



"50 YEARS AGO, I PLAYED THE SAME WAY": EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW

For the documentary video on Elaine Watts that we are making, we've had the pleasure of recording dozens of people: members of Elaine's family, fellow musicians, long-time friends, her students, and klezmer scholars. We thought we'd share some of this pleasure with you! Interviewing, transcribing, and pouring over careful transcriptions can change how you hear: time slows down and you savor the nuances, rhythms and feeling in peoples' voices. Eventually we'll use nuggets of these interviews to fill out a picture of who Elaine Watts is and why this family legacy of klezmer is so precious. For now, we offer a small sampling of the rich reflections people have shared in interviews. Interviews were transcribed by Thomas Owens, and edited by Debora Kodish.

Hankus Netsky: There's already these families in Jewish music [in Philadelphia]. There's a scene already for Joseph Hoffman to come into when he shows up in 1905; it's already here. And what happens is they add on to it—it becomes a cumulative thing. It becomes this in-gathering of the exiles. Because somebody comes from Krivoie Ozero—and he comes with his book [of music]. Harry Kandel's already here and he's from Krakow, you know, and he's from Galicia and he brings his book. Then you've got these guys from around Kiev who come also. And then you've got Morris Fried from Belarus, and he brings his book. And the Alexander family, also from Belarus. It's one community, and the musicians are basically putting together a repertoire that becomes the Philadelphia repertoire. And then it's a scene with families that continue

throughout the generations. So you have generations of Lemisches. Or you've got the Hoffmans, with Joseph Hoffman, Jakey Hoffman, Elaine Hoffman, Susan, you know. These families stay. They just stay here for generation to generation. So, it just continues. It's a place that has its own feeling and its own kind of atmosphere. It's not like these people played klezmer music every day—they didn't do that. They'd play it at weddings. But at a wedding you were back in the old country.

Morris Hoffman: Oh yeah! Pesach was the day. After the Seder, my father would say, "Get the clarinet!" He gave just one order, and that was it! So I would play the clarinet. My brother Jake, he played piano, and my brother John played the drum. And the family had a good time. In fact, we lived in South Philadelphia, where we had a porch. All the neighbors



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A page from Joseph Hoffman's books. Jake Hoffman on xylophone, in an Italian band in Philadelphia. Photos courtesy Elaine Hoffman Watts

would be on the porch, would watch us. We had fun! My father loved to dance. He was very ostentatious. He had to be the boss. And we had a good time. The whole family was together. And then, we were enjoying ourselves. But my father was the boss! He had my whole life planned. And I didn't dare disobey him. If he said this was green, this was green. The older generation, whatever they said, went. That's how it was.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: My cousin Buddy studied drums with my father, Jake. And he said, "Your father was eccentric," he said. "But what a musician." I said, "Nah, you're telling me he was eccentric?" He was a brilliant musician. Very troubled guy, you know. He worked hard to make a living. And he was just great. And

he didn't go to Curtis or Julliard. He took a half-a-dozen lessons at the Settlement Music School when they were, you know, "Got these immigrants, teach 'em something," you know. That's what that school was for. And he started out as a piano player, and he did play for silent movies. He had a sister, Aunt Esther, she's only died in the last five years or so. She played violin and piano, and would never play for anybody—one of those. And Uncle Morris, great saxophone and clarinet. And there was another uncle, Johnny, handsome guy, who was a jazz drummer: he worked for Paul Whiteman orchestras. I'm going back! And, uh, there was another uncle, Uncle Harry, screwball, great violinist who ran away from Peabody. And then there was

another sister, Aunt Ida, who was a great pianist.
Henry Sapoznik: This is what's so tragic and poignant about this. If you wanna play Irish music or Bulgarian music or old-time music, you just get in a plane and you fly to those countries, and you just roam around. You'll find some old guy on a porch and he's playing, and you're off to the races. We [Jews] don't have that. We need our elders. We need the carriers of the tradition. Drummers were in reasonably short supply. But to find an old-time drummer who was still actively working, and a woman! I mean, c'mon—break all the molds right here in this one person. She forces us to re-examine the received wisdom.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: When I started already to play, Daddy didn't

