

**Holocaust and Rap Music:  
A Comparative Study**  
By David Mitchell

The holocaust in Nazi Germany and the racism and poverty faced by the African-American community in America are two very different tragic events that produced similar musical results. The music produced by people from both cultures in the midst of these tragic events reflects what was happening to them as individuals and as a culture. This paper will compare rap music to Yiddish folk songs that were written during the holocaust. A comparison of these two different genres of music will bring into sharp relief the underlying motivation of Yiddish folk artists during the holocaust. It will also demonstrate the purpose that music served during the holocaust, and this study will shed light on the big picture of how music defines us culturally and as human beings in general.

There are five specific purposes that Yiddish folk music served during the holocaust. It helped them define and hold their culture together. It gave them comfort. It helped them make sense of what was happening to them. It was a call to action and defiance. And it put food in their mouths. Even though, on the surface, rap music sounds very different than Yiddish folk music. Rap music served those very same purposes in the African-American community. With this in mind, a comparison of music by Yiddish folk artist Mordecai Gebirtig and others with rap artist Tupac Shakur will show the similarities between these two musical genres and similar purposes that this music served.

Mordecai Gebirtig was born in Cracow in 1877. According to the United States Holocaust Museum, He

. . . made his living as a carpenter but was celebrated throughout the Yiddish-speaking world as a folk poet and songwriter—the “troubadour of the Jewish people.” During World War II, he continued to write and perform, using the medium of song to chronicle

his experiences under the German occupation. In June 1942, Gebirtig, age 65, was shot and killed by German soldiers when he refused to comply with a deportation order.

Gebirtig wrote *Our Town is Burning* in response to a 1936 pogrom in the Polish town of Przytyk. In retrospect, the song seems prophetic of the Holocaust, but Gebirtig had hoped its message (“Don’t stand there, brothers, douse the fire!”) would be heard as an urgent call to action. He was reportedly gratified to learn, during the war, that Cracow’s underground Jewish resistance had adopted *Our Town is Burning* as its anthem.<sup>1</sup>

*Our Town is Burning* is an example of two purposes that Yiddish music served during the holocaust. This song was an attempt by Gebirtig to make sense of what was happening to the people in the town of Przytyk, and it was a rallying cry of defiance to the people of Europe and the world to help the Jewish people of Poland.

Brothers, our poor town is burning! Raging winds are fanning the wild flames and furiously tearing and destroying and scattering everything. Everything is burning. And you stand by and look on with folded arms. You stand and look passively on while our town is burning. Our town is burning! Tongues of flames have almost consumed the whole town. And the raging winds howl. The moment is at hand when, God forbid, our town, along with all of us, will be turned to ashes by the flames, and only bare, black walls will remain, as after a battle. Our town is burning and only you can save it! Extinguish the fire with your very blood, if you must! Don’t just stand there, brothers, with folded arms. Don’t stand, put out the fire! Our little town is burning!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Our Town is Burning.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/music/detail.php?content=burning> (accessed December 12, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Mordecai Gebirtig, “Undzer Shtetl Brent,” in *Mir Trogn a Gezang!*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., edited by Eleanor Gordon Mlotek (New York: Education Department of the Workmen’s Circle, 1982), 232.

In many ways, Tupac Shakur's life paralleled the life of Mordecai Gebirtig. Like Gebirtig, Tupac was murdered. He died in 1996 in a drive by shooting in Las Vegas. During his short lifetime (1971-1996), he wrote songs that dealt with issues important to his community. The main issue found in his lyrics is the destruction of his community through racism, poverty and oppression. Like Gebirtig, Tupac calls for people to rise up and fight back. The following excerpt from "Holler if Ya Hear Me" is a good example of Tupac's call for violent action against the forces of oppression.

I bring truth to the youth tear the roof off the whole school

Oh no, I won't turn the other cheek

In case ya can't see us while we burn the other week

Now we got him in a smash, blast

How long will it last 'til the po' gettin mo' cash

Until then, raise up!

Tell my young black males, blaze up!

Life's a mess don't stress, test

I'm givin but be thankful that you're livin, blessed

Much love to my brothers in the pen

See ya when I free ya if not when they shove me in pen<sup>3</sup>

Tupac believed that the oppression of his people was primarily enforced through the police department. He even wrote a song entitled "Cop Killer" that advocated killing police officers. In Tupac's mind, the police could be directly compared to the Nazis regime that was killing people in Przytyk.

Even though the language in Tupac's song is quite different than Gebirtig's "Our Town is Burning," there are some similarities. For instance, they both use imagery of flames and burning. The

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<sup>3</sup> Tupac Shakur, *Holler if Ya Hear Me: Strictly 4 my N.I.G.G.A.S.* Jive Records, 1993. LP.

flames represent the anger and rage that they feel about what is happening to their people and how urgent it is that some kind of action be taken to defend their community.

