

The BARRY SISTERS

~~MY~~
OUR WAY

(TAHKA-TAHKA)



Stereophonic



The Barry Sisters

OUR WAY



STEREOPHONIC





*We take a tune that's sweet and low,
and rock it solid and make it gold.*

-The Barry Sisters

Age is just a number, and mine is unlisted.

-Claire Barry



1973 might not have seemed like the ideal year for a revival of Yiddish pop.

Discotheques were starting to fill up with sweaty swingers, Iggy and the Stooges were harnessing grinding proto-punk rage into *Raw Power*, Marvin Gaye was singing about the Vietnam War and getting it on, and Pink Floyd were becoming dorm room hall-of-famers with *Dark Side of the Moon*. But for Claire and Merna Barry, the Bronx-raised sisters whose crystalline voices, bi-lingual pop fluency, stunning looks, and bull's eye harmonies had become synonymous with what the old-timers liked to call "Jewish Jazz," the timing was just right.

They would take Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "Raindrops Keep My Falling On My Head," sing it in their trademark perky Yiddish and with their signature bandstand pluck, and the youth of America would heed the wake-up call.

Yiddish would be back with a vengeance.

“We decided we would sing only the most popular songs of the day,” says Claire Barry, now in her unlisted 80s and living between Manhattan and Miami (Merna passed away in 1976). “We wanted to make sure young people would listen to our music at that time. They had to find the music familiar. So we did songs they might know but sung in Yiddish! The hope was that maybe they would pick it up.”

The result was *Our Way*, a project so improbable in Nixon-era America that the sisters subtitled it “Tahka, Tahka,” Yiddish for “Really, Really.” Where else could you find Second Avenue Yiddish theater alongside *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? *Fiddler on the Roof* next to upper West Side mink coats and Las Vegas lounges?

By 1973, it was hard to find Yiddish on new records. The once-dominant diaspora tongue that ruled the Jewish stage and the Jewish page hit a severe post-war decline. In the 1920s, there were so many Yiddish speakers in New York City that the Yiddish daily newspaper *The Forward* outsold *The New York Times*, but the combination of the Holocaust’s decimation of an entire Yiddish-speaking world, the rise of Israel as a Hebrew speaking nation, and the upwardly mobile attraction of fifties suburban safety (goodbye tenement, hello Nassau County), helped ensure that Yiddish became optional, not essential, to Jewish-American identity. To make it the lingua franca of a seventies pop album was not simply an exercise in cultural nostalgia—it was a re-branding of a vanishing tradition for a new generation of potential disciples.

Originally released on Mainstream Records (a one time home to Janis Joplin, Sarah Vaughn, and Ted Nugent), the album connected with “young people” that might not have been as young as the sisters

had hoped for. They took on the 20s pop chestnut “Tea For Two,” used Yiddish to return the vanilla Perry Como smash “It’s Impossible” to its Mexican bolero roots, raided Hollywood for “Love Story” (imagine Ryan O’Neal crooning in Yiddish at the bedside of a dying Kelly McGraw), raided Broadway for “Cabaret” and “Alice Blue Gown,” and turned out what just might be-- second only to the one Cuban audio priestess La Lupe did just three years earlier-- the most liberating version ever of the Sinatra staple, “My Way.” So they didn’t sing “What’s Goin’ On” or “I Wanna Be Your Dog” (which, for what it’s worth, would have been called “Ikh vil zein dein hoont”). The effect was still the same: seventies America woke up as a Technicolor Yiddish dream.

For the translations, the sisters enlisted the help of Herman Yablokoff, the Yiddish theater legend responsible for one of Jewish music’s only hit songs about cigarettes (“Papirossen”) and for “Shvayg Mayn Harts,” better known as the song that bearded and barefoot West Coast mystic Eden Ahbez turned into “Nature Boy.” The vocal arrangements went to TV and film composer Jerry Graff, a veteran of the Nat King Cole television show who was so chummy with Claire and Merna that he was billed on the album as “Our Friend Jerry Graff.”

“I am still so proud of this album,” says Barry. “It brings back so many beautiful memories.”

