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Story**This year's Yiddishkayt L.A. hopes to spark some memories of a forgotten era.**

by Naomi Pfefferman, Arts & Entertainment Editor



Sabell Bender remembers when the New Beverly Cinema was the Globe Theater, a center of Yiddish drama in Los Angeles.

It was here in 1951 that the 24-year-old actress continued to make a splash as the Los Angeles Folks-Bine's ingenue, in a translation of J.B. Priestley's "They Came to a City."

"L.A. had a vibrant, serious Yiddish theater scene," Bender, 77, recalled. "We didn't do the bawdy musicals, the melodramas, but truly literary plays by Sholem Aleichem and Sholem Asch and Sholem An-Ski."

The houses were packed and critics from the West Coast bureaus of the Daily Forward and the Morning Freiheit reviewed the productions, which took place at venues such as the Globe, the Wilshire Ebell and the Assistance League Playhouse.

The mamaloshen, or mother tongue, hasn't graced those stages for more than a generation; the local bureaus of those newspapers have long closed; and Bender is among a dwindling group of old-timers who even remember that they existed. Indeed, when one imagines the golden age of Yiddishkayt, the secular culture of the European Diaspora, one thinks of Eastern Europe or the Lower East Side, not the City of Angels.

**A Katz-Inspired
Identity Check**by Naomi
Pfefferman, Arts &
Entertainment Editor

While watching the "Tonight Show" in 1993, music writer and scholar Josh Kun was shocked to see African-American jazz clarinetist Don Byron extolling the late klezmer artist Mickey Katz. At the

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ORANGE COUNTY

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Yiddishkayt Los Angeles' fifth biennial festival, "L.A. Confidential: The Hidden Story of Yiddish in Los Angeles," Oct. 8-15, hopes to correct the amnesia. Its 15 events will unearth the once-thriving literary and political scene that swirled here in the first half of the last century — a time when socialists, Spanish Civil War volunteers, intellectuals and writers recreated the shtetl in Boyle Heights and Beverly-Fairfax.

The "Yiddish Radio Hour" broadcast from a garage in the Miracle Mile; Mickey Katz performed his manic Yinglish parodies at Billy Gray's Band Box on Fairfax Avenue (see sidebar); and Benjamin Zemach, the director and modern dance pioneer, brought Stanislavski's influence to the Folks-Bine and the University of Judaism.

"Even I was surprised to learn about all this," said festival director Aaron Paley, 47, who attended secular kindershule and mittleshule in Van Nuys in the 1970s. "After all, Los Angeles' chief vice is what the brilliant social critic Norman Klein has called L.A.'s 'history of forgetting.' We've whitewashed our Mexican origins, we habitually knock down architectural landmarks, we cemented over our river — and we've forgotten our Yiddish."

If the contemporary landscape conceals the city's Yiddish geography, the festival will unearth it, said Stephen Sass of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California. Guided tours will spotlight our very own Old Country, where eight Jewish merchants uttered the first words of the mamaloshen circa 1850. Yiddishkayt virtually exploded here, 50 years later, when Midwestern and East Coast Jews flocked to Boyle Heights and adjacent City Terrace, lured by cheap properties subdivided by the Pioneer Lot Association.

On the bus tours, former residents such as Sylvia Brown will reminisce about how this predominantly Latino area was home to more than 75,000 Jews between 1910 and 1950.

Back when East Cesar Chavez Boulevard was still Brooklyn Avenue, the intersection at Brooklyn and Soto Street teemed with kosher bakeries, haberdasheries and even a live chicken market, Brown, 80, said. She still recalls the site of former landmarks such as the Leader's barber shop; the original Canter's Delicatessen, where sausage on Russian rye sandwiches cost a "nickle a shtickel"; and Currie's Mile-High Cones, where the scent of baking cones wafted onto a street lined with herring and pickle barrels.

"Every left-wing faction had its own schule," Bender added; in fact, her father, a socialist tailor, removed her from the International Workers Order school after a week "because they were communists, and he had big disagreements with the communists."

Instead, young Sylvia attended a branch of the Workmen's Circle schule located in a house on

earning his doctorate in ethnic studies, preferred the racialized music of Latinos and African Americans to Jewish culture.

"My impression had been that Jewishness — Jewish writing, scholarship and music — reeked of conservatism," said Kun, a cultural critic for publications such as Rolling Stone and the New York Times.

