

**From "The Essential Klezmer" by Seth Rogovoy
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"Wolf Krakowski's Shtetl-Rock"**

It is a long way from the Saalfelden Farmach Displaced Person's Camp in Austria (U.S. Occupied Zone), where Wolf Krakowski was born, to Northampton, Massachusetts, the ultramodern, ultraprogressive college town where he lives today. Yet in the course of a four-minute song, Wolf is somehow able to shrink the vast geographic and cultural distance, and even to reveal correspondences between the two unlikely worlds.

On *Transmigrations/Gilgul*, Krakowski teams with an ensemble of some of New England's finest roots-rock musicians on a dozen Yiddish folk and pop songs with contemporary twists. Krakowski's electric shtetl-rock combines the sound of the American roadhouse with mournful, vintage Ashkenazi melodies to create a self-styled "Yiddish world-beat soul" fusion. In the wrong hands, such miscegenation would sound forced at best or a novelty at worst, but Krakowski pulls it off successfully, perhaps because he is himself the very embodiment of Old World meets New.

Shortly after his birth, Krakowski's family moved to Sweden, where they lived for six years before permanently settling in Toronto. It was there, in Toronto's multi-ethnic, inner-city neighborhood known as the Junction, that Krakowski first confronted many of the dualities that would later inform his life and work. Not the least of these was the fact that the shul in the Junction sat literally across the fence from the railroad track, so that to this day the sounds of the *khazones* and the lonesome train whistle coexist inside his head -- as apt a summation as any of the extraordinary fusion at the heart of *Transmigrations*.

For much of Krakowski's early life, the figurative train whistle drowned out the *khazones*. He dropped out of high school at seventeen and ran away with the circus, sharing a room with a sideshow pinhead named [Schlitzie](#) and his keeper, a hard-drinking French-Canadian Gypsy prone to outbursts about the "Jew" Roosevelt (b. Rosenfeld). "I took it all in stride," says Krakowski, "It beat the hell out of high school".

The ensuing years were a blend of Kerouac-inspired, cross-country travel, all-night jam sessions with pickup bands, stints on a commune and with a Cambridge street theater, and jobs as a carpenter, sheetrock and guitar maker. In 1981 the Yiddish-speaking Krakowski began documenting Holocaust survivors on audio and videotape, years before Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah project for which Krakowski worked in 1994-5. Krakowski's own videos include *Vilna*, which he calls "the first post-World War II Yiddish music video," and *My Name is Stella: An Oral History*, the firsthand testimony of a Polish-Jewish nursing student's survival.

Transmigrations contains a dozen Yiddish folk, theater, and popular tunes written by the likes of Ben Zion Witler, Mordkhe Gebirtig, Max Perlman, and Shmerke Kaczerginski, rearranged by Krakowski variously as rootsy country-, blues-, and reggae-influenced tunes. "My life did not include music lessons or the New England Conservatory," says the self-taught guitarist. It did however include playing with Canadian folk legends Mendelson Joe and Daisy DeBolt and all-night jams with bluesmaster Big Joe Williams. "It started even before then--with my mom's Yiddish folk songs and Hebrew liturgy, mixed with the sounds of Fats Domino and the Everly Brothers on the radio."

What is perhaps most surprising about *Transmigrations* is how effortlessly the Old World -- the melodies, phrasing, indeed, the Yiddish language itself--blends with the New World, the sinuous electric guitar leads, the chunky Rastafarian-styled rhythms, the gospel-style choruses, the Latin dance beats, the honking, blues-drenched saxophone solos. In Krakowski's hands, the combination seems logical and downright organic.

"My sound represents what is best, and more importantly, honest, about the whole folk and pop experience as filtered through my experience and sensibilities," says Krakowski. "Not as mere 'pine-reproduction furniture' music. It is not a studied thing. It is a thing of the heart and soul. . . . I dig blues-based music above anything else. And it took a lifetime to have it all come together to the point where

my experience and evolution both as a person and musician enabled me to find the bridges in the songs and the melodies without messing with them or turning it all into a novelty or a joke."

A transcultural person, as at home in the world of I. B. Singer as he is in the world of Willie Nelson and Bob Marley, Wolf Krakowski builds a musical bridge between the two on *Transmigrations*. His music is also suggestive of the possibilities that might have occurred had Yiddish, and the Yiddish world, not been destroyed by the Germans. For better or worse, American popular music has pervaded all corners of the globe, so that everywhere indigenous styles of music are combined with American popular forms to create contemporary hybrids. Thus, you have Russian folk-rock bands influenced by the Velvet Underground and R. E. M. It isn't too much of a stretch of the imagination to think that had the Eastern European Yiddish civilization survived, it may have on its own produced music remarkably like that found on Wolf Krakowski's *Transmigrations*.

Krakowski himself is aware of this dynamic. "Without being corny, I sing through them and those that were silenced sing through me," he says. "It is as if all the people who I left behind somehow 'transmigrated' over here, and their stilled voices, cloaked in the raiment of R&B blues, country-rock and reggae, act as a bridge from the Old World to the New, through me."