Our Way was the eleventh, and last, Barry Sisters’ full-length studio recording. Throughout their career, they consistently drew from the wells of Yiddish and English popular song, everything from “Without a Song” and “Cry Me a River” to “Hava Nagila” and “Chiribim



Chiribom,” with stops at the Miami-to-Cuba soap opera of “Channa From Havana” and the hi-de-ho Arizona campfire yodels of “Ragtime Cowboy Joe” along the way. Even though the duo were also known to dabble in Italian and Spanish (their 1966 album *Something Spanish* teamed them up with Cuban jazz legend Chico O’Farrill), the “world of the Barry Sisters,” as one of their hits collections was titled, was really always two: the Jewish songbook and the American songbook. The former was mostly traditional folk melodies and Yiddish theater tunes and the latter was mostly jazz, pop, and Broadway standards. The hallmark of the Barry Sisters was that they never chose between the two, but hopscothed between them with a savvy and sophisticated bi-cultural glee.

“We wanted to be Jewish and American at the same time,” says Barry. “That was what our music was always meant to speak to.”

Claire and Merna grew up in a Yiddish speaking immigrant home in the Bronx, the daughters of a Russian father and a Viennese mother. When the sisters decided they wanted to sing in the Yiddish of their parents and not the English of their friends, their father put his authenticity foot down.

“We spoke English,” says Barry, “So my father told us when we started, ‘you must sing in Yiddish the way we do, with no American accents.’ And that’s what we did, we took a chance on Yiddish, with no accents, and it was marvelous. We spoke the new English but we also spoke Yiddish that people would recognize as haimish.”

Back in the thirties, Claire and Merna Barry hadn’t been born yet.

They were still Clara and Minnie and when they started singing on the *Feter Nahum*, or Uncle Norman, Jewish children's radio show on WLTH in New York, they were billed as The Bagelman Sisters. After recording a version of "Kol Nidre" for a young Moe Asch (the soon to be head of Folkways Records), the Bagelmans quickly moved to the front of the Jewish-American music world by associating themselves with the biggest names on the Second Avenue scene. They made their first 78rpm recordings in the late 30s for RCA Victor, harmonizing over a stellar quintet that featured the John Coltrane and Miles Davis of pre-WWII Jewish music: klezmer clarinet king Dave Tarras and composer/arranger Abe Ellstein. They followed it up with a collaboration with tenor great Seymour Rechtzeit, the ubiquitous and celebrated king of Yiddish radio (at one point, he was performing on 18 live radio shows during a single week).

"People told us that we had perfect harmony," says Barry. "But to be honest, we didn't know what harmony meant! We had no training, no schooling in this type of thing. There is a Yiddish word *beskert*, which means 'meant to be'. I always say, it was *beskert* that we would sing like that."

While the Bagelmans had become well-known in Yiddish-speaking circles and Jewish immigrant communities, their reality as first generation Americans extended far beyond the rich folk and theater worlds of Eastern European tradition. They knew all about jazz and swing music and had already watched, with the rest of the Jewish community, as a little-known Yiddish theater tune became a certified American pop hit.







In one of the greatest, and most oft told, tales of Jewish-American musical crossover, Sholom Secunda's "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen" fell into the repertoire of the African-American vaudeville duo and Catskills regulars Johnnie and George, who sang it in Yiddish at the Apollo Theater. In the audience was Tin Pan Alley and Broadway songwriter Sammy Cahn, who changed the lyrics to English and handed the song to the blonde Lutheran trio The Andrews Sisters who went to have a #1 hit with it in 1938. A month later, Benny Goodman followed suit with his own version, featuring the equally blonde Los Angeles singer Martha Tilton. Just like that, the old Yiddish tune that had all of America singing and dancing grew into an international pop staple, one of the most recorded songs of all time.

The seeming ease with which Jewish music became chart-topping American swing helped inspire pianist Sam Medoff to cook up the 15-minute radio segment *Yiddish Melodies in Swing* for radio station WHN. The concept was simple: take popular klezmer numbers and Yiddish tunes and play them in the swinging idiom of hot jazz. Tarras led the band and after the Pincus Sisters declined his offer, the Bagelmans joined the show, but only after a quick linguistic makeover. Inspired by the mainstream success of the Andrews Sisters, Clara and Minnie became Claire and Merna (the names of two of their classmates) and Bagelman became Barry (Berger was their first choice but nobody liked the way it sounded).

