

BLESS THE FIRE ... LINER NOTES

1. The Ladder

The title "The Ladder" refers to the melody, composed by Alan Bern, which adds one step at a time in the A section and takes away one step at a time in the B section. It also refers to the many images of ladders in Jewish tradition, starting with Jacob's Ladder, which connect the mundane and divine worlds. The text is adapted from one of the most beloved Shabes (Shabbat, Sabbath) songs, Sholem Aleykhem, which means "Peace unto you." It was originally written by the 17th century Kaballists living in the Middle East, who had a profound effect on the Hasidim living in Eastern Europe.

2. Gules, gules

Adapted from a text attributed to 'Der Kalever Tsadik', Reb Itzhok Ayzik Taub of Nagykaló, Hungary (1751-1821). "Gules" is Yiddish for "Galut" (Hebrew) or "diaspora," which is a theme in Jewish life and literature for over 2000 years. Often, as in this song, the diaspora is spiritual as well as physical, and the wish is expressed to be reunited with God as with a lover, an image going back to Song of Songs. The music is traditional, but begins and ends with a solo on "tilinca," which is an end-blown flute without finger holes, common in Rumania. Its breathy and lonely sound is a metaphor for the state of loneliness in the diaspora.

3. Marmarosh

"Marmarosh" is the Yiddish name for Maramures, an area of Rumania from which this melody originally comes. The arrangement recalls the large ensembles of strings that were common in pre-WWII klezmer ensembles. Arrangements like this one are created spontaneously by musicians who all know the main melody, and freely improvise alternate melodies and accompanying "comments," somewhat analogous to the way Early Jazz (Dixieland) musicians played together. Alpert's version of the melody stands in the footsteps of many generations of traditional Yiddish violinists.

4. Der mentsh trakht un lakht

A Yiddish proverb says, "Der mentsh trakht un Gott lakht," literally "A human being thinks and God laughs," equivalent to the English proverb, "Man proposes and God disposes." In this piece, an original composition of Alan Bern, humans do both the thinking and the laughing. The spoken text is from a poem by Itzik Manger, one of the greatest 20th century Yiddish poets and song writers. It invites us to "speak plainly and simply" about basic facts of the human condition, from loneliness and abandonment to the simple pleasure and comfort of a warm fire on a cold night. The clarinet solo, which is heard twice, is Kurt Bjorling's free adaptation of a beloved Hasidic waltz melody.

5. Mazltov Boris

Virtuosic clarinet playing is for many the sine qua non of klezmer music, and here clarinetist Kurt Bjorling shows why. Dedicated to the late Kiev clarinetist Boris Legun, this piece is a suite of klezmer melodies, starting slow and meditatively and ending fast and furiously. Bjorling freely embellishes the melodies and sets the pace as he goes along, while the rest of the band follows with an improvised accompaniment.

6. Hora Flora

The tsimbl (Yiddish for "cymbalom") is, along with the violin, the oldest of klezmer instruments, and the Yiddish "hora" is a slow dance with an expressive melody. Here Stuart Brotman performs his version of a melody made famous by Joseph Moscowitz, the best known

klezmer tsimbl player of the 20th century, who lived in New York and performed in his own restaurant there for many years in the middle of the century.

7. A shpay in yam

An original song by Michael Alpert in the traditional style of great Yiddish songs of lost or unrequited love. Throughout the 20th century, songwriters like Itsik Manger, Mordechai Gebirtig, and many, many others wrote new songs meant to sound like old folk songs, and many of Alpert's original songs have the same quality. "A shpay in yam" means literally "spitting in the ocean," like the English expression "a drop in the ocean," something which is ultimately insignificant, futile, or ephemeral (passing away).

8. Tsum tish

"Tsum tish," ("To the table"), is an original composition of Kurt Bjorling, recalling melodies created by old-time klezmerim (plural of klezmer) played to honor guests at a banquet or festive occasion around a table. Bjorling plays the melody twice on clarinet, and Bern improvises a florid accompaniment on the melodica, certainly not a traditional klezmer instrument (!) but not a bad partner for the clarinet, we think.

9. Still Happy

Many up-tempo klezmer melodies are called "freylekhs," which means "happy" or "joyful." Following a serious motorbike accident some years ago, when Bern recovered his ability to play again, he wondered why there are no tunes called "happy" and whether we're possibly embarrassed by such a simple expression.

Thereupon he decided to write a melody openly expressing happiness and this is the result. The melody is first heard on that non-traditional klezmer instrument, the melodica, and then joined by the rest of the band. The accompaniment is, as always in Brave Old World, improvised by the band.

10. At Midnight

Kurt Bjorling is famous in the klezmer world for digging up obscure recordings and introducing new repertoire to the scene. Based on 'Zhok Fantazi', recorded by an anonymous clarinetist early in the 20th century, this arrangement began as a jam between Bjorling and Brotman during a break in the recording session. When the rest of us heard the melody and how they were playing it, we insisted it be included on the recording. Bjorling plays the melody freely and Brotman improvises an accompaniment on bass.

11. Yankl Dudl

An original composition by Bern, the title is a Yiddish pun on "Yankee Doodle," and reflects Bern's fascination with melodies, sayings, and tales which exist simultaneously in different cultures. Here the melody is first played without accompaniment, in its simplest form sounding like a children's song. As the other instruments are added, the character of the melody changes, echoing Hasidic songs and eventually Anglo-American folk songs. Bjorling takes a wonderful, improvised clarinet solo based on a traditional klezmer dance melody. The text of Manger's poem reappears briefly, and the climax of the song is its softest moment, when Alpert sings the melody under his breath, recalling private moments when we sing "just for ourselves."

12. Es iz shoy n shpeyt

A traditional song with new text added by Michael Alpert, "It's already late" captures the moment before dawn when one day and night comes to a close but the new day has not yet begun. An earlier version of this song was recorded on "Blood Oranges," and the current arrangement evolved over many years to say good-night to audiences at the end of concerts.