


Susan Watts
and Elaine
Hoffman
Watts. Photo:
Julie Brown,
2005



In May 2008, PFP presented a major concert with Elaine and Susan Watts and a band of klezmer greats, premiering new arrangements of the music that these exceptional women have learned from two older generations of musicians in their family. The following conversation was recorded on March 4, 2008, at the Havertown home of Elaine Hoffman Watts by PFP staffer Elizabeth Sayre. Three other women were present, representing two generations of the Hoffman family: Elaine's sister, Leanore Nathans, and two of Elaine's daughters, trumpeter Susan Watts and Lorrie Keammerer.

"from then on, i never dropped the sticks"

Elizabeth: Tell me about the musical life of your family.

Leanore: When Elaine was a toddler, Daddy [Jacob "Jake" Hoffman] was always at that piano. Elaine took Daddy's drumsticks in her hands, and the practice pad, and she started to play in time with him. Daddy said, "Give me the sticks, I'll show you how to hold them." From then on...

Elaine: I never dropped the sticks.

Leanore: ... to perfection. My father always took interest that she be properly educated in music, percussion. She had the finest teachers, like Benjamin Podemski and David Grupp.¹ I have nothing of music. My ability is in handwork.

Susan: And dancing. She has a fantastic sense of rhythm.

Lorrie: She does have musical ability. They just did never find the right thing for her.

Elaine: No, no, my father made her stop when she was sixteen, because, you know, to become a chorus girl—was terrible.

Elizabeth: Where was the house that you grew up?

Elaine: 6205 Ludlow Street.

Elizabeth: What was the neighborhood like at that time?

Elaine: Mixed. It wasn't a Jewish neighborhood. It wasn't Gentile.

Lorrie: But then they moved. Susan doesn't even remember. My grandparents moved from that house to Wynnefield. We used to lay and nap under this piano, and Pop-Pop played and played and played. You know, your concept of what is normal is relative. When there were parties, or even just dinners, there was always live music after. It didn't even have to be a party. You always came into the house, and Pop-Pop was playing a freilach² on the piano. Whether it was a big holiday or we were just there being babysat, you always had music. In the basement, we used to put on puppet shows, and Pop-Pop used to play the xylophone with our puppet shows. So, Eileen, my older sister, and I were constantly exposed to anybody playing anything at any time.

Leanore: You would come home from school, Daddy was either teaching or playing. It was always happy. Every holiday, every dinner, every Friday night dinner, family dinner, it was beautiful.

Elizabeth: So, where was Jake Hoffman born?

Elaine: Krivoie Ozero in Russia.

Elizabeth: How old was he when he came over?

Elaine: Seven.

Elizabeth: How did he meet your mom?

Elaine: He played her brother's bar mitzvah.

Leanore: And he put a telephone in their home in Strawberry Mansion, so that he could call her and talk to her on the phone.

Elizabeth: Tell me about your mom's family a little bit. Was she born here?

Elaine: No, she came here when she was three, from Kiev, Russia [Ukraine]. She didn't find this out till we were all grown—there were two children, Aunt Margaret and my mother. My mother was three or four, they were like eighteen months apart, and they wanted to get out, from the pogroms. They gave the little girls wine, put them to sleep, and they were in the hay wagon, with horses, and they covered them in the hay. And they drove them out of Russia into Poland. A cousin told my mother the story.

Leanore: When they were in Russia, and the Cossacks — my mother told me this — would trample into their house with the horses. The floors

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Uncle Johnny
Hoffman
playing
drums.
Philadelphia,
c. 1920s.
Photo
courtesy
Elaine
Hoffman
Watts

were dirt, mud. My grandfather dug a tunnel. When they would come in, the Cossacks, and raid, he would put the two girls in this tunnel. And he put the mud back on them, and the rug.

Elizabeth: Did your parents speak Russian or Yiddish?