"We were not embarrassed by our name," says Barry. "Never embarrassed. It was just better for show business. We knew so many entertainers who did it back then that we thought it was just a good business decision. It wasn't about culture at all, just business."

During the show's Manischewitz-sponsored "American Jewish Hour," Sam Medoff led the Swingtet band with The Barry Sisters, "the daughters of the downbeat," on the microphones, and they merged Yiddish songs with what the show dubbed "merry modern rhythms." The show's theme song was even a klezemerized take on "When The Saints Go Marching In." Songs that were "sweet and low" like "Reb Duvidel" and "Eli Melech" were, as Claire and Merna liked to say, "rocked solid" and "made gold" by infusions of downbeats and Harlem swing and the sisters crooned, belted, and harmonized atop it all like hip super-club stars. The show ran until 1955 and The Barry Sisters became the official voices of the Yiddish Swing craze (the same one that turned the Romanian oldie "Der Shtiler Bulgar" into Ziggy Elman's "Frailach in Swing," and eventually Benny Goodman's "And the Angels Sing.")

"It just seemed so natural to combine Jewish music and swing," says Barry. "If the Jewish songs had a good beat, why couldn't we do swing in Yiddish? We heard the beat everywhere. Why not *this* song? Why not *that* one? We did it to anything we could find."

For the next two decades, that same strategy served the Barry Sisters well across a slew of singles and full-length LPs that garnered them recognition beyond the confines of the Jewish musical community where they nurtured their skills. Their album *We Belong Together* teamed the sisters up with composer Jerry Fielding—best known for his theme music to *You Bet Your Life* and later for his score to *The Wild Bunch*—and they stuck to a purely English-language songbook that included "In Other Words," "You're Nobody Til Somebody Loves You," and "My One and Only Love." They made it onto the *Jack Paar Show*

and the *Ed Sullivan Show* and soon after joined Sullivan on his All-Star Caravan to the U.S.S.R., performing for 20,000 people in Moscow's Gorky Park at a time when Western visits were still rare.

The liner notes to the album that followed, *Side by Side*, which they dedicated to Sullivan, described the experience this way: "[Sullivan] had an Iron Curtain smash in the Barrys, who literally tore down The Kremlin with a rip-roaring Western medley...which only goes to prove that all you need are ears to hear with, and eyes to see with, and makes no difference—Yank, Britisher, Ruski, or Hottentot, the Barry Sisters have made it."

Yet for all of their globe-trotting internationalism—which also included a celebrated performance for Israeli troops during the Yom Kippur War that became *The Barry Sisters In Israel*—the Barry Sisters were always at their best using their musical bilingualism to work out the complexities of identity back home, doing the Yiddish makeovers they perfected on their 30s RCA Victor sides and on the songs that bubbled up on *Yiddish Melodies in Swing*.

If adapting Jewish music to the rhythms and contours of the American pop landscape can be considered one of the dominant aesthetics of early twentieth century popular music, then the Barry Sisters ought to be considered crucial bi-cultural pioneers, part of the same treasured artistic genealogy that usually starts and stops with the Tin Pan Alley likes of Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen. They didn't turn America Jewish, they made Jewish sound more American.

Which is partly why the re-issue of *Our Way* is so important—it's the only Barry Sisters album that seems to reverse this tactic. This is an album of (mostly) giddy Jewish hijacks of American culture: B.J. Thomas speaking in Yiddish tongues, the Rat Pack gambling on Kol Nidre, Tea for Two served with a side of pickled herring. Mickey Katz and other musical comedians made this move in the 50s and 60s, but their chosen forms were parody and satire, wholesome vulgarity and schmaltzy wit. On *Our Way*, The Barry Sisters choose the elegant tradition of popular song itself.

Promoting their music as radically ethnic or anti-assimilationist wasn't the Barry Sisters style, but in its greatest moments—the finale of "My Way," the earnestness of "Raindrops"—*Our Way* has the feel of a utopian dream, a visionary cultural proposal: what if the world actually sounded like this? What if Yiddish hadn't become the language of refrigerator magnets and Jewish joke punch lines? What if the language of Eastern Europe was still the language of now America, all that memory, all that tradition now part of America's polyglot urban future, as hip and swinging as a new Kanye single, as urgent as a new Mexican immigrant border ballad from Los Tigres del Norte?

