

## Still your bubby's Yiddish Just a bit louder

[Lois Goldrich](#) • [Music](#)

Published: 06 March 2015



The Yiddish Princess rock band will perform at Rutgers March 10.

Somehow, it seems a bit incongruous to see the words Yiddish and rock in the same sentence.

It's even more startling to hear the phrase Yiddish rock. Still, says Jeffrey Shandler — a professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers and a scholar of contemporary Yiddish culture — that genre of music not only exists but is thriving.

“There's a tendency to think of the history of the language as ending, or starting to die out, with the Holocaust,” Dr. Shandler said. “That's not the case. What changed was who uses the language, and how.”

To demonstrate its use in the musical arena, Rutgers' department of Jewish studies has joined with the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers to bring the rock band Yiddish Princess to campus on March 10 to perform a free concert.

The concert is being offered in conjunction with Dr. Shandler's undergraduate course on the culture of Yiddish, which surveys Yiddish language and culture from the Middle Ages in Europe to the present.

"The idea of a hard rock Yiddish band may seem surprising to some people, who think of Yiddish as being tied to the past, but many young musicians are busy creating 21st-century Yiddish culture," Dr. Shandler said.

"For me, Yiddish Princess exemplifies contemporary Yiddish hipster culture, which draws on the riches of Yiddish going back generations and energizes it with the most up-to-date sounds and sensibilities," he said. "Anyone who wants to understand what is happening with Yiddish today should not miss this chance to hear contemporary Yiddish rock."

The Bildner Center, established in 1996 on the Rutgers New Brunswick campus, is co-sponsoring the event. The center acts as "the link between the work that scholars do as teachers and researchers and the public sphere," Dr. Shandler said. It sponsors a variety of public programs, such as lectures and literary readings, and an annual Jewish film festival.

Yiddish Princess "mixes power pop and hard rock with traditional Yiddish music, reflecting the powerful mix of cultures found in Brooklyn and other hipster outposts around the world today," Dr. Shandler said. The concert, which is open to the public, will be followed by a talk-back with members of the band, which he will moderate, beginning by asking them about their music and their personal journeys as musicians.

The six-member group has been around for several years, Dr. Shandler said, noting that the lead vocalist, Sarah Mina Gordon, is the daughter of the late Adrienne Cooper, "a great singer and teacher... who played an important role in teaching both traditional Yiddish folk song and theater and art songs and encouraged her students to make this music their own."

Her daughter, he said, has done exactly that, although "it's not the kind of music her mother would make. Her mother was a trained opera singer and had her own approach to singing. Sarah rocks out."

In fact, he said, "She is following a larger lesson that her mother taught. Learn this music and figure out how you're going to find your own voice in it — what you want to express and how."

Also in the group is klezmer clarinetist Michael Winograd, now playing keyboard.

"One reason we're organizing the concert is to expand people's sense of the possible for what can be done and is being done with Yiddish today," Dr. Shandler said. He noted that it is not unusual for people to think of it as a vestigial language, or at least to be surprised by the notion of a Yiddish rock band. "It goes against expectations."

He pointed out that although Yiddish Princess is based in Brooklyn, the home of many "young millennials who are musicians," the musical genre is not limited to that trendy borough.

“The kind of music they’re making is part of an international phenomenon,” he said. “There are other musicians in North and South America, Europe, as well as in Israel, who are looking at Yiddish as a resource for making contemporary music. They’re looking at traditional Yiddish music, or poetry that has never been set to music, that speaks to them. They’re looking to situate it in the kind of music idioms they are familiar with.”

This practice is more widespread in Europe, he said. “Ethnopol has been around for decades, where popular music idioms are fused with folk music practices. It had a big influence on klezmer musicians in the late 1980s. It inspired their thinking about how to revitalize traditional Yiddish music.”

Now, he said, the next generation of musicians is asking, “What’s the music we like to make? How does that speak to the music we know — hard rock?”

For most people, he said, the music of Yiddish Princess will be a surprise. “It’s not what you expect,” he said. “It shakes up your sense of the possible.” Students’ grandparents, for example, might not have realized that “Yiddish could rock and could be loud.”

Dr. Shandler said that it will be interesting to see his students’ reactions. “They come with different cultural and musical literacy,” he said. “I’m looking forward to hearing what they make of the concert.”

[http://jstandard.com/content/item/still\\_your\\_bubbys\\_yiddish/32687](http://jstandard.com/content/item/still_your_bubbys_yiddish/32687)