

THE JEWISH WORLD

“Like many Jews,” say the liner notes of Frank London’s intriguing CD *Invocations* (Tzadik), “I have felt a sense of alienation from operatic, showy cantorial music.” There is certainly little operatic about London’s soulful improvisations on liturgical settings by some renowned cantors; the spirit and tone are, rather, “intimate,” “personal” and “passionate,” to further quote from the liner notes. There is a deep *innerness* to London’s playing (which is, remarkably, on the trumpet rather than the clarinet—the latter valued by klezmer musicians like London precisely for its ability to evoke the sound of a *hazzan*, or cantor). That quality, along with London’s gift for “crying” ornamentation, well serves the almost uniformly imploring nature of the liturgical passages he seeks to illuminate here.

One might hope for more from *With Every Breath: The Music of Shabbat at BJ*

(Knitting Factory Records), a studio recording of some of the folk-style liturgical music that enlivens the phenomenally well-attended services at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. There is, certainly, a pleasing range of catchy melodies here: traditional Sephardic ones from Amsterdam and Turkey, Sufi- and Pakistani-inspired renditions of verses from the Psalms, traditional and contemporary *niggunim* (Hasidic-style melodies for prayer), one by a contemporary composer of liturgical chants. There’s an incantatory character to many of the tracks, and a consistent Sephardic cast to the entire album, reflecting, among other things, the Argentinian origin of all of the principal singers.

But the exuberant energy characteristic of services at BJ—perhaps difficult to capture without a live congregation—is conspicuously missing. For this exuber-

ance, turn to *A Jewish Odyssey* (Putumayo)—a compilation of Jewish world music of rich, exhilarating sound, embellished by delicious instrumental accompaniment. There is even virtuoso fiddling enlivening—or redeeming—a bizarre nonsense-syllable (or, according to the singer/composer, mystical) text. The sources of the more literal texts—quasi-liturgical hymns and (mostly) ardent or bittersweet love songs—vary from Yiddish poetry and traditional and contemporary Hebrew lyrics to Turkish and Spanish Sephardic songs; one track features five languages, only one of them Jewish. There is a Sephardic or Mediterranean flavor to most of the tracks, however, extending even to a European Hasidic/klezmer melody and the traditional American-Ashkenazic “Shalom Aleichem” hymn.

—ROBERT COHEN