

All that jazz

Brookline guitarist, music teacher Joe Weinberg is one hep cat

By Len Abram

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Joe Weinberg
.Courtesy Tremont School

BROOKLINE – The 1927 movie “The Jazz Singer,” among the first “talkies,” let audiences hear, as well as see, the drama on the screen. Sentimental – or *schmaltz* in Yiddish slang – the movie plucked a resonant chord for newly arrived Americans, so much so that it has been remade twice since, once with Neil Diamond. How do immigrants gain an American identity without losing their original culture? How do Americans retain their origins and yet still assimilate anew? The black writer Ralph Ellison has expressed the creative tension in American life, “Our fate is to become one, and yet many.”

In the movie, Jakie Rabinowitz, a cantor’s son, prefers singing ragtime and jazz to the tropes and traditions of cantorial music. When he leaves his family, his neighborhood and the songs of Israel, as his father puts it, he invents himself as Jack Robin, the jazz singer. The most celebrated performer of his time, Asa

Yoelson, stage name Al Jolson, plays Jakie and Jack in the original film. Jolson’s father was also a rabbi and a cantor.

Jazz is an American creation, whose chief characteristic is the freedom to express one’s self through music. In playing a melody line, the musician is free, if not encouraged, to innovate and to improvise upon it. So too, the jazz singer as Jack Robin improvises on his identity, makes up who he is from his past, his talent, his music, and his appreciative fans. Success brings him to a final act of assimilation in the drama, loving a Gentile woman, a *shiksa*. This line of Jews may end with Jack Robin, free to embrace his traditions or to let them go.

When his father is too ill to sing on Yom Kippur, Jack takes his place on the bimah. Jack’s “Kol Nidre” is his *teshuva*, his return. For his father and community, he remains Jakie. The tension of the one and the many in American life resolves. As a Jew, Jack resumes his mainstream career.

Jews have been drawn to jazz for decades. Al Jolson, who starred in “The Jazz Singer,” is credited with introducing the jazz and blues of African-Americans to white audiences. Ethnic groups influence American culture, along with being changed by it. For years now, bagels have edged out donuts as America’s favorite breakfast food.

Without African-Americans, there would be no jazz or blues, but other groups have contributed. The 1932 Yiddish standard, “Bei Mir Bist du Schoen,” for example, was first sung

by African-American musicians with English lyrics. Benny Goodman adopted the song as part of his repertoire, a big hit for his swing band. He added a klezmer section to emphasize its ethnicity.

Buddy Rich, Mel Tormé, Benny Goodman, Herbie Mann, Paul Desmond, Sammy Davis Jr., Amy Winehouse and Stan Getz are some of the better known Jewish jazz musicians or performers. Nica Rothschild, from the famous family, championed the music of Thelonious Monk, jazz pianist and composer. George Wein from Newton, is the founder of the Newport Jazz Festival.

Although not as popular, jazz still draws musicians to its rich complexity. Joe Weinberg is a jazz guitarist from Brookline, who performs and teaches in the Boston area.

TJA: Where did you get your training in guitar?

Weinberg: Over 25 years ago, I had my first guitar lesson. My high school, the Rivers School in Weston, also had an outstanding music school. There, I was exposed to jazz and the jazz guitar. I went on to study music at the University of Arizona. I played in jazz ensembles, a great way to learn to play the music. In addition, classical guitar training helped me to develop my technique in solo performances. Playing solo means performing all the parts of the band (bass line, rhythm and melody). It should sound like two guitar players at the same time. That's what I strive for.

TJA: Recently you've played for the city at Downtown Crossing. Where else have you performed?

Weinberg: This past summer has been busy. I played at the Stowe Vermont Jazz festival, Brae Burn Country Club and the Nantasket Beach Hotel. Capital One Bank has 360 Cafes in the area. I've played at their Boston, Brookline and Cambridge sites, and at Woodman's Restaurant in Essex. On the Cape, I've performed at resorts in Chatham and Falmouth. As for media, I've been a regular guest on WBZ Radio, the Jordan Rich show, and also featured on NPR and CNN radio

TJA: Can you explain this musician's joke? "A jazz musician plays 4,000 chords to four people. A rock band will play four chords to 4,000 people."

Weinberg: The songs in the jazz genre are more dense harmonically. These were often pop songs that became classics, such as the ones Tony Bennett revived. Early rock 'n' roll songwriting got simpler and that's not a bad thing. In layman terms, rock 'n' roll has less chords than a jazz composition. However, I appreciate the artistry of rock guitar players, such as Eddie Van Halen. The joke criticizes both traditions. Jazz is not only for elite ears and rock 'n' roll is not just for the simple minded. They're both music. Unfortunately, as the joke suggests, jazz is less popular.

TJA: What do you teach your students about jazz?

Weinberg: My students learn the fundamentals of being a good musician: ear training, guitar styles and techniques, rhythm, chords and chord changes. Not all of them want to learn to play jazz. That's fine. I think music should be enjoyable. For the students who study jazz guitar with me, most important is understanding how the jazz idiom is composed, to hear the notes on the fretboard before they play them, and improvise with those notes and chords. They learn to create their own ideas and improvisations.

TJA: Why do you think jazz is an essentially American music?

Weinberg: Jazz is first and foremost an American music. Every period in the evolution of the idiom – blues, ragtime, swing, bebop, modern -- was innovated in this country. From the early days of slaves singing in the fields to pass the time of their backbreaking forced labor to present day modern jazz, American musicians have made all the important innovations. Not even rock 'n' roll can claim that. While jazz started as strictly an African-American music, today it is played by and appreciated by all cultural backgrounds, including Jews. In a sense, jazz is like the United States, a melting pot of cultural influences, out of which comes its art.

Joe Weinberg's website is www.joeweinbergguitar.com.