But there was Byron, "a cultural practitioner of racial justice," defending Katz when host Jay Leno tried to dismiss him as a "bar mitzvah musician."

Byron replied that Katz was actually a clarinet virtuoso and a wildly subversive "Yinglish" artist whose wickedly satirical songs brilliantly parodied "Hit Parade" tunes and the whitewashed popular culture ("That's Amore" became "That's Morris").

"To hear Byron say, 'Hey, step back, this is incredibly radical, progressive, music, was eye opening,'" Kun said. "I thought, 'What's the dissonance here? Why do I own every one of Byron's recordings, and I don't choose to listen to the other?'"

So began a personal odyssey that led the scholar to create a multimedia essay, "The Yiddish Are Coming: Remembering Mickey Katz," which

Euclid Street twice a week. She studied her primer in a class taught by a Mr. Waldman, who spoke so passionately of the mamaloshen that spittle flew from his lips.

That kind of passion for culture and politics dominated the neighborhood: "On a warm summer evening, you could see crowds of people arguing in Yiddish from all different political factions, whether Labor Zionist, anarchist or Trotskyite," Sabell Bender said. When she married renown New York Yiddish theater actor Hershel Bender in 1948, the guests shouted out donations they had made feting the couple — all to the Communist Party.

That same year, Joseph Esquith, director of the Soto-Michigan Jewish Center was summoned to testify before the California's Un-American Activities Committee — ostensibly for allowing communist front groups to use the premises, according to USC associate professor George Sanchez. Although Esquith was ruthlessly cross-examined by state Sen. Jack Tenney, who was well known for his anti-Semitism, he eloquently defended the center as "a laboratory of democracy where free speech, free association and free assemblage flourish."

Less savory elements also flourished near Brooklyn and Soto. Yiddish speakers frequented pool halls and gambling dens owned by mobster Mickey Cohen, who parked his limousine (and his thugs) outside the Cornwall Street Synagogue while chanting Kaddish for his father.

As Los Angeles' shtetl moved west to Beverly-Fairfax after World War II, Cohen moved, too, investing in Billy Gray's Band Box and the nightclub Slapsy Maxie's, named for Jewish boxing champ Max Rosenbloom. Around 1946, Cohen put up the cash to bring the unknown comedians Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis to Slapsy Maxie's, where they promptly became stars.

Yinglish jokester Katz didn't do so well; after his second performance, manager Sy Devore raged, "I will not have this! There will be no Yiddish done in this club!"

Within several years, the mamaloshen prevailed when Slapsy Maxie's went belly up and was replaced by the New Globe, where Bender performed in 1951.

While that building at 7165 Beverly Blvd. is now the New Beverly Cinema, Paley plans to bring Yiddish theater back to the site — at least as a performance art sight gag — on a festival tour. Acrobats on stilts will perform as the "Mile-High Cohens," referencing the old Boyle Heights hangout, Mile-High Cones.

The nighttime Beverly-Fairfax excursion — which Paley calls "a nocturnal treasure hunt" — will also stop by the Yiddish Culture Club on West Third

he'll deliver as part of the Yiddishkayt L.A. Festival Oct. 14. The lecture tells Katz's story through Kun's experience of grappling with his own Jewish identity: "I think of it as a 'positional biography,'" he said. "I'm using Katz's life as a way to examine cultural questions that also matter to me: What does it mean to be Jewish? What is the right way to 'perform' Jewishness? And what is the role of the Jew in American culture?"

Kun, 33, wasn't much interested in the subject while growing up in a privileged Reform home in Cheviot Hills. Although he is the grandson of Holocaust survivors, he was more intrigued by the funky ethnic records he bought with every cent of his allowance than klezmer or Yiddishkayt. Because his frequent album purchases chagrined his parents, he often sneaked them into his bedroom after bicycling them home from a used record store.

The self-proclaimed "music nerd" listened to rap, Mariachi and ballads of the United States-Mexico border; he believes he went on to study border theory at Duke University, in part, because its "bifurcated, binational perspective" unconsciously reminded him of his

Street, established in 1926. Inside its vast, book-lined library, self-proclaimed "ukulele chanteuse" Janet Klein will warble vaudeville tunes such as "Rebecca From Mecca" and "Sheik of Avenue B," wearing her trademark Clara Bow bob. Paley persuaded the 30-something Klein to learn her first Yiddish tune, Aaron Lebedeff's "I Like She," for the occasion.

