

# Klezmer carols? Musician finds the blend works

A CD of classic Christmas songs performed in Jewish style is a hit with interfaith listeners

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Like "work party" and "healthy tan," the term "klezmer Christmas carols" seems like a mismatched punch line.

But it would be a mistake to dismiss the oxymoron as a mere seasonal spoof. In just five years, a CD of yuletide classics performed in the bittersweet musical style of Eastern European Jewish shtet'ls has carved out a niche, especially among interfaith couples.

Called "Oy to the World: A Klezmer Christmas," the disc is the brainchild of Paul Libman, a Chicago-based producer of music for advertising and films, and his band the Klezmonauts. Consider it a head-on collision near the chimney between Santa Claus and "Fiddler on the Roof."

When the CD first came out in 1998, Libman feared that he'd be seen as an equal-opportunity offender. "I joked about becoming Salman Rushdie's roommate," he said, referring to the writer who was forced into hiding after publishing a controversial book on Islam. "Instead, just the opposite happened, and it became this interfaith phenomenon."

Phenomenon might be a bit of a stretch, considering that "Oy to the World" has sold just 8,000 copies. Bing Crosby's version of "White Christmas"—the best-selling holiday tune of all time—has sold more than 30 million. But it has struck a chord, particularly for people in mixed mar-

riages, like the Libmans—he's Jewish, she's Italian Catholic.

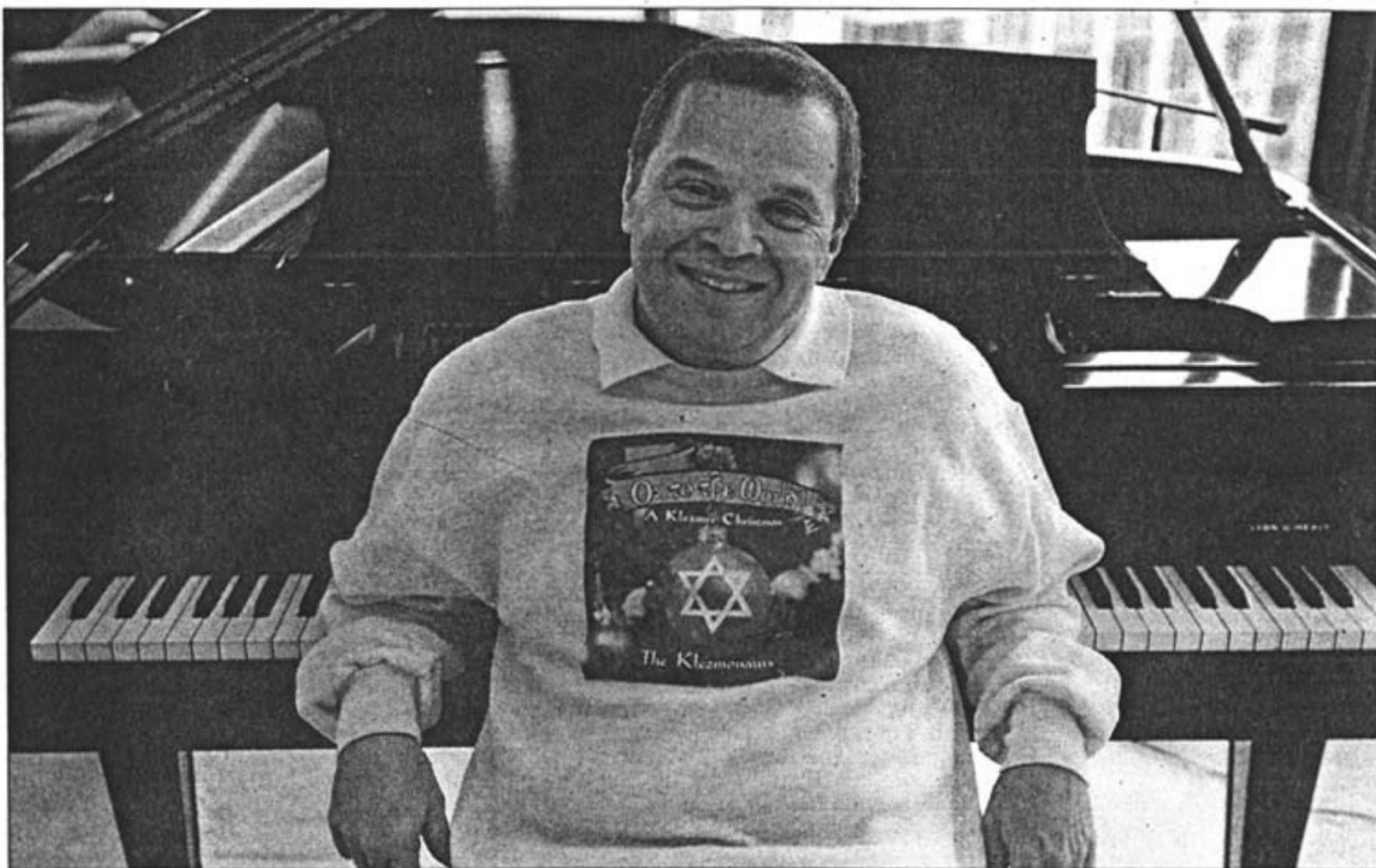
As the cover blurb touts: "It's the perfect solution for . . . the family that can't decide whether to play Christmas carols or Hanukkah songs." The eight-day Jewish holiday ends Tuesday.

