. I met an Israeli musician who heard me playing guitar on the steps of the rabbinical school and set me up in a theater in Jerusalem, an old house on King George street that later became a fancy Italian restaurant. It was a magical year.

We attracted musicians who were present in Jerusalem from all over the world. On any night I might be performing with a guitarist from India, a percussionist from Argentina, a mandolin player from Italy, it was delicious. We evolved a truly world music, and I made many friends. Israelis loved American music, but I felt myself outgrowing my own shtick. I was hearing something else.

Soon we were playing five nights a week with Jazz and Swing shows, Rhythm and Blues Shows, Country and Bluegrass shows, all American music. We took these shows all over the country but our base was the theater in Jerusalem.

Then on one afternoon, just after Passover, I sat down in a park in Jerusalem and heard a series of performers on a stage. Everyone was barbecuing meats with their families, sitting on the lawn. "What is this?" I asked. "Maimuna." Maimuna is a North African Jewish celebration loosely in honor of Maimonides. On stage, there was a series of performers. Oud players. Dancers. Singers. I had never heard such sounds. It changed everything for me.

I came back to the States and continued my studies. I started performing locally, same old stuff, mostly jazz singing now with a swinging little string group in small smoky clubs. All the time I was thinking a different sound, something more like what I had heard at the Maimuna. I bought an oud and began to experiment with it.

I came under the influence of a music teacher at my school who listened to me sing, heard me play, and said to me "for what you want to do, you will have to change your style entirely." I had already been playing for twenty years in the kind of steel string folk guitar style that was popular in the United States in the Fifties and Sixties. "You will have to play classical style, with your fingers, you will have to learn to sing deeper." I trusted him, though it would take me another ten years before I would know he was correct.

That's how it is when you have a teacher, if you trust your teacher, you give yourself entirely. I enrolled in a good music school, studying classical guitar, a complete re-education musically. My first piece was "Mary Had a Little Lamb," honest to God.

All the time I was remembering the oud sound I had heard in Jerusalem.

I wrote to someone in Jerusalem, a music archivist, who gave me a list of a half a dozen people in the US who knew about Sephardi and Oriental Jewish music, the "eastern" Jewish world music, and I contacted them all.

They introduced me to the avenues of pursuit. I went inside and out searching for the sound I was hearing within. I found it in Jerusalem. When the tunes are hidden in the past, I try to imagine what the tunes sounded like when performed.

Q: Your material sounded original to me, like the stories, I figured you made it all up.

JSG: Sometimes I can't remember.

Q: You also referred to your teachers quite a bit in your performance, er, ceremony. You don't call it performance, do you?

JSG: The shows evolved into a kind of ceremonial music, with the stories, poetry, improvisations, dialogue with audience, it all began to feel more like a ceremony to me. You can read about the evolution of that in my stories as well, in what I call the Gig Stories. The stories describe the transition from performance to ceremony.

I also acquired some wonderful co-players along the way, they are my conventicle of musical pals, intentional musicians, who I often appear with. It's not show business, it's ceremony. For sure.

Q: I notice that several of your CDs were recorded live, and one in the studio (see www.stonegoodman.com). Do you have a preference?

JSG: I prefer the live recordings, the possibility to catch something that erupts spontaneously only in performance. You lose something of the control that you can claim in the studio, with the mix, and the combination of tracks and computer enhancements. The first CD is a live recording of a folk festival that includes a storyteller, a poet, myself telling stories, and a number of instrumentalists. It is called Neve Shalom Folk Festival. The second CD I call D'var Guitar, which is the improvisational art form. It was also recorded live, on a particularly lively night. The third is The Sefirot, which we did in a studio, combining a lot of different musical styles. The fourth is Incantation, which we recorded live in front in a holy place but without an audience. The fifth one was recorded live in an historic hall in St. Louis, the Sheldon. It is called The Book of Splendor.

Q: Thank you for taking the time to explain your approach. I think you are doing something unique.

JSG: Thanks. I've been practicing. Glad you enjoyed it.