

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: JEWGRASS BREAKDOWN: NEFESH
MOUNTAIN'S MUSICAL RESPONSE TO
ANTISEMITISM

Gabriela Judith Cameron, Master of Arts, 2023

Thesis Directed By: Dr. Fernando Rios, School of Music

This thesis delves into the cultural and political expressions of Nefesh Mountain, a Jewgrass band, through their 2021 album, *Songs for the Sparrows*. This work is a reaction to the upsurge in antisemitism during President Trump's administration (2016-2021). Nefesh Mountain taps into their diasporic Jewish heritage to highlight American inequalities using this musical genre. The study addresses the gap of scholarship on the intersection of bluegrass with politics, Jewish influence in bluegrass, and the Jewgrass genre. It underscores the need for critical analysis of Nefesh Mountain's innovative musical contributions.

By analyzing the allegorical imagery in *Songs for the Sparrows*, this thesis discusses how Nefesh Mountain engages listeners with politicized topics in both their music and branding. I also focus on the allegorical content within their album. It explores how the album's themes engage listeners in sensitive and politicized discussions, trying to balance bluegrass-oriented audiences and Jewish community-oriented audiences. The research also includes an examination of media coverage on the band, highlighting the Jewish influence in bluegrass music and the broader societal role of Jewgrass music in fostering social awareness and encouraging dialogue. The study suggests that Nefesh

Mountain employs an educational strategy, merging Jewish religious motifs with the bluegrass tradition. It underscores the capacity of bluegrass music to articulate political and socio-cultural issues, advocating for a trajectory that is more inclusive in the American music scene.

JEWGRASS BREAKDOWN: NEFESH MOUNTAIN'S MUSICAL RESPONSE TO
ANTISEMITISM

by

GABRIELA JUDITH CAMERON

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Advisory Committee:

Dr. Fernando Rios, Associate Professor, Chair

Dr. Siv Lie, Associate Professor

Dr. Lee Bidgood, Professor

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Part I: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

In the profound tapestry of human tragedy and resilience, music can emerge as a poignant response to devastating events, such as those that transpired at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. On the fateful Saturday morning of October 27, 2018, a man opened fire at congregants during a Shabbat service. The reverberations of this act of violence resonate deeply, etching it as the deadliest attack in the chronicles of North American Jewish history.¹ It was within this context of shared anguish and collective mourning that Nefesh Mountain, a Jewish bluegrass ensemble gaining prominence, sought solace in the transformative power of music. Their composition, "Tree of Life," represents a unique endeavor within the bluegrass genre, a heartfelt musical testament confronting the specter of antisemitism. With a commitment to fostering collective healing, bandmembers Doni Zasloff and Eric Lindberg reached out to their global community of fans through Facebook live, unveiling the song "Tree of Life" as a solemn prayer resonating with the experiences of those who have encountered discrimination.

As the first anniversary of the tragedy approached in 2019, Nefesh Mountain embraced the occasion as an opportunity to commemorate the lives lost and confront the pervasive issue of white supremacy. The band chose The Station Inn, a revered bluegrass establishment in Nashville, as the venue for a soul-stirring performance of "Tree of Life." In a poignant prelude to their rendition, Zasloff articulated the profound emotional depth embedded within the

¹ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Bennet Clifford, Lorenzo Vidino, "Antisemitism as an underlying precursor to violent extremism in American far-right and Islamist contexts," University of Nebraska Omaha National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, report, October 2020, 14.

composition, underscoring the significance of its message, and inviting both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals to bear witness to the weight of antisemitism's impact:²

We wanted to share with everybody tonight a song that Eric and I wrote the Sunday after the tragedy in Pittsburgh. A crime of hatred, terrible antisemitic nightmare. We woke up that next morning and as musicians ... I knew that I wanted to do something, so we woke up and wrote a song ... It is an offering of love. It goes out to anyone who has ever been subjected to hate ... There's so much hate in this world. The only way that we know how to do anything is to try to put music out and try to heal that with love and music. The song is called "Tree of Life."³



Figure 1. Doni Zasloff and Eric Lindberg performing "Tree of Life" at The Station Inn. Screenshot from [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43HfRV0VZwM).

The song "Tree of Life" holds significant importance in Nefesh Mountain's artistic journey, as it represents the band's first foray into political discourse through their music. This song serves as a contemporary prayer, engaging with the tumultuous landscape of American political

² Nefesh Mountain consistently seizes the opportunity to dedicate the prayer to individuals who have endured prejudice-induced suffering. By dedicating "Tree of Life" to both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals, Nefesh Mountain effectively communicates their intent to utilize their music as a means of addressing and condemning white supremacy.

³ Nefesh Mountain, "Nefesh Mountain | "Tree Of Life" - Live at the Station Inn.," September 9, 2019. YouTube Performance, 00:00 to 00:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43HfRV0VZwM>

life during the late 2010s marked by the tenure of the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021. In “Tree of Life,” the band condemns antisemitism while acknowledging its interconnectedness with white supremacy.

Despite the notable participation of Jewish musicians in the bluegrass community, there is an underlying trend of antisemitism that has historically been present within this sphere. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of academic research focusing on the expression of Jewish identity within this genre, partly attributed to subtle undercurrents of antisemitism. Additionally, the bluegrass community has long been characterized by a notable aversion to discussing contemporary political issues.⁴ For these reasons, Nefesh Mountain's decision to utilize bluegrass as a medium to raise awareness about antisemitism remains novel. The group harnesses the power of allegorical imagery in their songwriting, interweaving their Ashkenazi Jewish heritage with the storied migratory narrative that courses through the veins of Appalachian bluegrass music. By carefully navigating the boundaries imposed by their dual role in both Jewish and bluegrass communities, the band delivers a musical exploration that attempts to challenge existing norms. Nefesh Mountain's "Tree of Life" and the album it hails from, *Songs for the Sparrows*, employ a stylistically hybrid form of bluegrass, progressive bluegrass, as a powerful vehicle to engage with contemporary political discourse.⁵ Moreover, the political commentary of *Songs for the Sparrows* discusses the antisemitism prevalent in the 2010s in the United States media zeitgeist. *Songs for the Sparrows* engenders an important dialogue within the bluegrass community regarding the discrimination faced by Jews in certain pockets of America.

This thesis critically analyzes a significant milestone in the development of bluegrass music

⁴ The broader bluegrass community avoids political discourse within the music. Additionally, the bluegrass community avoids political discourse in the public eye when conducting music promotion.

⁵ Progressive bluegrass, rooted in Appalachian string band music, blends traditional bluegrass with diverse genres like jazz, rock, classical, and Irish music. This fusion will be explored in greater detail later in the thesis.

through a close examination of *Songs for the Sparrows*. Through the incorporation of Jewish diasporic themes into bluegrass—a folklorized Appalachian diasporic musical genre—Nefesh Mountain's *Songs for the Sparrows* captures the elaborate experiences of the North American Jewish diaspora within a contemporary context. Nefesh Mountain provides commentary not only on the increasing occurrence of antisemitic incidents during the Trump administration but also on the broader societal context of antisemitism. They have become the first band within bluegrass to tackle this crucial concern through a recorded medium. As a result, *Songs for the Sparrows* actively contributes to the broader diversification and expansion of both contemporary Jewish identity expressions and the bluegrass genre. I argue that Nefesh Mountain's artistic endeavors epitomize a transformative and didactic intervention within the bluegrass community, opening an unprecedented avenue to combat antisemitism.

Scholarship on the Politics of Bluegrass Music

Nefesh Mountain has captured the attention of academics. Music scholar Andrew Klaus discusses the band's impact on the growing and evolving body of North American Jewish musical traditions in his article titled “Nefesh Mountain, 'Jewgrass,' and the Building of an American Jewish Experience.”⁶ Historians Shirli Brautbar, Peter La Chapelle, and Jennifer Hutchings explore Jewish contributions and influence in country music in their article, “The Valley of the Dry Bones: The Presence and Perseverance of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in Country Music and Bluegrass.” They argue that “in recent years, country and bluegrass Jews have taken a largely religious and liturgical turn as singer-songwriters in these genres.”⁷ This

⁶ Klaus, “Nefesh Mountain, 'Jewgrass,' and the Building of an American Jewish Experience.”

⁷ Brautbar, La Chapelle, and Hutchings, “The Valley of the Dry Bones: The Presence and Perseverance of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in Country Music and Bluegrass.”

study shining a spotlight on Nefesh Mountain's journey, and placing it in context with other Jewish country artists like Joe Buchanan and Kinky Friedman. However, the focus on Nefesh Mountain examines solely on their liturgical music, and does not highlight the political minutiae of Nefesh Mountain's role in the bluegrass space. While Klaus and Brautbar, La Chapelle, and Hutchings contribute valuable insights on Nefesh Mountain, their scholarly work primarily highlights the band's Jewish identity rather than critically analyzing their musical output. This thesis seeks to address this gap by providing an analysis of the band's compositions.

My research also expands the existing scholarship by examining *Songs for the Sparrows*' political commentary within the bluegrass community. Though Nefesh Mountain is widely known and respected in Jewish Contemporary musical communities,⁸ it is important to note that the group is gaining notoriety in the bluegrass scene as well. *Songs for the Sparrows* allows multiple interpretations, catering to the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of both Jewish and non-Jewish bluegrass listeners. As the band gains prominence within the bluegrass community, their listenership expands to include individuals who do not identify as Jewish. They present their political message in a lyrically ambiguous manner, following the practice common in bluegrass, much of bluegrass lyricism has historically relied on allegorical imagery to respond to the rapid change of industrialization and post-industrialization. Nefesh Mountain adopts this practice to convey their message about antisemitism.⁹ *Songs for the Sparrows* invites different understandings, contingent upon the specific cultural cohorts that audience members belong to. For instance, a Jewish listener may perceive the track "A Sparrow's Song" as a narrative addressing the challenges of diaspora, while a non-Jewish listener may interpret it as a broader

⁸ The participatory music played in synagogues, camps, and Jewish religious music is frequently referred to Jewish Contemporary Music or JCM. See Kligman for more information.

⁹ Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, 5.

condemnation of hatred. This nuanced approach enables the band to convey a wide-ranging message regarding the issue of antisemitism.

In addition to the sparse literature surrounding Nefesh Mountain, the existing body of music scholarship that explores the relationship between bluegrass music and politics remains limited.¹⁰ Within the bluegrass community, it is widely acknowledged that the topic of politics is to be deliberately avoided or omitted from discussions.¹¹ Political scientist Justin Acome characterizes the bluegrass community's avoidance of political discourse as a process of "depoliticization."¹² In this context, he contends that negotiations of existing power within and around bluegrass are obscured by the cultural practices of individuals who actively shy away from overt forms of conflict and divergence. Acome further posits that the bluegrass community is united by a shared sense of nostalgia, suggesting that political discussions disrupt this nostalgia-driven cohesion.¹³

Critical theorist Jordan Laney additionally observes the conspicuous absence of political

¹⁰ In the context of this essay, the term "politics" is employed to encompass activities involving the exertion of influence on government actions and policies in addition to endeavors aimed at obtaining and maintaining power. There exists a vast terrain for exploration pertaining to the inter-communal political dynamics within the realm of bluegrass, which presents an avenue for future research endeavors. Additionally, Nefesh Mountain offers insights into the politics of identity, as they draw attention to acts of antisemitism and hatred. While Nefesh Mountain refrains from explicitly referencing specific political officials or parties, their ideological leanings can be discerned as left leaning based on the language employed to articulate their ideas, such as advocating for the cessation of all forms of hatred, addressing the prevailing societal divisions, and advocating for the promotion of love.

¹¹ Recording industry executives commonly advise bluegrass musicians that they should abstain from incorporating political discourse into their artistic expression. Through my ethnography, it became evident that numerous members of the community remain uncertain about the reasons underlying this aversion towards political dialogue. Participants within the community frequently cite the backlash experienced by the musical group The Chicks as a prominent example, illustrating the potential repercussions that bluegrass musicians may face when engaging in political commentary.

Formerly known as The Dixie Chicks, the musical group faced a considerable onslaught of media backlash in 2003 following their disparaging remarks about former President George W. Bush. This incident resulted in the band being subjected to a widespread blacklist, effectively impeding their career trajectory. To the best of my knowledge, The Chicks represent a unique case wherein they openly expressed their discontent with the political landscape, consequently bearing the brunt of unprecedented backlash in recent musical history. In the wake of observing the aftermath that unfolded for The Chicks, numerous artists subsequently opted to exercise restraint and abstain from making explicit political commentaries. Accordingly, many of my interlocutors place significant emphasis on the expectation for musicians to solely concentrate on their musical endeavors, relegating political matters to the periphery.

¹² Acome, "Nonsense politics," 1.

¹³ Acome, "Bluegrass Nonsense Politics," 5.

engagement within the bluegrass festivals, emphasizing that negotiations of power at bluegrass festivals surface through encounters devoid of grassroots community building, becoming banal as a result of business-oriented networking and social hierarchies.¹⁴ Moreover, Laney delves into the ethos of nostalgia that permeates the bluegrass milieu, identifying nostalgia as an inherent operative when observing such hierarchical exertions of power. Nostalgia can be a useful tool when constructing a musical canon, and by employing nostalgia as a tool among bluegrass festival participants, people are more likely to adhere to a certain set of behaviors and performance practices. By using bluegrass festivals as a field site, she observes the creation and recreation of popup, transnational communities, and identifies nostalgia as the mechanism that festivals use to produce, and subsequently reproduce themselves.

Building on this idea of nostalgia, and understanding nostalgia's inextricable reliance on temporality, Laney underscores how the festival grounds are used as sites of temporal convergence. Because bluegrass festivals are built to last only one weekend, yet occur annually, Laney feels that bluegrass festivals consistently deconstruct, reshape, and reframe multiple temporalities. Given that nostalgia occupies a central position in bluegrass performance, any explicit references to contemporary politics in bluegrass settings run counter to established performance practices, engendering a paradoxical tension.¹⁵

Despite Laney's and Acome's contributions to the field of bluegrass scholarship, there remains a notable absence of musicologists and ethnomusicologists who have specifically delved into the nuances surrounding the bluegrass community's engagement with political expression.

¹⁴ The banality that Laney refers to is represented in characteristically surface level relationships within the participants of the bluegrass community. Participants easily rely on discussions of musical gear, family roles, bluegrass history. Many participants in the broader bluegrass community often avoid interpersonal discussions related to expressions of identity.

¹⁵ Laney, "Recreating and Deconstructing the Shifting Politics of (Bluegrass) Festivals," 16.

Laney has astutely observed a prevailing dynamic in her fieldwork, politics shape bluegrass and thus, the bluegrass community. I add that the passive decision of bluegrass community members to maintain an apolitical veneer, described by Acome as "depoliticization," is a deliberate political choice collectively made by the broader bluegrass community. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that existing scholarship was published prior to the significant political shift that occurred in the United States during the mid-to late -2010s, thereby unable to account for the impact of this period in national politics on the bluegrass community.

Irrespective of the party-line political orientations of these musicians, the political terrain of the late 2010s—intertwined with the lasting effects of the Trump administration—has illuminated bluegrass musicians' political expressions.¹⁶ Recent developments exemplify the changing landscape of political engagement within the bluegrass community.¹⁷ It is crucial to acknowledge the significant transformation that has occurred in the relationship between bluegrass music and politics within a relatively compressed timeframe. By employing ethnographic methodologies to investigate and comprehend this change, I aspire to empower participants and scholars of bluegrass music to grasp the magnitude of this paradigm shift, which

¹⁶ I would also note that the decision to express a political stance, as well as the debates over its appropriateness, often reflect generational differences. A growing number of young bluegrass artists are choosing to be politically vocal within these circles.

¹⁷ Mandolinist Sam Bush assumed a proactive role by organizing protests on the steps of the Tennessee state capitol, driven by concerns over the distressing upsurge in gun violence afflicting the state. Similarly, bluegrass songwriter Melody Walker spearheaded a protest event in response to legislation targeting drag performances and transgender individuals, culminating in the formation of a Grateful Dead tribute band aptly named "Grateful Drag.". This notable event garnered over \$4000 in mutual aid funds, specifically designated to support gender-affirming care for transgender youth. In stark contrast, a incident in 2021 involved mandolinist Ricky Skaggs, who publicly aligned himself with the Q-Anon movement—a radically conservative religious group that propagated the unfounded claim of Donald Trump's electoral victory being "stolen" by Joe Biden in the 2020 election. This public political stance elicited backlash from left-leaning segments of the bluegrass community, with many individuals denouncing Skaggs for his remarks. Despite its classification as a rock band, the Grateful Dead has exerted a substantial influence on the bluegrass community. Notably, Jerry Garcia, a prominent figure within the Grateful Dead, was renowned for his proficiency in banjo playing and maintained a close friendship with pioneering mandolinist David Grisman. Consequently, numerous enthusiasts of bluegrass music identify themselves as devoted "Dead Heads," denoting their allegiance to both the Grateful Dead and the bluegrass genre.

continues to evolve.

Methodology

This thesis largely draws upon methodologies employed by the fields of ethnomusicology and musicology. My journey begins with my own experiences as a music practitioner in Jewish communities, where I engaged with community members and observed the impact of Jewish-related bluegrass music. These experiences laid the groundwork for my later ethnographic work on Nefesh Mountain. In studying Nefesh Mountain, I attended several of their live shows between 2020 and 2023, predominantly in bluegrass-centric venues rather than Jewish communal spaces. During these events, I interacted with both the band and the audience, seeking a wider perspective on how Nefesh Mountain is received.

I spent considerable time with the band at the 2022 International Bluegrass Music Association Business Conference (IBMA), conducting informal interviews with Doni Zasloff and Eric Lindberg. My communication with Nefesh Mountain extended over emails and text messages from 2022 to 2023. Given their extensive touring schedule and the challenges of traveling with a toddler, our communications outside IBMA were brief and occasionally constrained by their limited availability. Nevertheless, Nefesh Mountain is aware of this research and expressed their endorsement for it during our meeting in 2022.

I also conducted digital ethnography by analyzing Nefesh Mountain's presence on social media, and their audience's reception to Nefesh Mountain's social media presence. This digital ethnography also entailed an examination of media discourse surrounding Nefesh Mountain in both Jewish media publications and music media publications online. I also analyzed user comments on Nefesh Mountain's social media pages to better understand the audience demographic, and the audience response. The intricacies of these methods are specified later in

this thesis.

In addition to my ethnographic work, I adopted a historical lens to document the evolution of Jewgrass music throughout the 20th century. My research relies heavily on the historical work of Benjamin Krakauer and T.J. Pertz, who offer crucial insights into the bluegrass scene in the latter half of the century. Given that the history of Jewgrass has not been extensively documented in academic circles, my analysis draws on a variety of primary sources, both digital and in print. I also interviewed Fred Bartenstein, president of the IBMA Foundation and a noted bluegrass historian, who provided valuable context on the development of Jewgrass music. Additionally, my discussions with Ira Gitlin, a prominent bluegrass banjoist and educator, shed light on the New York bluegrass scene of the 1970s and the early days of progressive bluegrass. While Nefesh Mountain is the main focus for this study, there are several Jewish-infused bluegrass bands, presently and over the course of history, that explore many different intersections of Jewishness and bluegrass. I encourage those interested to listen to artists like Jacob's Ladder, Zoe & Cloyd, Margo Leverett and the Klezmer Mountain Boys, and Andy Statman.