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want to play the klezmer business because it had a terrible connotation. "What are you, a klezmer musician?!" And this man, he played for years with Leopold Stokowski in the Philadelphia Orchestra. And, 40's, 50s, after the war, he traveled with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came here, and he traveled with them. I mean, this was a musician, and so this klezmer stuff— he would laugh at the whole thing. He would. He would say, "What do you mean? What a joke," he would say. But he knew songs. And he played for the Jewish Theater, when it was on Arch Street, and he knew all the stars— Molly Picon, Paul Muni. All the composers, conductors—they all knew Jake Hoffman. And, later years, at the Locust Street Theater, I played. It was a Jewish performance. And one of the men—I can't remember his name—they wanted to know who the drummer was, whatever, and they said "It's Jake Hoffman's daughter. Jake Hoffman." **Morris Hoffman:** Elaine, she was a nice little girl, and when she was growing up, my brother [Jake] taught her the drums. And then she went to Curtis, and her schooling was superb. And she was a fine, fine drummer. She could play the symphony orchestra, that's how good she was. Very talented musician. The klezmer stuff— no, she didn't play much of that. She was an excellent Jewish drummer. She knew all the tricks of the trade. [But] in those days, the men wouldn't hire a girl! And she resented it terribly. And, uh, it's different [now], but the men resented the ladies.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: The Jewish Society bands, they wouldn't use me. "She's a girl." My own cousin: "Elaine, you're great but you're—" I was a married woman. My children heard him say it! "But you're a woman," what's that got to do with how I play? They didn't

wanna use me. I did play Sunday mornings— Town Hall. Remember Town Hall? Broad and Race. Was this great theatre. And the B'nai Chaim used to bring in these very poor productions from New York City. Remember? And, they had a small orchestra. They hired me only because of Daddy, because I knew the music. Ernie used to come with me. And I had to bring drums. The Town Hall had acoustics: unbelievable. The Philadelphia Orchestra used to record there on the whatever. And these programs were for nothing that the B'nai Chaim used to give. And do you remember the people used to hit each other over the head to get in? It was hysterical. And the productions were—they were poor. But they used me 'cause I knew the music. That was it. They weren't thrilled about it, but they had to have a drummer. And all the actors knew I was Jake's daughter, so I had to be all right.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: I played— fifty years ago I played the same way: where were you? It isn't that overnight I became this marvelous drummer. I remembered that the boys in high school used to make fun of me, and I played rings around them, honest to God I did. And then, then I went to Curtis. Go know I was the first. It didn't even dawn on me. I just went on my merry way, dumb way.

Hankus Netsky: I mean, Elaine, you know, I had no idea that her father had taught her the traditional drumming exactly as he played it, and that they'd made recordings together with him playing xylophone and her playing drums. He would show her everything to do, just like she's doing for her grandson now, you know.

Susan Watts: The fact that this is a family thing—it means something. It means something to me. I think that's one of the reasons it feels comfortable. Most most people that I talk to— my friends that are

musicians—their families very reticent to support them being a musician. My family was reticent to support me NOT being a musician. So it's a totally different paradigm— totally, totally, totally different. And because [Elaine] made a living at it, and all her uncles made a living at it, and her father made a living at it, and his father made a living at it, it was okay for me to make a living at it, you know. But here's, again, her three children, each one in their own right, like, a full—like, really good, fine musicians and artists. And, I just think that that's kind of amazing, to be honest with you. **Elaine Hoffman Watts:** That's where I learned to play the drums. [Daddy] would take me down to the cellar, in West Philly, on Ludlow Street and he had a drum set, 'cause he taught there, and a xylophone, and that's how he taught me. I sat down at the drums, and he would say, "Do this, and I'll play that." And that's how I learned to play. And I remember him saying to me—he would show me something and I didn't get it, and he would say, "I'm showing you, dummy! Dummy, dummy!" But I didn't learn to read music, or the rudiments and all that stuff, until I was twelve years old.

Hankus Netsky: Elaine starts playing, and I'd never heard anybody play like that. Everything in the music—first of all, she knew everything. She knew exactly how the songs went. But she wasn't playing a beat on the drums; she was playing the tunes on the drums. It was different for every tune he played. Elaine played a style that was an older style. It really was a style that was like a tone painting with the drums. It was not like this Russian military kind of beat. She really was playing the music on the drums. Then I listened back to how Jakey Hoffman played on those recordings, and that was how Elaine was playing exactly. And it was amazing; it was like a time machine.

It's like, here was this person in 1995 playing a style that I don't know if anybody had played since the 20s. And it turned out that the reason that she had stayed with that style was basically that because she was a woman, she couldn't get on the scene. The Jewish klezmer scene was really a male thing in Philadelphia. And it was kind of a both blessing and a curse in a way because, you know, because she never modernized, and never did what the guys did—you know, in terms of playing, really kind of transforming the klezmer into just kind of general club date rhythm. She still played this incredible music on the drums, and it was like meeting someone who was a hundred years old.

