

Jewish Dinner Music

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It is Friday night at the Singapore Hyatt Regency Hotel. The Grand Ballroom smells like red roses and yellow curry. My guitar player Ari and I have been flown in from California to play the music for tonight's lavish banquet and Sunday's even more luxurious wedding, when Sondra Bar-Yehuda, daughter of the wealthiest Jewish family in the country, will marry Solomon Ruhala, son of the next-to-wealthiest. The weekend is Singapore's social event of the year. There are only 200 Jewish families left on this tiny Asian island but they can still make a lot of noise.

I am American but my partner is Israeli. Most of the people in this room look like him, with light brown skin, delicate features and easy smiles. My Polish/Russian thick eyebrows and big chin stand out like I were wearing a cowboy hat and spurs.

There are three things on every Singaporean's mind, and two of them are food. Singaporeans are obsessed with food, it is their art. I have played piano for a thousand banquets, but the buffet landscape stretching before me now is like nothing I have ever seen.

Seven enormous round hotel tables, covered in cream-colored linens, are arranged in the shape of a swan. The first is the satay table, where delicate Malay food servers, dressed in white from sandals to top of cap, pull chicken, beef and lamb skewers from barbeque grills and serve them with an incendiary Indonesian chili sauce called "ketchup." Guests in black tie and evening gowns wail in a feeding frenzy to get at the satays, piling six or eight at a time onto their plates.

The next table is for platters of Beef Rendang, tender beef poached for days in coconut milk, ginger and lemon grass. I watch people take one taste then close their eyes like they want to cry, like they are tasting a dish that dates from the precise instant when God invented food.

Table Three is rice dishes from Indonesia, Table Four is noodle dishes from Thailand, a fifth table is for red, yellow and green curries from Malaysia, and the sixth and seventh are covered with innumerable combinations of vegetables, fritters and breads from East India. Each time someone pulls the lid off a plate a savory steam escapes into the atmosphere, adding more curry, more garlic, more masala into the already marvelous mix. Then there is a second room, only for desserts, where pyramids of puddings and interlocking layers of strudels, fruit pies, babkas and tortes surround a four-foot tall chocolate cake shaped like the Kuala Lumpur Tower.

Ari and I are standing at Table Six, in our black tuxedos, waiting to play. Our instruments are already set up. We are nibbling curried cauliflower and fresh ginger flowers off bone china plates when we see the groom's father rush by with his arm around the thick shoulders of a white-bearded rabbi. The rabbi's arms are flailing in

anger, while Mr. Ruhala looks like he just jumped aboard a speeding truck.

“Uh oh,” Ari says. “Kapinsky. We’ve got trouble.” One rabbi would not suffice for a party as prestigious as this, so the Ruhalas and Bar-Yehudas have invited five. The rabbis have spent most of their time in the dessert room. There’s the local Singapore rabbi, the rabbi

from Melbourne, the rabbi from Tel Aviv, the rabbi from Brooklyn, and the rabbi from Los Angeles. All are Orthodox. With five long black frock coats, five beards, and ten braided forelocks under five wide brimmed black hats, the rabbis huddle together, en talmudis, walk together, eat cake together, and nod vigorously at the same time.

“Who’s Kapinsky?” I ask.

“He’s the Chabad rabbi they brought from Brooklyn. He’s very Hasidic, the most Orthodox of the five. Tonight is Friday night, Shabbat. Kapinsky will try to insist that we don’t make music on Shabbat.”

“Why not?” I ask. Ari looks at me funny.

“Doug, you’re my friend, we’ve worked together for years, and I know you grew up in California,” says my Israeli partner. “But sometimes I wonder. You are Jewish, aren’t you?”

I suppose that depends on who you ask. To gentiles I’m a Jew, but to religious Jews I’m probably only one step up from pork. Back home we always had music on Shabbat. What’s wrong with music?

“Why did they hire us in the first place, then?” I ask, feebly.

“They didn’t,” Ari says. “Mrs. Bar-Yehuda did. She wants music. And she’s paying us. But she’s also paying them.”

“But Orthodox Jews love music, Ari, and the Hasids probably more than anybody. We’ve played for lots of Hasidic parties.”

“It’s not about the music,” Ari says. “It’s about five rabbis. Five rabbis can’t agree about their cufflinks. They’ll just have to work it out so everyone is happy.”

From across the room we can see the five rabbis, Mr. Ruhala and Mrs. Bar-Yehuda, standing in the corner, discussing with hands waving in the air all the theological ramifications of allowing or disallowing music at tonight’s affair, complete with many palms hitting against foreheads, baleful stares towards heaven, firm shaking of heads, finally a few shrugs.