In this research, I employ the use of standard notation to communicate Nefesh Mountain's musical ideas. Standard notation is not the prominent form of musical communication in bluegrass. Bluegrass music is predominantly an orally transmitted genre and only relies on tablature for educational purposes. Transcriptions are provided by mandolinist, vocalist, composer, arranger, my loving husband, Nicholas Cameron.

This analysis of Nefesh Mountain is grounded in the disciplines of ethnomusicology, musicology. I utilize concepts from Thomas Turino's *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, particularly his ideas about participatory and presentational music, to explore how Nefesh Mountain fits within this framework. Siv Lie's work in Romani music studies, and her

text *Django Generations*, has been influential in helping me understand how music can both dismantle and reinforce diasporic memory. And lastly, I am inspired by the broader scholarly work of Lee Bidgood and his book *Czech Bluegrass: Notes from the Heart of Europe*. Bidgood uncovers negotiations of space and place, applying an intersectional, collaborative approach when analyzing socialization practices of Appalachian-derived string band music communities. I also engage with interdisciplinary scholarship from fields of political science, sociology, Jewish studies, literature, and psychology throughout this work.

Numerous bluegrass scholars simultaneously function as both musicians and researchers in the field. As a result, this document is enriched by my embodied experiences of performing bluegrass music, particularly as I navigated my ethnography. Being an active practitioner in the bluegrass music space has granted me “insider” opportunities. Through my process, the banjo transcended its role as an instrument, becoming an essential analytical and social tool. Playing and performing bluegrass music allowed me to better understand Nefesh Mountain’s performance on a technical level, adding a material dimension to this understanding. This hands-on approach proved to be invaluable. The intricacies of timbre, rhythm, and melody are often elusive when translated into words. Yet, through playing, I was able to capture a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of progressive bluegrass music. This intersection of practice and theory offered me a deeper insight into the intricate social politics and dynamics that pulsate within a bluegrass space.

North American Jewish Identity Expressions in Popular Music

Nefesh Mountain and the genre of Jewgrass, which emphasizes the expression of Jewish identity—be it liturgical or secular/ethnic—through its lyrics and arrangements, offer a

compelling lens through which to explore the multi-dimensional expressions of Jewish North American identity. Scholarly work on Jewish musical identity has predominantly centered around klezmer music.¹⁸ In undertaking this research, my aim is to underscore the need to venture beyond the limitations of Klezmer scholarship and delve into a broader panorama that reflects the kaleidoscope of Jewish North American identity.¹⁹ While there exists a wealth of scholarship pertaining to Klezmer and its revival in the late 1970s, many Jewish North Americans today articulate their contemporary Jewish identity through diverse musical forms known as vernacular musics.²⁰ Examples of vernacular music include jazz, pop, hip-hop, country, folk, Americana, and musical theater. Hence, it is of utmost importance that scholars closely examine the manifestation of Jewish identity within vernacular musics.

¹⁸ See Slobin, *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots*, Netsky, *Klezmer: Music and Community in Twentieth Century Jewish Philadelphia*, and Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity*.

¹⁹ There is a prevailing predisposition that Ashkenazic Jewishness is a dominant form of Jewish expression in North America. This has a number of cultural consequences surrounding expectations of Jewish expression. For example, many Jewish people turn to klezmer music, an Ashkenazic Yiddish wedding music tradition, as a means to connect with Jewish folk culture. But many Jewish people believe that klezmer music is the only form of Jewish folk music that exists. Much of klezmer and Jewish liturgical music is performed using minor modes. Debbie Friedman introduces new ways of making Jewish folk music using major modes. Nefesh Mountain builds on this expression of Jewishness in music by using Appalachian folkloric textures to sing and play Jewish music. Thus, I believe that Nefesh Mountain's music is in fact a Jewish folk music, regardless of its harmonic quality. Some disagree.

One day, I gave a lecture to undergraduate students about Nefesh Mountain and Jewgrass music. Many months later, I ran into a Jewish student who attended that lecture. We discussed Jewish music, and the student brought up my lecture about Nefesh Mountain. She admitted that she was disappointed in the subject matter of my lecture. I asked what she was expecting to learn about in the lecture, and she shrugged and said, "I guess Jewish folk music or something." I pressed further, "what do you mean by Jewish folk music?" She said, "I don't know, like the music you'd hear in the Old Country or in the streets of New York City." At this point I knew exactly what the student was trying to say, but I kept pressing, "what kind of music is that?" and finally she said, "klezmer."

This story is only one of many. I include this light-hearted example as anecdotal evidence that supports the overwhelming cultural perception that klezmer music is the only form of Jewish folk music. This is not true. Jewgrass, like klezmer, is a valid and legitimate practice of Jewish folk music. Why? Simply because Jewgrass is Jewish, and because Jewgrass is a folk music.

²⁰ "Vernacular music" is a term utilized by scholars for the critical study of specific forms of popular music. I first learned of this term from Benjamin Filene, who learned of it from music historians H. Wiley Hitchcock and John Rockwell. Filene uses "vernacular" to suggest songs employing a musical language that is current, familiar, and manipulable by ordinary people. He asserts that in contrast to fine art or classical music, vernacular only demands minimal formal training and material resources to produce it (although extensive formal training and mind-numbing resources can be applied to it.) I add to Filene's description that several forms of electronic pop music (synth pop, hip-hop) exist in the category of vernacular musics as well, since the materials required to create these musics are mass-manufactured and easy to acquire. It is important to note that while Filene uses "vernacular music" to describe folk, it does not only encompass folk music. For more information see Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 2000.

Nefesh Mountain and *Songs for the Sparrows* serve as a fruitful case study to examine the broader panorama of Jewish North American musical identity for many reasons. Nefesh Mountain's relationship to communal Jewish musical scenes (such as Jewish Contemporary Music and Jewgrass, both of which are explained in the following paragraphs) shows that the band has a strong sense of belonging within the Jewish communities of which they are part. Further, with *Songs for the Sparrows*, the band is currently one of the only vernacular musical groups to produce music that engages with the antisemitism prevalent in the historical period of 2016 to 2021. It should also be emphasized that Nefesh Mountain does not fall into the category of a klezmer band.²¹ By excluding Klezmer as a label that describes their sound, the group is making an active decision that they wish for their Jewish American identity to exist outside of that scope.

Jewgrass Scholarship and Definitions

One of my goals in this research is to bring attention to the limited amount of scholarship concerning public musical expressions of North American Jewish identity. This will be accomplished by focusing on the significance of Jewish bluegrass music, commonly referred to as Jewgrass.²² Jewgrass represents a relatively obscure genre within bluegrass music that has received limited scholarly attention. This distinctive musical style encompasses the integration of Jewish identity expressions, such as the utilization of Hebrew or Yiddish lyrics, allusions to Jewish ethnic identity, and occasional incorporation of musical idioms derived from Jewish-

²¹ In interviews, when asked if they wish to incorporate more klezmer into their sound, Eric and Doni express that they are more interested in including elements of Americana, bluegrass, and jazz instead of Klezmer. The band feels that because they were born and raised in North America, along with their parents and grandparents, they feel a more direct connection to the American folkloric music of bluegrass.

²² Jewgrass is a portmanteau of Jewish and bluegrass..

related musical traditions.²³ I would also point out that Jewgrass typically thrives in participatory musical settings, where the distinction between audience and performer is blurred, and active participation is emphasized. In contrast, Nefesh Mountain, being a presentational ensemble — one that maintains a more pronounced performer-audience divide and emphasizes virtuosity — positions them as an anomaly within Jewgrass.²⁴ *Smithsonian Magazine* contributor Jen Miller defines Jewgrass as the fusion of bluegrass music with Hebrew lyrics.²⁵ Miller's definition is limited in scope, failing to capture the subtleties of musical texture, instrumentation, arrangement, and, most critically, the social dynamics involved. Historian Shirli Brautbar further highlights the transformative nature of Jewgrass, noting its role in facilitating a sense of ownership among numerous Jewish musicians and songwriters, consequently empowering them to explore religious themes within the realm of country and bluegrass music.²⁶ Historian Fred Bartenstein traces the origins of Jewgrass to the 1960s when it initially served as a disparaging moniker coined by Southern bluegrass players.²⁷ Contrastingly, the term also became a wry insider joke among New York-based musicians during that period. Bartenstein credits Jewish musician Kinky Friedman for re-appropriating the term, subsequently embracing it for his alt-country ensemble in the early 1970s.²⁸

²³ Klaus, "Nefesh Mountain, 'Jewgrass,' and the Building of an American Jewish Experience," 102.

²⁴ Thomas Turino defines participatory and presentational musics in his text *Music as Social Life*. Turino defines these terms: Participatory performance is a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles. The primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role. Presentational performance refers to situations where one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 24.

²⁵ Jennifer Miller, "Jewish Bluegrass," *Smithsonian Magazine*.

²⁶ Brautbar, La Chapelle, and Hutchings, "The Valley of the Dry Bones: The Presence and Perseverance of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in Country Music and Bluegrass," 197.

²⁷ Personal communication, 2022.

²⁸ Kinky Friedman is a novelty songwriter, comedian, author, and politician from Texas. He served as the bandleader of the ensemble "Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys." Albums in Friedman's discography include, *Old Testaments & New Revelations* (1992), and *They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore* (2005). Friedman is

Jewgrass, whether in communal jam settings or more formal performance spaces, evokes a sense of shared cultural heritage and communal engagement among its active participants.

Jewgrass' presence within the communal spaces of Jewish gatherings bears witness to the ever-evolving nature of North American musical practices and their intrinsic role in shaping and reflecting contemporary North American Jewish identities. Nefesh Mountain started their Jewgrass journey by playing Jewish Contemporary Music, which also is participatory and emphasizes community. By merging bluegrass music, a presentational practice, with the sing-along nature of religious Jewish Contemporary Music, Nefesh Mountain presents their role in Jewgrass as presentational with participatory elements.

Aaron Klaus argues that the confluence of Jewishness and bluegrass music is characterized by a seamless fusion, exhibiting shared values such as a deep appreciation for family, reverence for ancestral heritage, a commitment to oral tradition, and a nuanced blend of joy and sorrow.²⁹ Klaus's analysis also draws attention to the spiritual resonance shared by Jews and bluegrass musicians, stemming from their connection to mountains, be they the lush highlands of Jerusalem Ridge in Kentucky³⁰ or the biblical hills of Old Jerusalem.³¹ A central and defining aspect of Jewgrass, according to Klaus, is the mutual longing for a "return" that is inherent in both bluegrass and Jewish identity.³² This longing, specifically among North American Jews,

viewed as a controversial figure by many. His performance is characterized by lewd and vulgar observations of Jewishness in Northern America. For literature about Kinky Friedman, see Mary Lou Sullivan, *Everything's Bigger in Texas: The Life and Times of Kinky Friedman*, (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard LLC), 2017. and Edward Stone, "'Ride 'Em, Jewboy': Kinky Friedman and the Texas Mystique," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 23-42.

²⁹ Klaus, "Nefesh Mountain, 'Jewgrass,' and the Building of an American Jewish Experience," 102.

³⁰ Bill Monroe's, founder of bluegrass music, place of origin.

³¹ It is important to acknowledge that among many Jewish North Americans, the longing for Israel as a homeland does not universally resonate. Instead, for many Ashkenazi immigrants, diasporic yearning originates from a sense of longing for the ancestral homelands in Eastern Europe. The historical displacement and the rupture of connections with their Eastern European roots form the foundation of their diasporic longing, underscoring the nuanced and diverse nature of Jewish diasporic experiences in North America. Nefesh Mountain use *Songs for the Sparrows* to illustrate diasporic longing for Central Europe.

³² Klaus, 102.

stems from a shared history of economic migration. Bluegrass originated as a musical tradition forged in pursuit of industrialized economic opportunities,³³ while many North American Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States, fleeing pogroms, in search of economic prosperity. Historian T.J. Pertz adds to this discourse by observing that the diasporic roots of many Jewish people draw them to bluegrass music, allowing them to forge a meaningful connection between the two cultural cohorts.³⁴ I add that in recent history, Jewgrass has emerged as a flourishing form of participatory music, finding its place within Jewish communal spaces, including Jewish Community Centers and synagogues. This phenomenon encompasses the engagement of both semi-professional and amateur musicians, contributing to the vitality of the Jewgrass scene.

Jewgrass serves multiple purposes within these communities, functioning as a vehicle for multi-generational Jewish education, community organizing, and the celebration of a distinctive North American Jewish identity. Jewish Community Centers and synagogues have expanded their musical programming to incorporate Appalachian folk music, such as bluegrass and old-time jams. In such settings, traditional Jewish liturgical songs, including "Hava Nagila" and "Oseh Shalom," as well as the works of Debbie Friedman—a cantor who integrated elements of the folk revival into Jewish liturgical music, contributing to the evolution of Jewish Contemporary music—are performed with bluegrass instruments. The repertoire at Jewgrass jams reflects a fusion of Jewish and bluegrass musical traditions. These jams also frequently integrate songs from the traditional bluegrass repertoire, including Flatt & Scruggs' "Blue Ridge

³³ Bluegrass emerged from Appalachian migration from rural to urban areas as a consequence of industrialization. For more information see: Fred Bartenstein, *Industrial Strength Bluegrass: Southwestern Ohio's Musical Legacy*, 2020.

³⁴ Pertz, "'The Jewgrass Boys': Bluegrass Musics' Emergence in New York City's Washington Square Park 1946-1951."

Cabin Home," in addition to traditional fiddle tunes like "Blackberry Blossom."³⁵

My Ethnographic Encounter with Jewgrass

Though I spent my youth as a Southern Jew raised in the Piedmont of North Carolina, I first heard of Jewgrass when I was gigging as a bluegrass musician in Asheville. Tucked away in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, and the largest city in the region, Asheville is known for its vibrant arts scene, Southern fusion cuisine, and abundant microbreweries. I have always been aware of Asheville's reputation for its left-leaning, politically liberal population. For these reasons, the city has become a tourist destination and offers an attractive place for transplants to live. In my time living there, many Jewish individuals moved to Asheville from places like New York, Los Angeles, and Colorado.

Asheville's geographical location, amenities, and steadily growing population set the stage for the city's budding progressive bluegrass scene.³⁶ Tourism contributes considerably to the Asheville city economy, bringing visitors from across the United States to partake in Asheville's numerous amenities. Asheville has cultivated some notable progressive bluegrass bands such as Steep Canyon Rangers, Balsam Range, and emerging jam-grass band Fireside Collective.³⁷ I spent my early twenties playing the brewery circuit with my former bluegrass band, Mama

³⁵ Funnily enough, within Jewgrass circles, it is not uncommon for musicians to interject the occasional Christian Gospel tune during jam sessions. Much of bluegrass is tied to practices of Southern Christianity. Gospel music is heavily connected with the genre. A notable example is the popular gospel song "I'll Fly Away," famously featured on the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* movie soundtrack. I recall an instance during my time leading a children's music class at the JCC in Asheville when, running out of Jewish material, I was asked by the JCC director if I could play "I'll Fly Away." This anecdote highlights a significant aspect of these jam sessions: the religious content of the music is not necessarily of central importance to the participants. While Jewgrass jams occur within Jewish spaces, they do not seek to replicate or supplant religious ceremonial practices. Instead, what characterizes these gatherings as Jewgrass is simply the presence of Jewish individuals engaging in bluegrass music-making.

³⁶ Historian Fred Bartenstein, personal communication.

³⁷ Jam-grass is a type of bluegrass music that is heavily influenced by jam band culture, such as the Grateful Dead, or Phish.

Danger.³⁸

In 2018, I noticed the Jewgrass participatory subculture in Asheville when I began working as an early childhood educator at the Asheville Jewish Community Center (JCC). I used my banjo to lead educational activities in the classroom. Parents and administrators routinely thanked me for my music and shared that they felt a regional, Appalachian, connection to their Jewishness when I played liturgical songs on my banjo. Though Jewgrass was a colloquial term used for some time, JCC members quipped, "Jewish bluegrass? Why not call it Jewgrass!" Thus, when I first heard the term "Jewgrass," it was one of endeared irony.

During my time at the Asheville JCC, the term "Jewgrass" emerged as a lighthearted moniker embraced by our community. I observed firsthand the profound impact this unique, community-cultivated iteration of Jewgrass had on its members. Parents recounted to me that their children played Jewgrass at home using toys as instruments. I watched three-year-olds on the playground sing Jewish songs together around imaginary campfires. One young student pretended that a small broom was his banjo; he even attached a clothespin to the broom, signifying that he, like me, was using a capo.

Shortly after I started working at the Asheville JCC, Penny White, the head song leader, extended an invitation for me to join her in weekly Shabbat and Havdalah sessions. It was through months of collaboration and mentorship with Penny that I began to explore and connect with various Jewish organizations in the Western North Carolina region. Soon enough, I found myself picking my banjo and leading songs for Jewish camps, synagogues, and community organizations. The ball was rolling. For the next several years, my Friday nights were booked and my summers chronically over-scheduled. I balanced progressive bluegrass gigs with Mama

³⁸ Mama Danger consisted of myself, my (now) husband, Nick Cameron, and Eitan Strauss-Cohn. All of us happen to be Jewish.

Danger and Jewgrass song leading gigs with the greater Western North Carolina Jewish community.

These series of events led me to discover Nefesh Mountain's music. It was through Nefesh Mountain that I realized Jewgrass existed not only as a communal, participatory music but also as a form of presentational music. Despite not being local to Appalachia, Nefesh Mountain gained considerable popularity within the Asheville Jewish community. They offered something that participatory Jewgrass couldn't provide: a high-fidelity recorded medium of Jewgrass. This opened up new avenues for Jewish Appalachians to engage with Jewgrass beyond the domain of communal music making. Upon my discovery of Nefesh Mountain's music, I came to the realization that Jewgrass was not confined to Appalachia alone. As I delved deeper into the genre, I uncovered additional Jewgrass groups in cities like Denver, Boston, and Washington D.C. Thus began my personal journey as an ethnomusicologist, driven to unmask the rich history, intricate mechanisms, and profound sociopolitical implications of Jewgrass music.

