

'Something to Sing About'

by Maggie Neff
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The warmth of Robyn Helzner's voice over the phone echoes that of her singing over mandolin and guitar. Performing alone and with her Trio, she travels the world sharing world Jewish music and its culture, and has recorded several albums. The Trio is versatile, from singing in Hebrew over high-spirited folk tunes to singing in Ladino (Judaeo-Spanish) to jazzy, rhythmic songs. Reached by phone, Helzner talked about her music, her identity as a "world Jewish music ambassador" and memorable moments on tour.



Courtesy Robyn Helzner

How did you get your start playing music?

I've been playing Jewish music since I was 8 years old. My parents played recordings of Hebrew and Yiddish music, so this was something I heard at home. I found that I had an affinity for this music. I started performing when I was 8, and it's just gone on from there into a career!

Tell me about your visits to China.

I have this reputation of going to very unusual places. In the late '80s I went to the Soviet Union, before it became the former Soviet Union, to give underground concerts for Jews and Refuseniks. ... And then, a few years after that, I was invited to serve as the High Holiday cantor for a congregation in Hong Kong. ... Through the work that I did in Hong Kong for six years, I met the head of the Jewish community in Beijing, a Jewish woman originally from New York. She invited me to officiate at her son's bar mitzvah—the first one ever held in Beijing—in 1996. Since then I've officiated at five other b'nei mitzvah, bar (and) bat mitzvahs, in Beijing. Who would have thought? OK, Jewish music in Eastern Europe, but Jewish music in China? Not in my wildest dreams. So that's been quite an exciting opportunity I never imagined having.

You get the feeling that what you're doing is ambassador work for world Jewish music. Why is that important to you personally, and also to the Jewish community and non-Jewish listeners?

We have an incredible musical tradition. It's always been sort of a challenge for me, deciding how to explain what is it that I do. If you say to somebody "I'm a Christian folk singer," you sort of have an idea of what they do, right? They sing religious music. But that is just a fraction of what my Trio does. So that's why I say we sing "World Jewish Music." We're singing songs about community, about love, about family, about work, about history. It just happens to be in these traditional Jewish languages. ... When you think about world music, Jewish music, I think is the original world music. Because Jews have lived all over the world and their music has been influenced by the cultures and traditions and the rhythms of all these countries where they've lived. It's fascinating. And the themes are universal. And you know, people will go to concerts to hear a Greek band, or a Celtic (concert) where they're singing in Gaelic, or to the opera, which is not necessarily in English. ... So as a performer, as a communicator of this music, it's up to me to make it accessible to everybody. ... So even if you don't understand the words, you're taken in by the melodies and by the stories of the songs.