This particular similarity is a good example of the role that music plays in the lives of humans in general. It helps people make sense of what is happening and is a powerful tool to call people to take action. Songs can encapsulate the emotional power behind the words and motivate people much better than words alone. Also it helps the listener remember what was said and carry it to others. In other words, it helps spread the word. This can be demonstrated by the fact that Gebirtig's "Our Town is Burning" became the anthem for Cracow's underground resistance movement in the 1940s. Even though this song was written in 1936, it was carried through time to the resistance that sprang up in Cracow in the early 1940's.

There are many other examples of music being used in this way. During the civil rights marches of the 1960's, "We shall Overcome" was sung at most marches. Also the whole folk revival movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's was focused on the civil rights movement. Songs by Woody Guthrie were revived much like Gebirtig's "Our Town is Burning" and applied to a new set of circumstances.

The appropriation of old music is another characteristic of human behavior in stressful situations. Appropriation serves two purposes. It comforts people and helps them define and hold their culture together in spite of tragic circumstances. It comforts people to know that this has happened in the past, but we got through it before and we will again, and it preserves their culture because it draws on culturally significant imagery that reminds people of who they are.

There are quite a few holocaust songs that have new words set to old songs. To Jewish people in ghettos or concentration camps, it was comforting to hear old songs that reminded them of home and at the same time spoke of their plight. This also helped them make sense of what was happening by putting these tragic events into the big picture of Jewish history.

A good example of this type of appropriation is a song that was sung in the Jewish ghetto of Vilna in Lithuania. “Rozinkes Mit Mandlen” (Raisins and Almonds) was sung by a boy as a prologue and epilogue in the musical revue *Moyshe halt zikh*. According to Shirli Gilbert, “*Moyshe halt zikh*, the final revue, was performed during the last phase of the ghetto, when the remaining Jews were being deported to labour camps in Estonia.”<sup>4</sup> The words to “Rozinkes Mit Mandlen” were changed to reflect the situation that the Jewish people found themselves in.

Well, we're now already at the end-  
We've enjoyed ourselves a little,  
And let's hope that an end will also come  
To the difficult night.  
Today we have given you  
All of everything,  
Everything with which we are rich  
We gave you, directly.  
Raisins and almonds-  
It's not bad  
It lifts the courage, it strengthens the spirit,  
We tell me, have I got it right.  
Raisins and almonds,  
May it be good for your health,  
To forget a little today  
Of our suffering and pain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 92.

Tupac Shakur also appropriated old music and used it in a new rap song. In 1993, Tupac released "Keep Your Head Up" on Interscope Records. Tupac borrowed the chorus from "O-o-h Child", a song that was written by Stan Vincent and originally released by the Five Stairsteps in 1970. Tupac's song encouraged African-American women to "keep your head up" in spite of what you have to face. The words that Tupac borrowed from this song are "O-o-h Child things are gonna get easier."<sup>6</sup> This song is very appropriate to borrow from because it draws upon African-American soul music and it fits in perfectly with the sentiment of "Keep Your Head Up." I'm sure that this song has powerful connections for Tupac and his audience to the early 1970's. Tupac's words are

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots

I give a holler to my sisters on welfare

Tupac cares, and don't nobody else care

And uhh, I know they like to beat ya down a lot

When you come around the block brothas clown a lot

But please don't cry, dry your eyes, never let up

Forgive but don't forget, girl keep your head up

These two songs are examples of the role that music plays in the big picture of human existence. Music can be a rallying cry of defiance like "Holler if You Hear Me" and "Our Town is Burning" or it can be a lullaby of encouragement for people who need a boost like "Raisins and Almonds" and "Girl Keep Your Head Up." This illustrates that music is a powerful tool of communication, and it is used in very similar ways in different cultures and across time.

Aleksander Kulisiewicz is another Jewish artist whose Yiddish folk songs are a close parallel to Tupac's rap music. He was a student in 1939 when he was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen

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<sup>6</sup> Stan Vincent, "O-o-h Child," Youtube.com, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVF4r3fLBrU> (accessed December 13, 2009).

concentration camp for antifascist writings. He wrote fifty-four songs while in the concentration camp about his experiences there. He was also a talented performer. He would travel around the concentration camp and perform clandestine concerts for the inmates in Sachsenhausen. There is a description of one of his performances by inmate André Gouillarde in *Music in the Holocaust*. According to him, “He raised his hands and a threatening fist. His voice was full of madness and hatred, then again pleading and often like the crying of a sick child. The audience gazed upon the soloist as if upon a statue of revenge. Several sick prisoners became powerless.”<sup>7</sup>

The words in “Koncentrak” (Concentration Camp) by Kulisiewicz match the cynicism and vitriol that can be found in many of Tupac songs. The words in this song are dripping with hatred and disgust. This song must have been like a bloodletting of anger for those who heard it inside the walls of Sachsenhausen. It must have given them a sense of commiseration with their fellow inmates and eased their pain for a little while.