Characteristics of Progressive Bluegrass and its Scene

In the 1960s, amidst the folk music revival, progressive bluegrass emerged as a dynamic offshoot of its traditional counterpart.³⁹ It stands out as a genre that has evolved from traditional bluegrass by integrating elements from external musical genres such as jazz, classical, rock, and Irish music. This genre emphasizes original compositions. Additionally, progressive bluegrass

³⁹ When describing progressive bluegrass, the term "progressive" is intended to signify modernity. However, the term "progressive" is also often used to describe a left-leaning political ideology. I do not think that it is a coincidence that progressive bluegrass generally holds left-leaning political views. Scholarship on this topic is limited. For related scholarship pertaining to progressive bluegrass see, Notable contributions to scholarship on this subject can be found in the works of Lornell (2020), Rosenberg (1986) Cassell (2021), and Krakauer (2018). Krakauer, Benjamin. "A 'Traditional' Music Scene and Its Fringes: Experimental Bluegrass of 1970s New York City," *American Music* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 164.

encompasses covers of contemporary popular music, as well as innovative interpretations of established bluegrass pieces.⁴⁰ Progressive bluegrass artists prioritize creative expression. The use of musical influences outside of bluegrass results in a more flexible rhythmic sensibility. Moreover, progressive bluegrass may incorporate instruments not traditionally associated with bluegrass performance, such as cello, flute, five-string fiddle, electric bass, and drums (traditional bluegrass instruments identified below). Improvisation is also prominent in progressive bluegrass.

Progressive bluegrass serves as an umbrella term encompassing musical works that build upon the established repertoire of traditional bluegrass.⁴¹ Traditional bluegrass is characterized by its meticulous adherence to meter, utilization of male vocal harmonies in intervals of thirds and sixths, and frequent implementation of an AABB song structure.⁴² This style also places significant emphasis on improvisation and includes both vocal and instrumental performances. The ensemble typically consists of standard bluegrass instruments such as the banjo, mandolin, fiddle, guitar, upright bass, and dobro.⁴³ The term "traditional bluegrass" refers to music that adheres to the performance practices established in 1945 by influential artists such as Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, Flatt & Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers.⁴⁴ Noteworthy contemporary artists specializing in progressive bluegrass include Béla Fleck, Sam Bush, Sierra

⁴⁰ As an illustration, during the 1960s, The Country Gentlemen, a bluegrass band from Washington D.C., included a rendition of Manfred Mann's popular song "Fox on the Run" in their repertoire. Over time, this rendition has gained recognition and is now considered a bluegrass standard. Similarly, in contemporary times, ensembles such as Punch Brothers have embraced the practice of covering songs outside the bluegrass genre, such as Tame Impala's "Let it Happen."

⁴¹ The classification of bluegrass "subgenres" is an area of growing interest within the field of bluegrass studies. See scholarship mentioned in footnote 37 for an elaboration on these topics. For more accessible and publicly available discussions on bluegrass genre variants, one can refer to Lessons With Marcel's YouTube video essay titled "A Guide to Bluegrass History by Subgenre." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yotEBfB8h34>

⁴² For a more detailed explanation delving into the technical mechanics of bluegrass, see Cade Botts' 2023 thesis, "Bluegrass: A Harmony."

⁴³ The dobro is a resonophonic guitar that is played with a slide.

⁴⁴ Contemporary examples of traditional bluegrass include Del McCoury, The Po Ramblin' Boys, and emerging act the Kody Norris Show.

Hull, Molly Tuttle, Billy Strings, and Nefesh Mountain.⁴⁵

Geography plays a significant role in both traditional and progressive bluegrass. Traditional bluegrass originated in the upland Southeastern United States and was introduced to Nashville by Bill Monroe.⁴⁶ Moreover, the distinct banjo playing style attributed to Earl Scruggs, which is synonymous with traditional bluegrass, originated in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.⁴⁷ In contrast, progressive bluegrass emerged in the northeastern United States through the efforts of "Yankee" musicians seeking to engage with southern Appalachian folk music. These regional influences continue to shape the genre, with progressive bluegrass predominantly performed in the Northeastern, Midwestern, and Western regions of the United States. Traditional bluegrass, on the other hand, remains primarily concentrated in the upland Southeastern United States and Appalachian region. It is not uncommon for musicians to relocate to areas that align with the type of bluegrass music they prefer to play. It is important to note that progressive bluegrass musicians build their musicianship and technical prowess by learning from the canon of traditional bluegrass.

In the midst of jam sessions, soundchecks, and live gigs, bluegrass community members immerse themselves in fervent discussions, fiercely deliberating the subcategorizations of bluegrass genres.⁴⁸ This, in part, is due to the genre's rapid expansion and musical exploration. Such subcategories include newgrass, new acoustic, dawg music, mash, neo-traditional bluegrass, jamgrass, and chambergrass, among others. Progressive bluegrass serves as the overarching term that encompasses these categories. However, there is a general consensus

⁴⁵ In 2022, I saw Béla Fleck perform with his band My Bluegrass. When introducing his music, he quipped, "You know, they say there are two kinds of bluegrass. There's traditional bluegrass, and then the 'other' kind. Well, we play the 'other' kind."

⁴⁶ These descriptions of traditional bluegrass draw heavily from Neil Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History*.

⁴⁷ Gordon Castelnero and David Russell, *Earl Scruggs: Banjo Icon*, 6.

among bluegrass musicians and scholars that progressive bluegrass is predominantly defined by its deviation from traditional bluegrass norms.

An observable trend is emerging within progressive bluegrass, wherein numerous artists have recently been more open about embracing left-leaning ideologies, incorporating their political beliefs into their musical expressions and public personas. This departure from the established norms of traditional bluegrass, including its avoidance of political discourse, finds its roots in the politically charged climate that pervaded the United States during the latter half of the 2010s, coinciding with the ascension of President Donald Trump to power. It was during this period of sociopolitical upheaval that a surge in musical output occurred, giving voice to artists who sought to engage with the prevailing political landscape. Prominent figures within this left-leaning contingent include Punch Brothers, whose critically acclaimed album *All Ashore* (2018), along with Billy Strings' release *Home* (2019), garnered prestigious GRAMMY awards, showcasing their discerning examinations of the Trump administration.⁴⁹ It is worth noting, however, that akin to the approach adopted by Nefesh Mountain, these musicians employed allegorical imagery as a means of conveying their messages, opting for metaphorical channels rather than overtly addressing the issue of white supremacy. This allegorical imagery encourages the listener to delve into the material without being deterred by the potentially divisive and politically charged subject matter.

Jewishness and Progressive Bluegrass

Extant scholarship suggests that progressive bluegrass as a movement in the 1970s can be

⁴⁹ As of 2023, Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway have released their second album "City of Gold," featuring Tuttle's haunting murder ballad titled "Goodbye Mary." The song vividly recounts the tragic tale of a young woman who attempts to give herself an abortion after being denied proper care. This is written in response to the United States' Supreme Court's overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

attributed to the aspirations of young Jewish participants who sought to actively engage with Southern Appalachian folk music. Historian T.J. Pertz sheds light on the substantial involvement of Jewish youth in the mid-20th century in New York City's bluegrass scene,⁵⁰ and ethnomusicologist Benjamin Krakauer explores the 1970s emergence of one of the earliest progressive bluegrass bands, Breakfast Special. Though Krakauer does not discuss the band's relationship to Jewishness outright, when examining the Breakfast Special catalogue, and speaking with interlocutors familiar with this period, it is clear that band members held affinity for their Jewish identity in their music.⁵¹ It still remains that bluegrass music scholarship surrounding this period does not outright address the Jewish heritage of many pioneers of progressive bluegrass.

There exists a precedent of antisemitism circulating within the bluegrass community, with numerous interlocutors sharing anecdotes of Bill Monroe and other prominent musicians making antisemitic remarks towards bluegrass community members of Jewish heritage. As a result, the term "Jewgrass" emerged in the 1950s as a pejorative label for Yankee musicians in the Northeast who played bluegrass.⁵² However, in recent times, Jewgrass has been reappropriated by groups like Nefesh Mountain to proudly embrace and celebrate their Jewish heritage.

Because "Jewgrass" was used as a derogatory term targeting Northern, Jewish bluegrass musicians, I suggest that musicians who faced instances of antisemitism during the folk-revival period of the 1960s-1970s opted to break away from the traditional confines of bluegrass embodied by Southern musicians. Instead, Northern musicians ventured into a diverse range of

⁵⁰ T.J. Pertz, "The Jewgrass Boys: Bluegrass Music's Emergence In New York City's Washington Square Park, 1946-1961," 2005.

⁵¹ Krakauer, Benjamin. "A 'Traditional' Music Scene and Its Fringes: Experimental Bluegrass of 1970s New York City." *American Music* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 163-193. This work does not discuss the band's Jewishness explicitly.

⁵² Fred Bartenstein, personal communication.

music using acoustic instruments as their sonic palette. This evolution may have played a role in shaping the development of progressive bluegrass as a distinct genre. As a result, numerous Jewish musicians broke away from the confines of the traditional bluegrass canon and embarked on expanding the boundaries of the music. Notable early progenitors of progressive bluegrass from Jewish backgrounds include Andy Statman, Marty Cutler, David Grisman, Richard Shulberg, and others. Many non-Jewish musicians were instrumental in the development of progressive bluegrass as well.

The late 20th-century folk revival was profoundly influenced by the descendants of immigrant families who were actively involved in socialist politics in the early 1900s. T.J. Pertz notes that young Jewish teens, frequenting early bluegrass jam sessions at Washington Square Park in New York City, were children of socialist activists.⁵³ Historian Robbie Lieberman highlights the multi-generational influence of this activism.⁵⁴ The parents of Jewish kids playing early bluegrass were part of New York's labor movement in the 1900s, engaged with organizations like the Jewish Socialist Federation, the Yiddish newspaper *Freiheit* (The Forward), and The Workmen's Circle (now The Worker's Circle). These groups offered communal resources, fostered a secular Jewish community, and supported striking workers. *Freiheit* also promoted communal music, like mandolin orchestras and Yiddish chorales.⁵⁵ Additionally, many Jewish socialists were active in trade unions like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Industrial Workers of the World, which also encouraged communal musicking.⁵⁶

⁵³ Pertz, 2005.

⁵⁴ Lieberman, 1989.

⁵⁵ Jon Kalish, "A Mandolin Orchestra's Labor Roots," *The Forward*, May 30, 2014, <https://forward.com/schmooze/199190/a-mandolin-orchestras-labor-roots/>

⁵⁶ Industrial Workers of the World, *The Industrial Workers of the World: Songs to Fan the Flame of Discontent*, Spokane, WA: Industrial Workers of the World, 1905.

The folk revival of the 1960s was part of a larger trend that spanned over a century, where Appalachian folk music was strategically used for collective political resistance.⁵⁷ Prior to this revival, during the 1950s, bluegrass struggled to maintain its popularity against the rising tide of rock-n-roll. Exiting this period, a new generation, largely children of socialist activists, began to reinvigorate this genre in college settings and nightclubs. One of these progenitors was Ralph Rinzler, a key figure in the folk revival and co-founder of the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival. Rinzler played a pivotal role in shaping the legacy of bluegrass music.⁵⁸ As a New Jersey teenager, Rinzler developed an interest in Bill Monroe's work and later pursued a career in folk music, playing the mandolin. His educational background and deep involvement in the folk scene led him to become Monroe's manager, significantly reviving Monroe's dwindling career. Before Rinzler's involvement, Monroe, known for his temperamental nature and strained relationships with colleagues and former bandmates, was struggling to maintain his reputation. Rinzler's influence was instrumental in reshaping the collective memory of Bill Monroe, Rinzler called Monroe the "Daddy of Bluegrass," though today, the bluegrass community opts for a more formal epithet, the "Father of Bluegrass."⁵⁹ People like Ralph Rinzler, raised by parents steeped in socialist activism, often spent their childhoods at socialist Jewish summer camps, participating in communal music-making.⁶⁰ Folk revival icons like Pete Seeger played a significant role in these camps, with many of the songs he popularized still being performed there today. This background likely influenced the 1960s folk revivalists, imbuing communalist principles in their approach to music, reflecting the values they were raised with. Pertz notes of this demographic,

⁵⁷ See Filene, 2005.

⁵⁸ The rest of this paragraph draws largely from Ron Roach's, "The Story of Bluegrass:" Carlton Haney, Bill Monroe, and Redemption Drama in the First Bluegrass Festivals," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 20, no. 1, 2014.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lieberman.

“As strong as the affinity of Jews for the Left was the affinity of the Jewish Left for folk music.”

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Expanding on Pertz's ideas, I suggest that the younger generation gravitated towards folk music as a respite from the pervasive political activism surrounding them. For these young individuals, playing music was an opportunity to step away from their usual organizing responsibilities. As children, they were not fully conscious of the folk revival's connection to activism. Pertz writes, “Bluegrass, with its strongest thematic interests in love, landscape, and labor (the act of working itself, not labor unions), did not press an ideological agenda onto its adherents,” and instead the Washington Square Park players found solace in bluegrass music’s “anti-commercial sentiments” and thus furthered the “players’ appreciation of the otherwise apolitical genre.”⁶² For these youngsters, playing music was a casual Sunday afternoon pastime. While they didn't explicitly use folk music as a tool for political organizing, it's highly likely that the communalist values ingrained in them influenced their approach to music-making. Their social interactions, initially fostered through labor organizing, laid the foundation for a unique community ethos. Consequently, these teens' approach to creating music was shaped by the principles of community organizing.

The development of progressive bluegrass in the late 20th century, linked to the urban folk revival and its subsequent generations, suggests that this group of young Jewish folkies played a role in integrating left-leaning political ideologies into the genre. The notable Jewish presence in the 1960s folk revival, particularly among those with socialist organizing backgrounds, likely infused the bluegrass community with communalist principles stemming from socialist activism. Moreover, these socialist viewpoints have significantly shaped the emergence of progressive

⁶¹ Pertz, 33.

⁶² Pertz, 35.

bluegrass as a genre.⁶³

In the contemporary context, there are many participants in the progressive bluegrass community who hail from this more urban, Jewish immigrant lineage. While socialist labor activists were the parent generation to the 1960s folkies, the participants and consumers in the 1960s folk boom are the parent generation of today's progressive bluegrass participants. For example, Béla Fleck has openly discussed his Jewish immigrant working-class heritage in interviews.⁶⁴ Nefesh Mountain stands as an important exception as the first progressive bluegrass band in a commercial setting to openly explore Jewish life and culture in their music.

The preceding paragraphs have explored scholarship on bluegrass and politics, Jewgrass, and progressive bluegrass in order to lay the groundwork for my examination of Nefesh Mountain. This band serves as a compelling subject for exploring the intersections of political engagement with bluegrass music and Jewgrass music, and the foregrounding of Jewish expressions in popular music. In the ensuing sections, I review the band's pre-2021 discography, illuminating their evolutionary trajectory leading to their pivotal album, *Songs for the Sparrows*. Moreover, a distinct facet of this investigation entails an exploration of the musical content of Nefesh Mountain's works, a dimension that has yet to be thoroughly addressed in existing scholarly discourse concerning the band. I trace the key milestones, influences, and transformative moments that have shaped Nefesh Mountain's artistic progression. This contextualization is instrumental to comprehending the band's creative development, which culminates in *Songs for*

⁶³ Take, for instance, Earl Scruggs' expression of dissent against the Vietnam War, evidenced by his participation in a charity concert in Washington D.C. during the 1970s. Surprisingly, this significant event has received scant attention in the broader narrative of bluegrass history. The details and ramifications of this episode are complex, warranting a thorough investigation that could itself form the basis of a separate thesis. I look forward to examining case studies such as these in my future research endeavors.

⁶⁴ Curt Schleier, "How A Jewish Kid From The Upper West Side Became The World's Best Banjoist," *Forward*, November 9, 2018, <https://forward.com/culture/music/413972/bela-fleck-banjoist-how-jewish-kid-from-upper-west-side-won-22-grammys/>.

the Sparrows. I subsequently turn toward my analysis of *Songs for the Sparrows*, where I outline the broader narrative in the track list and offer an in-depth examination of two key songs from the album, “A Sparrows Song,” and “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank).”

This study goes beyond just addressing the gap in scholarship about contemporary Jewish involvement in bluegrass. It aims to uncover a byproduct of the dynamic, multi-generational impact of the Jewish Left's political activism in the United States. While Nefesh Mountain themselves were not directly engaged in labor organizing, the generations preceding them — those who influenced Nefesh Mountain and their forebears — were involved. Consequently, the North American Jewish heritage of Nefesh Mountain played a significant role in shaping the behaviors and perspectives that have influenced the band. Such influences were instrumental in Nefesh Mountain's attraction to Appalachian string band folk music, knowingly or unknowingly, and their integration of this music with political activism, a key aspect of their Jewish identity. This research explores the interplay of political involvement with both bluegrass and 'Jewgrass' music, emphasizing how Jewish expressions in popular music are linked to the legacy of the American Jewish Left.

Part II: Nefesh Mountain's Music

Nefesh Mountain Discography

An analysis of Nefesh Mountain's pre-2021 discography contextualizes the significance of their album *Songs for the Sparrows*. In the period spanning from 2016 to 2020, the band's artistic output revolved around themes of Jewish religious identity, achieved through the incorporation of bluegrass elements into Jewish liturgical music. In 2016, Nefesh Mountain introduced their debut record, *Nefesh Mountain*, which drew inspiration from the contemporary Jewish musical canon influenced by cantor Debbie Friedman. The compositions featured on *Nefesh Mountain* were specifically crafted to encourage participation, emphasizing their communal nature. Subsequently, the band released their second album in 2018, titled *Beneath the Open Sky*, which saw a deliberate expansion of their songwriting themes to encompass facets of Jewish secular identity alongside the exploration of Jewish liturgical music. This album included the song "The Narrow Bridge," conceived in response to the presidential election of Donald Trump, signifying Nefesh Mountain's incorporation of political themes within their musical oeuvre. Throughout both albums, Nefesh Mountain collaborated with renown bluegrass musicians, establishing a seamless integration within the domain of progressive bluegrass, thereby further solidifying their artistic trajectory.

Nefesh Mountain, 2016

In *Nefesh Mountain*, the band presents bluegrass interpretations of Jewish liturgical melodies such as "Modeh Ani" and "Mi Chamocha." The primary initial objective of *Nefesh Mountain* was

to faithfully reproduce and share songs within Jewish communal settings.⁶⁵ The songs, such as “Mi Chamocha” and “Esa Enai,” follow an AABB musical structure. This format enhances audience participation and group singing in live performances by providing distinct auditory section markers, making the songs more accessible and easier for listeners to join in.

The participatory quality of Nefesh Mountain's music can be ascribed to the individual musical trajectories of the band members prior to the formation of the group. Doni Zasloff, known for her work as "Mama Doni," had previously established herself as a singer-songwriter specializing in Jewish Contemporary music for children.⁶⁶ During this time, Eric Lindberg, with his background in jazz and bluegrass guitar, had joined Zasloff's band as a touring member, allowing for their mutual acquaintance and eventual romantic connection. The amalgamation of Zasloff's experience as a Jewish song leader and Lindberg's proficiency in jazz and bluegrass guitar facilitated the inception of the band and the development of their debut album.