Elaine: My mother did say they had an old grandmother that lived with them, she did speak Russian. But when the grandmom died ...

Lorrie: They spoke Yiddish.

Elizabeth: Tell me how your father learned music.

Elaine: They were shamed into it. He graduated high school, which nobody did then. He was going to Brown's, one of those pharmaceutical prep things. And Grandpop said, "What, do you want

to make sodas at a fountain? Be a musician!"

Lorrie: But the whole family played. The grandfather wrote music, and they all played. He had lessons at Settlement Music School ...

Leanore: Seven lessons, he always told me, seven. Then he would come home at night, a little boy, playing weddings. ...

Elaine: Polish weddings ...

Leanore: or affairs that went on and on and on. His hands were frozen from carrying the drums, and he would kick with his foot on the door and call his mother in Yiddish, "Please open the door, my hands are frozen."

Elaine: But I'll tell you another one. He always worked, he made money. They lived in this little hole of a

house in South Philly. He put in indoor plumbing, a toilet. He made money!

Elizabeth: This was before you were born.

Elaine: Oh, he was a young man!

Lorrie: You're talking 1910, '12, '14, before even the First World War. He was born in 1898.

Elaine: The Second World War wouldn't take him because he was too short. He wanted to go in the Navy Band. It would have changed his whole life.

Leanore: Uncle Morris was taller. He was drafted in the band.

Lorrie: All the brothers played. He had how many brothers? There were four boys ...

Elaine: Uncle Johnny, Uncle Harry, Uncle Morris, and Daddy.



Jake Hoffman, Elaine's father, and the "ersbte Eynikl," first grandchild, 1945.

Jake Hoffman at a family Passover seder, with grandchildren Eileen, Robert, Joanie and Lorrie. Photos courtesy Elaine Hoffman Watts

Lorrie: There were four boys and a girl.

Elaine: Two girls, Ida and Esther.

Lorrie: Oh, I didn't know Aunt Ida. But, anyway, they all played. All the boys played.

Elaine: They all went to Settlement. Aunt Ida went to Settlement, she would perform ...

Lorrie: She never played professionally, concerts.

Leanore: She played concerts for organizations.

Susan: How about Esther?

Leanore: Violin and piano.

Elaine: Esther, she could play, but she was crazy.

Elaine: Uncle Morris told me that Aunt Ida at one time taught piano at Settlement.

Lorrie: Uncle Johnny played the drums...

Elaine: ... Good jazz!

Leanore: With Paul Whiteman.

Lorrie: And then Uncle Morris Hoffman, he's still alive, he's 95, he played at the — what was the name of that place?

Leanore: The Latin Casino.³

Elaine: From the day it opened till the day it closed, at shows and theaters. He was a doubler; he played all the reeds. He played sax, clarinet, flute, bassoon.

Lorrie: He taught me how to play clarinet.

Leanore: Daddy got to hate music!

Elizabeth: What did he hate about it, the business?

Susan: I think it just eats you up. It's very difficult.

Elizabeth: Was it different then than

it is now?

Susan: It was different then because there was more work and you could make a good living. But it was still very difficult.

Elizabeth: You mean, like, competitive, and people not treating you well?

Elaine: Right, right, right, right!

Leanore: You were not looked up to. You were a klezmer.

Elaine: No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the shows, the theaters. Daddy didn't depend on the klezmer work. This man was a musician for anybody! Before the sound came in movies, every theater had a symphony orchestra as good as the Philadelphia Orchestra. Daddy used to play in those 60-piece orchestras. Podemski — this is when Leanore was born, in 1923 — he said, "Why don't you come in the Philadelphia Orchestra?" Daddy said, "I'm making \$60 a week playing at the theater, and you're only making \$40 a week at the Academy." Daddy did not depend on klezmer.

Susan: Nobody depended on klezmer!

Elizabeth: What was klezmer for in those times?

Elaine & Leanore: Weddings.