A waiter rushes over, nods, disappears, and returns with six glasses of schnapps. Rabbi

Kapinsky recites the prayer over the schnapps, and the six men drink while Mrs. Bar-Yehuda watches. Mr. Ruhala slams his glass down on the tray.

“Gevalt!” he says, and walks over to Ari and me. “OK, it’s settled, you can play,” he says.

“We can?”

“Yes, but by their rules. You can play, but you can’t use your instruments. You can sing, but you can’t use your microphones.”

“But...there are three hundred people in this room.” Ari says. “No one will hear us.”

“That’s true. And you can clap your hands but you can’t touch... well, anything but yourself, you know?”

“You mean anything that makes noise?”

“Right. No guitar, no piano, don’t touch anything, don’t stamp your foot, don’t turn on your microphone. Just clap your hands, sing as loudly as you can, and hope to God the rabbis join you. It’s the best we can do.”

“When can I bang my head on the floor?” I ask.

“Tomorrow,” says Mr. Ruhala. “Are you ready?”

“Now! Go, go, go!” yells Mrs. Bar-Yehuda, running over, silks swirling. “Quickly, before they change their mind!”

Mrs. Bar-Yehuda yanks my last bit of curry out of my hand. Ari and I walk to the center of the ballroom where we are doomed to die like musicians: well-dressed, but unheard and unnoticed.

2

Ari and I have played for a lot of weddings. Weddings are where people pass on their happiness, where they teach the next generation how to celebrate in the same way they always have, to sing the songs and dance the dances they all learned when they were children, when grandparents and great grandparents were still alive, when the family was that much closer to the ancient homeland. A proper wedding must include every one of the old customs, so they may never be forgotten.

Singaporean Jews were once from Iraq. They fled, family by family, over the course of many generations, chased down the Malay Peninsula until they ran out of land. They are Singaporeans now, big city people, but they still cut the challah a certain way, dance

the hora a certain way, escort the bride to the dance floor the way they did it in Baghdad. Their lives are in Singapore but their roots remain in long ago Jewish Iraq. It is Ari's and my job to make sure those roots are remembered.

Sometimes this is easier said than done.

"May we have your attention please, ladies and gentlemen, if you would be so kind?" Ari calls, once, twice, three times. But since Hasidic rules prohibit even cupping our hands to try and make it easier to be heard no one is paying us any attention.

I try calling out in Hebrewish, that is backwards: "If you would be so kind, ladies and gentlemen, please, your attention, we might have?" It's useless. People are tucked comfortably into the middle of the seamless conversation we call Jewish Dinner Music:

"So, Chaim, how's business?"

"Business? You call what I got business?"

We try clapping our hands, shouting: "Follow us, everybody!" No one responds. There are few things in the world that feel more foolish than clapping your hands and failing to get anyone else to clap theirs.

If the rabbis would only join us people would quiet down. But this is a power play. Although they are seated at a round table not ten feet in front of us, Rabbi Kapinsky and the others continue tilting languidly back in their chairs and musing loudly about the Messiah, accompanying their questions with many beard swings and hand motions. We clap, they muse, and the Jewish Dinner Music continues unabated. We are dying up here. If anyone has a vaudeville hook we could be yanked from this country at any moment.

But like most Israelis Ari is not crazy about the Orthodoxy. So while he claps his hands he slowly moves towards the rabbis' table until he is clapping his hands directly over Rabbi Frankel's head. This puts Rabbi Frankel in an uncomfortable position. He can't stare back at Ari because that would imply that we are actually here. But Rabbi Frankel is uneasy, so he nudges Rabbi Levi, who twitches at Rabbi Ankori, and, at length, Rabbi Kapinsky stands up.

The instant Rabbi Kapinsky stands the conversation hushes. It is as if the serrated knife has been drawn sharply across the ceremonial loaf of challah: the noise in the room is cut immediately in half, and then into smaller and smaller pieces, and soon there is total silence. It is very impressive. The rabbis are the spiritual center of this community, and they have proved it once again. Kapinsky bows and beckons to us with both hands, as if to say now that he has parted the waters Ari and I may cross into musical paradise any time we wish.

Everyone is staring at us so we begin clapping again, slowly at first, as Ari begins singing a beautiful Hasidic melody written by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach called Yase Shalom. Rabbi Rosenzweig smiles when he recognizes the tune and begins waving his hands exultantly in the air and turning in a small circle. The other rabbis join in on the melody and almost immediately the entire room is filled with singing voices, in parts, like a choir. With everyone singing it sounds deep, pure, almost like a recording.

