

# A contrast in local Jewish music: Mark Rubin & Robbi Sherwin



By TONYA CONE  
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

**T**he life of Mark Rubin sounds like one uphill battle after another.

From his early years in a place where the Ku Klux Klan sponsored the Fourth of July air show and teachers, police officers and family doctors tried to convert Jews to Christianity in the course of their business, to his efforts trying to preserve a piece of culture he says American Jews have thrown away, the opinionated musician has not had it easy.

Born and raised in Stillwater, Okla., 43-year-old Rubin describes his childhood home as a highly musicalized environment.

His parents met when they were members of the University of Arizona marching band. About a month after Rubin was born, his father was hired as executive director of Kappa Kappa Psi, a student



service and leadership recognition society that serves college and university band programs, at Oklahoma State University.

Part of his family's story is that Rubin traveled with his parents to visit every major marching band program in the nation for his father's work. Since he was the executive director's baby, people in the programs made him little marching band uniforms, blankets and toys.

Rubin's father also played baritone horn in Stillwater's community band.

"Small Midwestern towns still have a gazebo in town and a community band that meets at a church and give free concerts in the summer," Rubin said. "It was a big source of joy for him."

Rubin also grew up surrounded by Native American culture, which he said introduced him to the complexity and social niceties of a culture other than the dominant one.

"As a member not of the dominant culture, you cling to that energy," he said,



PHOTO BY TODD V. WOLFSON

noting that his adopted brother is Native American and, while raised Jewish, was as well versed in Native American culture and a fancy dancer as well as being bar mitzvah. In 1977, when Rubin was about 10 years old, his father took a job at the Uni-

While award-winning Jewish musicians Mark Rubin and Robbi Sherwin have made their mark across the nation and internationally, they have not received nearly as much exposure or recognition here in their home city, Austin.

The two musicians couldn't be a better contrast. While Rubin's work in Jewish music is rooted in tradition, Sherwin's goal is to make prayer and Judaism more accessible by presenting it in a new light. This month, *The Jewish Outlook* features a wide-ranging, no-holds-barred interview with Rubin, and in June will feature a profile of Sherwin.

versity of Oklahoma Hillel Foundation in Norman, Okla.

The foundation, Rubin said, was in a state of disrepair when the family arrived, unable to hold on to a rabbi for long.

"They couldn't do it because they were

bringing in these poor yeshiva bokers, guys who grew up in Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, anywhere with Jews or cosmopolitan culture and drop-

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ping them off in the shiniest part of the buckle of the Bible Belt where, when I was growing up — the Pentecostal movement has become strangely philo-Semitic in the last 20 years — they were openly anti-Semitic,” he said.

Rubin said Norman, where he attended middle and high school, is the only place he knows of where Catholics — who were hated as much as Jews and blacks by the KKK and other hate groups — clung to Jews, simply for support.

Although Ruben is a Jew, it helped that he was considered a local. He said a “white is all right” situation existed, too, where he was considered OK because at least he was not black.

“I knew everybody,” Rubin said. “People were watching out for me. I was the town Jew but people would watch out for you and try to keep you out of trouble.”

It didn’t hurt that he stands more than six feet tall and weighs 300 pounds.

Rubin was also armed with some defense mechanisms. In a place where the KKK — which Rubin said basically was a social club — sponsored the Boy Scout troop and prayers to Jesus were said at school each morning, Rubin’s father taught him that prejudice was driven by confusion rather than hatred.

“My father said none of these people are smart enough to be anti-Semitic; they’re just stupid. It’s not anti-Semitism; they don’t even know what Semitism is,” he said. “So when a brick comes through the window or there’s a cross burning in the yard, or a swastika’s on the front door — which all happened pretty regularly — that’s not seen as anti-Semitism because these guys aren’t smart enough.”

### ANTI-SEMITIC OR NAÏVE?

Rubin said that, while this may have just been a convenient lie, he did not feel like he grew up in an anti-Semitic environment. Instead, he felt he was in a naïve environment with people who were all the same and had a hard time interacting with the rest of the world.

Living in Oklahoma community also had some positive aspects, Rubin said.

People in rural America have a relationship with music, he said, that differs greatly from that among those in urban areas.

“Music is not a commodity, it’s not a flavor, it’s not something you sprinkle on something or put up as wallpaper,” he said, describing the rural experience. “Music is actually part of everyday life. It’s an expression of everyday culture.”

