

# BAGELS AND BONGOS

**Naomi Gryn** meets the founders of record label Reboot Stereophonic

Martini or Margarita? The soundtrack to Jewish cocktail parties is about to go as retro as a mushroom *vol-au-vent* with the arrival of Reboot Stereophonic, a non-profit record label dedicated to reissuing lost gems from American Jewish musical history.

Reboot Stereophonic is one of several creative collaborations to emerge from Reboot, which joins a new wave of Jewish cultural outfits such as *Heeb* and Nextbook and YaD Arts. Just as a frozen computer screen necessitates that the computer be restarted or ‘rebooted’, Reboot, founded in 2003, hopes to revive different Jewish traditions and give them significance for the twenty-first century. It holds an annual summit in Utah, bringing together Jewish writers, academics, producers, artists and activists working in diverse fields, collectively known as ‘Rebooters’. Other Rebooters’ initiatives include an excellent study of young Muslims, Catholics, Protestants and Jews in the USA – *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era* – and a quarterly journal, *Guilt & Pleasure*, which promises its readers ‘something like a literary magazine gone uproariously psychedelic . . . a vibrant discussion salon recreated in magazine form’.

One of the driving forces behind Reboot is 35-year-old Roger Bennett, who grew up in Liverpool and moved to the States in 1992. He is now a vice-president at the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, a group of charitable foundations in Canada, Israel and the US which share the common mission of encouraging young people to strengthen their knowledge and appreciation of their history, heritage and culture.

‘The joy of Reboot,’ says Bennett, ‘is that there are no desired outcomes, no right or wrong. We just got some of the smartest people of our age together to frame their own questions as they faced issues of identity, community and meaning.’

One of the participants at the first Reboot summit was Josh Kun, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *Andiotopia: Music, Race and America* (UC Press, 2005). When Kun mentioned in passing to Bennett that he owned a collection of obscure Latin-Jewish records, the idea of Reboot Stereophonic was born.

‘Since I was a kid,’ says Kun, ‘records were for me a way to build my own world, to figure out who I was, and make sense of the world in private. The records that gave birth to this label were records that I’d been collecting for those very reasons – Jewish records that were considered marginal, somehow off the map of dominant Jewish identity.’

Kun, also in his mid-30s, was raised as a Reform Jew in Los Angeles. ‘I’ve always identified culturally with Jewishness but have a somewhat ambivalent relationship to it in terms of what my role is, what I’ve inherited and what I’d want to change. I’m drawn to hybrid culture. I’m drawn to borders, to crossroads, places where things intersect and collide.’

With its large Mexican population, Los Angeles has a strong Latino flavour, but in fact most of Kun’s Latin-Jewish fusion albums came out of New York. He explains how the geography of the two cities has affected cultural collisions: ‘On the East Coast there’s a real mix of immigrant populations – of Caribbeans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans – and the way that they interacted with Jews in New York is different. LA is such a spread-out city that it’s a lot easier to self-segregate than the East Coast, where it wasn’t unheard of for Jews and Puerto Ricans to find themselves living in the same neighbourhoods, listening to the same radio stations, eating at restaurants next door to each other.’

## *Bagels and Bongos*

---

Kun’s research led him to Mickey Katz, a Jewish musician from the 1950s who recorded parodies of pop songs from the American hit parade, including a number of Yiddish and Latin favourites. ‘My Yiddishe Mambo’ was probably his most famous – a wild trilingual English, Spanish and Yiddish parody of the mambo craze. ‘I started thinking that there must be more of these songs and started following clues about where Latin-Jewish hybrids came from. *Bagels and Bongos* was the one I kept finding.’

With its witty arrangements of ‘*Bei Mir Bist Du Schön*’

as a mambo, 'Belz' as a foot-tapping rumba and 'Hava Nagila' reinvented as 'Havana Negila', *Bagels and Bongos*, released in 1959 by the Irving Field Trio, sold two million copies. Irving Field, born Isadore Schwartz in 1915, grew up in Brooklyn and wrote his first song when he was nine. At 17, working as the resident pianist for a cruise ship line heading for Cuba and Puerto Rico, he fell in love with Latin music. For Bennett, the album raises questions about Latin influences on Jews in the 1940s and 1950s. 'It was a time when African-Americans, Latins, Jews and Italians all came together, stole from each other's musical traditions and, to this day, Latin music has many Jewish classics in it that Latino listeners don't even know are Jewish.'

*Bagels and Bongos* was the album with which the Reboot Stereophonic label was launched last August, remixed by the Mexican Institute of Sound, the *nom de disque* of Camilo Lara. Lara is a DJ and record company executive based in Mexico City where Field is still revered as Campos el Pianista – the stage name he adopted in the 1940s while playing at the Crest Room in the Waldorf-Astoria.