"When I look back on this music," says Barry. "All I want to say is Dear God, thank you for giving us the opportunity. What a wonderful opportunity."





Claire

SIDE 1
RAINDROPS KEEP FALLING ON MY HEAD 2:23
(Trop'ns Fin Regen Oif Mein Kop)
ALICE BLUE GOWN 1:52
(Klaidelch Fin Himel Bloi)
CABARET 2:31
(Cabaret)
MY WAY 4:34
(Mein Waig)
BEI MIR BEST DU SCHON 3:25

SIDE 2
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE 3:45
(Was Nix Maiglich Zein)
TEA FOR TWO 3:10
(Tay Far Tzvey)
MAME 2:36
(Mame)
LOVE STORY 3:58
(A Meisik Fin A Liebeh)
TO LIFE 2:45
(L'Chaim)

It was a big night in Hollywood when Burt Bacharach accepted an Oscar for his great song, "Trop'ns Fin Regen Oif Mein Kop."

It's always a big night when Frank Sinatra addresses himself vocally to everyone within earshot and proclaims he does things "Mein Waig." We figure that all along, anyway.

"No, No Nanette" revived itself on Broadway and in the process brought back the fabulous, "Tay Far Tzvey."

When Perry Como tells us "S'ken Nit Maiglich Zein" we believe him.

And Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal suffered so beautifully to the tender strains of "A Meisik Fin A Liebeh."

Onstage in "Irene" Debbie Reynolds gets set for a lavish party while everyone is so enthralled with her ensemble they sing, "Klaidelch Fin Himel Bloi."

When you're in love the whole world is Yiddish!

Naturally you realize by now that the aforementioned songs are better known as "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head," "My Way," "Tea For Two," "It's Impossible," "Love Story" and "Alice Blue Gown." You can sprinkle this heavenly half dozen with "Mame" and "Cabaret," add a liberal dose of "To Life" ("L'Chaim") from "Fiddler On The Roof" and everyone's favorite memory bon mot, "Bei Mir Best Du Schön," and you have an album that may be the most unique, charming and entertaining example of what imagination and talent can do for a round piece of wax with a hole in the center!

The artists are the inimitable Barry Sisters, Claire & Merna, who have been doing things "Their Way" all through their illustrious show business careers. And to that add tah-ka, tah-ka, which means really, really! The girls have been commercial and they have been stars in their own milieu, belting Yiddish favorites to world-wide acclaim.



ORCHESTRATIONS—JIM TYLER
 "Bei Mir Best Du Schön—Al Cohen
 PRODUCED BY ARCHIE BLEYER
 PHOTOGRAPHY: The GRAFFITIERS—FRANK KOLLEGGY
 COVER DESIGN: MPI
 Special Thanks to Our Family, Julie Glausberg, Carl Barry and Marny Pine
 for Adding Their Voices to "Cabaret" and "Mame"....
 Fans & Bands • Norman Pace • Manhattan, N.Y.

STAFF: DAVID BROWN DESIGN
 Available On All Tape Configurations
 For More Catalog Titles
 Dept. 8, Hemisphere Records, Inc. 1700 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10019

To quote from the old truism, there is nothing as powerful as an idea whose time has come. Claire and Merna had an idea and this album is the result.

Their idea was profound, their thinking basic—why not take some of the most popular songs around today and sing them in Yiddish? The language is warm and mellifluous, easily lending itself to English lyrics without the slightest loss of mood change. Plus there was the inescapable novelty of hearing "Raindrops" as "Trop'ns Fin Regen Oif Mein Kop."

The girls sought out an old and dear friend, Herman Yabloukoff, a veteran of fifty years in the Yiddish Theatre. Herman was as excited about the concept as Claire and Merna and he readily agreed to translate the material into Yiddish.

They next went to Jerry Graff to conduct the orchestra and write the vocal arrangements. Jerry too was an old friend, often referred to by the girls as their "security blanket." It was apparent the

project was to be a labor of love strictly among "family." The results bear this out.