A big part of the week when he was growing up, Rubin said, was the Wednesday night singing, a social event where people got together to sing songs from the Church of Christ Hymnal.

Some Christians forbid musical instruments in religious services for the same reasons Jews do, he noted, but a lot of those people are so trained up in music they are also musicians.

“It was a bluegrass jam out in the parking lot at the end of the service when the preacher had gone and the beer had shown up,” Rubin recalled. “Old men would sit around and sing bluegrass. You could really see the correlation between where the core of their music was coming from and how this was more a secular expression of this religious expression.

The same was true of Native Americans he knew, Rubin said.

“Singing a song or playing a drum was not something you did; it was part of something that was an everyday experience. Consumerist America has really done away with that,” he said. “When you see Southern, rural people biting back at progress, some of what they’re biting back at — it’s not that they’re attached to their xenophobia or the negative aspects of their culture; they’re also very attached to positive aspects of the culture.”

His experiences as a Jew in the rural South, Rubin said, taught him lessons that still come in handy.

“Now that I’m well established in the Yiddish scene, I tend to be the only guy like me there, which is great because that was how it was when I was growing up — I’m the only version of me. It’s given me good tools to hang out with these nebekhy, whiny, complaining, weak-willed Jewish dudes from New York who are like self-parodies,” he said.

“I have great tools to deal with because I was around a bunch of self-righteous Pentecostals my whole life who I didn’t really get along with but we could really play some good music together.”

Rubin, who knows how to play at least a dozen instruments, is probably best known from his work with Danny Barnes in the Bad Livers, but his musical experiences run the gamut, including bluegrass, jazz, western swing, punk, blues, conjunto, Middle Eastern music and, of course, Jewish music, what many people — though not Rubin himself — would call klezmer.

Rubin said that, since winning greater acceptance as Americans in the United States after serving in the military during World War II, Jews in this nation have done everything possible to assimilate, including shed Jewish culture, accents, styles of dress, and Yiddish — the language that bound the Jewish people together for centuries.

He considers the move a bad call.

The Jewish culture taught in synagogues and schools today, he said, is “the totally made-up, Walt Disney version of culture,” including Israel, which he said is, culturally speaking, the equivalent of a fairy tale.

Jews have turned a language that was dead outside of religious usage into a conversational language and ended up with music like “Hava Nagila,” Rubin said.

“That’s not a piece of Jewish music,” he scoffed. “None of these were. They were made up by a committee of guys who were sitting in a room, trying to create a fake culture for themselves so in 1948 could say they had their own ethnicity.”

Rubin remembers about 10 years ago when playing a Purim party in Fort Worth that his girlfriend, who spoke fluent Yiddish, was with him. They had the opportunity to speak with an older woman who was excited to talk with someone in Yiddish, and they asked her to teach them a song.

Raised in Poland, the woman sang “The Internationale,” the international Socialist anthem, in Yiddish.

“Her rabbi comes up behind her, makes her stop. ‘Shah, shah, that’s the language of the gutter, the camps. We speak Hebrew now.’ That represents every Jewish community center and synagogue in Texas, in America really,” Rubin said.

### ‘YIDDISH GETS STUFF DONE’

“The moment you do that, you throw away all the rhythm, and you throw away the inflection; you throw away all custom and form that went along with that language,” he said. “So basically you’re taking your own culture and putting it in the trash can and turning around and walking away.”

Making matters worse, many of the people in the United States who did support Yiddish culture had their money wrapped up with Bernie Madoff in his extensive Ponzi scheme, so when he was exposed, the little funding that did exist disappeared.

Rubin said that, unlike pop music, a core repertoire of Jewish music connects Jews around the world.

“It’s like my grandfather used to say: ‘I speak seven languages, but Yiddish gets stuff done,’” he said.

One of reasons Rubin — whose arm is tattooed with images taken from Arthur Szyk’s famous Haggadah and a quote written in Hebrew from his first Hebrew primer — says he has been effective as a Jewish musician in places like the Catholic Polish, Mexican or Protestant bluegrass bandstands is that he has done the opposite, clearly identifying himself as a Jew.

“When I’m humming a melody, it’s nigunim. That’s my fallback,” he said, referring to tunes he learned when exposed to Eastern European immigrants when he was growing up.