Concentration camp, disgusting, disgusting dog,  
Devilish is his glory,  
Ah, why does a corpse need gentle gestures,  
In the camp jacket everything is shit-equal!  
No need for diplomas here, and the bishop sweeps the shithouse-  
Whether you are a slave or a general, you won't be the centre of the world!  
La la-la, la-la, la-la, la, and the bishop sweeps the shithouse . . .  
And I am also sweeping! Jum-pa didida didida didida jum-pa!  
Whether you are a slave or a general, you won't be the centre of the world!<sup>8</sup>

“Changes” by Tupac expresses the same kind of hatred and vitriol as “Koncentrak” by Kulisiewicz. The expression of these strong emotions is another facet of music’s place in our experience

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<sup>7</sup> Gibert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 121.

as human beings. Music allows people to purge themselves of these feelings and it offers comfort to others who might be going through the same thing. Others may hear these words and realize they are not the only one who feels this way. At the same time, these songs document and make sense of what is happening to others in the same situation. Music makes an individual's experience part of the communal experience.

Come on come on

I see no changes wake up in the morning and I ask myself

Is life worth living should I blast myself?

I'm tired of bein' poor & even worse I'm black

My stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch

Cops give a damn about a negro

Pull the trigger kill a nigga he's a hero

Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares

One less hungry mouth on the welfare . . .<sup>9</sup>

This particular song is another example of appropriation of previously recorded material. Tupac borrowed the chorus and piano accompaniment from "That's Just the Way It Is" by Bruce Hornsby.

Another motivation for rappers and Yiddish folk musicians during the holocaust was survival. For Yiddish folk musicians, music was a way to put food on the table, get cigarettes, or money. For many it was a way to get enough food to survive. There was one particular song that beggars used to sing in the streets of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. Inmate Paulina Braun said that "Have Compassion, Jew Hearts" was an omnipresent song with beggars in the ghetto.

Fenced in by walls, by wires,

The ghetto wrestles with death,

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<sup>9</sup> Tupac Shakur, *Changes: Greatest Hits* Interscope Records, 1998. CD.



People are little more than shadows,  
Twisted bones, dry flesh.  
You see people running, making a racket in the streets,  
Suddenly – you see a dead body.  
Eyes shine out of a pale face,  
And you hear a weak, quiet cry:  
Have compassion, Jewish hearts,  
Give me something to eat, or some money;  
Have compassion, Jewish hearts,  
I still want to live, I still want to see the world! . . .<sup>10</sup>

This song fulfills two goals that Yiddish musicians had during the holocaust. One was to document what was happening to them. The other goal was to survive. This song goes on for several more verses to paint a bleak picture of Warsaw ghetto life. It clearly documents things that people witnessed in the ghetto of Warsaw. As a song that was sung on the streets, it would have been very difficult to pass someone singing this song on the street and not give them whatever money you might have.

Yiddish musicians also used music to survive in Vilna's concentration camp. Kulisiewicz and others who did clandestine performances there would sometimes receive food or cigarettes from fellow inmates. Playing or singing for Nazi officers and camp guards could also be beneficial to inmates.

In the Warsaw ghetto, an orchestra was assembled that performed on a regular basis. The musicians were paid with a subscription fee that was collected from people in the ghetto. This fee would have been highly motivating to musicians who found themselves in the Warsaw ghetto. With this in mind, it is interesting to speculate about the philosophical reasons why music was important to

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<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 33.

Jewish people during the holocaust, but it is most like these practical matters that motivated many Jewish musicians to perform in Vilna and Warsaw.

Tupac was also motivated by practical matters such as money and survival. In an August 1994 interview, Shakur said, “A thug is an underdog, 1000 against one and still fighting. We have nothing. To make something out of nothing is what America’s about.” He went on to say, “. . . and here I am, a high school drop-out. I’m proud of that achievement. That’s what Thug Life is all about. If we’re not thugs, we don’t survive . . .”<sup>11</sup>

It is very revealing to compare artists from different backgrounds and times who find themselves in similar stressful situations. In the end, the motivation to continue to make music despite the circumstances is very similar. There are four basic motivating factors, and they are the need to make sense of what is happen to them, to find comfort, defy the circumstances, and survive. The musicians in this study drew upon their cultural background and resources to try and fulfill these needs. In the process, they helped define their culture and time, and they show us what it means to be human.

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<sup>11</sup> June Joseph, *Tupac: A Thug Life*, (London: Plexus, 2005), 49.