Elizabeth: Just weddings, or were there other events?

Lorrie: No, like at our house ...

Leanore: Organizations. The Krivozer [Krivoe Ozero]...

Elaine: The landsmanschaft organization — these people that came over from

the same town in Russia, they were called landsmanschaft organizations.

They would have parties and banquets, and Daddy would play them. The Krivoe Ozero was the town that Daddy came from, and that's the musicians they used. The German Jews used Abe Neff, this one used this one, and it's a whole mish-mosh, I found out. Daddy was not a businessman! Daddy was a virtuoso musician. He couldn't care less about the business!

Leanore: He used to play an act, "Sing along with Jake."

Elizabeth: What was that like? A solo act?

Leanore: He'd play the xylophones, starting out with "My Baby," and those songs, all Fred Astaire type of numbers. He used to write to Lawrence Welk constantly, "Please, let me audition for you."

Elizabeth: He was a composer, too, right? Tell me about his compositions.

Lorrie: We always heard them. He played them all the time. He played "Eteleh"; he played "Lakeleh"...

Leanore: And another one, "First Grandchild"...

Elizabeth: Were there charts?

Elaine: Yeah, two, for "Lakeleh" and "Eteleh." And one was lost. I have a little cassette that he made in the living room on Braddock Lane — you [Susan]

were not born. I'm playing drums and Daddy is playing piano. I have it, and he played those three freilachs. And off of those, we had the music for "Eteleh"

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and “Lakeleh,” and Susan’s friend, we sent him the tape, and he transcribed “The Ershte Eynikl.”

Elizabeth: That’s “The First Grandchild”? And you’re going to play those three tunes in the show?

Elaine: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Tell me about what else you’re playing.

Susan: Well, we’re playing all the music that my great-grandfather wrote. I never met him. He seems like the most interesting, nutty. My mother’s father’s father.

Elizabeth: What was his name?

All: Joseph Hoffman.

Susan: He wrote these books. I don’t know whether he did it from memory. Nobody knows about these books.

Elizabeth: So these books of his that you have are dated 1927?

Susan: Yeah. I don’t know whether he had sheet music and copied it. He did it in three different keys: B-flat, C, and E-flat.

Elizabeth: It’s for the different instruments, in other words.

Leanore: He also wrote poetry, beautiful poetry...

Susan: He learned Yiddish, he learned how to play cornet in the Russian Army. So in this book there’s all these really nice Russian marches. And there’s concert pieces. There’s things he wrote — there’s Naftuli Brandwein doinas.⁴ Naftuli Brandwein is a klezmer clarinetist. Dave Tarras, who was a big klezmer clarinetist at the time, that wrote popular stuff ...

Elizabeth: You mean, these compositions from other people are in the books?

Susan: Yes, yes!

Elizabeth: Did he transcribe them?

Susan: I don’t know, that’s what I’m saying. I don’t know whether he did it from his memory, or if he did it from other sheets of music ...

Elaine: Or old phonographs, the 78s.

Elizabeth: So, these books are a mix of his compositions and other people’s stuff?

Susan: And “Trad” pieces, traditional klezmer tunes, traditional

eastern European tunes...

Elaine: That they’re still playing today.

Elizabeth: Well, Elaine, your father saw your talent, and he really supported you. Tell me what else happened to you, and how did you become a musician?

Elaine: Actually, I can’t do anything else. My family will tell you that.

Susan: She certainly can’t nurse.

Lorrie: She can’t cook, she can’t ...

Elaine: I can cook, I don’t want to cook!

Lorrie: She can’t sew, she can’t type.

Elaine: I can’t sew and I can’t knit. So it was default — play the drums! But I can make kasha. No, I always wanted to be a drummer.

Leanore: She went to junior high, Holmes Junior High at 55th & Chestnut.

Elaine: It’s an African American old age home now.