Nefesh Mountain draws inspiration from the established musical repertoire of Debbie Friedman, a cantor associated with the Reform movement. In Judaism, the Reform movement emerged from efforts to align Judaism with modern life and Western philosophical trends. It is characterized by political liberalism, gender equality, active participation in interfaith dialogues, and religious progressivism, including the acceptance of ordination of women and LGBTQ individuals as rabbis and cantors.⁶⁷ Debbie Friedman, inspired by these Westernized ideals, infused Jewish liturgical music with 1960s folk-revival songwriting techniques.⁶⁸ By incorporating elements reminiscent of artists such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, Friedman's

⁶⁵ I used some of Nefesh Mountain's liturgical songs in my own days of song leading.

⁶⁶ Brautbar et al., 202.

⁶⁷ Union for Reform Judaism, “What is Reform Judaism?” *Union for Reform Judaism*, 2023.

⁶⁸ Brautbar et al., 195.

innovative songwriting transformed the landscape of Jewish liturgical music.⁶⁹ Similar to Seeger, Friedman's musical compositions emphasize collective participation and prioritize communal singing. Her music continues to resonate within Reform congregations, exerting a profound influence on the Jewish Contemporary song leading tradition.⁷⁰ Building upon Friedman's impactful contributions, Nefesh Mountain actively contributes to the expanding canon of Jewish Contemporary song leading.

Nefesh Mountain's innovative approach extended beyond the fusion of Jewish liturgy and bluegrass elements, as the band actively sought the collaboration of esteemed bluegrass artists such as Mark Schatz on bass and Sam Bush on mandolin, who served as session musicians for the record. Sam Bush is particularly renowned for shaping the performance aesthetics of progressive bluegrass through his group Newgrass Revival. These aesthetics include extended solos, a rock-infused style, and a casual appearance marked by long, shaggy hair and everyday streetwear. Newgrass Revival played a crucial role in transforming both the sound and visual style of progressive bluegrass music. By collaborating with Bush and Schatz, Nefesh Mountain not only established a strong rhythmic base and developed a unique, forward-looking sound but

⁶⁹ Elaine Woo, "Debbie Friedman, self-taught Jewish folk singer, dies at 59," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 2012, accessed July 2, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-debbie-friedman-20110111-story.html>.

⁷⁰ Debbie Friedman, a prominent voice in Jewish liturgical music, can also be regarded as a political figure with profound implications. The introduction of the renowned Reform Jewish prayer, "Mi Shebeirach," by Friedman carries a significant political and queer history. Referencing *My Jewish Learning*, the "Mi Shebeirach" "prays for physical cure as well as spiritual healing, asking for blessing, compassion, restoration, and strength, within the community of others facing illness as well as all Jews, all human beings." As a queer woman herself, Friedman witnessed the devastating impact of the AIDS crisis on her circle of friends towards the latter part of the 20th century. During that time, the "Mi Shebeirach" prayer was seldom recited during Shabbat services. Driven by a desire to address the immense suffering experienced by the queer community, Friedman embarked on a mission to reimagine the "Mi Shebeirach" as a folk song that emphasizes collective healing. Although its essence remains a prayer for healing, Friedman infused the "Mi Shebeirach" with a folk melody and implemented Western harmony. Today, this rendition of the "Mi Shebeirach" is recited in Reform synagogues during every Shabbat service prior to reading the Torah. It is through Friedman's solidarity with the queer community that the trajectory of Jewish liturgical expression in North America underwent a lasting transformation, despite this origin story often being overlooked. See Gregg Drinkwater, "Queer Healing: AIDS, Gay Synagogues, Lesbian Feminists, and the Origins of the Jewish Healing Movement," *American Jewish History*, vol. 1, no. 4 (October 2020): 605-629.

also paid tribute to the pioneers of the progressive bluegrass scene.⁷¹ While the album *Nefesh Mountain* may not have received substantial recognition within the bluegrass community specifically, I posit that the deliberate inclusion of such renowned musicians established a trajectory that propelled the band's subsequent endeavors within the bluegrass community.

Songs on *Nefesh Mountain* have been used participatory contexts, several factors led to the band to showcase their music in a more presentational manner. Firstly, recording in a secluded, high-fidelity studio allowed for precise orchestrations that highlighted their virtuosity. Secondly, their touring expanded beyond Jewish community venues to include social clubs and conventional performance spaces. I believe these factors influenced the band to adapt their music, flexibly tailoring it to the specific demands and engagement styles of each venue and its audience. The body of compositions showcased in their first album extends beyond the function of communal participatory music making and demonstrates that it also can thrive within a presentational setting.⁷² This versatility, allowing the music to be presented in both

⁷¹ The distinctiveness of progressive bluegrass is often attributed to the prominent role of the mandolin. In traditional bluegrass music, the mandolin's function involves striking the strings on the off-beats, resulting in a rhythmic effect known as a "chop." Drawing inspiration from Bill Monroe's influential mandolin playing style, contemporary mandolinists have carried forward the tradition of placing the "chop" slightly ahead of the off-beat, thereby creating a rhythmic phenomenon referred to as "drive." This rhythmic technique is estimated to be approximately 1/32 ahead of the off-beats, contributing to the dynamic and energetic nature of the genre.

The term "drive" remains a subject of ongoing debate, serving as a descriptor for the rhythmic feel unique to bluegrass music. Attempting to articulate the essence of "drive" is akin to attempting to describe a new color; its exact definition eludes us, yet its presence is unmistakable when experienced.

Nevertheless, I suggest that progressive bluegrass mandolin diverges from the traditional bluegrass approach by eschewing the characteristic "chop" technique. Renowned progressive mandolinists like Sam Bush, David Grisman, and Chris Thile often opt to play directly on the beat when performing their original compositions. This deliberate choice reflects a rhythmic sensibility influenced by rock music, imparting a more relaxed and flexible rhythmic feel.

Moreover, the advent of recording technology advancements played a pivotal role in the emergence of progressive bluegrass. The transition from tape-based recording to Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) grids introduced the use of metronomic "click" tracks, enabling musicians to synchronize their timing precisely. This digitization of the recording process has impacted the overall execution of "drive" in bluegrass music. As a result, the ethos of progressive bluegrass retains this distinctive element of performance practice, maintaining a balance between tradition and innovation. For more about "drive," see Joti Rockwell's "Drive, Lonesomeness, and the Genre of Bluegrass Music," thesis, University of Chicago, 2007.

⁷² For an overview of identifying the sonic qualities of both participatory and presentational music, see Turino's *Music as Social Life* Chapter 2.

presentational and participatory contexts, has played a pivotal role in establishing Nefesh Mountain's standing within the spheres of Jewish and bluegrass music alike.

Beneath the Open Sky, 2018

Nefesh Mountain's second album, *Beneath the Open Sky* (2018), marks a shift in the band's repertoire. It expanded their approach by incorporating original compositions that foreground Jewish identity through their lyrics, in addition to offering progressive bluegrass arrangements of Jewish liturgical songs. This diverged from the path set by their eponymous debut album, which primarily features arranged traditional Jewish liturgical pieces. While the utilization of Jewish liturgical text remains a prominent facet of their creative endeavors, *Beneath the Open Sky* ventured further into an exploration of Jewish identity in a secular sense. Some songs, such as "Oseh Shalom," directly incorporate Jewish liturgical texts and melodies, thus grounding the music within a specifically Judaic context. Other compositions, like "Eretz's Reel" and "Kitchen Gal," draw inspiration from the performance practices associated with Appalachian traditional fiddle tunes, a common feature of bluegrass canon, demonstrating a confluence of musical traditions. It is noteworthy that Nefesh Mountain also includes their own interpretations of traditional American folk songs, exemplified by their rendition of "I Want to Hear Somebody Pray."

A noteworthy track on *Beneath the Open Sky* is "The Narrow Bridge," marking Nefesh Mountain's first venture into addressing political issues in their music. The song is lyrically inspired by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), a figure whose teachings continue to influence Judaic studies. Rabbi Nachman's saying, "The whole world is a very narrow bridge,

and the most important thing is not to be afraid at all,”⁷³ resonates through the track. Drawing from this perspective, Nefesh Mountain uses a didactic Jewish approach to comment on national politics, specifically expressing dissent towards the Trump Administration. Lindberg mentions, “We wrote the song in December of 2016 – just after the election. It wasn’t meant to be a political song, but the country felt so angry with each other and divided. We were responding to that.”⁷⁴ While “The Narrow Bridge” was their first attempt to explore political themes in their music, Nefesh Mountain's explicit engagement with the topic of antisemitism emerged with their subsequent album, *Songs for the Sparrows*.

The release of *Beneath the Open Sky* contributed to Nefesh Mountain's public reception, solidifying their stature as a Jewish bluegrass ensemble within the bluegrass music industry. This album garnered considerable critical acclaim, featured in music publications such as *The Bluegrass Situation*, *Billboard*, and *The Rolling Stone*. It is worth mentioning that Lindberg secured a sponsorship from Deering Banjos during this pivotal period, underscoring Nefesh Mountain's standing in the industry.

Beneath the Open Sky offered more opportunities for the band to collaborate with longstanding members of the bluegrass community. Sam Bush was again featured on this record, and with him: Jerry Douglas on dobro, David Grier on guitar, and Tony Trishka on banjo. Tony Trishka—another key figure in the development of progressive bluegrass coming out of the 1970s in New York City—boasts a career that has since spanned over half a century. Trishka’s fluttering virtuosic picking, and his staunch commitment to the study of instrument’s history, has

⁷³ Shalom Rosenberg, "A Narrow Bridge: Rabbi Nahman of Breslov's Faith in a World of Doubt," *Tradition* 55, no. 4 (Fall 2023): 1-14.

⁷⁴ Dauphin, “Nefesh Mountain on Combining Bluegrass with Jewish Identity.” In an interview with *Billboard*, Lindberg shared that the song was “inspired by America’s bitter rapport with itself during the 2016 Presidential campaign” “We wrote the song in December of 2016 – just after the election. It wasn’t meant to be a political song, but the country felt so angry with each other and divided. We were responding to that. If you turn off the news, you realize there are beautiful people.”

been lauded for expanding the scope of what the five-string bluegrass banjo can acoustically accomplish. Tony Trishka's music was so influential that numerous budding banjoists of today still try to meticulously replicate Trishka's style. Trishka continues to foster this community of aspiring progressive bluegrass banjoists. One of Trishka's biggest fans was also a former student of his, a young Jewish teen from Manhattan named Béla Fleck.⁷⁵

Press Coverage for *Songs for the Sparrows*

By analyzing the press coverage surrounding the release of *Songs for the Sparrows*, one can gain an understanding of Nefesh Mountain intentions with their album. Nefesh Mountain uses press coverage as an opportunity to communicate their message combating antisemitism.

Without such deliberate unveiling of their album's intentions through the press, the band's underlying message would be prone to greater ambiguity. While *Songs for the Sparrows* employs nuanced details to construct a broader narrative encompassing diaspora and migration, the press substantiates the album's political dimension, establishing a connection between its release and the contemporary political landscape from which it emerged.

Songs for the Sparrows adopts a nuanced approach to political commentary due to the various considerations and limitations Nefesh Mountain encounters while navigating both Jewish and bluegrass communities. A significant portion of Nefesh Mountain's Jewish audience is not familiar with performance practices associated with bluegrass. Conversely, the broader bluegrass community often lacks familiarity with Jewish cultural practices and identity. Nefesh Mountain demonstrates adaptability in their performances, tailoring their approach to suit each context in which they play. For example, when performing in Jewish religious spaces such as Shabbat

⁷⁵ At the 2023 Blue Ridge Banjo Camp Fleck personally spoke extensively about Trishka's influence on his playing.

services, the band modifies their musical repertoire by incorporating a greater emphasis on canonical liturgical music that aligns with Judaic settings.

When Nefesh Mountain performs in bluegrass spaces, they adjust their performance style to encompass two primary objectives. Firstly, by adopting practices closely tied to bluegrass—like specific instrumentation, arrangements, nature-referencing lyrics, stage banter, and repertoire—these musicians can engage with and resonate more effectively within the bluegrass community. Second, the band takes on an educational role, utilizing their performances as opportunities to enlighten the bluegrass audience about various facets of Jewish life. The band effectively navigates the “depoliticized” nature of bluegrass, enabling them to convey their message regarding antisemitism while complying with the artistic norms and conventions of the genre.

On June 11th, 2021, Nefesh Mountain released *Songs for the Sparrows*. The album premiered at number 6 on the Billboard Bluegrass Album chart, and their instrumental track "Big Mountain" reached the number 1 spot on the Bluegrass Today chart. *Songs for the Sparrows* received recognition in prominent music publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Bluegrass Today*. In addition, Nefesh Mountain also received support press coverage from Jewish publications such as *Hey Alma* and the *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, these publications highlight their blend of musical styles and Jewish influences.

Before analyzing the press coverage of "Songs for the Sparrows," it's crucial to understand the steps involved in acquiring media attention for an up-and-coming band in the music industry. This context is essential as it reveals Nefesh Mountain's role in influencing media perception of their music. Bands, often in collaboration with a publicist, pen a press release before an album launch. This press release provides information for publications to craft their stories about the band. Musicians are often told by managers, agents, and executives, that features in these

publications are critical to their career success. These features present an opportunity for bands to reach a broader audience.

Conversations with Nefesh Mountain's audience, particularly in bluegrass circles, have shown that many discovered the band through media coverage, indicating the effectiveness of this approach in gaining industry momentum. Additionally, I have reviewed numerous press articles about *Songs for the Sparrows*, finding that many share similar text and talking points. This suggests that music journalists discussing Nefesh Mountain likely referred to a press release. For this survey, I've selected a few representative publications for discussion.⁷⁶

A fundamental dichotomy arises in the reportage of *Songs for the Sparrows* within music media and Jewish media. Given Nefesh Mountain's substantial audience encompassing both bluegrass and Jewish spheres, the band has undertaken the task of customizing their press outreach to align with the readership of these respective types of publications. By observing the press surrounding *Songs for the Sparrows*, one can glean insight regarding how the band navigates both Jewish and bluegrass communities, and about the priorities upheld by Nefesh Mountain's listeners.

For instance, Jewish publications—which typically cover North American Jewish popular culture—praise *Songs for the Sparrows* as an embodiment of North American Jewish artistic expression. In *Hey Alma*, the headline states, “A Jewish Bluegrass Band is Here for You,” highlighting the band's concerted efforts to foster a sense of closeness within the Jewish community.⁷⁷ The headline in *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)* spotlights Nefesh Mountain's

⁷⁶ This paragraph is informed by my experience in creating press releases for music publications. For additional insights, refer to Donald Passman, *All You Need to Know About the Music Business*, (New York: Free Press, 2009). Although I approach "how to succeed in music business" guides with caution, Passman's perspective as a music attorney and his established reputation in the industry provide relevant context for understanding the landscape in which Nefesh Mountain is aiming to advance.

⁷⁷ Chloe Sarbib, "A Jewish Bluegrass Band Is Here for You." *Hey Alma*, June 11, 2021.

composition "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" by saying, "Anne Frank's famous optimism gets a bluegrass twang in Nefesh Mountain's new song."⁷⁸ Such headlines prioritize the band's celebration of Jewish identity. Both publications emphasize Nefesh Mountain's fusion of identity, blending twang and Jewishness, two seemingly disparate entities.

Jewish media's focus on Nefesh Mountain predominantly highlights their fusion of Jewish and bluegrass elements, rather than their anti-antisemitism activism. This emphasis is somewhat unexpected, as it might be assumed that a Jewish audience would be more engaged with content related to combating antisemitism. The decision to spotlight Nefesh Mountain's distinctive blend of identities could be a choice by the publications, independent of the band's own preferences. An examination of numerous Jewish cultural publications reveals a consistent trend towards this thematic focus. It's possible that the band itself may have influenced this narrative as part of their publicity strategy. Ultimately, Nefesh Mountain's portrayal in these publications appears to play a significant role in redefining the contours of North American Jewish musical identity.

Exploring beyond Nefesh Mountain's portrayal in Jewish media, I shift focus to music journalism, where the band utilizes their influence to inform a wide audience about antisemitism. This approach indicates that their stance against antisemitism is a key aspect of their public image, extending beyond just Jewish-focused media. By addressing antisemitism in a wider context, Nefesh Mountain seems to be strategically expanding their reach to include non-Jewish audiences. This move aligns with current liberal-leaning media trends that emphasize identity politics, setting the band apart in terms of their performance identity. While it is possible that music publications may have a significant Jewish readership, such an audience is not the primary focus of these outlets. Ultimately, Nefesh Mountain's engagement with the topic of antisemitism

⁷⁸, Gabe Friedman, "Anne Frank's Famous Optimism Gets a Bluegrass Twang in Nefesh Mountain's New Song." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 9, 2020.

serves multiple purposes: it promotes their music, broadens their audience, and ensures their relevance in a constantly evolving media landscape.

The *Rolling Stone* headline, "How Nefesh Mountain are Fighting Anti-Semitism with Traditional Bluegrass,"⁷⁹ signifies a departure from the Jewish cultural identity emphasis typical in Jewish publications, focusing instead on the band's political activism. This framing by *Rolling Stone*, which caters to a broad readership including non-Jewish and non-bluegrass audiences, positions Nefesh Mountain at the intersection of North American Jewish evolution and the contemporary bluegrass genre. However, *Rolling Stone's* focus on the band's anti-antisemitism activism carries the risk of pigeonholing Nefesh Mountain's public image. Additionally, *Rolling Stone's* lack of familiarity with the bluegrass community might lead to misrepresenting Nefesh Mountain's role, not fully acknowledging their long-standing Jewish involvement in bluegrass, and inadvertently portraying them as a "traditional" bluegrass band. This overlooks the musical aesthetics of Nefesh Mountain, and also progressive bluegrass writ large. Known for their in-depth, personal artist coverage, *Rolling Stone* in this case appears to miss the nuanced identity of Nefesh Mountain, risking a superficial cataloging of the band in public memory.⁸⁰

Rolling Stone's use of "traditional" to describe bluegrass music runs the risk of evoking stereotypes associated with Appalachia, including notions of being rural, impoverished,

⁷⁹ Joseph Hudak, "How Nefesh Mountain Are Fighting Anti-Semitism With Traditional Bluegrass." *Rolling Stone*, June 11, 2021.

⁸⁰ *Rolling Stone's* utilization of the term "traditional" also alludes to a narrative of Jewish assimilation into North American folk music practices. *Rolling Stone* has introduced Nefesh Mountain's music into the public media sphere, indicating that Nefesh Mountain's expression of North American Jewish identity is welcome and celebrated. By publishing the story about Nefesh Mountain and labeling their work as "traditional," *Rolling Stone* bestows upon the band a certain degree of public credibility in their denunciation of antisemitism. Moreover, the use of "traditional" positions the band in the public eye as a prominent force within bluegrass music. It is my presumption that *Rolling Stone* used the word "traditional" in this sense from a perspective of marketing and publicity. By analyzing the use of "traditional" from this context, it can be gleaned that the use of "traditional" may have been intended to reach as wide of an audience as possible.

