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### Guy Mendilow shares his love for Ladino music

By Charles Munitz  
Advocate correspondent

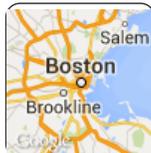


The Guy Mendilow Ensemble. Mendilow is on the far right.

PHOTO/GRETJEN HELENE

Guy Mendilow, a Bostonbased musician who specializes in the Ladino music of the Sephardim, was born in Jerusalem and spent part of his youth there, but also lived abroad during many of his formative years. His father, a professional jazz musician turned academic political scientist, traveled widely and, as a result, Guy had the opportunity to spend extended time in Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and the United States, which ultimately spurred both his interest in

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Ladino music and his capacity to interpret it through an understanding of multiple musical idioms.

During his youth in Jerusalem, Mendilow lived in a large Ladino neighborhood and he recalls passing by open windows and hearing "old women singing in gruff voices in a language I didn't understand." That language was Ladino, and it was not until Mendilow learned Spanish in Mexico that he had the opportunity to return to listening to that music with new ears and new understanding. "For anyone who is interested in stories as much as I am," he says, "these tales of love, kings and queens, and treachery on the open seas - often very dark - really hooked me."

Popularized versions of Ladino music in the Israel of Mendilow's youth had not captivated him - "please spare the schmaltz," he says - but later, when encountering more original field recordings from the Mediterranean communities in which the music evolved - Salonika, Sarajevo, Turkey - he came to appreciate its rich diversity. As well, he says "a little musical growing up" enabled him to appreciate "the serpentine quality of the music." With ancestors from Transylvania and Russia, Mendilow, an Ashkenazi Jew, was raised in a household in which it was ordinary for the family to make music together. In the 1990s, he went to Oberlin College as an undergraduate, attending the liberal arts program, not the music conservatory. Despite having studied classical piano in his youth, he was drawn neither to pre-professional classical nor jazz training tracks. His main instrument in college, interestingly, was the sitar and his major was Environmental Studies. (Mendilow's grandfather, curiously, had been a professor who had set up a department of English literature in a university in South India - years before and in that context made the not too-successful attempt to get his colleagues there to appreciate Western music.)

Later on, pursuing musical interests in his own mode, Mendilow attended, and received a graduate degree from The Longy School of Music in Cambridge.

Not unexpectedly, Mendilow's varied influences reflect a strong sensitivity to internationalism as well as to the Jewish tradition. Mendilow, an interpreter and performer with strong ethnomusicological interests, leads an international ensemble, including Israeli, Palestinian, Japanese and American members.

A scholar as well as a performer, Mendilow acknowledges the excitement of rediscovering original material and takes seriously the challenges and responsibilities of reinterpreting it creatively.

"I love the academic research that goes into this. It's also a challenge - learning, from

### Poll

As members of the state's congressional delegation ponder the Iran nuclear deal before a mid-September voting deadline, do you plan to contact them with your opinion on the deal?:

- Yes, and I will urge them to vote against it.
- Yes, and I will urge them to vote for it.
- No, I trust their judgment in these matters.
- Unsure, while I monitor the debate as it unfolds.

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the field recordings, what it may have been like in these communities to sing these songs and to get a sense of who might have sung them. Some are wedding songs, songs of the home; almost none were prepared for the stage. The challenge is to figure out what are the rights and responsibilities of the musician wanting to work with these songs while at the same time wanting to create something new based on them."

Equally devoted to bringing alive the drama of the many tales told in these songs and to creating new musical modalities from the original sources, Mendilow's ensemble embodies the creative interface between the curatorship of cultural treasures and an inspired reinvention of them.

Noting the delicate tension between reproduction and interpretation, Mendilow observes, "you don't just get to do whatever you want with material like this, you have an obligation to represent it respectfully." And yet, as a creative musician working with this material, it is simply the case that "the further towards being an artistic creator you are, the further away from being a cultural curator you become. That's just the way it is."

Nonetheless, with strong sensitivities to both sides of the curatorial creative divide, Guy Mendilow has created an inspired fusion of the two that is at once culturally rich and imaginative, lively and entertaining.

The Guy Mendilow Ensemble will perform "Tales From The Forgotten Kingdom" at Rockport Music, in the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, at 8 p.m. on Aug. 27. For tickets, visit [rockportmusic.org/guy-mendilow](http://rockportmusic.org/guy-mendilow).

Charles Munitz publishes the *blog* Boston Arts Diary.

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