



**String and a prayer:** Reuben Hoch (left) and Tom Lippincott work on arrangements for their upcoming show at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts.

## Chassid jazz

Reuben Hoch spins spiritually rich jazz from the melodies he's heard all his life.

### By Bob Weinberg

"That's an old melody," says drummer-composer Reuben Hoch, sitting amidst the clutter of amps, guitar parts, music stands and the latest jazz mags in the Lanna living room of bandmate Tom Lippincott. "I can't even tell you who wrote it."

Hoch's not kidding. The tune he's talking about, "Avinu Malkeinu," had already been an oldie-goldie when Rabbi Akiva added lyrics — a plea to God for rain — in 160 A.D., Hoch relates. The haunting, minor-key chant, familiar to Jews with even limited exposure to a synagogue, has been embellished over the years and receives yet another update thanks to Hoch and his bandmates in the Chassidic Jazz Project, a group that's been taking traditional Jewish liturgical music and rearranging it with a modern jazz aesthetic. The results are a dreamy, often melancholy mix of East and West, somewhat reminiscent of John Coltrane's spiritually questing later work and nothing like the relentless (and recently popular) Jewish dance music known as klezmer.

Hoch, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, is a compact, sturdy man with a powerful handshake. Lending him a studious air are a pair of octagonal eyeglasses and graying hair beneath an ever-present ruff, which doesn't prevent him from swearing like a truck driver (although his day job is actually as an anesthesiologist/pain management specialist). Dressed in a sweater vest, he's a bundle of energy and good spirits, an almost total opposite of the lanky, laconic Lippincott, who sports a beard and glasses and whose humor is as dry as toast.

Hoch and Lippincott, who first started working as CJP in 1998, are preparing for their Jan. 23 concert at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, going over songs, arrangements and charts for the musicians who will be joining them on stage: a violist, cellist and saxophonist as well as

jazz-world notables Don Friedman on piano and Bobby Thomas Jr. on percussion. (The New York-based Friedman has played with everyone from Scott LaFaro and Chet Baker to Ornette Coleman and Charles Lloyd; Miami native Thomas cemented his reputation with Weather Report and, fittingly, grew up listening to cantors when he went to syn-

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agogue on Miami Beach with Jewish friends.)

Their lilting, spiritual music wafts from the speakers of a computer, captured live on mini-disc at their last gig — Temple Beth David, near PGA — something Rabbi Akiva most likely had to do without.

"The very first time we played at the Hollywood Art and Culture Center," Lippincott recalls of the group's debut performance, "we went in there thinking it's gonna be this artsy crowd that would be receptive to more avant-garde stuff, so that's kind of the direction we took it. And we were setting up and we're seeing the people come in and just about everyone in the audience is 70 or above, and we're getting more and more scared ..."

Hoch busts out laughing at the memory: "Oh, shit, we're sunk now!"

"And I'm going, 'Should we play "New York, New York" or something?'" Lippincott continues. "So, we were like, let's just do what we planned on doing, come what may. And at the end of the concert, all of these people started coming up to us. This one lady came up to me and goes, 'Young man, I've never heard anything like that, but it was beautiful.'"

"Yeah," Hoch interjects, "we really haven't had anyone come up to us and say [in an indignant voice], 'Why did you do that to "Avinu Malkeinu" or "Adon Olam?"' Nobody's done that yet, but expect someone out in the Jewish world to give you some shit."

It's hard to believe anyone would have a problem with CJP's respectful and moving renditions of Jewish prayers. Hoch culls the music from melodies he learned as a child going to Yeshiva, or a Jewish school, that was located on the top floor of the Munkatcher synagogue, a major Chassidic sect in New York.

"So, every morning, we davened in their shul [synagogue]," Hoch says, describing the Orthodox practice of chanting and swaying in prayer. "There was a musical quality to it. They have their own music, the Chassidim," he continues in an excited whisper. "It's incredible."

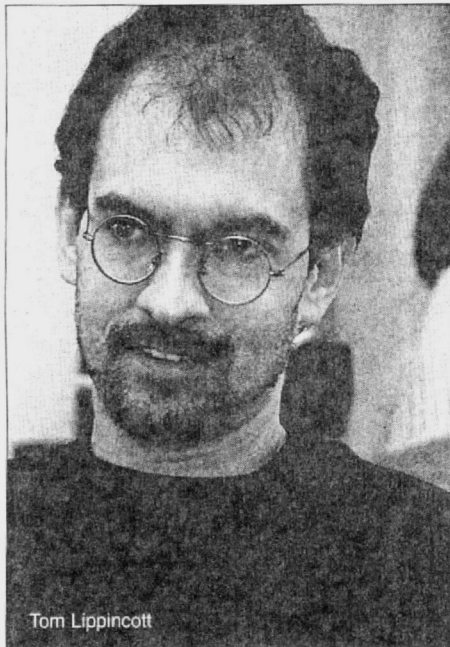
While Hoch was receiving religious training, he also was beginning to feel the pull of another faith: jazz. He had received his first drums at the age of 12 and began listening to jazz at about age 14. It was an Art Blakey record someone had lent him that really set his course. "I put it on and listened and I said, 'Man, I don't know what the hell he played, but I want to be able to play that one day.' It was *Witch Hunt* or one of those records, you know [scatting], 'dugga-ding-digga-ding, ding-digga-ding,' and I was like, 'How do you put those beats in there?' It was unbelievable."

