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Shimon Ben-Shir, at Ryles Wednesday, grew up in Israel listening to Latin music. Both influences can be heard in his bop-oriented jazz.

Rhythm and Jews

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By Steve Greenlee

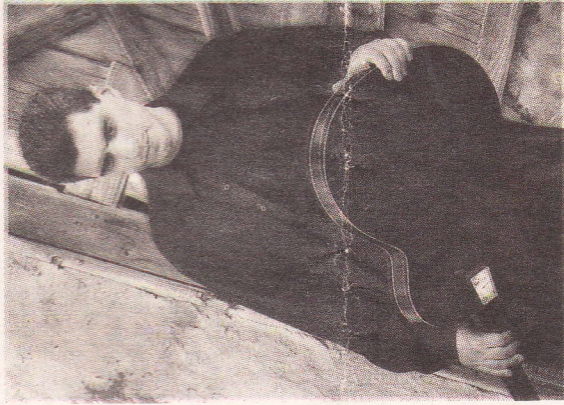
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Jazz is a melting-pot music. It began as an amalgam of sounds from America, Africa, and Europe, and in the 100 years since it first showed up on the streets of New Orleans it has been acquiring other bits and pieces along the way. Places as diverse as Cuba, India, Japan, and Scandinavia have helped jazz evolve.

So even though there is an odd confluence of three similar jazz concerts over two days in the coming week, it should come as little surprise that various forms of traditional Jewish folk music are finding their way into jazz.

It's really nothing new, either. Heck, Benny Goodman put hints of Jewish music into some of his jazz, and Mickey Katz practically invented the idea of klezmer-jazz in the 1940s. Jewish jazz got its biggest lift in the early '90s, when John Zorn formed Masada to play a riotous blend of jazz and klezmer.

Perhaps it's Zorn's influence, but it seems that more and more jazz musicians are incorporating the sounds of the Middle East into their music. One of this year's best discs so far is percussionist Roberto Juan Rodriguez's "El Danzon de Moises," which mixes jazz with Jewish and Cuban music. And in Boston, next week offers a rare conver-



Issi Rozen found his music evolved to include Israeli sounds.

gence of concerts with local jazz bands that play similarly influenced material: On Wednesday Shimon Ben-Shir's group plays Ryles, and on Thursday the band Naftule's Dream plays the Milky Way and Issi Rozen's group performs at the Regattabar.

Don't be misled into thinking these groups all sound the same. Where Ben-Shir and Rozen play pop that brings in flavors of Israel (and Latin America, for

that matter), Naftule's Dream is a Masada-like band that plays equal parts jazz and klezmer.

In fact, Naftule's Dream grew out of a klezmer band. Glenn Dickson, the clarinetist who leads the group, also leads the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra, which plays traditional music the traditional way.

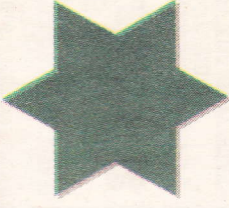
"We started writing new music, and it wasn't fitting into the same audience," says Dickson, 42, who lives in Medford. "We're coming from inside of the music and going out, as opposed to some of the bands that have been playing jazz a long time and are sort of going back to Jewish music and looking for new influences. For us, it's extending the vocabulary that's already there."

Naftule's Dream records for Zorn's label, Tzadik, and has just released its third album, "Job," a live disc recorded at the Milky Way two years ago. The group wraps in free jazz, rock, and modern classical as well, with an eclectic lineup that includes trombone, accordion, guitar, tuba, and drums.

"We're using modern compositional techniques rather than just taking the [Jewish] melodies and sticking them into a particular rhythm," says Dickson, who grew up in Washington, D.C., and went to the New England Conservatory.

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Three bands
that merge
jazz with
klezmer and
other folk
elements
are in town



A joining of jazz and Jewish music

► JEWISH JAZZ

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"We're taking the elements of the music — the modal concepts, the rhythmic concepts — and extending them and improvising on them. Whether it works or not, I don't know. Maybe in 20 years people will say, 'Ugh, that sounds campy.' But for us it works great. We totally love it. It acts as a solid ground for the free jazz side of things."

It's miles away from the music of Ben-Shir, whose material is rooted directly in bop. But even though Ben-Shir finds himself aligned with mainstream jazz, he says it would be unnatural for him *not* to fold in music of the Middle East — or that of Latin America.

"In my home, I grew up with a lot of Latin music. My father used to listen to a lot of real traditional Latin music," says Ben-Shir, 39, who lived in Israel until his late 20s, came here to attend the Berklee College of Music, and now makes his home in Brookline. "Living in Israel, there's so many different things that you can find. People came from all over the world, and they brought their culture."



Hear audio clips from Issi Rozen, the Shimon Ben-Shir Group, and Naftule's Dream on www.boston.com/globe/living

In Ben-Shir's music, the influence is subtle. Tunes on his new disc, "Shades," are not recognizable as derivative of the Middle East until you pay close attention to melodies and chord changes.

Still, even that comes naturally to him. "When I'm writing, I don't really think of the intervals or anything. I write the melody," he says. "I don't think my music is associated with Jewish music or anything. I'm not a musical snob."

Neither is Issi Rozen, a guitarist who blends elements of tradi-

tional Israeli music into his jazz. His recent disc, "Homeland Blues," feels at home alongside Ben-Shir's, though Rozen's choice of material is quite eclectic. He plays mostly originals but throws in such diverse pieces as Oscar Hammerstein's "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise" and an Israeli folk song called "Shir Hanoded."

Jewish folk music is a natural fit for jazz, Rozen says. "It has strong melodies, mystical melodies," he says. "It's a very emotional music. If you think of Middle Eastern music and klezmer music, that's a very emotional music. And jazz is an emotional music. You express. You express what you're feeling when you're improvising."

Rozen, 35, has long been interested in jazz, but found that he was truly expressing himself only when playing the music he grew up with in Tel Aviv, where he lived until he was 23.

"I grew up with all kinds of music — blues and rock and Middle Eastern music and everything," says Rozen, who moved here to go to Berklee and now lives in Brookline. "My grandmother is from Iraq. She used to listen to only Arabic music, and any time I'm at her house, that's what I hear. When I started playing, I played bebop. But that wasn't my music. I wasn't listening to bebop all the time. But slowly, as I let my music evolve, this [Israeli music] started coming in. And I found that this is a better form of expression for my musical background. When I bring all the influences I grew up with, it better expresses who I am."

Shimon Ben-Shir Group, Ryles Jazz Club, Wednesday night at 8. \$8.

Naftule's Dream, Milky Way Lounge, Thursday night at 10. \$6.

Issi Rozen Quartet, Regattabar, Thursday night at 8:30. \$12.