See Thomas Turino's "Nationalism and Latin American Music: Selected Case Studies and Theoretical Considerations," and Fernando Rios' *Panpipes and Ponchos: Musical Folklorization and the Rise of the Andean Conjunto Tradition in La Paz, Bolivia*, 2020.

uneducated, pure, and working-class. These stereotypes are associated with bluegrass and are largely constructed by urban elites. Urban ruling class individuals observe and appropriate rural practices, using them to represent the nation's qualities. Such stereotypes can imply that "traditional" elements are archaic and stagnant, potentially overlooking the evolving nature of bluegrass music.

This portrayal risks undermining the progressive elements in bands like Nefesh Mountain and the genre of progressive bluegrass as a whole. In broader music industry circles, particularly those not specialized in bluegrass, there's a tendency to categorize all bluegrass music simply as "bluegrass," without acknowledging its progressive and traditional variants. In contrast, within bluegrass communities, a clear distinction is often made between "progressive bluegrass" and "traditional bluegrass," reflecting their respective value systems.

Benjamin Filene expounds upon how such constructions of "tradition" are intrinsically tied to United States nationalism. These constructs often depict individuals making music in rural Appalachian communities—individuals who lack power and have tenuous connections to legislative bodies—as emblematic of national expression. Filene refers to this construct of tradition as "public memory," elucidating how Americans remember their country's musical history, how such memories are transmitted, and how these conceptions shape the cultural outlook of the nation.⁸¹

When applying Filene's concept of public memory to the contemporary music landscape, it becomes apparent that public memory is still being shaped by cultural intermediaries—individuals whom Filene categorizes as folklorists, record company executives, music journalists, management, agents, and publicists. However, in today's sphere, these intermediaries

⁸¹ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*, 5.

possess access to a much wider audience compared to the periods of folk revival history that Filene examines. The deployment of public memory on a mass media scale carries profound societal implications. *Rolling Stone's* employment of the term "tradition" in this context serves as an exemplification of how public memory is currently being constructed around the genre of bluegrass, and subsequently, Jewgrass.

In their discussions about antisemitism within music media, Nefesh Mountain often employs broad and vague language, framing their political stance around concepts like combating "hate" and promoting "love" and "peace." Such language is common in liberal critiques of conservative practices. This tendency of Nefesh Mountain to use broad and vague language when discussing antisemitism likely stems from their navigation between two distinct audience demographics: the bluegrass music and Jewish communities.⁸² Each group has its own unique set of values and priorities. The bluegrass community operates within the music industry, a business-centric environment driven by economic motivations. In such environments, relationships can be transactional. In contrast, their Jewish audience, who engage with the band in a more communal and spiritual setting, tend to prioritize connection and communal care. Balancing these differing expectations and values could be influencing the way Nefesh Mountain articulates their stance on antisemitism, leading to a more generalized approach in their public discourse. Nefesh Mountain finds themselves in a uniquely challenging position, striving to balance the growth of their individual brand alongside their responsibility for nurturing a community that holds deep personal significance for them. By utilizing broad language, Nefesh Mountain can cater to both of these spheres, without ruffling too many feathers.

Given the lack of extensive studies on antisemitism in the music industry, there is little

⁸² Naturally there is some overlap between these groups.

account of how antisemitism permeates the music industry from a labor perspective. My understanding is primarily based on anecdotal evidence from Jewish interlocutors within the bluegrass music community. These personal accounts provide a glimpse into how antisemitism might be manifesting more broadly in the industry. Jewish musicians have relayed to me their experiences of antisemitism in their professional lives, which include microaggressions, stereotypes, and in some cases, being blacklisted from certain spaces. Such exclusion not only marginalizes the personal identities of Jewish musicians but also adversely affects their ability to earn a living. The insights gathered from these interlocutors highlight the necessity for more in-depth and specific conversations about antisemitism in the music industry from a labor perspective, encouraging a shift away from the general and vague terms that often dominate the conversation.⁸³

Nefesh Mountain's album *Songs for the Sparrows* has continued to serve as a platform for the band to address antisemitism in 2023. During the late 2010s, Nefesh Mountain's activism focused on issues affecting Jewish life in North America. These conversations occurred in relation to significant events, such as the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia,⁸⁴ and the 2018 Tree of Life tragedy. It's also crucial to note that Nefesh Mountain uses discussions of antisemitism to advocate on behalf of all marginalized groups, often intertwining this broader advocacy with their commentary on antisemitism. This approach reflects a broader sense of solidarity with various marginalized communities, extending their message beyond the specific context of Jewish experiences.

Since the Fall of 2023, after the October 7 attacks Hamas lead against Israel, Nefesh

⁸³ I choose to keep my interlocutors names private in order to protect and preserve their music careers.

⁸⁴ Debbie Elliot, "The Charlottesville Rally 5 Years Later' It's what you're still trying to forget'," *NPR*, August 12, 2022.

Mountain has continued their anti-antisemitism activism, including their music from *Songs for the Sparrows* in their response. On October 8th, the band performed their song “Tree of Life” on social media to respond to these attacks.⁸⁵ This demonstrates that prior to 2023, Nefesh Mountain utilized their platform to speak out against antisemitism in primarily in North America, and 2023 onward, Nefesh Mountain has opened their scope to speak of antisemitism on a global scale. Nefesh Mountain’s public response indicates that the band is willing to adapt their scope of discussing antisemitism to match prevailing discourse in surrounding media. This leads me to believe that these discussions, while valid and true to the band, are in fact part of a broader brand strategy.

While Nefesh Mountain’s activism and branding strategy have solidified the band’s status as a prominent Jewish voice in the bluegrass community, this branding strategy has narrowed the creative scope of the band. During a conversation with Eric and Doni in 2022, they expressed a slight degree of dissatisfaction with being pigeonholed as a seminal Jewish bluegrass band within the bluegrass community. The group feels compelled to adhere to Jewish themes in their songwriting to maintain their position in the industry. Eric conveyed his belief that Jewish musicians like Béla Fleck, Allison Brown, and Noam Pikelnny possess the freedom to explore a broader range of musical expression precisely because they choose not to place explicit emphasis on their Jewish identity in their branding. Eric articulated, “Just because we happen to sing about being Jewish doesn't mean we only want to sing about being Jewish. We're not even that religious. We're cultural Jews. We just want to make music; we don't want to have to ‘be anything.’”⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Nefesh Mountain (@nefeshmountain) “We are horrified and sickened by the terrorist attacks on our dear friends and family in ISRAEL.” Instagram video, October 8, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CyKILbSMYDQ/>

⁸⁶ Personal communication, September 2022.

Understanding the nuances of media coverage surrounding Nefesh Mountain uncovers the complexities involved with building a progressive brand deeply rooted in heritage. Branding as a concept is steeped in the late stages of capitalism, promoting individuality and separation from a communal identity. This approach stands in stark contrast to the essence of activism, which is inherently community-focused, promoting grassroots organizing and a collective spirit. Nefesh Mountain's commitment to fostering community among their audience demonstrates that their heritage and activism informs a large part of why they do what they do. When speaking with Nefesh Mountain in 2022, the band shared that their activism spans generations in their family, Doni winked and smiled, "yeah, we both were raised by total hippies."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Personal communication, September 2022.

Musical and Literary Analysis of *Songs for the Sparrows*



Figure 2. *Songs for the Sparrows* album cover. At the center of the album cover, Zasloff and Lindberg are sitting under a tree which represents the “Tree of Life.” Note the two sparrows, which also represent Zasloff and Lindberg.

Track List Overview

This section examines select tracks from the album *Songs for the Sparrows*, shedding light on the musical influences integrated by Nefesh Mountain. The analysis focuses on the band's incorporation of Jewish identity within the album's compositions. *Songs for the Sparrows* represents a significant shift from Nefesh Mountain's earlier work, as the band moves away from incorporating Jewish liturgical elements into their lyrics. In the following sections, a detailed analysis of specific tracks like "A Sparrow's Song" and "Piece of the Sun (for Anne Frank)" will be presented. Meanwhile, the ensuing paragraphs offer a brief overview of several other songs from the album.

1. *Wanderlust*
2. *A Sparrow's Song*
3. *Somewhere On This Mountain*
4. *Big Mountain (feat. Sam Bush & Jerry Douglas)*
5. *Piece Of The Sun (for Anne Frank)*
6. *Where Oh Where*
7. *Suite For A Golden Butterfly*
8. *In The Wide Open Air*
9. *I've Endured*

10. *Evermore (Hashkiveinu)*
11. *In The Here And Now (feat. Sam Bush & Jerry Douglas)*
12. *These Wayward Winds*
13. *Tree Of Life*
14. *David And Goliath (Bonus Track) [feat. Bryan Sutton]*

The album *Songs for the Sparrows* commences with the upbeat and pulsating, "Wanderlust." Immediately capturing the listener's attention, the song initiates with a dynamic and forceful banjo introduction.⁸⁸ The tempo and the rapid-fire succession in which the notes are being played create an impression akin to embarking upon a journey. This notion is particularly apt, given that "Wanderlust" represents the band's interpretation of the Jewish Traveler's Prayer. While the song does not incorporate Hebrew language, it serves to establish Nefesh Mountain's developments in their approach to songwriting, prioritizing lyrical exploration of Jewish identity over adherence to Judaic liturgy.

"Wanderlust" not only serves as an introduction to this fresh musical direction, but also establishes a thematic foundation for the album, immediately centering the concept of communal healing. The chorus resonates as Zasloff and Lindberg sing together, "let us look within for love, and with each breath of trust send us some hope, the wanderlust, and light the way ahead for us." Nefesh Mountain interweaves motifs of communal support and trust into their lyrics. The presence of musicians Jerry Douglas on the dobro and Bryan Sutton on the guitar further enrich the sonic landscape of the song.⁸⁹ Later in the album, "Wanderlust" reemerges in a reprised rendition titled "These Wayward Winds," serving as a symbolic marker for the approaching denouement of the musical odyssey embarked upon within *Songs for the Sparrows*.

"Big Mountain" is an instrumental piece, featuring musicians Jerry Douglas on the dobro and

⁸⁸ It is important to note that progressive bluegrass banjoist Wes Corbett is playing this riff. By choosing Wes Corbett, an accomplished musician who has taught at Berklee College of Music and has an online course that teaches Progressive bluegrass banjo, this further solidifies *Songs for the Sparrows* in this genre.

⁸⁹ *Songs for the Sparrows*, track 1. 2021.

Sam Bush on the mandolin. The title of this particular piece seemingly alludes to the renowned song "Big Country" by Béla Fleck. This is not a coincidence given that Fleck is the reason that Lindberg began to learn banjo.⁹⁰ During live performances, Nefesh Mountain frequently incorporates "Big Mountain" into their repertoire, often as part of a larger medley referred to as the "mountain medley," which also encompasses their song "Esa Enai" from their eponymous album released in 2016. "Big Mountain" garnered significant attention from media and made a debut on the *Bluegrass Today* chart, securing the sixth position in June of 2021. This achievement attests to the song's resonance within the bluegrass community and its reception among enthusiasts of the genre. Effectively, as a stand-alone song, "Big Mountain" makes no reference to Jewish identity.

"Where Oh Where" intricately weaves together Irish musical elements, characterized by the prominent inclusion of the Irish flute. Though the sonic textures of this composition bear the influence of Irish traditions, the lyrical content delves into Jewish liturgical narratives. Doni sings to ask earnest questions about humanity, as the song poses fundamental inquiries pertaining to the search for moral grounding within the vast expanse of the universe. Each verse draws upon evocative references to elements of nature, establishing thematic connections with the Old Testament, such as allusions to Miriam, Eden, and the Tree of Life.

The final verse of "Where Oh Where" serves as a profound response to the aforementioned inquiries posed by Doni. It articulates: "Where's our compassion, is it somewhere we can discover?" and emphatically asserts that compassion resides in close proximity, within the very fabric of one's immediate surroundings: "It's never too far, it's right where you are. It's always been in the arms of each other." This emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity

⁹⁰ Personal communication, 2022.

as an invisible network of roots beneath the surface, akin to binding trees in a forest as a unified entity.

Nefesh Mountain's overarching theme of communal unity resonates not only through the introspective lyrics but also within the musical arrangements. In the chorus, the band adopts the melodic vocal technique known as lilting, characteristic of the Irish vocal style, wherein syllables are sung in a rhythmic manner using the vocable “dee-dum.” The lilting in this particular composition is performed collectively, underscoring the significance of communal support and the power of collective singing as a unifying force.

"In The Wide Open Air" showcases Lindberg's banjo expertise, employing the distinctive clawhammer style, alongside fiddler Alan Grubner.⁹¹ These instrumental textures deviate from bluegrass aesthetics, instead drawing inspiration from old-time music. In a complementary manner, Doni's sings lyrics reflecting a diasporic experience of seeking a sense of belonging in a new land. She sings with poignant introspection, "Grant me the strength to be alone in the wide-open air. Let this land become my home, I'll take some comfort there." Zasloff also sings a verse in Hebrew, adding a layer that reflects the band's commitment to embracing and celebrating their Jewish identity:

נסו בקשו כל אשר עם לבבי
כמו שית השדה וכל העשבים
והאילנות, וכל הצמחים
כלם התעוררו לקראתי

Translation:

*Try to seek all that's within my heart
Like the field's bush and all the grass
And the trees, and all the plants
All awoke to me*

The utilization of Hebrew by Zasloff in "In The Wide Open Air" indexes facets of the Jewish

⁹¹ Nefesh Mountain, *Songs for the Sparrows*, track 5 (2021).

diasporic experience in relation to the North American landscape. While Hebrew predominantly assumes a sacred role within North American contexts, its application in this particular song transcends liturgical associations. Nefesh Mountain employs the Hebrew language as a means to imbue the music with a contemplative layer, further enriching its thematic depth.

The incorporation of Hebrew into an interpretation of the North American landscape exemplifies Nefesh Mountain's distinctive approach, which seamlessly integrates Jewish identity with the aesthetics of the Appalachian region. Zasloff's singing establishes a connection between herself and the surrounding natural environment, signifying a profound yearning for harmony and unity. Through this lyrical expression, the song culminates in an introspective reflection on the enduring bond between humanity and the encompassing landscape.

In doing so, Nefesh Mountain expands their boundaries of musical exploration, fusing diverse cultural and linguistic elements to create a resonant and multi-dimensional sonic experience. The inclusion of Hebrew in "In The Wide Open Air" emerges as a testament to the band's commitment to interweaving various artistic and cultural threads, resulting in a harmonious amalgamation that transcends conventional boundaries. This can be seen in the following verse, when Doni sings about standing among the trees:

*Cause I don't feel so far apart
When I'm surrounded by the trees
So I'll take this heavy heart
Its there I'll set it free*

Trees hold significant symbolic importance within the Jewish faith, often regarded as natural caretakers and viewed as the "pinnacle of the plant world," playing a transformative role in sustaining life on Earth.⁹² In the observance of *Tu'bishvat*, colloquially known as "the birthday of the Trees," Jewish individuals partake in a *seder*—a ceremonial dinner—featuring foods derived

⁹²Akiva Wolff, "Trees in Jewish Thought," *My Jewish Learning*, 2023.

from trees such as pomegranates, olives, figs, and apples.⁹³ Planting a tree is considered a *mitzvah*, an act of virtue and goodness.⁹⁴ The band's connection of this Jewish theme to the North American landscape is another example of their incorporation of Appalachian folkloric textures inherent in old-time music.

"I've Endured" is a song written by Ola Belle Reed, an Appalachian folk musician whose music is prominent in the bluegrass canon. This inclusion showcases Nefesh Mountain's commitment to bluegrass music and acknowledges its community history. Importantly, the song also resonates with Jewish storytelling themes, highlighting resilience and overcoming challenges. This choice by Nefesh Mountain underscores the ability of music to bridge cultural narratives and traditions, while honoring the roots of the bluegrass genre.

Nefesh Mountain finds resonance in the themes explored within "I've Endured," resembling themes of Jewish holidays, such as Passover and Hanukkah, that commemorate the enduring spirit of the Jewish people throughout history. This composition delves into the struggles and triumphs encountered in the natural world, mirroring a Jewish narrative of perseverance. Nefesh Mountain subtly modifies the lyrics during their rendition of the song, transforming the line from "Went to church on Sunday to learn the Golden Rule" to "Went to pray on Fridays." This lyrical adaptation purposefully references the Jewish observance of Shabbat, which commences at sunset on Friday evenings. Through this slight lyrical adjustment, the band expands the religious diversity inherent in the traditional bluegrass canon, and can be seen as another example of how the band tries to bridge Jewish and bluegrass communities.

Nefesh Mountain also slightly changes the chord progression of "I've Endured" from Ola Belle Reed's version. While the song conventionally employs a chord progression that outlines I-

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

IV-I-IV-I in the verse, the band deviates from this established pattern, incorporating an vi chord (I-IV-I-IV-vi). In music theory, this is called a deceptive cadence. This iv chord serves the same harmonic function as the I chord. As a result, the harmony aids to tell the story by creating a sense of longing when paired with the lyrics, “how long must one endure?”. Many of Nefesh Mountain listeners are familiar with the bluegrass canon, playing songs like “I’ve Endured” at bluegrass jams. Because of this, the audience knows the chords to the Ola Belle Reed version. By changing the chord, Nefesh Mountain are adding their own spin on “I’ve Endured.” Through this alteration, one can see that the music enhances the lyrical story of overcoming adversity and reflecting back on one’s trials. I’d like to think that this sense of longing created in the harmony underscores the intricacies of experiencing diaspora and migration.

"Suite for a Golden Butterfly" is an instrumental composition that interweaves Jewish liturgical melodies, bluegrass motifs, and Irish influences. Comprising three movements, each rooted in a different musical style, the movements slowly flow into each other over the course of the composition. By weaving together these musical stylistic choices, Nefesh Mountain demonstrates familiarity with a variety of folk musical practices. Through these textural and stylistic expressions, Nefesh Mountain fosters a musical narrative that compliments the band’s brand and origin story, weaving North American and Jewish cultural identities together.⁹⁵

Lindberg's music shows a clear influence from Andy Statman and David Grisman, two Jewish pioneers in progressive bluegrass who have infused their heritage into their work. Andy Statman plays both mandolin and clarinet, proficient in in a variety of musical styles, such as bluegrass, jazz, and klezmer. In the 1970s, he was part of the ensemble Breakfast Special, boasting a saxophone (Statman played alongside his Breakfast Special bandmate Tony Trishka,

⁹⁵ His enduring friendship and frequent collaborations with Jerry Garcia have significantly influenced the development of jam band culture within the bluegrass domain.

who took on the role of pedal steel guitar). Statman is very open about his Orthodox Jewish identity. Currently living in New York City, he still plays at places like Rockwood Music Hall. David Grisman is also a celebrated figure in the bluegrass community, having recently been inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association's Hall of Fame in 2023.⁹⁶ He is also known for branching outside the bluegrass genre, drawing influences from jazz and jam band styles while playing acoustic instruments, and because he bears the nickname "Dawg," he calls his style "Dawg Music." In 1995, Statman and Grisman collaborated on, *Songs of Our Fathers*, an album where the duo perform a variety of Jewish musics.⁹⁷ Lindberg employs motifs from the *Songs of our Fathers* track "Chasidic Melody" in the first movement of "Suite for a Golden Butterfly." By incorporating elements from *Songs of Our Fathers*, Lindberg pays homage to the musical styles and Jewish influences of Statman and Grisman, constructing a narrative of heritage and memory surrounding Jewishness specifically in progressive bluegrass music.