Doing things to hide the fact that one is a Jew, he said, fans the flames of those who are xenophobic and racist.

“One of the reasons I’m not a member of the JCC is, I don’t see the word Jewish, a Star of David or even a ‘J’ on their parking pass,” Rubin said. “I can’t tell

you how insulted I am. I’m insulted that I have to go through security to go daven. I think it’s absolutely asking for it. It totally misreads the local culture, it’s an imposition of some vision of fear that comes from another place and, frankly, it’s really ignoble at the core.”

Rubin’s godfather spoke Yiddish as his first language and his father thought it was important for him to be exposed to Yiddish culture.

“I lucked out,” Rubin said. “Kids today raised by a Jewish family aren’t given culture; they aren’t given that flavor. How can they relate to Jewish custom, song and melody if they haven’t been exposed to it their whole lives? In some respects, I understand perfectly well why my version of Jewish music may not relate to the really awful folk pop music that’s now called Jewish music.”

When Jews are not exposed to that kind of culture, he said, their reference to music and culture will be the same as the dominant culture.

“It’s going to be pop music. If you want to speak to someone meaningfully, you have to approach them in a way they are most comfortable,” Rubin said, adding, “I know some of these people, I’ve worked with them and see what they’re doing is valuable but it doesn’t affect me one bit. What I hear when I hear pop music is pogroms, the goyim.”

Traditional Jewish modality and melodies based on Hasidic and Ashkenazi traditional chants, he said, put people in the same state of bliss that they are trying to get to through prayer and study.

Rubin suggested that, if rabbis and congregation leaders want to bring people together, all they need to do is what has worked for Jews for centuries.

“I contend that even not being exposed to Jewish modes and nigunim, that anyone who’s ever been in any kind of Jewish context is going to relate to it immediately,” he said. “Even if they’ve been separated as they are today, by two and three generations, it’s gonna flip a switch.”

If he were to say this in Israel, Rubin said, he would be branded a right-wing racist. There, he added, there are young musicians who have clung to this music and walked away from rock and pop music to form klezmer bands — a move that has turned into a form of punk rock, even angering the musicians’ parents.

But Rubin is more than just talk. He has sacrificed to try to salvage and maybe even revive traditional Jewish music.

He cannot afford a car and his home is being foreclosed, Rubin said, but yet he has earned “life dollars” traveling to play Jewish music in Europe since 1996. He began making the trips because only a small pool of people were left who knew

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the tunes, material and correct approach to this kind of music.

“The guys I work with are cutting-edge, avant garde, and there is an aspect of that I am able to go with,” Rubin said. “Few people can play the bass and tuba and improvise and also know the traditional material. I’m kind of a rarity.”

Plenty of characters do a blackface minstrel review of Jewish culture and are quite successful, he said, because no one is qualified enough to say otherwise.

In Europe, Rubin — who says he plays Jewish music with a local Texas flavor — performs with various groups, including the Other Europeans and Frank London’s Klezmer Brass All-Stars.

The Other Europeans, an international group of 14 Yiddish and Roma musicians, is an attempt to restore a relationship between two ethnic groups that have been intertwined for centuries but have been ripped apart by war, the Holocaust and immigration.

Rubin said he is able to play double bass and tuba as part of the European Union-funded project — meaning that only European citizens would usually be able to participate — because having European relatives who were forced to leave in his lineage makes him eligible for European citizenship and because no qualified Jewish bassist lives within the EU.

“The Germans and Austrians who pay for this stuff have to confront their own complicity,” he said.

In 1999, Rubin got together joined Frank London in Europe, where the brass band craze is huge, playing the world music circuit at big festivals.

“We held down the klezmer slot at the world music festivals. They make room for Jews there. They feel like they need to. You can get funding for Jewish culture in Europe,” he said.

Rubin also works with Jewish music elsewhere — teaching at KlezKamp, a Yiddish folk arts program founded in 1984 in Kerhonkson, N.Y.; KlezKanada; Klezfest London; Yiddish Summer Weimar; and the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, Poland — and has worked with the Roma brass band Boban Markovic Orkestar the Brotherhood of Brass, a Jewish and Gypsy brass band.