We switch into “Simantov, Mazeltov,” the timeless chant about good fortune, and segue that with a song about King David, the King of Ancient Israel. Eyes glistening with happiness, the rabbis now join hands with each other and begin dancing in a circle. When the people see this they begin to form circles themselves, men with men and women with women, and soon three or four hundred people in tuxedos and formal gowns are dancing around the buffet tables like children at a picnic.

I love this music. It’s simple, but it’s spiritual. I am a jazz player back in California but I rarely get to feel like this. What a nice surprise. This is turning into a great...oops.

As fast as he stood up Rabbi Kapinsky now sits down. The other rabbis flop into their seats too, followed by all the guests, like marionettes falling in a domino line when the puppeteer takes a break. In a heartbeat Ari and I are again clapping our feeble hands by ourselves. After a few more futile attempts to keep the music alive, we stop. Everyone in the room picks up a fork and the Jewish Dinner Music roars back to life.

“Nu, Abe?”

“Ehhhh, nothing new. If socks were stocks I’d have a bundle.”

Rabbi Kapinsky smiles at me. I turn to Ari. Ari looks at Mr. Ruhala. Mr. Ruhala shrugs. Mrs. Bar-Yehuda shrugs.

Ari turns back to me. “Well, that’s it,” he says.

“That’s it? Eight minutes?”

“Eight minutes. Ten thousand miles. Let’s get some cake,” Ari says.

3

A musician hates not to play. A part of me feels bad, like we’ve failed, like we haven’t done our jobs, like we’ve broken the chain. Ari sees me fretting. With a wedge of chocolate cake and two pieces of poppyseed strudel on his plate he says: “Doug, you worry too much. They loved us.”

“But...”

“Trust me. We’re not done.”

“What about the rabbis?” I ask.

Ari smiles. “They’re happy,” he says. “Look at ‘em.”

The five rabbis are walking through the room, laughing, eating babka, offering benedictions, eating more babka. White bearded Rabbi Kapinsky is beaming like a Brooklyn Santa Claus.

“Just wait,” Ari says. “Try the papayas.”

When I don’t answer he says: “Iraqi Jews are different, Doug. Their first language is Arabic. Their second language is Hebrew. Their third language is English. They’re wealthy industrialists but in their heads they’re still living in their little villages. The rabbis like to talk about God but the people just want to dance. Be patient.”

So I eat my cake, looking closer at people’s faces, seeing a lot of Iraq in their round Arabic noses and thick, dark hair. Many have blue or green eyes. Men and women over forty are short and stocky, but their children are taller and handsome, and their grandchildren are preciously beautiful, like huge-eyed curlyheaded child models. Everyone clusters together in small groups and people punctuate each conversation with constantly moving hands. Only when the five rabbis are present do their vibrant personalities seem constrained.

Then at the stroke of ten the Rabbis all leave, like Jewish Cinderellas. Perhaps this was part of the negotiation. Not thirty seconds after the last “Mazeltov!” Mrs. Bar-Yehuda hurries over to Ari. “What are you waiting for?” she whispers.

The dessert room had been closed but now the doors swing open and I see our p.a.system has been moved and our instruments turned on. So I run behind my piano and Ari grabs his guitar and breaks immediately into the lightning fast Israeli/Arabic tunes he plays like a hive of musical bees.

We play the square-dance-like Taisch, the Arabic-sounding Linda Linda and Miserlou, the ever-joyous Hebrew Hava Nagila and Yiddish Zingarella, the Lebanese Habibi, the Persian Oli Zum Ga. Three hundred people jump forward twice, back once, all together, clap hands on four.

Then the bride-and-husband-to-be, the children of the most prosperous families in the community, clasp wrists with their little brothers and sisters and raise their arms high over their heads to form a tunnel that the rest of the guests must dance and wriggle through, laughing and singing all the while.

They sing every melody. They dance every dance. They will not let us quit until our

hoarse voices and the blisters on Ari's fingers will allow us to play no more. Finally, long after 2am, when we shush people to stop and sing Hatikvah, the Israeli National Anthem, the entire party stands arm in arm and most have tears in their eyes.

It's a lovely moment. I feel filled up, happy. For one night Ari and I have been permitted to enter the tiny Jewish community of Singapore. I hope we have done our job, and that in years to come, whenever someone recalls the weekend of Sondra and Solomon's wedding, Ari and I will be there too.

A small child in a pink and white party dress approaches the stage. "Please, my mama asks, you could play just one more?"

"OK, just one more!" Ari calls, and adds several words in Hebrew. I only understand one: "Baghdadi." The dancers grab our hands and we are swept into the circle, everyone singing Baghdadi style, unaccompanied. Round and round we all go, turning grand circles through a roomful of puddings and babkas.