Although he'd meet Blakey briefly, and later work and record with some of his sidemen, Hoch's greatest thrill was being invited by Blakey's daughter, the vocalist Evelyn Blakey, to play a birthday tribute to the legendary drummer, who was sometimes known as Buhaina. "I remember Evelyn called me and said, 'Listen, I want you to do this thing for Bu, you know, we're going to Philadelphia.' I said, 'OK,

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for who? For your dad? For his birthday? You want me to be the drummer in your band for Art's ... You've got the wrong guy!" Here, Hoch once again dissolves in raucous laughter. "It was interesting because I had listened to so many of his solos, you know those openings, 'DA-dagga-da, DAGGA-da, dugga-da,' you know, those rudimental press rolls and march things, and I said, 'You know, Evelyn, yeah, that would be interesting to do if you let me do like an Art rip-off thing.'"



Tom Lippincott

Even while pursuing his degree in medicine, Hoch never gave up his dream of playing jazz professionally. He'd spend four years in Israel playing with the progressive jazz group Zaviot and then return to New York, where he'd fall in with the downtown jazz crowd, playing and recording with saxophonist Dave Liebman, guitarist Leni Stern, keyboardist Christoph Spendel and bassist Jeff Andrews. It was Andrews, and manager Charlie Fishman, who really convinced Hoch

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that his Jewish heritage just might provide an interesting hook to gain him notice in the crowded jazz world, as opposed to the rather standard contemporary jazz fusion he had been playing.

Hoch sent a copy of his nondescript 1995 CD *If I Only Knew* to Fishman, who had managed Dizzy Gillespie, and he asked the experienced jazz manager what he thought of it.

"He said, 'I wanna tell ya: big deal,'" Hoch recalls. "I said, 'Oh, thank you, very nice to know.' I was very proud of myself because it was 13 original compositions I came up with. He said, 'You know, a million of these things come out every month. You know, you're a real putz. You have this knowledge and background of Jewish music and the world is looking for interesting things. They're looking for world music with a cultural basis. Bring that out in the music. Wynton [Marsalis] is all about bringing black culture into jazz.' Who's really doing that with Jewish music, other than klezmer, with the Klezmatiks and Don Byron and now, of course, John Zorn?"

Bassist Andrews added an amen to Fishman's advice when Hoch approached him about doing a tribute album to Native American saxophonist Jim Pepper. "He said, 'Screw Jim Pepper. The heck with American Indian music, why don't you do something with your Jewish background?'"

Hoch started collating material, tracking down recordings of melodies he had heard all his life. But,

he says, he was overwhelmed with the amount of material and didn't quite know how to approach it. Although nothing came of it, he says, "It was very much alive in my mind."

Then, in 1998, Hoch, who had since moved to South Florida, was approached by Cynthia Miller of the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood. She wanted him to create something to honor Israel's 50th anniversary, in conjunction with an exhibit the center was showing.

"They called me in July," Hoch says, "and I said, 'I've been thinking about doing [Chassidic jazz] for years. Then, [Miller] said to me, 'You're on,' and I said, 'No, I'm not. I'm not ready.' She just looked at me and said, 'You've got three months to get ready, buddy boy.'"

The group has since grown from its original trio incarnation to include saxophone and strings, and for the show at the Broward Center will include special guests Friedman, Thomas Jr. and cellist Dawn Buckholz, in addition to the regular crew of Hoch, Lippincott, saxophonist Felipe Lamoglia, violist Marie Randell and bassist Dan Feiszli.

The concept is all coming together for Hoch, even as he and Lippincott try to decide how best to place the chess pieces on the board. Friedman, they've decided, will come out and do a solo thing on two different arrangements of "Shalom Aleichem," maybe have him joined by Thomas on percussion. Then, at the end of the evening, the whole ensemble will come together for a nod to Coltrane with a group jam on "Impressions."

Soundman Kevin Kaufman, who owns the Lantana house/studio where Lippincott lives, and who works with guitarist Mike Stern, will be on hand to record the results, so there's a little more pressure to get things just right.

"Originally, it was a very loose thing, where we had these charts and basically created stuff in our style and creativity around these parts," Hoch says. "Now, we have people who need to have charts. Tom has been great, he's the musical director in this thing and he's been helping me with the arrangements and has come up with some of his own beautiful, beautiful arrangements to some of the pieces, really stunning stuff."

Working with so many pieces, particularly with piano, presents a particular challenge, Lippincott says. "In general, the more stuff that's going on, the more careful I have to be that I'm not overplaying and adding to the cacophony," he says.

Recently, Lippincott has been struggling for as nondescriptive a sound as he can get, and he worries sometimes about sounding too much like creative touchstone Bill Frisell. In fact, a recent recording he completed under his own name, titled *Painting the Slow Train Brown*, strives to do just that, in the process, he says, ensuring that radio will give it a wide berth and that it certainly won't aid in getting gigs locally.

"What I decided was that the most important thing to do for me was to do something that was honest," he says. "I met so many musicians who get caught up in this thing that 'I'm gonna do this and this and try to get on the radio' and it just seems that something's missing when people approach it from that standpoint."

It's that kind of integrity, not to mention musical ability, that Hoch seems to value most about his colleague. "I feel a lot of the sound comes through Tom," he says. "Much of the musical success of this group — not in the financial sense ..."

"I bring in the big bucks," deadpans Lippincott, cracking up the drummer.

"I'm a real guitar lover," Hoch continues. "And when guys stretch out and do the things Tom does, it allows the music to be 10 miles wide."

For both men, the spiritual component of what CJP is doing is another satisfying element to the music they're creating.

"That's what's fascinating to me," Hoch says. "This isn't just coming on the bandstand and blowin' some tunes. Do you find that, Tom? It's got a different thing to it, there's a mission in a way."

"I personally tend to approach music in general that way," Lippincott responds. "But definitely, particularly with this stuff, because by definition, it's there."

*The Chassidic Jazz Project performs 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 23 at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 S.W. Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale. Tickets cost \$28. Call 954/462-0222.*

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