"My great-grandmother was from Poland, so I was curious to reconnect with my heritage," Klein said.

Encouraging hip young artists like Klein to work in the mamaloshen is part of the festival's mission: "We not only want to recreate Yiddish life in a vibrant atmosphere, we want to show that it can provide a foundation of ideas and creativity for new artists to draw on," Paley said.

Although his festival is the largest of its kind in the United States — part of an international Yiddish revival since the 1970s — not everyone believes such fare furthers Yiddishkayt.

"If you have a festival, it's very nice," said retired UCLA Yiddish professor Janet Hadda. "The problem is that people are wanting to connect to a culture that doesn't really exist anymore authentically, which was the culture of Ashkenaz in Eastern Europe. It was the culture of everything swirling around and clashing together: Chasidim, anarchism, socialism and secularism. All of that existed in tremendous vibrancy before World War II and existed in remnants afterward through immigration, but is now gone."

Paley, for his part, hopes the 2004 festival will encourage Jews to learn more about this rich past, which also existed in Los Angeles.

"I want this year's events, along with other initiatives, to encourage the Jewish community to rediscover our own old country — the lands to the east of the L.A. River," he said.

Yiddishkayt L.A. starts Friday, Oct. 8 at 7:30 p.m. at Sinai Temple in Westwood with the Alef Project, presented by AVADA. For more information on "L.A. Confidential," including a complete list of events and locations, call (323) 692-8151 or visit www.yiddishkaytla.org.

"Some scholars speak of Jews as the original border dwellers," he said.

Katz (1909-1985) also seemed to be a border dweller of sorts, marginalized by both mainstream and Jewish Americans, although his beginnings were auspicious. The son of Latvian immigrants played with the Spike Jones orchestra before starting his own band, the Kosher Jammers, in the 1940s. In 1947, he composed his first musical send-up, "Haim Afen Range," and promptly sold 10,000 records. Next came parodies such as "Downtown Strutter's Ball," a spoof of "Darktown Strutter's Ball," which transformed the song's African-American party into "a real freilach affair at a Second Avenue palladium." "Max the Messer," recast "Mack the Knife" as a "big shlub" who works as a kosher butcher on Fairfax.

Kun came to see Katz as an important transitional figure in American Jewish pop culture, linking 1920s vaudevillians such as the Barton Brothers with the folk parodist Allan Sherman and TV comics such as Sid Caesar.

Nevertheless, by the 1950s he had become something of a pariah in polite Jewish circles: "[He] rode the line between Jewishness

and Americanness
bareback — no
'White Christmases'
or 'Easter Parades,'
no Al Jolson
plantation fantasies
or de-Semitizing
name changes," Kun
wrote in L.A.
Weekly. "With Hitler
still fresh in
everyone's mind,
Katz relished his role
as the carnivalesque,
too-Jewish outsider,
the Borsht Belt
jester pariah who
kept speaking
Yiddish even after
self-hating club
owners and radio
DJs urged him to
stop."

Kun, who had
previously spurned
Jewish music as
"everything I wanted
to escape"
discovered a hero in
the musician.

"I found him bold,"
he said. "At a time
when Jews in pop
culture weren't
supposed to look
Jewish, here was this
artist who exacted a
kind of subcultural
revenge by turning
beloved songs into
tunes that were
loudly, obnoxiously,
hilariously Jewish."

Katz was not
rewarded for his
efforts. Toward the
end of his life, he
played the Florida
condo circuit and
assorted simchas —
including Kun's
great-grandparents'
50th wedding
anniversary, the
writer was stunned
to learn. Kun's
upcoming lecture will
feature taped clips
from the event,
where Katz played
his "kilt and
yarmulke ode,"

‘McNaKatz’s Band,”
and invited Kun’s
Uncle Norm onstage
for “Yiddish Mule
Train.”

The scholar might
still feel ambivalent
about Jewish
conservatism, but
Katz has helped him
develop a cultural
identity of sorts. He
is now writing a
treatise on Jewish
Latin songs of the
1940s and 1950s, as
well as a book on
Tijuana.

“Katz worked out his
relationship with
America in public so
[other Jews] ...
could worry about it
in private,” he wrote
in L.A. Weekly.

Kun could well be
speaking of himself.

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