

ARTISTIC CREATION VS. CULTURAL CURATION

There is a spectrum between *cultural curation*, best described as an ethnomusicologically "correct" performance of songs from a particular time and place, and *artistic creation*, which can be regarded as an artist's unique contribution based on his or her personal aesthetics and experience. Artists working closely with traditional material have an added responsibility in acknowledging where on this continuum they lie, and in identifying their aims in so situating themselves.

In this case, it should be stated from the start that *The Forgotten Kingdom* does not aim for ethno-musicological authenticity. While my creative process with these traditional Ladino songs does indeed begin with ethno-musicological field recordings, followed by research into the songs' traditional function and context, it generally takes major turns.

Most of these songs were sung primarily by women, in the home or community events like weddings, unaccompanied except perhaps for a drum. The themes may be dark, but the songs were normally sung in a familiar way, without melodrama. My next steps often lead me away from tradition, knowingly and deliberately. I ask compositional questions: "What can I imagine the mood of the story, or the emotions of some of the characters, to be, despite the traditional ways the song would have been sung? Was I to create a soundtrack for this story, how would I use the musical tools available to me, and the expertise of the Ensemble members, to bring these tales, moods and emotions to life in a way that will feel personally real, and that will give audiences a powerful emotional experience?"

As a composer and a student of culture I readily acknowledge that it is risky to recast such old, rich material this way. We leap from tradition into modern imagination.

My hope is that the resulting arrangements bring the stories to life in a way that will be vivid and fresh for modern western audiences — and that through the emotional resonance created, these audiences will in turn also become interested in the musical legacy of communities that were all but destroyed and whose traditions quickly fade in a rapidly globalizing world. — *Guy Mendilow*

THE FORGOTTEN KINGDOM

PERFORMED BY THE GUY MENDILOW ENSEMBLE

Chris Baum (USA) — *Violin*

Guy Mendilow (Israel/UK/USA)

— *Musical Director; Vocals, Guitar, Berimbau*

Sofia Tosello (Argentina) — *Vocals*

www.guymendilowensemble.com



AN ENTIRELY TOO-BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LADINO SONG

The final expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1491 and from Portugal in 1497 began migrations in which the Jews eventually settled in communities spanning the vast Ottoman Empire, from Northern African and the Mediterranean to the Balkans, and beyond. In each adopted home, languages, food, customs, stories, songs and musicality mingled and cultural and linguistic offshoots eventually evolved.

The language itself is a beautiful illustration of these broader patterns. Various called Ladino, Spaniolit, Yehuditze, Hekatia, Saphardi or simply Spanish, the language is more like a number of closely related sub-streams, today grouped under the umbrella term Judeo-Spanish. To some extent, each community integrated words and expressions from the local language, including Greek, Slavic languages, Arabic, Turkish, and Hebrew. Wherever it is found, Judeo-Spanish is also a type of linguistic time capsule: The Spanish Jews preserved the lexis, syntax, morphology and phonology of Medieval Spanish as well as idioms, pronunciation and accent of words which have long since vanished from Spain itself.

Judeo-Spanish is still spoken by pockets of Jews, today primarily in Israel, though it is considered an endangered language.

The Forgotten Kingdom springboards off of songs mainly from the communities of Sarajevo and Salónica. The traditional source music is primarily from the early twentieth century, though the lyrics of a few of these songs are much older, even pre-dating 1492. While these older songs may well have been sung for hundreds of years, there is little evidence left to indicate the melodies and ornamentations used back then. The melodies that we know today are much more recent.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I first heard Sephardic songs in my boyhood Jerusalem home. Yet it wasn't until later, when I started listening *through* other artists' interpretations to the traditional songs and tales, that I got hooked by their riveting history of integration, migration and adaptation.

These songs tell great stories. Not because they are Jewish or Mediterranean or Balkan, but because they present near-universal themes that continue to captivate today. The story of the stories—a case study in shifting identities due to migration, the evolution and change of tradition, of resilience and struggle—is alive and relevant today, too.

The story of Ladino mirrors experiences that I, and most of the artists in the Ensemble, live personally, as an immigrant to the US. Not only have we changed because we're in new homes, but our homes have also changed because we're in them. This is also the story of the United States and it comes at a time when we very much need to remember stories like this, to fight the darkness and small mindedness that grows so rapidly in this country.

What has haunted me as I've created *The Forgotten Kingdom* is how these stories give us a glimpse into the end of an era, and what it's like to be caught up in the shift from one age to a very different new one. Each story/song in *The Forgotten Kingdom* can be pegged either to the "old world" (what we'd call a world of romantic naivety, be that right or wrong) or to the "new world" (OUR world today).

Many of these tales are set against the last vestiges of the Ottoman Empire, as a centuries-old order broke down under the weight of the traumatic Great War. The old world remained, but teetered on the brink of a new era. What was it like for those on the cusp? Imagine for a moment the soldiers in the song "*La Vuelta Del Marido.*" In this song we have this very romantic notion of horses wearing breastplates of silver, of gallant officers wearing white gloves, leading the charge.

This was the picture for hundreds of years. And it was even the story of some armies in 1914. Imagine: This is actually how some of the first officers rode into the first battles of World War I. Picture this gallant soldier, riding heroically with his white gloves...straight into the meat grinder of mechanised warfare in the Battle of the Frontiers. How brutal, this clash of old and new worlds.

To us, looking back with our historical hindsight, it seems almost inevitable, especially because this was the birth of *our* world. But to those living through this transition of ages, the course must've been anything but a foregone conclusion, a too-terrible future that few would've dared dream. I wanted to explore what it was like to see the breakdown of empires, the glimmers of hope that then evaporate. What is it like to be caught on the wrong side, in that kind of nightmare?

In what ways are we also already straddling two worlds without even knowing it? If we, or my son's generation, are destined to know two very different eras, the wake up call won't come in the form of a storm of steel like in WWI. It'll come in a modern guise. What'll it look like this time? Is it possible that fifty, sixty years from now people will see that we also were being hurtled into a very different times (climate change? The realignment caused by Trumpism/Brexit? The tensions revolving around migration and refugees?...)

The circumstances and details have shifted. Yet so much of the story still plays out. Those elements that move us in these old adventures — courage, working together across ethnic lines, strength in the face of despair — speak to ways we too might grapple with our own daunting, unfolding tale. The past lets us feel the potential risks, terrors, and wonders the future might bring, and steel ourselves to meet this future with integrity and tenderness.