The track list of *Songs for the Sparrows* illustrates the album's thematic cohesion. The opening selection, "Wanderlust," establishes a whimsical atmosphere of discovery, with the overarching aesthetics situating the record within the genre of progressive bluegrass. This introduction is followed by the single "Big Mountain," which garnered critical acclaim, emphasizing the band's familiarity with this particular style. Nefesh Mountain also highlights the theme of communal healing in the composition "Where Oh Where." The group draws upon elements of the natural world as inspiration for the lyrics, additionally incorporating Irish music elements.

⁹⁶ International Bluegrass Music Association, "Recipient History," 2023. <https://ibma.org/awards-by-year/>

⁹⁷ My ethnographic research on klezmer-bluegrass fusion music guided me to explore the work of Zoe & Cloyd. In 2022, they released an album titled *Songs of our Grandfathers*, a tribute to the music of Statman and Grisman, with Statman himself producing the record.

Furthermore, the band pays homage to the traditional bluegrass canon by including a cover of the song "I've Endured" on the album. Nefesh Mountain subtly alters the chords, and also the lyrics to incorporate Jewish practices of Shabbat, expanding the religious diversity within the traditional bluegrass repertoire. In the instrumental piece titled "Suite for a Golden Butterfly," the band blends Jewish liturgical melodies, Irish influences, and bluegrass motifs. This composition crafts a sonic narrative, evoking the story of a migration experience. In the following sections, I delve further into such phenomena, offering a deeper analysis of the album's outstanding singles, "A Sparrow's Song," and "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)."

In-depth Analysis: "A Sparrow's Song"

"A Sparrow's Song" is the title track on *Songs for the Sparrows*. The inception of this composition can be traced back to a formative sojourn undertaken by Nefesh Mountain to Ukraine and Poland, where the duo embarked on a familial voyage aimed at exploring their diasporic heritage. Amidst the very woods that bore witness to their forebears' fate during the Holocaust, they chanced upon the presence of sparrows. Employing allegorical imagery, "A Sparrow's Song" addresses the issue of prejudice. In an interview with Keith Billik, Eric elaborates the band's intentions by saying, "[it] ultimately came from thinking about the many groups of people who are horribly discriminated against in the U.S. To us, sparrows represent a small but mighty voice."⁹⁸

Given Nefesh Mountain's broad audience demographic, this composition holds the potential to elicit diverse interpretations from various listeners, whether they identify as part of the Jewish community or belong to the wider bluegrass sphere. Ultimately, the function of "A Sparrow's

⁹⁸ Billik, the Picky Fingers Banjo Podcast, April 2022.

Song" is to serve as the band's impassioned indictment of the pernicious consequences wrought by white supremacy. "A Sparrow's Song" assumes an introspective and contemplative demeanor. This song establishes the thematic groundwork for the prevailing critical discourse throughout the record. By virtue of its allegorical lyrical content, "A Sparrow's Song" can be construed as a commentary on the politically tumultuous era of the late 2010s, epitomized by the tenure of the Trump Administration. Within this composition, Nefesh Mountain endeavors to integrate and distill the multifaceted events unfolding within the United States during this period, encompassing the surge of white supremacist activities, such as the notorious "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the border crisis, the far-reaching impact of the pandemic, and the response of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Emanating from a somber G minor tonality, "A Sparrow's Song" commences with an introductory melodic motif:



Figure 3. "A Sparrow's Song". The accented notes indicate the melody, while the unaccented notes represent the banjo rolls surrounding the melody. Transcription by Nicholas Cameron.⁹⁹

Eric sings the opening lines:

*"O Little bird I hear your song,
you've been overlooked for far too long.
We've met before
On the ancient road*

⁹⁹ Nefesh Mountain's use of the 7/8-time signature in this passage is yet another indicator of progressive bluegrass because progressive bluegrass experiments with odd time signatures.

*And share a tale
And a pain
Both new and old"*

The question of the sparrow's identity emerges as a central inquiry. Drawing from the aforementioned origin narrative, Nefesh Mountain establishes the character of the sparrow, seen as “overlooked,” and expressing understanding of that experience. While such feelings may present among individuals experiencing diaspora, the lyrics are vague enough to be relatable in a variety of contexts. It is noteworthy that the duo's personal encounter with diaspora is entangled with their Jewish heritage. By harnessing their own diasporic encounters, as expressed in press for the album, Nefesh Mountain seeks to forge a profound connection with individuals who have undergone the harrowing experience of displacement and the loss of a cherished homeland, be it due to coerced relocation or catastrophic upheaval.

The incorporation of the sparrow motif stems from the sparrow's ubiquitous presence across the globe. The sparrow, a common bird encountered in diverse geographic regions, is seen as a pest and often attracts negative human attention. In examining the cultural presence of the sparrow, Ornithologist Denis Summers-Smith offers further insight on its historical significance, “to many people across the world, the sparrow is the most familiar wild animal and, because of its association with humans and familiarity, it is frequently used to represent the common and vulgar, or the lewd.”¹⁰⁰ The band has expressed in interviews that these qualities inspired them to choose sparrow as a central character in their narrative.¹⁰¹

In the second verse, Doni joins Eric in singing:

*They say you're small
Not worth a thing
But I know the truth
I've heard you sing
And face to face*

¹⁰⁰ Denis Summers-Smith, *The House Sparrow*, 26.

¹⁰¹ Billik, “Picky Fingers Banjo Podcast,” 2022.

*I've felt it too
When they see themselves
And their hate
And they don't see you*

Recognizing the marginalization faced by the sparrow, Nefesh Mountain's pays tribute to the intrinsic worth of its voice. Within this particular stanza, the band extends empathy towards the bird, acknowledging its vulnerability. By conveying the lyric "I've heard you sing," Nefesh Mountain emphasizes that the sparrow's voice is deserving of recognition and reverence. Doni and Eric utilize the pronoun "they" to allude to the perpetrators of animosity and hatred toward the sparrow. Although the exact identity of "they" remains implicit, it appears that Nefesh Mountain employs this pronoun to reference individuals who hold power. Examining the geopolitical landscape of the era during which "A Sparrow's Song" was penned, it becomes apparent that the use of "they" suggests a veiled allusion to political figures espousing nationalist or anti-immigration ideologies.¹⁰²

In the deliberately ambiguous narrative created by Nefesh Mountain, listeners can pick up on certain keywords that hint at the band's stance within the political landscape of the time when the song was released. The inclusion of the term "hate" points to the discourse prevalent among politically liberal individuals, who use "hate" to describe motivations behind policies and behaviors enacted by conservative political players. Such words are seen in media discourses when referring to charged events that characterized this political period. For example, the "Unite the Right" rally that transpired in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. This gathering, orchestrated by a coalition of white supremacists, emerged as a response to the mounting calls for the removal of Confederate monuments throughout the southeastern region of the United States. Noteworthy about this rally was its ability to unify individuals espousing diverse right-

¹⁰² I have confirmed this with Nefesh Mountain as well.

wing ideologies. Participants of the rally voiced antisemitic and racist sentiments. These rallies, which elicited counter-protests, rapidly escalated into a harrowing incident whereby a white supremacist deliberately drove his vehicle into a group of counter-protesters, resulting in the injury of 35 individuals and the loss of one life.¹⁰³

The extensively covered "Unite the Right" rally evoked significant public sentiment and garnered widespread attention from the news media. Numerous citizens of the United States expressed dissatisfaction with President Donald Trump's perceived failure to unequivocally denounce the violent actions of the rally's participants. Observing the unfolding events through the lens of news coverage, many individuals experienced a palpable sense of disappointment and sadness. Many felt that President Trump's statements, which encompassed a condemnation of "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides," failed to assuage the concerns of the populace and were deemed by some as inadequate in their repudiation of white supremacy. Consequently, a prevailing sentiment emerged among citizens of the United States, positing that President Trump exhibited support for the "Unite the Right" rally, perceiving his rhetoric as detrimental. Given the rally's contribution to the perpetuation of antisemitic ideologies during this specific political period can allow one to interpret "A Sparrow's Song" as a potential response to the disconcerting events that unfolded during this period. The rally's role in furthering antisemitic ideologies during this particular political era allows for an interpretation of "A Sparrow's Song" as a potential artistic response to the troubling events of that time.

After the second verse, the band uses the chorus of the song to speak to the sparrow:

*And so we sing
A sparrow's song
For those who were told*

¹⁰³ Angie Chuang, and Autumn Tyler, "An Obscured View of "Both Sides": Default Whiteness and the Protest Paradigm in Television News Coverage of the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" Rally." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (2023).

*They don't belong
A call of long for the
Days gone wrong
Don't fear little bird
Just fly, fly on*

In the chorus of "A Sparrow's Song," Nefesh Mountain articulates a sense of solidarity with the sparrow, affirming that collective singing possesses the potential to surmount fear when confronted with bigotry. This chorus can be understood as the central thesis statement of the album, reflecting the band's aspirations to foster connectivity and inclusivity across diverse communities through their musical endeavors. By dedicating the sparrow's song to those who experience a sense of displacement or exclusion, Nefesh Mountain transcends their specific attachment to Jewish identity, offering an ode of peace and unity to individuals who confront prejudice amidst periods of uncertainty. In an interview with the *New Jersey Times*, Zasloff addresses her positionality: "We are not preaching anything. We are not trying to convert anyone. We are not politicians. We are not making any kind of statement. We are about love and hope. We believe that music can be a bridge to connect humanity."¹⁰⁴

The musical arrangement in the chorus exhibits a deliberate sparsity of texture when juxtaposed with the preceding verses, effectively heightening the sense of tension. The legato articulation of the dobro and fiddle intertwine, this creates a contrasting sonic palette against the more pronounced attack of the banjo, which is played in a higher register. This interplay of textures serves to build anticipation, culminating in the stirring lyric, "don't fear little bird, just fly, fly on."

Following the chorus, a transformative musical passage unfolds, the banjo and fiddle soar in unison, playing a melodic hook that propels the song forward. This melodic motif seamlessly

¹⁰⁴ "It's part of the Jewish story," *New Jersey Jewish News*, 2021.

transitions into a progressive bluegrass pulse.¹⁰⁵ Concurrently, the band vocalizes the rhythmic syllables "dai dum," evoking a subtle allusion to Irish musical traditions, against the backdrop of the G minor tonality. This instrumental section leads the composition into its third verse.

The third verse expands the narrative of the little sparrow:

*Too many times
Too many years
You forged on ahead
Held back your tears
While you'd abide
By the hawks and crows
Because you believe
In the dream
We all should have a home*

Within this verse, Nefesh Mountain introduces additional entities, the "hawks" and "crows." When asked about this particular line, Eric expressed that these avian characters are imbued with connotations of predation or foreboding symbolism. The band's deliberate vagueness in this verse provides ample room for individual interpretation, as the precise meaning behind the inclusion of hawks and crows remains enigmatic. In my analysis, I propose that these avian figures symbolize those in positions of power who adhere rigidly to a particular identity or worldview. The term "abide" in this context can be construed as either enduring or patiently waiting. The sparrow, therefore, must navigate the dominant narrative imposed by these influential avian creatures, which may pertain to the expression of identity. In order to remain faithful to its convictions, the sparrow is compelled to endure the afflictions imposed by these looming figures. At the end of the verse, Nefesh Mountain sings that the sparrow steadfastly asserts a universal desire for a place to call home: "we all should have a home."

Contrasting the looming essence of the hawks and crows, Nefesh Mountain positions the

¹⁰⁵ See footnote 55 about "drive."

sparrow against these figures, singing the lyrics "because you believe in the dream, we all should have a home." By doing so, they utilize the sparrow as a vehicle to underscore their particular positionalities shaped by their own Jewish diasporic identity. Through the emphasis on the inclusive sentiment "we all should have a home," Nefesh Mountain underscores the notion that the sparrow, representative of marginalized communities, does not find solace or security within its immediate environment. Nefesh Mountain crafts the image of the sparrow as a harbinger of hope, even for the looming aviary figures. The collective invocation of "we all" imparts the impression that the sparrow seeks liberation not only for itself but also for the oppressive entities symbolized by the hawks and crows. I see this as another instance where Nefesh Mountain transcends the confines of representing their specific ancestral lineage and instead articulates a yearning for universal liberation.

Following the conclusion of the third verse, a dissolution of musical elements occurs, with the fiddle, bass, and guitar gradually ceasing their playing. This deliberate reduction in instrumentation leaves the banjo as the sole sonic protagonist, assuming the role of arpeggiating in solitude over a G minor chord. Eric employs the technique of playing the banjo "up the neck," thereby traversing the instrument's higher register. This deliberate artistic choice paired with the G minor tonality imparts an otherworldly musical texture, evoking an ethereal ambiance that enriches the sonic backdrop.

This change in texture sets the scene for Zasloff to sing in Hebrew:

אָני צפּור דרור מ'הדרֶךְ הַעֲתִיקָה
 שֶׁר מִלְכִּי אֵל הָאֵל-נוֹדֵעַ
 עִם קוֹלִי תַצְעִיר גִּשְׁמִתִּי נִסְעֶרֶת
 שִׁירֵי הַדְּרוֹרִים בְּיָמֵם הַרְחוֹקִים

Transliteration:

Ani tzippur dror m'haderech h'atikah

*Shar me libi el halo noda Im koli
ha'tzair nishmati nitzeret
Shire hadrorim bayamim rechokim*

Translation:

*I am a sparrow from the ancient road
Singing from my heart to the unknown (void)
With my young voice my soul is excited
The songs of sparrows in the distant days*

The use of Hebrew in "A Sparrow's Song" by Nefesh Mountain presents an intriguing departure from the band's typical engagement with the language, which traditionally holds sacred significance. Rather than drawing upon Jewish liturgy or religious texts, the band has crafted their own Hebrew lyrics for this particular composition. While much of the song revolves around the band addressing the sparrow, a notable shift occurs when Zasloff assumes the perspective of the sparrow and sings in Hebrew. By adopting the sparrow's point of view, Doni embodies the essence of the "small but mighty voice" intrinsic to the sparrow. This artistic mechanism conveys a message of self-empowerment and self-liberation.

The inclusion of Hebrew within the context of the minimal musical arrangement in this particular section of "A Sparrow's Song" can evoke associations related to liturgical Hebrew, despite the absence of explicit liturgical text. The arrangement of the music plays a pivotal role in shaping this impression. The gradual shift in accompanying instruments creates a more spacious sonic texture, allowing the solo banjo and voice to assume prominence. This transition in the musical landscape contributes to an atmosphere of significance and importance within the composition. After a Nefesh Mountain performance in Washington D.C. in 2022, I spoke with an audience member who shared their personal experience of this section, likening it to a state of trance. Preceding the Hebrew verse, the overall musical texture is characterized by density and intricacy, with complex layers that evoke a captivating and immersive auditory experience. In contrast, the subsequent Hebrew section adopts a sparse approach, directing the listener's focus

towards Zasloff's vocal performance. It is worth noting that traditional Jewish liturgical music often features solo vocal delivery by a cantor. Hence, the juxtaposition of Hebrew lyrics with the musical backdrop in this passage elicits an evocative ambiance reminiscent of liturgical aesthetics, cultivating a sense of sanctity and reverence.

In addition to the lyrical content, an interesting aspect to examine in this verse is Zasloff's pronunciation of Hebrew. Hebrew is often described colloquially as a guttural-sounding language, characterized by the placement of certain consonants deeper in the throat compared to languages such as English, where consonants are typically articulated at the front of the mouth during speech. In the first line, "אני צפור דרור מהדרה העתיקה" (transliteration: *Ani tzippur dror m'haderech h'atikah*), Zasloff sings the "R" in "dror" with an Americanized pronunciation, where the tongue is bunched up in the back of the mouth. In Hebrew, the "R" sound, represented by the letter *resh* (ר), is typically pronounced deep in the back of the mouth, accentuating the soft palette, approximating an exaggerated "H" sound in American English, similar to a dramatic sigh. Similarly, in the word "מהדרה" (*m'haderech*), the final letter *kaf* (ך), transliterated as "ch," is pronounced with a guttural effect at the back of the throat, resembling the "ch" sound in words like challah or Chanukah. However, Zasloff pronounces the *kaf* with a softer "H" sound, similar to the "H" in the word "hello."

The adoption of non-guttural pronunciations in Hebrew by many Americans can be attributed to a certain level of discomfort or unfamiliarity with the guttural nuances of Hebrew. However, it is crucial to note that Zasloff's use of Americanized Hebrew pronunciations in this context does not constitute errors or misrepresentations of the language. Instead, it is a deliberate aesthetic choice. While some American Jews may choose Israeli Hebrew pronunciations in pursuit of

“linguistic authenticity,”¹⁰⁶ Zasloff, as an American singer performing North American music, believes that utilizing Americanized Hebrew pronunciations aligns better with the musical style she presents. She humorously acknowledges the situation, stating, "I realize that I sound like a moron because I'm not using the 'ר' (R). When I'm in America, I have to say it the way Americans say it. I understand that it's not 'right.' It's a dilemma."¹⁰⁷

After the Hebrew section, the musical arrangement transitions into a sequence of intricate banjo rolls, which serve as a prelude to a syncopated instrumental segment. During this portion, the band engages in a vamp, creating a repetitive rhythmic pattern, while various instruments take turns performing solos. Following this instrumental interlude, Zasloff proceeds to sing an English translation of the preceding Hebrew verse. It is noteworthy that this translation marks the final introduction of a new section within the composition of "A Sparrow's Song."

*I'm just a sparrow
From the ancient road
I sing from my heart
Into the vast unknown
With my little voice
My spirit soars
In the Sparrow Songs
Of long ago*

Zasloff's choice to sing the English translation following the Hebrew verse presents another example of Nefesh Mountain's deployment of ancestral history as a means to articulate their opposition to prejudicial attitudes. By virtue of their diasporic identity, and utilizing both English and Hebrew, the ensemble assumes an intermediary position, allowing them to engage with a

¹⁰⁶ I put “linguistic authenticity” in quotes because Israeli Hebrew was partially revived and mostly constructed and codified as a language in relation to the establishment of Israel, making analysis of authenticity difficult to investigate. Furthermore, any discussion of “authenticity” is slippery and exists outside of the scope of this thesis. Bluegrass music, established in 1945, is technically “older” than the existence of Hebrew as a national language, which was established in 1948.

