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A Merry, Musical Hanukkah

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

"These are like footprints through history," said Roger Bennett, glancing at a spread of old records splayed out by his side. "It's more than just music. It's more than just vinyl."

True to the spirit of the season, these were footprints tickled by tassels and tracked with snow. The records on display before Mr. Bennett—each judiciously selected and Judaically adorned—were some of the many thousands belonging to the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, a curious group of Jewish-music enthusiasts with holiday domination on their minds. Or maybe just rumination. As Mr. Bennett, a New York-based Idelsohn Society member, continued, "The question we want to frame is: Is it only Hanukkah songs that are Jewish, or could you make a case that, in America, Jews singing Christmas songs are the most Jewish of all?"



Ramsay de Givie for The Wall Street Journal
 Roger Bennett and Courtney Holt of the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation.

It's a question for the ages, or at least the past 50 or 60 years. That's the period covered by "'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah: The Musical Battle Between Christmas and the Festival of Lights," a new 2-CD Idelsohn Society release that compiles 34 holiday songs, from Hanukkah and Christmas traditions, in a package fit for gifting on either occasion. Or both.

"I grew up with a weird mix of Christmas and Hanukkah," said Courtney Holt, another Idelsohn Society member and a current Los Angeles resident. "Growing up in New York, at [private] school, we would have mass every day, and then me and my friends would get in a van and go to Hebrew school after. For us, Christmas was not about Jesus—it was about the season, it was about snow."

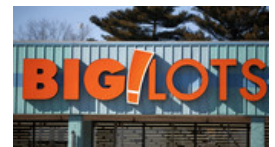


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He was not alone. As chronicled in the liner notes for "'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah," the synchronous holidays have negotiated a sort of detente as each has expanded and evolved. As consumer culture swelled in postwar America, Christmas took on connotations beyond those aligned with church; meanwhile, as many Jewish immigrants from Europe strove to assimilate, the significance of Hanukkah heightened and started to commingle or compete with Christmas. Traditions for both holidays, as if in a postmodern montage, began to blur.

The musical results strike a spirited tone on "'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah," which features Jewish artists singing about the swirl of the season through a mix of reverence and jocularly, with a tinge of winning weirdness to boot. From a recording released in 1961, music-industry gadabout Mitch Miller leads a wild sing-along of "White Christmas" (written by the Russian-born Jew Irving Berlin); from decades later, the folk singer Debbie Friedman sings a rousing anthem from the point of view of a latke.

"Having Lou Reed wish you 'happy holidays' is a beautiful thing, no matter what," said Josh Kun, another Idelsohn Society member, of Mr. Reed's "Holiday I.D.," which opens the second disc. "Hearing Herb Alpert do 'Jingle Bells' is pretty wonderful."

Celebrating such cross-cultural exchange is Idelsohn's mission. The society, which is headquartered on Third Avenue, comprises four members: Mr. Bennett, in New York; Messrs. Holt and Kun in Los Angeles; and David Katznelson, in San Francisco. They assembled in 2004 as collectors with common interests—and more records than most. "In my garage I have around 6,000, and that is after a sell-off when I moved," said Mr. Holt, who is 44.

Mr. Bennett, who is 42, countered: "I have about...countless."



Enlarge Image
Ramsay de Givé for The Wall Street Journal
Some of the society's records.

On a recent afternoon, the two were working in New York to strategize future doings for the Idelsohn Society, including the planned launch next year of a digital archive of video interviews with erstwhile Jewish music luminaries. The archive project was seeded in part by a sizable grant from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, which supports work "that reflects the realities of Jewish life in

America today."

When they began, the society's members aimed merely to reissue old records that were otherwise wasting away. "But we kind of backed into being a fully functioning cultural society after we realized that many of the musicians were still alive," Mr. Bennett said. "These performers were dying, and we wanted to save their stories. We're mining the postwar Jewish experience, when Jews moved en masse from the city to the suburbs, and in many cases from tradition to modernity."

The group's storyline also traces back to a passion for vintage vinyl records: their sounds, their covers, the suggestions of stories lying dormant in their grooves. The members fiend for them and find them in junk shops and thrift stores all over the world. "We have spent a lot of time around Palm Beach, where Jewish vinyl seems to grow on trees," Mr. Bennett said.

Increasingly, they also receive records in the mail, sent from quizzical kids passing on their parents' collections. "When I started collecting old vinyl, it felt like it had value," Mr. Holt said. "Nowadays, if somebody found a stack when they were cleaning, they would be more likely to put it in the trash than give it to a Salvation

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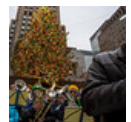
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