

## Yiddish

### Keeping Songs Alive — With Karaoke

By RICK HARRISON

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Mention karaoke, and most people think about tacky bars where alcohol-impaired customers mumble forgettable renditions of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," or maybe something more contemporary from the songbook of Britney Spears. But a father and son in California are following the bouncing ball online with a more sober mission, using karaoke as a way to preserve and disseminate old Yiddish melodies.

Save the Music (no relation to VH1's foundation of the same name) boasts more than 7,000 Yiddish and Ladino songs in its catalog, and claims to be the world's leading collector of Yiddish records. To help a new generation of listeners learn to appreciate Yiddish music, the nonprofit organization is currently working to make its music collection available via an online radio station, library and, yes, an Internet karaoke machine.

"Music is the best method to bring people into the soul of something," said Daniel Azjen, 50, Save the Music's director of development. "In three minutes you have a teaching, a piece of history, something that moves your soul. You don't have to know anything."

Save the Music began in 1998, when Azjen's son Roman was working on a family history project for a high school English class. Roman's grandmother had taught Yiddish for 20 years in Mexico City, where he lived until moving to the United States in 1987, and the family had many Yiddish records and books that were falling apart — something Roman realized was happening to all Yiddish material. Daniel Azjen had a Web company near his home in San Diego and a neighbor had a small recording studio. And thus, the idea for Save the Music was born.

"People have a secret love affair with Yiddish," Roman Azjen, 21, told the Forward. "Yiddish words aren't technical words — they're emotional words. Comedians use them for a reason."

Roman took a year between undergraduate study at Stanford University and his first year at Stanford Law School to shepherd the project, and to begin the time-consuming and costly process of cleaning and digitizing the stacks of music the organization receives from individual donors. It arrives from Argentina, Australia, Mexico, California and New York. "It comes from people who have been schlepping it with them forever," Daniel Azjen said. "From the heart of people who did not have the strength to throw it out."

While the Azjens are eager collectors, they don't particularly want the clutter that comes

from thousands of records. "Universities collect them and put them in a room," Daniel said. "We don't care for the plastic; we care for the music." In fact, they plan to donate all the records to Florida Atlantic University's Judaica and Jewish music collection when they are finished with them.

The Azjens spend hours not only playing and recording records in real time, but also carefully editing out the pops and scratches that have accumulated over decades and, in some cases, figuring out how to deal with cracked and completely broken records. In addition, it is difficult to determine or track down the copyright holders to of the many records, a concern for a budding lawyer like Roman Azjen.

"We feel comfortable if we have copyrighted material on the site that because we are nonprofit, people won't come after us," he said. "But there are statutory penalties."

The Azjens must focus on fund raising, as well. Save the Music is partially supported financially by the nonprofit Internet Development Fund, but other sources of revenue are also needed. Already having spent \$300,000, the Azjens seek an additional \$700,000 to complete the project and to provide the entire music catalog online. Currently, only samples are posted on the group's Web site ([www.savethemusic.com](http://www.savethemusic.com)), including a karaoke version of "*Zog Nit Keyn Mol*" — "Never Say," the anthem of Jewish partisans who fought against the Nazis — with translations and transliterations in English, Yiddish, Spanish and French. In addition to the karaoke, the goal is to provide multiple versions of the same song — perhaps eight or 10 renditions, by performers ranging from Chava Alberstein and Theodore Bikel to Paul Robeson and Jan Peerce — with original lyrics, sheet music and transliterations so that new performers can learn the melodies and continue to pass them on.

Daniel sees the Internet as the ideal medium for both disseminating music and fund-raising. "If you take all of the Jews all over the world, you might have 1 million who can consume and pay for Jewish culture," he said. "It's hard to reach them with a newspaper, but online, we can reach them instantaneously."

And he sees music as an even more ideal medium for a greater good. "We're looking to bring back the enjoyment of being Jewish that music used to generate in people," he said. "Not just a tradition, not just a religion, but a happiness. If you lose the music, then you lose the spirit."