¹⁰⁷ Buchwald, Linda. “From barbecue to rodeo, web series finds connections between Jewish and American cultures,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. March, 19, 2019.

wider listenership. This intentional choice of translation acts as a recognition of the universal themes embodied in the experiential narrative of the sparrow.

I perceive that the confluence of Hebrew and English lyrics within the composition potentially evokes the conceptual tenets associated with "*doikayt*," from the Yiddish vernacular, meaning "hereness." The historical pertinence of *doikayt* resides as a guiding principle attributed to the Jewish Labor Bund, a socialist and anti-Zionist coalition originating from Russia in the year 1897.¹⁰⁸ Comprehending the exigency to confront the systemic oppression endured by Jewish communities dispersed throughout diverse Eastern European nations, the Bund embraced *doikayt* as an unwavering commitment to be intricately rooted and actively engaged within their respective countries of origin. Their motto, which has become representative of contemporary Jewish socialist ideology, states, "Wherever we live, that's our homeland."¹⁰⁹ This reverberation coincides with the aforementioned sentiment espoused by the sparrow, emphasizing the equitable notion that all individuals ought to possess a place to call home.

Nefesh Mountain's "A Sparrow's Song" derives its inspiration from the duo's familial pilgrimage to Poland and Ukraine, embarked upon with the intent of rediscovering ancestral roots. By employing avian motifs, the song constructs a narrative that undertakes a portrayal of the treatment endured by immigrant populations. Released amidst a period of heightened political tension, the composition makes allusive references to the discourse espoused by right-leaning ideological proponents.

Nefesh Mountain establishes a link between the sparrow and the concept of diaspora, leveraging the ubiquitous presence of this avian species as a foundational metaphor. Additionally, the incorporation of other avian figures such as hawks and crows contribute to a

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Blatman, "Bund," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Boyarin, *The No-State Solution: A Jewish Manifesto*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 2023.

foreboding imagery, representing manifestations of authority and power. Through utilization of the sparrow's image and vocalization, Nefesh Mountain confronts the fear that is often intertwined with experiences of prejudice.

The band builds upon own heritage as inspiration for “A Sparrow’s Song,” using progressive bluegrass as a medium to craft their own message of solidarity. The interplay of diverse musical textures within the composition engenders a sense of yearning, facilitated by its establishment within a minor tonality and the arrangement's discernible reflection of avian flight patterns. This auditory effect is achieved through the exploration of both the upper and lower registers of the banjo. The solo passages of the banjo in the composition act as a sonic representation of an individual sparrow's melody, while the violin, interacting with the banjo, may symbolize unity and collective achievement.

By purposefully embracing vague imagery, Nefesh Mountain comments upon expansive themes and conceptual frameworks, allowing the band to critique the political landscape of the late 2010s. Furthermore, Zasloff’s performance of the song's lyrics in Hebrew imparts an additional stratum of interpretation, evoking the band's diasporic lineage and forging a temporal bridge between past and present. The use of Hebrew, a historically sacred language, adds a spiritual dimension to the composition. This spiritual quality is enhanced by the use of minimalistic musical textures, creating a thoughtful and almost otherworldly atmosphere. Additionally, incorporating Hebrew lyrics is a nod to the band's diasporic roots. I interpret the incorporation of Appalachian music elements as crafting a musical landscape that aims to capture the essence of the Jewish Labor Bund, resonating with their motto: "Wherever we live, that's our homeland."

In-Depth Analysis: “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)”

"Piece of the Sun (for Anne Frank)" blends bluegrass with elements of Irish music, showcasing the artistic fusion achieved by Nefesh Mountain. This melding results in a collage of musical textures which prominently features the talents of celebrated Irish and bluegrass musicians Jerry Douglas (dobro), John Doyle (guitar/bouzouki), John Mock (bodhran), Jeffery Taylor (piano, accordion, bass accordion, dulciana). This diverse instrumentation creates a textural backdrop that celebrates musical innovation, a tenant of progressive bluegrass, and represents a sonic frontier—one that synthesizes the folk-revival musics of North America.

From the 1960s onward, the North American folk-revival has incorporated migratory folk musics such as bluegrass, old-time, Irish,¹¹⁰ and klezmer. Over the course of the 20th century, each of these musical practices developed collaborative music communities, a centralized canon, and annual national and regional gatherings. Nefesh Mountain incorporates elements of these musics in *Songs for the Sparrows*, but in “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank),” the band focuses on fusing Irish and bluegrass.

Although Irish and bluegrass music are not inherently associated with Jewish traditions, the later 20th century North American folk-revival movement witnessed notable Jewish engagement in these musical practices.¹¹¹ It is important to note that this Jewish involvement was predominantly secular in nature, with secular Jews who were active participants in the folk-revival movement also demonstrating a propensity for left-wing political ideologies.¹¹² Moreover, many Jewish participants in the North American folk-revival movement did not

¹¹⁰ For information about Irish traditional music from an intersectional perspective, see Tes Slominski's *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music*, Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2020.

¹¹¹ Pertz, “The Jewgrass Boys,” 2005.

¹¹² Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival*, 10.

perceive their Jewishness as a central element of their musical identity.¹¹³ The cohort of Jewish individuals who partook in the folk-revival movement during the mid-to-late 20th century can be viewed as a distinct group raised with shared values and cultural expressions. It is noteworthy that this cohort, primarily composed of descendants of Jewish immigrants who came to North America, placed significant emphasis on acculturating into North American society. Consequently, they did not perceive the incorporation of Jewish cultural expressions into their musical endeavors as essential.¹¹⁴

Gaining insight into how folk-revival participants expressed their Jewish identity is crucial for comprehending the historical dynamics of both the North American folk-revival and North American Jewish history. While Jewish individuals were actively involved in these musical movements, the incorporation of Jewish religious musical traditions into the broader scope of US folk revival music was limited. Nonetheless, by virtue of their intrinsic and embodied connection with their heritage, traits of Jewishness inevitably became woven into these musical practices. Peter Goldsmith elaborates that these folk-revival progenitors, “[dedicated themselves] to the process by which others mediated understandings across cultural boundaries.”¹¹⁵

Goldsmith's portrayal, in my interpretation, encapsulates the underlying ethos of the folk-revival musical traditions. Folk revival progenitors, informed and socialized through their upbringing in political organizing spaces, may have influenced elements of folk-revival qualities such as community organization. As described in an earlier section of this thesis, “Jewishness and progressive bluegrass,” many of these progenitors were descendants of Jewish immigrants who engaged in socialist activism.¹¹⁶ As children, progenitors of the folk revival grew up going

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Pertz, 49.

¹¹⁵ Peter D. Goldsmith, *Making People's Music*, 5.

¹¹⁶ Pertz, 32.

to socialist summer camps, watching their parents attend grassroots organizing meetings, and seeing their friends participate in community service initiatives. As a result, this way of social engagement may have influenced how these progenitors participated with folk-revival musics, utilizing grassroots organizing as a means to unite and connect communities through music. Consequently, I think this embodiment of communal practice paved the way for the replication of organizing tactics seen in the folk-revival.¹¹⁷

Considering this historical context, I interpret Nefesh Mountain's song "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" as portraying an amalgamation of these ideals. By calling upon these historically precedented folk-revival practices, the band tries to communicate their blended presentation of North American and Jewish identity. I see the band's synthesis of Irish and progressive bluegrass textures, coupled with the inclusion of renowned progressive bluegrass and Irish musicians, as a way to tell their story of unity.

The song kicks off with a melodic flat-picking guitar passage accompanied by syncopated strumming. The utilization of flat-picking technique on the guitar aligns with the stylistic conventions of bluegrass performance, while the presence of syncopated strumming evokes the distinctive role of the guitar in Irish music. This introductory guitar passage establishes the overarching theme of the song, setting the tone for the musical journey that follows:



Figure 4. "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" melody. Transcription by Nicholas Cameron.

¹¹⁷ I speculate that these progenitors did not even realize this is what they were doing. They were just acting under the social guise of which they were raised.

The first verse establishes the setting of this narrative, Zasloff sings:

*"When you were young, eyes wide and clear
Without this big old world to fear
You held my hand, asked "Mama why
Do we love and feel so much inside?"
I said "now honey, what do you mean?"
You said "I think I have a dream,
I could feel the fire in everyone
and knew they had a piece of the sun."*

After the first verse, a recurrence of the opening theme emerges, but with a slight variation. This time, the theme is executed in unison by the low whistle and tin whistle. The inclusion of these instruments imparts an Irish timbre to the piece. Irish motifs are also expressed in the music through the deliberate accentuation of grace notes, imparting a characteristic "slide" quality that evokes the lively sensations associated with Irish dance practices.¹¹⁸ By incorporating Irish music into "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," the composition serves as a historically precedented textural embodiment of blending of immigrant communities.¹¹⁹

In "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," the smooth, controlled sound of the low and tin whistle contrasts sharply with the crisp, energetic strumming of the guitar and dobro. The whistles' flowing, legato style adds a whimsical, Irish-traditional touch, while the lively, rhythmic plucking of the fretted instruments injects a bluegrass vibe. This blend of different timbres and playing styles creates a rich and varied sonic landscape, telling a story of cultural fusion within the music.

In addition to its arrangement of textures, "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" explores

¹¹⁸ Notably, Irish music often serves as an accompaniment for *cèilidh* dance music, a form of participatory group dance that has taken root as a community practice among Irish (and Scottish) populations worldwide.

¹¹⁹ In the 1990s, there were several fusion projects that blend US and Irish musical elements, such as Tim O'Brien's 1999 record, "The Crossing", and the collective Transatlantic Sessions. Transatlantic Sessions continues with leadership from Scottish fiddler Aly Bain and dobroist Jerry Douglas, with guitarist John Doyle as a member of the house band. This convergence established a paradigm for commercial fusion projects that bring together top Irish (colloquially referred to as "Celtic") and Americana/string band musicians.

themes of family and resilience in the face of adversity. In live performances, before introducing "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," Zasloff often shares the story behind the song's creation, providing context and background to the audience. She recounted how her daughter, Millie, grappled with strong emotions at a young age, experiencing feelings she couldn't understand. However, Millie serendipitously discovered a remarkable coping mechanism. When Zasloff inquired about Millie's newfound resilience, she expressed that Millie replied by saying "everyone has a piece of the sun inside of them." The insight of her child resonated with Zasloff, and she felt moved to capture that in "Piece of the Sun (for Anne Frank)".

Employing "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" as a narrative vehicle, Zasloff uses her music to convey a message of transcending suffering through the embrace of hope. Coinciding with Millie's transition into adulthood upon reaching the age of 18 and graduating from high school, Zasloff and Lindberg, welcomed a second daughter named Willow. Zasloff's narrative voice endeavors to impart Millie's wisdom to her younger daughter, Willow, fostering a generational legacy of fortitude and optimism. During the show, Zasloff said "Millie's story reminded me of another young girl who held onto hope, a girl who kept a diary, Anne Frank."¹²⁰ Doni perceives life as an enigmatic journey punctuated by various forms of suffering, yet firmly believes that such adversity can be surmounted through the cultivation of hope and a sense of communal belonging.¹²¹ In "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," Doni intertwines the spirit of both Millie and Anne Frank across the dimensions of spacetime, giving rise to a multi-generational narrative. Within the second verse, Doni contemplatively ponders the inner world and experiences that Anne Frank, as a young girl, might have encountered during a period akin

¹²⁰ This summary is based on Zasloff's speech at a live show at City Winery in Washington D.C. in 2022 before Nefesh Mountain performed "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)."

¹²¹ This sentiment is also underscored in Nefesh Mountain's other musical works. Zasloff makes a similar speech before performing their song, "Tree of Life."

to Millie's formative years:

*“Way back in 1943,
she lived inside her diary.
In days beneath our darkest skies,
with a burning ember, deep inside.
She writes to grieve, but not despair,
for adventure lives inside our prayers.
And while our hearts beat like a drum,
they'll always have a piece of the sun.”*

Doni's allusion to Anne Frank's optimism can be viewed as an invocation of American Jewish storytelling that influences national public memory surrounding the Holocaust. Within the United States, the constructed story surrounding Anne Frank's life and experiences often emphasizes an overarching sense of optimism, despite the tragic fate she endured. Anne Frank is renowned for her quote, widely circulated as, "...in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."¹²² Yet it is important to contextualize this quote within the broader paragraph from which it originates, as Anne Frank grappled with her ideals when confronted with the harsh realities of the world. In the text preceding this quote, Frank initiates her passage by reflecting on the challenging circumstances she and others faced, "That's the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered."¹²³

Historian Alex Sagan argues that Anne Frank's most famous quote is often taken out of context.¹²⁴ He writes, "Her optimistic words were a private expression of desperate hope in times which, as she presents them, plainly contradicted such idealism."¹²⁵ Sagan attributes the canonization of Anne Frank's optimism to the dramatization of her diary that was published in the United States in 1952. During the post-war era, the United States was confronted with the

¹²² Anne Frank, *Diary*, 1942.

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Alex Sagan, "An Optimistic Icon," *German Politics and Society*, 1995, 97.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

task of reconciling its identity amidst a climate of uncertainty. According to Sagan, Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich Hackett (screenwriters of *It's A Wonderful Life*) oriented Anne Frank's story to resonate "with ascendant American beliefs in the inevitability of progress, the virtue of tolerance, and the value of freedom."¹²⁶ The theatrical and cinematic adaptations of Anne Frank's Diary achieved remarkable success. The Hacketts' portrayal of Anne Frank's narrative not only earned them a Pulitzer Prize but also held an extensive run of 717 performances on Broadway. Sagan contends that the reception of this adaptation, along with the Hacketts' depiction of Anne Frank's "rosy optimism," played a pivotal role in elevating Anne Frank to an iconic status. As such, she became a poignant figure through which individuals could engage with and seek to comprehend the profound impact and aftermath of the Holocaust.¹²⁷

Zasloff's use of Anne Frank's story in her music might unintentionally echo the optimistic tone set by The Hackett's adaptation of Frank's diary. This portrayal can be seen as problematic due to its potential societal implications. When a narrative like Frank's is altered or softened, it risks misrepresenting the true nature of her experiences and the Holocaust. Such interpretations could allow North American Jewish communities, particularly those established in the United States before World War II, to somewhat distance themselves from the Holocaust's harsh realities. This kind of memorialization shapes collective memory by engaging with people's grief, which can be a powerful tool for political and social discourse.

While Nefesh Mountain uses their press as a platform to showcase a message of "hope," the band tries to embed these values into their music. By invoking themes of optimism, progress, and tolerance in the song, Doni utilizes these ideas to counter the prevailing conservative-leaning political climate of the late 2010s. This discourse reflects the broader liberal-conservative

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

dichotomy that has continued to permeate US mainstream media. Through Nefesh Mountain's incorporation of North American folk revival textures, their blending of Irish and bluegrass elements, and their uniquely Americanized portrayal of Anne Frank's story, a new interpretation of North American Jewish identity emerges. Nefesh Mountain underscores these ideals in the chorus of the song:

*So flicker on
And glow through the night until the dawn
I believe you were right all along
my little one*

In the transitional phase between the chorus and the following verse, the guitar and dobro take turns engaging in solos that incorporate the central instrumental theme established at the beginning of the composition. Notably, the guitar's strumming technique reflects the characteristic style of Irish traditional performance, while the dobro's distinct timbre can be clearly identified as a quintessential bluegrass instrument. As such, these instruments engage in a captivating cross-cultural conversation facilitated by the nuances of their respective tonal qualities. This musical exchange transcends cultural boundaries, representing a harmonious dialogue driven by timbral diversity.

Subsequently, Doni employs the following verse to construct Anne Frank's optimism:

*She sat and wrote it all by hand
While shots ring through the Netherlands
Though fear came knocking every day
But her spirit kept it far away*

*When there is hope and there is life
We'll always have our days of strife
Don't wait until the battle's won
Shine on your flame, your piece of the sun*

*So flicker on
And glow through the night until the dawn
I believe you were right all along
My little one*

Within this verse, Doni incorporates references to Anne Frank's narrative as a didactic tool to explore and engage with Frank's resolute sense of optimism. In contrast to a narrative that portrays Frank as a heroic figure triumphing over suffering, which Sagan argues was constructed by the Hacketts, Doni utilizes Frank's writings as a means to impart valuable life lessons to her young daughter, offering guidance on navigating through periods of adversity and uncertainty. Through this deliberate integration of Anne Frank's story, Doni seeks to instill in her daughter the strength and resilience needed to confront life's challenges. This is demonstrated by Doni singing "don't wait until the battle's won, shine on your flame, your piece of the sun." While this optimistic engagement with Anne Frank's diary draws on the Americanized ideals of her story, it avoids what Sagan calls the Hacketts' "[minimization of] Frank's Jewishness in an unacceptable way, forcing her to assimilate as a universalized heroine."¹²⁸ Instead, Doni is synthesizing the story of Anne Frank with her daughter's life with the backdrop of bluegrass and Irish textural blend to evoke messages of Jewishness in North America.

Subsequently, a shift in harmony and texture marks the onset of a distinct instrumental section in the song, signifying a transition into a new musical phase. The introduction of the bodhrán, an Irish frame drum, intensifies the syncopated rhythm, injecting the composition with increased energy. Additionally, the accordion is brought in as an extra layer of melodic texture, blending with the newly introduced thematic elements. This interplay of instruments contributes to a dense musical texture, which, in my interpretation, aims to evoke the communal spirit associated with *cèilidh* gatherings, an Irish social dance. The blended timbre resulting from the combination of the legato passages and the percussive attack of the flat-picking guitar evokes a jubilant image of individuals joining hands in celebratory unity, a manifestation of the themes of

¹²⁸ Sagan, 99.

"hope and life." This section is written as follows:

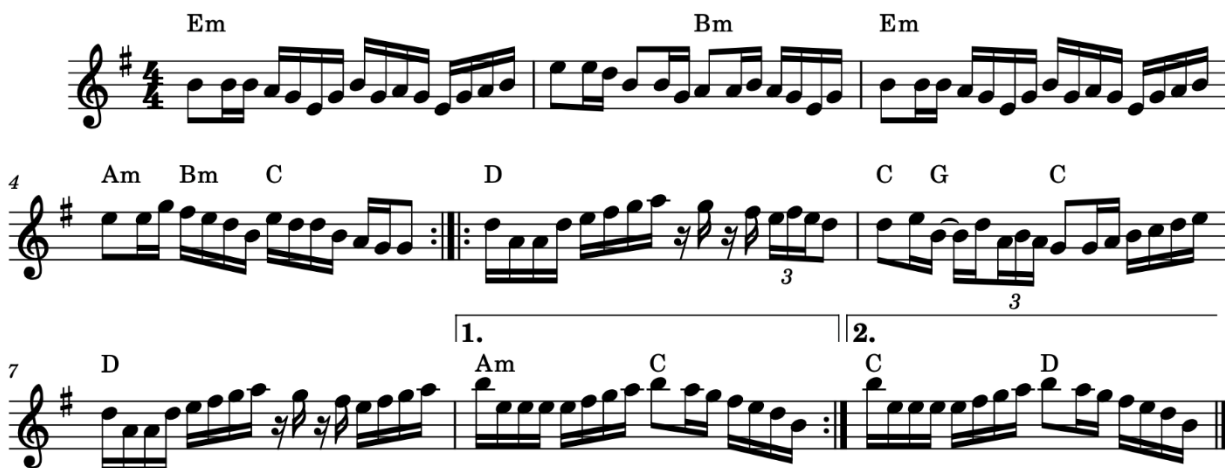


Figure 4. "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)." Transcription by Nicholas Cameron.