Henry Sapoznik: Those of us who have had the chance to work with these representatives of another era, like Elaine, are fortunate. Anyone who doesn't take advantage of playing with the old musicians has missed a glorious opportunity. For example, last night when we were setting up the bandstand, I was one musician separated from Elaine. I said, "No, I wanna be next to the drums." And I'm sitting there listening to Elaine, and I'm saying, "I'm stealing that. I'm stealing that. I'm stealing that. I'm gonna play this back for her on the next repeat." And then I'm hearing Elaine hearing me, and I'm saying, "I don't care about anyone else, we've got our own concert going on back here. I'm her audience and she's my audience." The thing I always found most interesting was listening to the drummers to understand the press rolls and those tight patterns, and that became the goal for playing banjo. So, when working with someone like Elaine, whose musicality is so immense that she can coax out a variety of tonal ideas in the playing—not just easy stuff like volume or stream of consciousness playing—it's really about, "How can I support and

enhance what's going on in the frontline?" So that's why I always like sitting next to her; it's like I'm still learning.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: But when I started out, you know, my father was just worried I wouldn't get married. I did play in the New Orleans Symphony. I didn't like that kind of work. I liked playing the shows, and different stuff. In the Symphony, you sit there for three movements, and come in with a triangle, or whatever. It wasn't my cup of tea. But I was a very, very good tympanist, and I could've made it as a tympanist in a symphony. But I, you know, I was married. I had Eileen. I would have to take my family to North Dakota or some place, you know.

Hankus Netsky: I think of Elaine as someone who really plays the old style. It's like putting something in a time capsule in about 1920, and we still have it because of her father teaching her, "This is the way it's done." Whereas Jakey Hoffman was not a very modern drummer, [his brother] Johnny Hoffman was. Johnny Hoffman played with swing bands. I mean, Johnny Hoffman did make that transition more. Jakey was more of an orchestral drummer. When swing music came along for that generation, they had a choice to either go with it and modernize or not. And I don't think Jakey was a guy who modernized. He stayed with that orchestral approach, and he learned, you know—the right way. I mean he learned, he was a trained drummer, and he could play with the orchestras. And the Jewish music for him—and this is the key with Elaine—the Jewish music was an outgrowth of the orchestral music. It was not a subset of swing, but in New York it became one.

Susan Watts: The live music in the house was Jewish; there really wasn't anything else. The only other thing was that when I was a kid, you know, she taught every day after

school, and I would sit on her lap after school while she taught her students, 'cause otherwise I never got to see her. And she played the xylophone with the kids too, so I got to learn all these other songs that she played on the xylophone. Then, starting at a very early age, she schlepped me to her jobs.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: And the first date we had, Ernie came with me on the job to carry the tympani, and he's been carrying the drums ever since. But I always worked! Oh, from the day I got married. Listen, I went out with boys who said, "Oh, you can't play the drums." I said, "Yes. Goodbye." A couple of them. What are you, crazy?

Elaine Hoffman Watts: This is a little story about Jacob Neupauer. We used to rehearse every Sunday morning Saturday—whatever—Richmond and Allegheny on top of a taproom. And my oldest daughter had just been born. And I used to bring her. We all used to go to the rehearsals! My mother, Ernie—and I used to bring her in a wicker clothes basket! I was the tympanist. And he made this unbelievable arrangement! They were all great. They all went on to become great musicians. And I became a klezmer drummer. And then Marco Farnese, we did these great operas. And I used to take my mother. And we used to play in South Philly on all the playgrounds. And he was just a wonderful man to me. Also, you didn't make a lot of money. But I was the only drummer, and I had to do everything. And he used very, very good musicians. I mean, these were all good jobbers: a lot of retired orchestra violinists. And it was a pleasure, and it was good. Then I used to do some jobs around Columbus Day for Italian bands. Ernest'll tell you about it. And I used to take the kids. We had fun there. Not a lot of money. You'll notice this strain runs through it.

Marco Farnese: I had a small opera

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company here in the city, and the man who was getting me musicians for the performances, the contractor, said, "I have a little lady for you that you might be able to use. And, so that's how I met Elaine. So, of course, she did ask me would we have anyone else. I said, "No, you're it." And, to make a long story short, she'd just go through that music, and she would select every crucial section of whatever section had to play, and she just would make up, you know, either in her mind or a separate sheet or something, and cover everything that had to be done, which was incredible. And fortunately she also had all her own instruments. She carried those back and forth. And she just was incredible. Incredible, for all the years that she did this for me. I would have certain people that I knew I could depend on. And, of course, Elaine was right at the top of the list. Once I got to know her, then I wouldn't hire anybody else. She was just great, you know. To me it never meant anything that she was a woman playing, you know, percussion. She was a percussionist, and period. And top flight.

