

[Pigeonhole This!](#)



Our roving musicologist, blog contributor **Ben Conniff** went uptown for this report:

Ever wonder what James Brown's music would have sounded like if he'd been raised Jewish? Neither have I. But the unlikely collaboration known as Abraham, Inc. asked just that, and earlier this month at the [Apollo](#), they answered it. The band consists of [David Krakauer](#), a highly acclaimed concert clarinetist who has toured as a soloist with the world's best classical ensembles and crafted his own best-selling classical and klezmer recordings; [Fred Wesley](#), a trombonist and funk pioneer known for his work with James Brown, Bootsy Collins and

Parliament; and [Socalled](#), a Canadian Jewish "beat architect," rapper, singer, pianist, and accordionist, and probably more that I couldn't keep track of. Since 2006, the three men have been on a mission to fuse their seemingly disparate influences—klezmer, funk, and hip hop—culminating in the blowout Apollo show.

The physical juxtaposition of these three pillars was predictably jarring. On the left, Wesley was short and stocky and looked every bit the grizzled veteran of the soul and funk eras. Wesley wore a sharp gray suit over a black t-shirt and the serene look of a man who's seen pretty much all there is to see. At center, the middle-aged Krakauer wore classical black duds but radiated youthful excitement, as though he'd just finished playing in the pit orchestra of CATS. On the far right, Socalled's ill-fitting clothes, thick-rimmed glasses, Krusty the Clown hairdo and powder-pale face made him look, well, insane.

As the music began, I worried that this collaboration was just as crazy as it seemed. Socalled opened with a Yiddish folk song in quavering vibrato, and when he added a synthesized hip-hop layer underneath, it sounded like a joke. But as the band constructed its sound piece by piece—Wesley's fat trombone licks, Krakauer's Klezmer-tinged improvisations, the rhythm section's funk structure—they found a balance that was powerfully danceable.

Wesley, ever the solid bandleader, kept the ensemble's centrifugal forces grounded while injecting a dose of humor on songs like "Breaking Bread" and "House Party." Socalled was the embodiment of versatility, transitioning smoothly from Tevye to battle rapper to mad clown accordionist all in one song. But the true star of the show was Krakauer. His solos were wild and dense yet impeccably crafted within the band's chords. He wiggled behind his mic like a snake charmer on coke as he conjured up higher and higher notes, reaching a peak well above anything I've heard come out of a wind instrument. Then, by circular breathing, he held that note for about two minutes, and the entranced audience watched his cheeks puff in and out like a piece of industrial machinery. To call anyone other than James Brown the hardest working man in show business would be as criminal as calling Ladainian Tomlinson "[L.T.](#)" But Krakauer sure gave Brown a run for his money.

I predicted the standing ovation before and after the encore. I wasn't even shocked by the curtain call a few minutes later. But when I snuck out the door a good five minutes after the band's last appearance on stage, the crowd was still on its feet, determined to beat their hands until they were black and blue.

Keep an eye on [the band's website](#) for an upcoming CD and a full tour.