It is important to recognize that this instrumental section takes the shape of a typical fiddle tune. Fiddle tunes are widely known as the crux of Appalachian string band-derived musical practices, such as old-time, bluegrass, and Irish traditional music. In bluegrass, during a fiddle tune performance, one instrument at a time plays the melody, taking a solo or a "break," while the rest of the band provides harmonic accompaniment. Bluegrass musicians are encouraged to explore improvisation during their instrumental breaks, creating slight variations of the fiddle tune melody. On the other hand, in Irish traditional music, the melody is typically played simultaneously by all melodic instruments (fiddle, flute, bagpipes, mandolin, accordion, and concertina). The instruments providing harmonic accompaniment in Irish music are usually the guitar and sometimes the bass. Unlike bluegrass, in Irish music, the melody is not improvised; instead, it remains consistent throughout the performance. Typically, the guitarist in Irish music has the freedom to choose and play chords that they feel fit the melody.

In "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," as the melodic theme played by the whistles gradually recedes, the prominence of the syncopated guitar strumming takes center stage in the

arrangement. This shift creates the illusion of shifting temporalities. Through this effect, the listener might get the impression that a considerable period of time has passed, adding a new dimension to the narrative unfolding within the song. In the next verse, Doni sings to address her daughter, who, in the context of the lyrics, has grown older over the course of time:

*“Now daughter dear, you're at an age,
Where questions go beyond the page.
When I was young and lost at sea,
Your grandma gave this book to me.”*

*“It's all in here but I can't explain,
Why history has so much pain.
But just as every new day comes,
So does our flame, our piece of the sun.”*

In her lyrics, Doni Zasloff presents a nuanced narrative that intertwines with the poignant story of Anne Frank, highlighting the profound wisdom that can be gleaned from children's perspectives on the world. Through her sentimental yet candid expression, "it's all in here but I can't explain, why history has so much pain," Zasloff acknowledges the deep-seated suffering embedded in history. However, she immediately shifts focus with the lines “But just as every new day comes, so does our flame, our piece of the sun,” which suggests a deliberate choice to move beyond this pain, without thoroughly addressing its roots. This approach mirrors the general sentiment surrounding Anne Frank's story, which often involves recognizing the pain but predominantly emphasizes moving forward and not dwelling on past horrors. Additionally, these stanzas reflect the band's commitment to liberal-oriented activism, echoing their public statements that call for an end to “hate,” yet they stop short of directly addressing the underlying power structures that contribute to human suffering. In my view, this moment represents a missed opportunity for Zasloff to use her platform to identify and challenge the systemic powers that perpetuate mass scale human tragedy. This approach suggests a form of activism that,

although an engaging performance, falls short of the more direct and explicit methods of activism that are historically preceded among the Jewish Left.

As Doni sings the chorus, the instruments swell in the background, honing the message of the song:

*“So flicker on,
And glow through the night until the dawn,
I believe you were right all along,”
My little one.”*

During this moment, the low whistle and tin whistle assume a prominent role, emphasizing Zasloff’s delivery of the chorus. This infusion of the whistles enhances the overall performance of the song at this juncture. One could perceive the resonant presence of the whistles echoing in the background as an evocation of a sparrow’s melodic call. Within this context, the metaphorical interpretation emerges of the “small but mighty voice” of the sparrow harmonizing with Zasloff, intertwining their melodies in a hopeful and uplifting union.

Zasloff concludes the chorus by incorporating additional lines:

*“So flicker on
I believe you were right all along
can't you see that your light was never gone?
My little one
It is the sun”*

This moment in “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)” can be regarded as the climax. While it may be easily perceived as a final message that Zasloff intends to convey to her daughter, I propose an alternative interpretation where she breaks the fourth wall. In this interpretation, Zasloff is singing is directed towards Anne Frank herself. Anne Frank, through her documented experiences in exile, offered the world a personal narrative during a time when countless stories like hers were lost. In contrast to the Hackett’s sanitized portrayal of Frank, Zasloff portrays Frank as a teacher instead of a valorized heroine, acknowledging the wisdom Anne Frank

imparted, "I believe you were right all along." Anne Frank's diary marked the culmination of her own personal story, yet its publication ensured that the narrative of Anne Frank continued to flicker on, perpetuating her legacy. By acknowledging this enduring impact, Zasloff recognizes the power of Anne Frank's storytelling and how it has resonated across generations. The grief surrounding Anne Frank's story, and other stories like it, can be used to establish national public memory.

For example, 2015, I embarked on a trip to Israel through "birthright,"¹²⁹ where I visited Yad Vashem, Israel's National Holocaust Museum. Yad Vashem is situated in the Jerusalem hills on Mount Herzl (named for the founder of the Zionist movement). Adjacent to the museum is the Israeli National Cemetery, which houses memorials such as the Great Leaders of the Nation's Memorial Park, the Victim's Acts of Terror Memorial, Memorial of the Last of Kin for Israeli Defense Forces, Garden of the Missing in Action, and memorials for the Six Day War and Yom Kippur Wars, among many others. In the heart of this vast compound of Israeli national remembrance lies the Children's Holocaust Memorial.

The Children's Holocaust Memorial sits beside the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, in a hollowed-out underground sanctuary. As I descended into the depths of this memorial, I found myself surrounded by countless stars suspended in the air, their collective brilliance illuminating the space. The memories of lives lost in the Holocaust is often symbolized by light. Through a speaker, voices recited the names of the children whose lives were lost. As I traversed the path within the cavern, my mind pondered the profound impact of the Holocaust on my own family's

¹²⁹ "Birthright" or *taglit* is an organized trip to Israel funded by the Israeli government or government beneficiaries. It is a trip for young Jewish adults to travel and see Israel. This has political ramifications and contributes to Israeli nationalism.

history.¹³⁰ After passing through a dark undergrown maze filled with stirring youthful grief, a startling realization dawned upon me: the luminous spectacle that unfolded before me was, in fact, an illusion. The seemingly infinite stars that adorned darkened space were merely fragments of reflected light, cast by an array of dark mirrors. To my surprise, only a single candle burned, its glow was enough to create the illusion of traversing among the stars. This art installation conveys a powerful message, subtly alluding to the idea of nation-building: from the many, emerges the one.

My sharing of this experience at the Children's Holocaust Memorial is a testament to the powerful emotions and influence that national memory can wield. It highlights how a nation like Israel uses collective grief to foster a sense of shared adversity among its citizens, prompting them to turn towards each other and their nation, united in collective grief. This concept of national solidarity through shared grief is not merely anecdotal but has been substantiated through academic research.

In 2019, a psychology study at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, Israel, led by Gal Ariely, delved into this phenomenon. The study focused on how the observance of Holocaust Memorial Day significantly reinforces a sense of nationalism in Israel. Ariely's study underscores the significant role that memorial days play in Israel, particularly in the context of how Israeli policymakers and government elites utilize these commemorations. These influential figures craft and employ national memory from a top-down perspective, effectively shaping the 'imagined community' of the nation-state. Through such deliberate actions, they play a pivotal

¹³⁰ Within my own family, a significant number of relatives reside in Israel. My participation in the "birthright" was an expectation that had been placed upon me from an early age. However, I feel compelled to express my disapproval of the inhumane actions and human rights violations committed by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people. It is my mission to raise awareness and educate those around me about the profound and devastating consequences of unchecked nationalism.

role in forging a shared national identity among Israeli citizens.¹³¹ While Ariely acknowledges that the psychological study of national memory is still underdeveloped, with a need for more comprehensive research to support these findings, this study represents a recent stride in understanding how grief and trauma can be instrumental in strengthening specific aspects of Israeli policy.¹³²

Nearing the end of “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank),” a chorus takes the stage, harmonizing and blending of folk musical traditions, symbolizing a celebration of interconnected immigrant communities. As Doni repeats the phrase “it is the sun,” the music crescendos, accompanied by a chorus of voices chanting the vocable “dai dum.” This particular style of vocalization bears resemblance to a traditional singing technique found in Irish music known as *lilting*. Often likened to the scat singing of jazz, *lilting* is informally referred to as “diddling,” where singers utilize syllables like “diddle,” “dee,” and “dum” to create melodic patterns.¹³³

In this section, it is my belief that Nefesh Mountain evokes a Jewish improvisational singing tradition, known as the *nigun*, through the practice of *lilting*. In Jewish music, a *nigun* entails the spontaneous creation of a vocal melody sung over the syllable “lai.” In a subtle manner, Nefesh Mountain seamlessly combines the consonants of *lilting*, particularly the “d” sound, with the vowel sound of the *nigun* syllable, “ai.” This choice of syllabic combination serves as yet another

¹³¹ Gal Ariely, “National Days, National Identity, and Collective Memory: Exploring the Impact of Holocaust Day in Israel,” *Political Psychology* 40, no. 6, 1392. This quote also draws from Anderson, 1986.

¹³² In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Nefesh Mountain turned to social media to voice their support for Israel. Their posts suggest that the band perceives criticism of the Israeli government as a form of antisemitism. This perspective steered their continued emphasis on anti-antisemitism. While they acknowledged and condemned the loss of Palestinian lives, their primary focus was on the rise of antisemitism across the globe. Nefesh Mountain's online statements predominantly centered on the suffering of Jewish people, avoiding delving into the systemic power structures that contribute to such political crises. This leads me to believe that Nefesh Mountain's activism surrounding the October 7 attacks sought to placate their audience, using liberal-oriented activism to enhance their brand. In response to October 7, Nefesh Mountain released a new song, “More Light,” and announced the “Love and Light” tour for Winter 2023.

¹³³ For more information about this vocal practice, see Catherine Mullins, “Blah Blah Blah: Making Sense of Nonsense in Irish Music,” *Musical Offerings* 5, no. 2, (November 2014): 87-117.

mechanism through which Nefesh Mountain skillfully interweaves elements of Jewish musical heritage into the tapestry of North American folk textures.

The concluding section of the song serves as the peak of Nefesh Mountain's narrative, woven through both music and lyrics. While the lyrical content of "Piece Of The Sun (For Anne Frank)" reflects upon themes such as family, multi-generational growth, hope, and optimism, it is the music, blending of bluegrass and Irish influences, that adds an additional layer to the story, evoking a sense of inter-communal harmony. While the lyrics convey themes of hope and suggest that each individual carries a "piece of the sun" within themselves, it is the music itself that narrates the tale of coming together as a community. Hence, the sonic representation of inter-communal harmony within the music underlines the message that while every individual possesses their own unique "piece of the sun," it is through collective unity and the coming together of these individual fragments that they fuse into a brilliant and radiant sun.

"Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)" portrayed a message of community and optimism by blending Irish and bluegrass music with textual literary references to the writings of Anne Frank. Nefesh Mountain drew musical inspiration from the mid-to-late 20th century folk-revival, where significant Jewish secular participation profoundly influenced the construction of Irish and bluegrass music communities. The framing of Jewish secular heritage was invoked to elucidate the significance of Jewishness within the context of the folk-revival and its relation to Nefesh Mountain's music. In the lyrics of the song, Nefesh Mountain made explicit references to Anne Frank's story, employing her writings as a teaching tool to impart resilience in the face of suffering and uncertainty to their own children. While Anne Frank's optimism had become a frequent reference point in North American Jewish culture, it was often misinterpreted, leading to a sanitized portrayal of her life. Nefesh Mountain navigates implications and constructions of

public memory in “Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank). By employing elements of bluegrass, Irish music, and Jewish identity, Nefesh Mountain also interweave the singing practices of the Jewish nigun with the Irish lilt, presenting a fresh and transformative representation of North American Jewish identity. This fusion showcased an embodied practice of Jewish joy and community, encapsulating a vibrant and inclusive expression of cultural heritage.

The media representation of Nefesh Mountain's album *Songs for the Sparrows* has indeed codified the band's political intentions behind the album. Through their press circulation, Nefesh Mountain showcased their liberal-leaning political message, which might have been less evident solely through listening to the album. By strategically positioning themselves in both Jewish media and music media circles, the band is able to forge connections with a widespread audience, disseminating their political message.

***Songs for the Sparrows* Recapitulation**

In summary, Nefesh Mountain's album *Songs for the Sparrows* weaves together intricate elements of political engagement, diasporic narratives, and Jewish cultural expression within the bluegrass and Jewish music realms, creating a resonant musical journey for a diverse audience. In understanding the cultural significance of Nefesh Mountain's *Songs for the Sparrows*, the album details a broader narrative of diasporic connection, using bluegrass to outline this migratory-influenced storyline. Within this musical odyssey, “A Sparrow's Song” assumed the role of a definitive thesis statement for the album, unveiling a North American diasporic experience while offering a relatable protagonist for listeners to identify with. Depending on the audience's affiliation, whether from the bluegrass or religious Jewish community, this song's interpretation may vary, resonating with unique perspectives. Meanwhile, “Piece of the Sun (For

Anne Frank)" reframed the narrative of Anne Frank, engaging with her story in the form of public memory construction, and also as mechanism to impart lessons on enduring suffering. Despite Anne Frank's Dutch origin, her story became memorialized by Americans, and the infusion of Irish folk elements in the song attest to the influence of American folk music. As a result, these seemingly international influences served as representations of nationalism and public memory. In "Piece of the Sun (For Anne Frank)," Nefesh Mountain centered Jewish joy, reimagining Anne Frank's story as a conduit to rewrite the narrative of Jewish musical expression, infusing it with resilience.

Conclusion

Nefesh Mountain's *Songs for the Sparrows* remains the only existing bluegrass album that delves into the subject matter of antisemitism. Nefesh Mountain navigates between bluegrass and Jewgrass communities, showcasing an understanding of their multifaceted audience's perspectives. By reaching out to both Jewish listeners and bluegrass fans, the band expands the horizons of North American Jewish expression in popular music while broadening the current topical subject matter within the bluegrass sphere. *Songs for the Sparrows* amplifies the voices of individuals of diaspora, drawing inspiration from Nefesh Mountain's Ashkenazi roots.

Through an analytical exploration of *Songs for the Sparrows*, this thesis sought to shed light on the relatively understudied intersection of bluegrass and politics within the broader field of ethnomusicology and musicology. Bluegrass, a product of folklorization, serves as a musical emblem for the expression of American identity. The bluegrass community is growing, gathering in systematic ways through festivals, conventions, universities, while also developing institutions

such as bluegrass societies.¹³⁴ By studying the overlap of bluegrass and politics, scholars can see that bluegrass music and its surrounding community have striven to be a microcosm of mutual aid and solidarity, regardless of political orientation. Presently in the digital age, bluegrass serves as a source of solace for participants, providing a sense of community and connection when such qualities become increasingly challenging to find. The recent surge in political expression among prominent figures in the bluegrass community reflects an ongoing evaluation of how to foster a more inclusive and accessible space for all individuals. While negotiations of space and place in the bluegrass world are constantly unfolding, there remains much more work to be done.

Nefesh Mountain's foregrounding of their Jewish identity in the context of bluegrass music presents an excellent opportunity for scholars to delve into how other North American Jewish artists express their cultural identity through various popular music genres. Historically, the field of ethnomusicology has primarily focused on researching Jewish music within the realms of klezmer or Jewish liturgical music. For instance, many North American Jewish artists have embraced hip hop as a platform to foreground their Jewish identity. While scholar Judah Cohen has examined the convergence of Jewish American hip hop with masculine identity, there remains a wealth of unexplored territory in this vibrant arena.¹³⁵

I am humbled to share that an earlier version of this thesis received the 2022 International Bluegrass Music Foundation Neil Rosenberg Bluegrass Scholarship Award. This recognition brought with it the opportunity to attend the IBMA World of Bluegrass Conference, where I had the pleasure of meeting numerous individuals who expressed genuine enthusiasm for this work. The IBMA conference holds significant importance within the bluegrass community, drawing

¹³⁴ I hope to explore the contemporary institutionalization of bluegrass music and its ascension into bluegrass into higher education in future study.

¹³⁵ Judah Cohen, "Hip-Hop Judaica: The Politics of Representin' Heebster Heritage," *Popular Music* 28, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.

many musicians to Raleigh, NC—my hometown—to rub elbows with record executives, publicists, and fellow enthusiasts. It was a momentous occasion for me to realize that the very building where I graduated from high school served as the backdrop for this event. During the conference, I was approached by numerous musicians, many more than I could count, who had read this work and eagerly shared their connection with the subject matter: "I'm Jewish too!" This heartwarming response highlighted the presence of both a surprisingly large and an unsurprisingly welcoming Jewish population within the broader bluegrass community. These encounters reaffirmed the significance of exploring the convergence of bluegrass and Jewish cultural expressions, underscoring Nefesh Mountain's role as a voice for embracing cultural diversity within the bluegrass landscape.

One of my most cherished interactions at IBMA was with bassist Charlie Lowman of The Kody Norris Show. I had the pleasure of meeting Charlie through the introduction of banjoist and educator Ira Gitlin, another Jewish member of the bluegrass community. Charlie sported a fluorescent orange nudie suit adorned with fringe, frogs, and purple lilies, complemented by a cowboy hat perched atop his head. Ira put his arm around Charlie, "You know that Charlie Lowman here has Jewish heritage?" Charlie shook my hand and spoke with a charming drawl resembling the Upland South, "I'm from Chicago, and my Granddaddy was Yiddish. He even spoke Yiddish!" Ira smirked and questioned, "Charlie, now, if you're from Chicago, how did you get that southern accent?" Charlie smiled and laughed, "Well, I reckon it's from spending so much time in Tennessee!"

These earnest moments of connection served as powerful indicators that discussions about expressions of Jewish identity had been relatively uncommon in the bluegrass community until very recently. I observed a strong desire among fellow bluegrass enthusiasts to connect and

engage over matters of Jewish heritage. Shedding light on this evolving phenomenon has reaffirmed that much of the bluegrass community is eager, receptive, and willing to embrace and celebrate cultural diversity within the realm of bluegrass music. To tell these stories, to bear witness to this unfolding process of bluegrass inclusivity, and to be part of these negotiations in this work, is truly an honor and a privilege.

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