Libman didn't conceive his CD as an ecumenical exercise but as a response to the deluge of holiday music that floods the airwaves each year. "I looked at all these Jewish musicians—Kenny G, Michael Bolton, Neil Diamond—and that they all had Christmas albums. . . . So, I just figured I'd respond by doing the most inappropriate Christmas album ever."

The result is a sometimes hilarious, often haunting interpretation of such old favorites as "Deck the Halls," "We Three Kings" and "Away in the Manger"—along with an original Libman number called "Santa Gey Gezhunderheit," which is Yiddish for "go in good health." The Klezmonauts include several well-known Chicago musicians, including Johnny Frigo, Fared Haque, Arnie Roth and Bobby Lewis.

"My original goal was that I'd give it away to clients," said the 56-year-old pianist and jazz arranger, who has penned jingles for everyone from Kellogg's to Coca-Cola. But when he played the music for fellow musicians, he realized he was onto something.

"They'd get the weirdest look . . . and then they'd say, 'Hey, you



Tribune photo by David Klobucar

Paul Libman's CD, "Oy to the World: A Klezmer Christmas," has Christmas carols in the style of Eastern European Jewish shtet'ls.

know what? This is really good."

Thanks to Michael Medved, the nationally syndicated radio host, the CD found an audience far beyond Libman's studio. It developed a cult following, dominating the previously untapped market of "mixed-marriage music."

Lauren and John Kern of Flossmoor—she's Jewish, he's not—have a copy. It's just one way of melding their respective December traditions.

"We thought it was a hoot—then we came to appreciate the quality of the music," said John Kern, a psychiatrist. He speaks as more than a casual listener; he is a saxophonist in a klezmer band called the Klezmedics, a group of doctors with a few teachers thrown in. "I grew up loving Christmas carols . . . and it's rare to have something that bridges the musical gap."

Jodi LeGath of Clearwater, Fla., agrees. Searching for a way to blend her Judaism and her husband's Catholicism, she heard the tunes playing at a bookstore and knew she had to have it. "It can be a real challenge to respect the two holidays. You just try to take the best of both faiths and do what works for you."

Libman has a fistful of e-mail from customers expressing similar thoughts, often including their own convoluted family histories. "You've done a thing both beautiful and hysterical all at once," wrote one New York correspondent. "It's the perfect thing to play for my father-in-law who is very much a Star of David on top of the fir tree type."

That response that has made "Oy" more than just another project for Libman. Even if a major label came calling, he says he's not interested. "I

would never relinquish control, because it gives me an opportunity to communicate with people. You wouldn't believe the way people pour their hearts out."

It's even touched those with no baggage at all. "I'm about as Gentile as you can get, but this has become one of my favorite Christmas CDs," said Dave Hudson of Chicago. "The klezmer influence somehow enhances the timeless melodies that we are all so familiar with."

Born in Wisconsin, Libman moved at age 5 to Memphis, where he was one of two Jewish children in his elementary school. "I was at the tail end of the era when students were required to say the Lord's Prayer and participate in the annual Christmas pageant," he recalled.

After initially balking at piano lessons, "something eventu-

ally just clicked," he said. Memphis also exposed Libman to different types of music.

By 5th grade, the Libmans moved back to Wisconsin and joined a Conservative synagogue, which he remembers as a "very joyless place." The one exception was the weekly visit by Max Janowski, the legendary musical director at KAM Isaiah Israel in Hyde Park who died in 1991. Janowski would shuttle to Milwaukee to lead the choir, bringing lush arrangements that inspired a young Libman.

"He was the first person to re-imagine Jewish music, and it really connected with me," Libman said.

Today Libman, his wife and three adult children have a tradition of displaying both menorahs and Nativity scenes at this time of year. "It was never about your faith or mine," he said. "It's about God."