

Singing Political Songs In A Troubled Time

Daniel Kahn's newest album reminds the listener that the message his music tells is especially pertinent today.

By [GEORGE ROBINSON](#) ✓

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Daniel Kahn (with accordion) and his Painted Bird group makes a rare appearance here. [Paintedbird.de](#)

The way he sees it, Daniel Kahn has been playing Perchik almost all his life.

Kahn will act the role of the itinerant radical organizer in the Folksbiene's new Yiddish-language "Fiddler on the Roof," which opens on July 4, but as he says with a laugh, "I've been learning about him for years, singing the songs of An-Sky, Gebirtig, Manger," referring to the playwright of "The Dybbuk" and the Yiddish poets/songwriters Mordechai Gebirtig and Itzik Manger.

As the leader of the Painted Bird, his scintillating Berlin-based punk-klez-folk-Yiddish band, Kahn has been bringing the works of such politically astute songwriters, along with his own driving originals, to a new audience for almost a decade and a half. His latest CD, "[The Butcher's Share](#)" (Oriente), will have its official launch in concert at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan on Tuesday, June 26 (7 p.m., 334 Amsterdam Ave., [jccmanhattan.org](#), \$25.)

Although Kahn will firmly assert that the message of his music is timeless, a cursory reading of newspaper headlines will remind you that his music is especially pertinent today.



Daniel Kahn and his band The Painted Bird. Courtesy

Kahn, who grew up in Detroit and moved to Germany in 2005, is quick to point out that material on “The Butcher’s Share” was assembled and recorded mostly in 2015 and that “everything was in the can before [Donald Trump’s] nomination.” “Radicality is traditional, subversion is traditional,” he says, pushing back the stingy-brim hat from his brow and gazing into the placid waters of New York harbor. “But we’re living in a time of encroaching authoritarianism, of greater oppression from capitalism than ever.”

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He notes, “I’ve been singing Hirsh Glik’s ‘Shtil di Nakht’ for a very long time. I’ve been singing [anti-Fascist songs] for over 10 years; it’s just that now the point is making itself.”

The first half of the new album is even darker and more percussive than Kahn’s previous sets with Painted Bird.

“This is about as cynical as I can get,” he says, half-jokingly. “But the last songs [on ‘Butcher’s’] are very introspective.”

They are also as gentle and thoughtful as anything he has recorded, revealing a warm underside to his more frequently heard fire.

How does he see the role of political song in a troubled time? Kahn rubs his dark beard thoughtfully.

He adds, “The transposition of historical and linguistic borders has its own value.” “Ideally,” he begins, “the most effective thing is to pose provocative, interesting, confusing questions, either in terms of content or in the manipulation of the context. To sing a Yiddish song from [the 1930s] about the revolutionary potential of women, of their work and their dignity, that’s content I support, but it’s more powerful given the fact that singing it now it still has relevance today, in a very different historical context.”

■ i The most political thing you can do is to tell a human story, and Yiddish has incredible stories to tell.ii

Kahn is not interested, however, in participating in the Yiddish equivalent of the old Irish phrase about “the committed preaching to the converted.” His goals are more complex, subtler than providing musical marching orders to people who already agree with him.

“I don’t like music to hit people over the head,” he says. “I think our job is to throw a wrench into the works, to bring some irony, skepticism and humor.”

Besides, he says, “The most political thing you can do is to tell a human story, and Yiddish has incredible stories to tell, stories that have been silenced by murder and assimilation and nationalism. That’s a shame, and I’m glad to be part of a community that is unmuting those stories.”

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