That the Barry Sisters were able to perform these songs in Yiddish and then, after hearing a line or two of lyrics, make listeners forget they were hearing a song in another language, is a tribute to their masterful artistry and total versatility.

The impact of the album can best be summed up by the reaction of a friend who stopped at their apartment to hear the master tape. Before it was played he commented, "I love the idea. I think it'll be a sensation in the Catskills when you perform the material live." After hearing the tape he shook his head, smiled and said, "Not just the Catskills—you can add the Rockies, the Alps and Mt. Everest!"

After one listening you'll know what he meant. Let's hope Claire and Merna Barry keep doing things "their way"—even if it sounds a little like "Mein Waig" the first time you hear it!



Merna

Stereophonic: History sounds different when you know where to start listening.

“Make your ear like a funnel...” — Rabbi Yohanan, Babylonian Talmud.

“Abre cuto guiri mambo” — Arsenio Rodriguez, from the Congo saying “open your ear and listen to what I’m going to tell you.”

We believe that music creates conversations otherwise impossible in daily life. Our goal is to incite a new conversation about the present by listening anew to the past. We will do this by unearthing lost classics from the archive, sounds that are languishing in thrift-store crates across the nation. The stories that accompany them have yet to be told: hybrid identities, eclectic communities, racial dialogue and pioneering musical style. This is music that forces listeners to ask themselves anew, who am I, what have I inherited, and what am I going to do about it?

We will do that with no museum stuffiness. This is music you might actually want to throw on at a party, music that will make you laugh, will make you think, stuff you probably have never heard before and will definitely not find on any Jewish music compilation your Hebrew School teacher gave you to get in touch with your roots. Our approach is new school, secular (but we hear the spirit when it calls), multicultural, progressive, irreverent, obsessive, self-deprecating, and urban. The label is helmed by Jews who grew up on new wave and punk, know what a dub-plate is, and put mambo, Tupac, and The Ramones on the same iPod playlist, and who believe, more

than anything, that history sounds different when you know where to start listening.

Be in touch with us:
www.rebootstereophonic.com

And if you like this, check out the magazine *Guilt & Pleasure* — www.guiltandpleasure.com and the website www.trailofourvinyl.com.

Stereophonic is: Courtney Holt, David Katznelson, Josh Kun, and Roger Bennett
Special thanks to the following: Dana Ferine, Lou Cove, Erin Potts, Scott Belsky, Rachel Levin, Jeffrey Solomon, Birdman Recording Group, Marco and Anne Cibola, Hippo and Campus at Hippocampusmusic.com, Amelia Klein, Deb Leipzig, Jaclyn Lafer, Jane Steinberg and all at Reboot, Debbie Findling, Shana Penn, Mikel Arteta, Samson, Ber, and Zion Florence, Samuel Holt, Cecilia Bastida, Matt Johnson, Brian Huizingh. David Katznelson would like to especially thank Scott Colburn and Seymour Stein.

Josh Kun wishes to thank: Claire Barry for her kindness and generosity and to Joy Pargman for all of her help, support, and patience in making this project happen. Thanks also to Lorin Sklamberg of YIVO, Phil Brown of Brown University for his help with archival images, Eddy Portnoy for his instant Yiddish translation of Iggy Pop, Henry Sapoznik, and USC Annenberg’s Steven Rafferty for his tireless research assistance.

Audio Restoration and Remastering by: Gary Hobish at A. Hammer Mastering, San Francisco
Liner notes by: Josh Kun
Design by: Nove Studio

Stereophonic 2008

CHECK OUT OUR OTHER CLASSICS



IRVING FIELDS TRIO Bagels and Bongos

Featuring “Raisins and Almonds,”
“Belz,” and “Havannah Negila”

RS 001



JEWFACE

Remastered from wax cylinders, giants of vaudeville, including Irving Berlin, showcase lost classics, featuring “When Mose with His Nose Leads the Band”

RS 004

GERSHON KINGSLEY God Is a Moog (2 disc set)

Experience Sabbath and Passover through the fingers of the man behind The In Sound from Way Out

RS 003



FRED KATZ Folk Songs for Far Out Folk

The long-coveted 1959 jazz classic — back by popular demand

RS 007