Leanore: When Elaine went to junior high, I said, “Go down and apply to play in the band.” She came home and she said, “They gave me the triangle.” I said, “You hit the triangle. Someday something will happen and they’ll need you.” And she became the drummer.

Elaine: No, want to hear a story? I had become a famous drummer by then, in junior high. The teacher wrote a musical. I was the only one that could read music, sit down and play the set. I had the chicken pox. The principal of the school came to the house, and they covered me up with calamine lotion—the rash was already all out already—and I went and played the show and came home!

Leanore: And did you not perform — Paul Whiteman had a program...

Elaine: An amateur hour. Yes. I did that.

Elizabeth: When was that?

Elaine: I was eighteen years old. I was at Curtis. I was on television. He had an amateur hour.

Elizabeth: What did you play, drum set?

Elaine: The drums, and I soloed, whatever.

Elizabeth: So, tell me a little bit

about Curtis and what it was like being there.

Elaine: Oh, it was nice! When I first got in there, a couple of guys came and said to me, “Are you the girl that plays the drums?” Because I didn’t realize, not till many years later, that I was the first female that was ever accepted there to play percussion.

Susan: And graduated.

Elaine: Yeah, that graduated.

Elizabeth: Did the other students and the teachers accept you?

Elaine: Oh, yeah! These students that I went with, they all became famous symphony musicians.

Elizabeth: So, how long were you there? You went straight from high school to Curtis?

Elaine: Yeah, I went two years there, then I went a year to the New Orleans Symphony, which I did not like. It was boring.

Susan: You sit there and count ...

Elaine: And then you come in wrong. Then I came back to Curtis, and I was really devastated because my teacher left.

Elizabeth: So it was two years, and then the New Orleans Symphony, and then another year, and then you got your diploma.

Elaine: Right. In 1952 I was in the New Orleans Symphony. Of course my mother came with me. You couldn’t let a nineteen-year-old Jewish girl go by herself. Anyway, it was still segregation there. On the buses, they had signs: “Colored.” They had pegs in the signs, and the seats had holes in them, and then you moved them. So, my mother and I got on the bus, and there’s nobody on the bus but us, so we took the sign and hid it. All the people, white or black, didn’t know where to sit. It was hysterical, they’re looking for the sign — “Where’s the sign?” Somebody said to me, many years later — Susan and I were together, they said, “Why didn’t you steal the sign?” I said, “I didn’t have anything, I just stuck it in the bottom.” But it was a hysterical story.

Elizabeth: And then what happened?

Elaine: I jobbed around, played, taught ...

Susan: Had children, got married ...

Elaine: No, no! Got married first, then had children! Anyway, but — I played and then I got married.

Elizabeth: What year did you get married?

Elaine: 1955.

Elizabeth: And you played ... there's that picture of you playing drums at your own wedding, right?

Elaine: Yeah! Daddy was playing a solo, and I played along.

Susan: You had to play at family things whether you wanted to or not. She played at my wedding. We had a jazz quartet, or something like that, and she played the drums. She said, "Get out of there, get up, I'm going to play!"

Lorrie: We just went to a wedding in April, in Brooklyn, our cousin's wedding. The band was terrible. Susan and my mother, and then Buddy's kids, who really play good, Jordan and Larry plays saxophone, they took over the band, because this band was horrible. Susan knew the guitar player, and she goes up, and she goes, "What's up with this band?"

Elaine: Susan played, we all played.

Elizabeth: Elaine, how was Susan as far as music when she was little?

Elaine: Genius! From the get-go. First she went to Suzuki piano. She was really good.

Elizabeth: How old was she?

Elaine: How old, Susan? Three or four?

Susan: I don't know. I just remember loving it. And Lorrie was a fabulous clarinet player! She played so good, and I remember her clarinet teacher coming over to the house, teaching her, and giving her lessons — Joe Smith — and she had such a beautiful sound. She thinks she wasn't any good. I don't know why she thinks that.

