MARK YOUR CALENDAR:
Little Failures: An Evening with Gary Shteyngart, May 12, 7:00 p.m.
Award-winning author Gary Shteyngart joins us.
Professor Sasha Bendruss for a conversation and reading from Little Failures. A member-financed with and hosted at the National Museum of American Jewish History. See our website for ticketing information.

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MISSION
The Myer & Rosaline Feinstein Center for American Jewish History promotes the study of Jewish experience in America. Founded in May 1990, the Feinstein Center is part of Temple University’s Department of History in the College of Liberal Arts. The Feinstein Center is dedicated to pursuing new avenues for research and teaching in the field of American Jewish history. It sponsors conferences, symposia, academic fellowships, publications and public events, all devoted to new approaches to understanding the many dimensions of Jewish experience in the United States. The Feinstein Center aims to serve the scholarly community and also engage with the broader public in its mission.

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Feinstein Center
THE MYER & ROSALINE FEINSTEIN CENTER FOR AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

Why Music? LILA CORWIN BERMAN

WHY MUSIC? The 2013 Pew Study of U.S. Jews fashioned an empirical portrait of American Jewish life. An observer might think it told us all there is to know about American Jews. It did not. Indeed, a year into Sounds Jewish, a series of programs that broadly considers music as an agent of tradition and transformation in Jewish life, I am convinced that what we learn from listening to and analyzing Jewish music is just as essential to understanding American Jewish life as the data from Pew. So, why music?

First, to employ a turn of phrase from anthropologist Claude Levi Straus, music is “good to think with.” In other words, as we examine the Jewish music scene, we examine Jewishness more broadly. We confront the hazy line that separates the secular from the religious in a liturgical verse woven into a hip-hop song, or in the backdrop of a bar filled with the sounds of a reggae (a Hasidic-inspired tune). We are pressed to ask questions about markets and economics: who produces, distributes, and consumes the varieties of Jewish music? We hear strands of political activism—about Israel or labor or the environment—in lyrics and melodies. And we listen to Aschkenazi, Sephardic, Middle Eastern, and African Jewish traditions blend, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes dissonantly.

Indeed, we turn to music for what it tells us that does not fit neatly into a pie chart or a graph. Its outcomes are not easily measurable, and its purpose is more profound than any empirical question we might pose. We could, of course, quantify elements of it: how many children’s songs invoke grape juice, for example? And, certainly, music producers try to make a science of understanding the market and figuring out how to give people what they want to hear (or make people want to hear what producers give them). But music also impels us to ask different questions about the human experience: Does it sound good? How do we feel when we hear it? What traditions, histories, and communities can we access through it in new ways? Do we want to listen to it by ourselves or with others? Does it make us want to dance or sway or tap or cry?

As you read here and see on our website, we have spent this year talking to musicians and scholars of music who have provided us with new categories for understanding Jewish experience. And we have allowed ourselves to listen to music for what it can tell us and, simply, for what it sounds like.

A version of this column appeared in the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent in March 2015.

Samples from Sounds Jewish
Inaugurated in March 2014 with an evening of “Jewish Music Unplugged,” the Sounds Jewish series has featured a diversity of musical traditions, including klezmer, John Zeris’s Radical Jewish Music label, Shimon Carlebach, Sephardic folk songs, beatbox, children’s music, and more. Here’s a sample:

• Jon Madof, Yoshiie Fruchter, Greg Wall, and Jessica Lurie, who helped bring the Klezmer music-Carlebach sound of Zimmah to Philadelphia, joined Feinstein Center director Lisa Corwin Berman in a pre-show conversation about musical fusion, and the personal and professional in the Jewish music business.

FROM OUR ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Profile of Warren Hoffman
Over the past year, the Feinstein Center created a new Advisory Committee to provide vision leadership and complement its longstanding Advisory Board. We sat down with Dr. Warren Hoffman, Associate Director at Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia’s Center for Jewish Life and Learning, author of The Great White Way and the Broadway Musical (Rutgers, 2014), and playwright, to hear more about his vision.

WH: I think the Feinstein Center is a real model for what smart, engaged Jewish programming can look like. Coming from an academic background myself, I like that the Center asks big, thought-provoking questions about topics like Jewish food, music, culture, and cities, but does it in a way that’s accessible, fun, and lively. These aren’t dry talks by Ivy-league academics, but concerts and panel discussions by Jewish artists and practitioners themselves that invite audience engagement and discussion.