Focusing on Jewish music has kept Rubin from some better-paying gigs, and he has abandoned many projects he started, including an album recorded with Congregation Agudas Achim’s Rabbi Neil Blumofe, due to lack of funding.

Rubin first moved to Austin about 20 years ago, when the city offered a low cost of living and musicians could eke out a decent wage. Today, he said, he is priced out of living here.

As time goes on, he said, he also feels less and less a part of the city’s Jewish community, which he said lacks any interest in or support for his Jewish music, and is seriously considering leaving Austin because of it.

“You can’t tell somebody something’s important; they tell you what’s important with their dollars,” Rubin said. “They have spoken, and they’ve spoken loudly.”

At one point, Rubin began attending a shul that was built around the same time as the one he had gone to in Oklahoma, used the same siddur and had a rabbi who led prayers the way he remembered.

The congregation was later led by a hazzan who brought in an acoustic guitar and a pianist.

### THE KEY TO HIS HEART

“Then it was all ‘Kumbaya,’ squared-off western American music,” Rubin said. “That doesn’t hold the key that opens my heart. I can’t even walk in there now. It’s a goyish service. Their culture, the culture they’re trying to speak to, doesn’t relate to my experience.”

Musically, he noted, he agrees more than disagrees with Rabbi Blumofe, whom he refers to as the singer in his band.

“I’ve always admired way he attaches song and melody to his service,” he said.

Agudas Achim has been good to Rubin, he said, and gone out of their way to find opportunities for him to play there.

One of the things of which Rubin is proudest in Austin is when he helped move the Torah from Agudas Achim’s old home on Bull Creek Road to the congregation’s current location on the Dell Jewish Community Campus.

“Very few people realize the importance of that march and the role music plays in it, but they did,” he said of the congregation. “That’s a great mitzvah for a musician. At that moment in our custom and our tradition you are literally transformed into David with his harp. If you’re spiritually attuned enough to be in touch with that, you can really see putting yourself in the footsteps of the generation before.”

Rubin has also played some other events in Austin’s organized Jewish community, including a Purim party at “The J,” and has connected with a family who he said understands Jewish culture, practice and custom better than anyone he has encountered. He had played at all their life-cycle events and anticipates continuing to do so.

“Those are the pillars of the community. The community may not even be aware of them,” he said. “If I can get one of those in a lifetime then I’m ahead.”

The situation has burned out others working in Jewish music here, but Rubin sees glimmers of hope, like his students, who may play other kinds of music but

identify as musicians who play Jewish music for dancing, and in Austin, the Mazel Tov! Cocktail Hour at the East Side Show Room (See story & photos, A20).

“These kids got together with an interest in Jewish music but they don’t have the beginning of a clue what it’s supposed to sound like, so they’re cobbling it together,” Rubin said. “If they do it long enough, that will be a real experience for them.”

In the last three or four years, he said, he also has noticed people who have rejected dominant American culture — street musicians, buskers, people who ride the rails and are part of a hobo culture — who are seeking their own version of culture and have adopted Jewish music as their own.

He saw this at KlezKamp, when people who were not Jewish, looked like they lived on the street, and were self-taught musicians began showing up to learn to play klezmer music. (KlezKamp, which is run by Living Traditions, is partnering with the University of Wisconsin in Madison to create a Yiddish culture program that will be the first of its kind in the world.)

“They just long for it in a Hasidic way — a physical yearning because of an emptiness where society hasn’t provided the nourishment human beings need to exist,” he said of the people he noticed.

“They’re so attracted to what they hear in old Jewish music they’ve adopted it and are studying it.”

He ran across the phenomenon again when he played at Mardi Gras in New Orleans this year.

In addition to continuing his work with Frank London’s Klezmer Brass All-Stars and Hank Sapoznik and the Youngers of Zion, and looking forward to an Other Europeans double CD scheduled for release next year, Rubin is dealing with a shoulder injury and playing American music with Silas Lowe as Fatman and Little Boy.

This is the first time in at least a decade that Rubin has been really serious about pursuing American music, and he plans to spend three to four months on the road with Silas this year because he thinks it is fun.

“The fact of the matter is, I live in America and there are people who like American music, so it’s doing pretty well in relation to the other things I do,” he said, adding, “I was raised a white man in Oklahoma and I’ve been playing bluegrass and country music my whole life, so I fake it pretty good. People are interested in that.”

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