Lorrie: 'Cause I never could count, and Mommy used to say, "You can't count, you can't count!" I could play really good, but you have to do that

counting thing when you play. So I never felt that I was as good as everybody else.

Elizabeth: Susan, when did you start playing trumpet?

Susan: When I was eight; she said I was seven. I didn't like my piano teachers, and what wound up happening was I quit the piano, but I never stopped playing. I still, to this day, love playing the piano. Lorrie played the clarinet, Eileen played the accordion and the bassoon, Pop-Pop was always there playing the piano, we had a vibraphone set up. Mommy's vibraphone was set up in the living room. I would come home from school, and she [Elaine] was teaching, and I'd sit on her lap while she gave lessons, you know? So we had this closet, and it was A, B, C, D. It was a sliding closet, the panels on the closet. A was coats, B was another sliding [door], then C....

There were four doors, and in the fourth door on the bottom, ooh, it was always a mess. On the bottom were all kinds of instruments. There was the accordion, there was a violin, there were all sorts of percussion instruments, and my dad's trumpet from high school was there. I remember one day, just picking it up and playing it, and I loved it. I just could do it right away, naturally; it just came out. I remember saying, "I want to take trumpet lessons." That's how I started to play. I couldn't count either. I didn't learn how to count until I started teaching.

Elizabeth: Did you play in groups in middle school and high school? What kind of groups?

Susan: Everything.

Lorrie: You didn't have your own bands and stuff, no, no. She played in school orchestra and district orchestra.

Susan: But I was in Philadelphia Youth Orchestra. I was the youngest person they ever accepted for brass. That's how I got the travel bug. 'Cause I went to Australia. I was fifteen. I was like, "Oh, my God! I love this!" Then we went to ...

Elaine: Scotland! England, Scotland, and Wales. We were in Dover ...

Susan: I got sick as a dog. Do you remember?

Elaine: They wanted to take her tonsils out in England.

Susan: Yeah. And I missed a concert in Bath. Then I went away to St. Louis Conservatory of Music. It was like Curtis, you had to live on your own. It was too much, it was too far away, I was too young. It didn't work out. But I came back home, and that's when I started playing more. I went back to Temple, and I started playing in Haitian bands, and I started working in radio, and I worked at WRTI, and I got into jazz more. I was in the scholarship brass quintet at Temple. To make a long story short, I never graduated with a music degree. Then I went and got married, and I went back to school and got a bachelor's degree in English literature from Rosemont, and quit playing the trumpet. Then, eleven years ago, I left my husband, and I came home to this wonderful world of klezmer!

Elaine: That's true, that's it! That's how she found klezmer.

Elizabeth: How did klezmer go from being something that was bad to being what it is now?

Elaine: If you were a musician, you wouldn't want to be called a klezmer. It meant you were a bum in the park. It died out. Dead! Gone! For 20 some years. I would say from the Second World War on. These musicians in New York, Frank London, Henry Sapoznik, and Hankus Netsky here in Philadelphia, and several other people. They went and they said, "This music is too good to die, to leave it like that." In 1976 Hankus Netsky called me and said, "I'm looking for Jake Hoffman." I said, "You're two years too late, he died!" Then Hankus came here and I showed him Grandpop's books, and he [Hankus] had that Klezmer Conservatory Band. Which is a joke because klezmer was not a

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Online:

Legarreta biography/discography:
<http://www.donaldclarkmusicbox.com/encyclopedia/detail.php?s=2184>

Orquesta Sensación, past and present:
http://www.cubamusic.com/pg018_op-lookup_t-FIGURES_s-BIOGRAPHY_v-133.shtml

University of Texas online resource on Latin American music:

<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/music/>

Archived articles from

<http://www.descarga.com>, an excellent commercial Latin music

resource: <http://www.descarga.com/cgi-bin/db/archives/index?RJ4ZvDhQ;;453>

(articles on *charanga*, *charanga* 5-key flute, various musical groups, and much more)

Fania Records: www.faniarecords.com

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Commitment. Fania/Emusica remastered edition 130 184.