FC: Ten years from now, what would you like to see in American Jewish cultural life that’s not happening today?

WH: Not to be coy, but I think it’s an unanswerable question, because if we’re doing the right thing, Jewish cultural life will be responding to and looking very different than whatever the needs of society are 10 years from now, including addressing trends and issues that we can’t even predict yet. I think it’s important to stay relevant, Jewish American culture needs to be more forward-thinking and speak to the changing society in which we live, not lamenting the past and the way things were.
FACULTY NEWS


Lila Corwin Berman: Murray Friedman Professor of American Jewish History and Director of the Feinstein Center; author of American Jewish foodways, particularly the culinary revival of the American Jewish Committee’s Philadelphia chapter. While Murray Friedman, the Center’s first director, documented oral histories of the living founding leaders in order to preserve a record of their visions, the Center represented a collaborative effort between faculty at Temple University and leaders of the American Jewish Committee’s Philadelphia chapter. Whereas in Europe Jews suffered severe residency and travel restrictions, in the United States immigrants were confronted with an expanding frontier in which there were few limitations on movement, but a host of challenges for the practice of traditional Judaism. The eclectic religious practices of mobile Jews throughout the continent, along with various attempts by local and national leaders to foster order and consistency, resulted in new institutional and ideological modes intended to make Judaism compatible with the mobile American environment.

Laura Levitt: Associate Professor of Religion and Director of Jewish Studies; author of Samuel and the Shaping of Tradition (Oxford, 2013) and several recent articles; research interests include mythelephantissa, an ancient near east, and the origins of the protodel in ancient near east.

Mark Lorchter: Associate Professor of Religion and Director of Jewish Studies; author of Samuel and the Shaping of Tradition (Oxford, 2013) and several recent articles; research interests include mythelephantissa, an ancient near east, and the origins of the protodel in ancient near east.

Laura Levitt: Professor of Religion, Jewish Studies and Gender, co-author with Miriam Peskowitz of “Feinsteins” a comprehensive annotated bibliography for Jews, Temple University Press’s Online Bibliographic Series, currently writing “Holding the Place of the Archive,” a book that examines material objects in police storage and artifacts housed in Holocaust collections.

Elliot Ratzman: Assistant Professor of Religion; teaches courses on Jewish thought, culture, and politics; researching the religious dimensions of American Judaism in order to preserve a record of its visions, the Center represented a collaborative effort between faculty at Temple University and leaders of the American Jewish Committee’s Philadelphia chapter. Whereas in Europe Jews suffered severe residency and travel restrictions, in the United States immigrants were confronted with an expanding frontier in which there were few limitations on movement, but a host of challenges for the practice of traditional Judaism. The eclectic religious practices of mobile Jews throughout the continent, along with various attempts by local and national leaders to foster order and consistency, resulted in new institutional and ideological modes intended to make Judaism compatible with the mobile American environment.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Lila Corwin Berman’s Metropolitan Jews

Professor Lila Corwin Berman’s newly released book, Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit (Chicaco, 2013), considers the role that Detroit’s Jews played in the city’s well-known narrative of migration and decline. Taking its cue from social critics and historians who have long looked toward Detroit to understand twentieth-century urban transformations, the book tells the story of Jews leaving the city while retaining a deep connection to it. Berman argues that though most Jews moved to the suburbs, urban abandonment, disinvestment, and an embrace of conservatism did not invariably accompany their moves. Instead, the Jewish postwar migration was marked by an enduring commitment to a newly fashionable urbanism with a vision of self, community, and society that persisted well beyond city limits. Supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment of the Humanities, and the Frankel Institute for Advanced Islamic Studies at the University of Michigan, the book explores the evolution and limits of American Jews’ shifting liberalism in the twentieth century.

New Oral History Project: Founding Leaders of the Feinstein Center

This year marks the Feinstein Center’s twenty-fifth anniversary. Founded in the spring of 1990, the Center represented a collaborative effort between faculty at Temple University and leaders of the American Jewish Committee’s Philadelphia chapter. Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball (Oxford, 2011) and Religion and Sports: An Introduction and Case Studies (Columbia, 2015), faculty member Rebecca Alpert was recently appointed as director most recently of “East Towards Home,” produced by Theater for the New City, NYC.

Samples from Sounds Jewish continued


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