Bennett remembers the DJ's reaction with amusement: 'When we said, "Can you remix a reissue?" he said: "Oh my God, who am I to remix Campos el Pianista?"' Fields might be a legendary figure in Latin America, but now aged 90 he lives in a bed-sit on the West Side of New York and still works six nights a week, as the resident pianist at Nino's Tuscany, an Italian restaurant on West 58th Street.

## God is A Moog

Gershon Kingsley is undoubtedly best known for 'Popcorn', a huge hit in the 1970s for Hot Butter and since covered by artists all over the world, most recently by Crazy Frog for whom it's now a chart-topping ring tone.

Kun bought Kingsley's *Shabbat for Today* on eBay, where it was described as a 1968 recording of a *shabbat* service for Moog synthesizer and was billed as a 'rock opera'. Kun was surprised to discover that this pioneer of electronic music had made any Jewish recordings, but a visit to Kingsley – who, by coincidence, lives just a couple of blocks from Irving Fields – revealed that stored on his computer were another 800 songs with Jewish themes that he'd composed for Moog.

Bennett is fascinated that someone as commercially successful as Kingsley should do this: 'Even at the height of his success there was something inside him that couldn't stop composing Jewish music.' Kingsley's Jewish sensibilities run deep; his mother wasn't Jewish but in 1938 Kingsley fled from his native Germany to Palestine, where he lived for some time on a kibbutz. When he arrived in America in 1946, Kingsley earned his living as an organist – later becoming musical director – for various synagogues in California and New York.

Reboot Stereophonic's second release is *God is a*



*Moog: the Electronic Prayers of Gershon Kingsley*, a double CD compilation of Kingsley's work. The first CD includes a selection of Kingsley's Jewish compositions; the second contains two reissues: *Shabbat for Today* and *The Fifth Cup: A Dramatic Seder*. 'If you can imagine the Passover service as political musical theatre,' says Kun, 'that's what Gershon pulled off.'

## Tevye does the cha-cha

Reboot Stereophonic's next release, due in the spring, is *Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin*, by Joe Quijano, a celebrated Puerto Rican percussionist and salsa bandleader. First released in 1965, it was one of many cover versions that appeared in the wake of the musical, re-interpreting the soundtrack of *Fiddler on the Roof* through various Latin tempos and styles.

Kun found the LP in a used record store in the Bay area. 'It's not a deconstruction. He preserves the spirit and the joy that's in all those songs but adds these wonderful elements to it by making it his own, translating the musical into another musical vocabulary.' When the rest of the Stereophonic team agreed to reissue the album, Kun was thrilled 'because Quijano's not a Jewish musician and





Irving Fields enjoys the perks of a cruise ship season

it demonstrates that this is not just a one-way street’.

Bennett puts *Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin* on to the portable record player in his office. The melodies are as comforting as a bowl of hot chicken soup but, spiced up by Quijano, it’s like walking into a party where you think you’ll know all the other guests and then you see, propped against the wall, a dark, handsome stranger with a twinkle in his eye. I know by heart Tevye’s ‘Sabbath Prayer’, how he implores God to protect his children from pain and defend them from the stranger’s ways, yet we all know how the story ends: one of Tevye’s daughters marries a goy and then the rest of the family is forced to leave their beloved Anatevka. As I look out across Manhattan’s magnificent skyline, in this city where Jews have made such a profound and lasting impact, tears of nostalgia prick my eyes. The paradox of Jewish longing for universal acceptance is that the wrench from the shtetl leaves us with a gaping wound.

### Melting pot

The term ‘melting pot’ was first coined by the British writer Israel Zangwill, as the title of a play that was a Broadway triumph in 1908. Zangwill prophesied that the hordes of new immigrants flocking to the United

States would devote themselves to looking forward, not back to the past that they’d left behind, and that this would give rise to a mighty nation.

Kun argues that Zangwill’s notion of the melting pot has been misunderstood. ‘The melting pot was a symphony in fact. People talk about the melting pot as this emblem of diversity and multiculturalism, when in fact the melting pot was not about that at all. The melting pot was about taking multiculturalism, multiple languages, multiple cultures, and melting them into one, into a singular idea of an American race. To me, that is a model of assimilation that feeds a mono-cultural nationalism that I’m not very interested in advocating.’