_____. 1976, reissued 2007.

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Larry Harlow. 1975, reissued 2006. *El Judío Maravilloso*. Fania/Emusica remastered edition 130 115.

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Israel “Cachao” Lopez. 1977, reissued 2005. *Cachao y Su Descarga*. Salsoul 7015.

Orquesta Nuevo Ritmo. 1960, reissued 1999. *The Heart of Cuba*. GNP 2264 (reissue with Peruchín recording).

Foto Rodríguez y Su Orquesta La Única. 2006. *En Honor a Pupi Legarreta — el 27 Aniversario*. CM/Corre Music 52.

Mongo Santamaría. Reissued 1996. *¡Arriba!* Fantasy 24738.

_____. 1963, reissued 1998. *Watermelon Man*. Milestone 47075.

Various Artists. 2007. *Charanga at the Palladium, Vol. 1*. Universal/Protel 160

conservatory kind of music! It was folk music. So that’s how it started. What we found out is that every city has its own kind of klezmer tunes, because the people that settled in New York came from some wherever, and they brought their music with them. Boston has its own. Philly is known for its particular kind of klezmer, and a lot of it is in Grandpop’s book. Everybody has their own shtick, their own genre, and we don’t do that. We do Philadelphia klezmer. That’s what we’re known for.

Elizabeth: Can you tell me any ways that it’s different from the other styles?

Elaine: It’s just different melodies, that’s all. It’s still klezmer. It’s still a freilach, it’s still a bulgar,⁵ it’s just different tunings. Some tunes are exactly alike, but they start in different places in different cities.

Elizabeth: Since klezmer has come back, or been revived, by these younger guys, how has that affected you? You’ve been able to do some traveling, and you go teach at workshops?

Elaine: We didn’t know about these klezmer things. This KlezKamp in New York, Henry Sapoznik — it’s been there! I said, “Susan, you and I

are going to go.” It was at this broken-down hotel in the Catskills. We go up there, and we start to play. They had no idea who we were. They went, “Oh, my God, who are they?” And that was it. In 1996. And then, Alicia Svigals — I played on her record, *Fidl*. I always say she discovered me. She played for me in Washington at the concert we did for the NEA.⁶ So, [now at] KlezKamp, I have a class. Year after year after year. And then Hankus got me into KlezCanada.

Elizabeth: Do you see a lot of young people who are interested?

Elaine: Oh, it’s marvelous! It is really great to see all these kids, and my grandchildren, of course.

Elizabeth: So you think it’s going to continue to live?

Elaine: Oh, I hope so, yeah. They travel — some of these ethnomusicologists travel to Europe, to these little towns, to dig up things.

Leaonore: Elaine is a genius musician. She was properly educated to bring it out of her, the finishing touches.

Now through change of environment and situations, the horah, the Jewish dances, it’s all being recognized and properly brought forward. Before, a klezmer played on a corner in a street, with my father’s time, before

the War, before the Depression. Times change, that’s all it is. Of course, you get disappointments and frustrations, and fortunately, now, at this age, Elaine is being recognized for what she worked for and really deserves. Really, it’s a wonderful feeling.

Notes

¹ Podemski was a percussionist in the Philadelphia Orchestra and author of the now-classic *Standard Snare Drum Method*. Grupp was timpanist in the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1950s.

² A type of lively Yiddish dance and tune.s

³ Originally located in Center City Philadelphia, this well-known area nightclub relocated to Cherry Hill, NJ, in 1960, and finally closed its doors in 1978.

⁴ Another common klezmer tune type: improvised, said to derive from the music of Romanian shepherds.

⁵ Popular klezmer dance tune.

⁶ In Summer 2007, Elaine and other winners of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) National Heritage Fellowship were honored in Washington, D.C.