

# Welcoming the Shabbes...Backwards

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During most summers, I have the incredible opportunity to go to the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec, and attend a week-long festival of Jewish and Yiddish music and culture. KlezKanada (yes, intentionally spelled with two K's) provides a wonderful atmosphere to experience the most enjoyable Yiddish music, culture, and craftworks. Over the course of the festival, participants split up and take courses on Yiddish language, culture, humor, artwork, or numerous other offerings. Musicians also participate in master classes and ensembles led by leading names in the Klezmer world. However, there is one thing that brings everyone at KlezKanada together; the backwards march that immediately precedes *Shabbes* dinner.

The backwards march involves all the musicians lining up at the lakefront (which is at the bottom of a hill that the dining center sits on) and beginning to play the same tune, a *Nigun* (Hasidic melody) in G minor. Everyone who is not playing this song either sings along, takes pictures, or helps guide the musicians along the path should they stray from it. After the traditional backwards march, there can be no more playing, as the participants now consider the *Shabbes* to have begun, even if religiously it does not begin until Sundown. Although the march has only been a tradition at KlezKanada for roughly ten years, its roots go much farther, back to the time of the *Zohar*, or “Book of Splendor,” in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The book is the centerpiece of Jewish mystical thought, called the *Kabbalah*. It was written down in 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain by the Jewish scholar, Moses de Leon. The *Zohar* contains a paragraph that deals with the sanctity of the Sabbath and contains these lines:

"One must prepare a comfortable seat ... like one who prepares a canopy for a bride. For the Shabbat is a queen and a bride. This is why the masters of the Mishna used to go out on the eve of Shabbat to receive her on the road, and used to say: '*Come, O bride, come, O bride!*' And one must sing and rejoice at the table in her honor ... " (Arbell)

The *Shekhinah* (the term used for the Sabbath Bride), is welcomed by international Jewry at sundown on Friday nights. But the tradition of receiving her on the road was modified to accommodate changing lifestyles in modernity. Now, turning to face the entrance of the synagogue (during verse 9 of the Sabbath prayer *L'chah Dodi*) is substituted for greeting the *Shekhinah* on the road. The words "Come, O bride, come, O bride! Come as a bride cometh, Queen of the days!" are recited during this verse (Martin 1968: 155-7). The practice of "turning backwards" to face the entrance of the synagogue was taken up by local klezmer bands in Eastern Europe in the 1800's, and incorporated into their marches around the town (KlezKanada.com). The bands would also march from town to town especially to play for different weddings, and it is thought that the tradition of the marching band came from the necessity of traveling either from town to town, or between sections of the same town. The tradition of backwards marches on *erev Shabbes* (Sabbath eve) was then "discovered" by Jenny Romaine, a modern Yiddishist doing field research in Eastern Europe roughly ten years ago (KlezKanada.com). Romaine then brought this intriguing discovery to KlezKanada where it was warmly received, and over the past decade it has become a KlezKanada tradition. A few years after the transmission of this tradition to Canada, a Moldovian born clarinetist, German Goldenshteyn, *a'h* (deceased), immigrated to New York City. On a visit to KlezKanada, he confirmed that the band in his hometown had a similar backwards march. Through this informal

type of transmission, the tradition of greeting the Sabbath Queen ‘backwards’ has remained alive for more than one Jewish folk group, in more than one location.

Within the broad mainstream culture that greets the *Shekhinah* on *erev Shabbes*, are the musicians at KlezKanada, who now include the backwards march in their smaller greeting tradition. The backwards march in this way can be seen as a type of revival; that is, a ritual that both connects the participants with their past, and unites them in the present. Even within the smaller tradition of the backwards march, there is yet another variation. It involves those people who don’t play instruments, and instead, help guide the musicians. Clearly, the tradition of marching backwards had to be modified for them, and allow them to face forwards, to effectively guide the musicians. If it weren’t for this smaller group modifying a revival of a tradition, the entire tradition could have collapsed because the musicians could not see where they were going, and marching backwards would have been impractical.

Even more interesting are participants at the American KlezKamp, an older and jazzier version of KlezKanada, but one that received the tradition later. Because many of the participants attend both KlezKamp and KlezKanada, transmission occurred through culture contact, where it was modified again, to better accommodate the American group. We can see how, even in sharing a tradition, the Canadian and American groups invent their own unique variants, “marshalling symbols to create [their own distinct] cultural boundaries” (Peterson-Royce 1982: 7), within the broader mainstream.

Because KlezKamp occurs indoors at a hotel instead of outdoors in the mountains, and because KlezKamp takes place in the winter, unlike KlezKanada’s summer festival, many changes had to occur to keep this tradition alive. With an indoor location, a mass backwards

march through hotel hallways would be impractical, so instead, a circle is formed with musicians that rotate backwards on a stage. Through all of these necessary differences, though, one aspect of Shabbes that could have remained stable was intentionally changed; the *Nigun* in G minor—a tune central to the KlezKanada tradition—is not part of the KlezKamp tradition. Rather, a similar, yet different *Nigun* in G minor is used at KlezKamp, as a way of making sure the cultural boundaries between the two Kamps are not blurred.

Even though there are major distinctions between the ancient welcoming of the *Shekhina*, and the modern backwards march, both traditions are still part of what helps bind highly different folk groups into one Jewish community, all uniformly observing the Sabbath, but each in their own distinct ways.

Key Words:

Yiddish music—United States and Canada—history of backwards march

Klezmer music—United States and Canada—history of backward march

Folk music transmission—Yiddish backwards march—United States and Canada

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