According to Kun, the artists on their label have resisted the melting pot. ‘These are musicians who have refused to be melted. In the 1950s and 1960s when the rest of America’s Jews went through massive assimilation, suppressing Jewishness in favour of a whitewashed Americanism, what does Irving Field do? He puts out a record that has Yiddish melodies on it, Yiddish melodies rewritten through Latin music. Gershon Kingsley is somebody who has gone out of his way to think *outside* of the available models of what identity is as an immigrant in this country.

‘We all know the stories of what happens to Jews in the melting pot; those are the stories of American music,

Tin Pan Alley, rock and roll. What I'm drawn to are those moments when things bubble over from the melting pot, or when someone gets in it and then jumps out, and says that they don't want to be part of it.'


### *A labour of love*

Reboot Stereophonic is, says Bennett, 'a labour of love'. Other co-founders include Courtney Holt, director of New Media for Interscope Geffen A&M; Jules Shell, a documentary filmmaker; and David Katznelson, who runs Birdman Recording Group in San Francisco. No one draws a salary. All the profits go back into the record label.

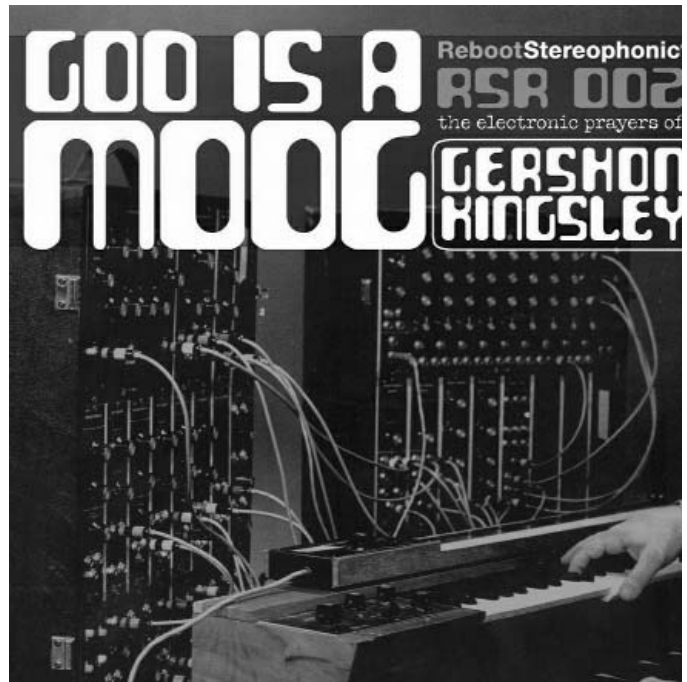
Bennett is frustrated that Jewish funders underestimate the importance of culture, 'even the ones who are desperate to engage the next generation. Yet if you look at the Christian movement, they're not wringing their hands here in America if young Christians aren't going to sermons on a Sunday. They've developed a powerful music industry, a video games industry, a film industry. They obviously have a larger audience, but the reality is that they've utilized culture as a conveyor of value.'

However, while Christian evangelists are discovering how to exploit cultural vectors such as music, television and cinema as a way of imparting ethical values and bringing lost souls back to the Church, Reboot is not concerned with religious practice or synagogue attendance or morality, but rather with the transmission of Jewish cultural history along with what both Bennett and Kun call 'Jewishness' in and of itself.

'This is not kitsch for us,' Bennett stresses. 'It's like recovering a piece of history. Our fourth album is called *Jew Face* – music from 1910 to 1920, when Jews realized they could make a lot of money by writing antisemitic songs about Jews – songs like 'Cohen Has Got a Big Nose', or 'Cohen Is Very Cheap', or 'Cohen Is Very Bad in Bed', and they are some of the most remarkable writers of that era. Irving Berlin wrote a lot of them when he was just coming through. We're going to re-release 40 of the songs. It's an incredible part of musical history, the opposite of black faces: Jews dressing up on stage as antisemitic caricatures and making money out of non-Jews.'

Kun hopes Reboot Stereophonic will become an alternative archive of American Jewish history. 'This is the history of the ways that being Jewish intersect with other modalities. Long term, the goal is to create a living archive so that these records are available for a new generation of listeners, not just to listen to the music but to investigate their own sense of self, their own history, and their own relationship to this identity that may or may not have been handed down to them.' 

**Naomi Gryn** is a writer, broadcaster and documentary filmmaker with a passion for hot pastrami on rye.



Reboot Stereophonic's CDs are available from [www.rebooters.net](http://www.rebooters.net)  
Mexican Institute of Sound's remix of Irving Field's 'Cha Cha 29' can be downloaded from [www.rebooters.net/rebootstereophonic/mp3/01ChaChaNo2931416.mp3](http://www.rebooters.net/rebootstereophonic/mp3/01ChaChaNo2931416.mp3)