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Moving to the Beat of a New Klezmer

By Jim Fusilli | NY Culture | February 2, 2011 | Photo by Jon Wasserman

The delightful, deliciously complex music of Abraham Inc. makes a marriage of funk, klezmer and hip-hop seem inevitable.

"It's a great gathering of cultures," said the New York-based group's clarinetist and frontman, David Krakauer, who called the blend "an African-American/Jewish house party." Abraham Inc. will play (Le) Poisson Rouge Wednesday night.

"Typically, people don't like to stray from genre," said Josh Dolgin, aka Socalled, the group's rapper-producer. "That said, the histories of African-American music and Jewish music are constantly rubbing up against and energizing each other. Since the beginning of Jews and African-Americans living together in this country, they've been freaking each other out."



Mr. Krakauer has been expanding the boundaries of klezmer since the late 1980s. He was a member of the Klezmatics before starting Klezmer Madness!, and has worked with avant-garde musicians Anthony Coleman, Ben Neill and others. In 2001, he was given an album by Mr. Dolgin that blended klezmer and hip-hop rhythms, recorded in Mr. Dolgin's Montreal basement studio.

"I listened to it and was blown away at how clever and funky it was," Mr. Krakauer recalled. Mr. Dolgin was incorporated into Klezmer Madness!, and soon the group began attracting a younger audience. A devoted funk fan, Mr. Dolgin said his appreciation for klezmer blossomed while searching for old records to sample in his mixes. "I happened upon the real stuff from the '20s and '30s, when the culture was rocking."

In 2006, Messrs. Krakauer and Dolgin asked trombonist Fred Wesley to join them. A pillar of contemporary American music, Mr. Wesley was the trombonist for, and musical director of, James Brown's band, and later a member of Parliament-Funkadelic and the Count Basie Orchestra. He readily agreed, and approached the opportunity as a musical challenge.

"I'd never heard klezmer," Mr. Wesley said. "I thought the technical side was going to be difficult, but David wanted me to do my thing." Mr. Wesley took comfort in the knowledge that Mr. Krakauer was, as the trombonist said, "an aficionado of Sidney Bechet and Charlie Parker," giving them a common jazz language.

"I didn't grow up hearing Yiddish," said Mr. Dolgin. "I grew up with funk and hip-hop. Krakauer is the same way: He grew up with jazz and classical music. The klezmer tradition was killed off in the Second World War; the roots of the trees were ripped out of the ground. The Klezmatics laid the groundwork for the revitalization of the culture. Now we're here with Fred—he's a godfather of the modern African-American music tradition. It's a very connected evolution."

But ethnomusicology isn't the point of Abraham Inc. As Mr. Dolgin said, "Even though it's high-concept, we want to make catchy songs."

Mr. Fusilli is the Journal's rock and pop music critic.