Susan Watts: She really taught me to listen to singers—'cause she always used to play for operas. And she would sit over there when we lived here, and when we lived on Braddock Lane she would sit in this big, fuzzy brown chair that was right next to the stereo. And she would put the opera on, and she would have the score in front of her, and she would read the score as the opera was playing, where she would—and when her tympany came in, she would practice. You know what I'm sayin'? She learned her part in a way that—she listened! Do you know what I'm saying? This is big, huge and important. This was a big, huge lesson for me that carried me throughout my whole, entire musical life, to this day. You have to listen. You have to listen to music. Music is an aural click thing, you know. And it's all about your ears. And you can only get out what's in. And what's—you can only get what's in by putting in, you know. And so I listened,

and I listened, and I listened, and I listened, and I listened, and I listened, and I continued to listen, daily, to singers, to everything I can— anything I could get my hands on. I'd buy just any old Jewish record for a quarter at yard sales. Whether it's good, whether it's bad, it doesn't matter. It's all good; it's got somethin' on it that I need to listen to, you know.

Gwen Foster: We couldn't do Handel's Messiah without her unless she was just unusually busy and couldn't come. After that first performance, we just fell in love with her—this little Jewish lady. And that was controversial enough, but when Elaine—you know how she is full of passion; we just fell in love with her. But wherever she was, she just fit in and just electrified the performance, brought not only class, but excitement, to every performance and still does. Nothing bothered her. I mean, we would just do something she'd never heard of before, she said, "Just bring it on me." Whatever you wanted, she could make it happen.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: How did I do this? I don't know how I did this. And I carpooled Hebrew school too. When I started working the theaters and things like that, my husband got disgusted washing dishes, and he bought a portable dishwasher. That's how I got my portable dishwasher!

I taught for the Philadelphia public schools music. They had— this was in the 50s, the 60s— such a music program like you wouldn't believe, and the man's name was Dr. Lewis Worsen. He was a marvelous, marvelous man. When he died, forget it, and now it's nothing. And I taught on Saturday mornings for them; they had satellite things. And I was making three-something an hour. I was making ten dollars for the whole morning. And they had all good musicians coming there and teaching. I started teaching Gerry Brown when I was about eighteen or nineteen. Daddy started him, and he said, "No, Elaine, you teach him. He's better off with you." He used to come in a little sailor's suit. And Eileen used to sit on my lap when I

taught him. Eileen was in her Dr. Dentons. And he was just good. He was good!

Gerry Brown: So they took me to this place—the West Philadelphia Music Center. Well, they brought me there, and the teacher that was there was this gentleman by the name of Jake Hoffman. However, as it turned out, he was busy with touring and things like that so I studied with [his daughter] Elaine for, I guess, about nine years. That was the foundation of my career. People can come up and say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, you know, you're a world-class drummer." You know. And, "How did you get started?" Well, I actually got it started with a woman. I'm very proud to acknowledge that and to give Elaine the accolades that [she] deserves. You know, she was dropping little seeds, and of course it was up to me to, you know, "Okay, I need to check this out." I didn't know where it was leading, but there was this trust. The desire was there, but I [also] trusted her and that's priceless.

Susan Watts: When she had students in the basement, which she still does, but when I lived there, I would go down and play the xylophone with her students. I would play the xylophone, she would play the drums some times. Like, I've been playing with her forever. From the get-go. When she schlepped me to jobs, she schlepped me 'cause she was playing the drums. I was playing with her. So, I [have] played with her forever.

Theresa O'Brien: She would never pull any punches with you. She'd say, "Come on, get it right! What are you doing? Did you practice?" She would get on you. We'd trudge down to her basement, where she had a drum set of pads, and that's where I started taking lessons and learning how to play more classical music. And she opened my eyes gently. She was harsh on me in a nice way, you know. But she always pushed me to try to do better, just because she wouldn't take less than what I could do. You know, it's all about confidence, and I think that's what Elaine gave to me, which I'm trying to

give to my students, is you can't lose if you don't try. She always wanted me to do better.

Elaine Hoffman Watts: In 1959, I was teaching I think it was the Logan Elementary. They had Saturday morning music classes, and wonderful, wonderful teachers. Those kids—it was great. I was pregnant with Lorrie, my middle daughter. And the supervisor came in. I was sitting at the desk and I got up. And he said, "Hup! You can't teach when you're pregnant. Go home, and when you have the baby, you can come back next year." That's the way it was. It isn't that they fired me. They said, "You can't teach when you're pregnant. You'll come back in the fall."

Susan Watts: People are starting to give her attention, and I think that what initially came out is important but it's not the whole story. What initially came out was, you know, "Huh! You men, you had the monopoly, but here I am!" And

that's true and right and feh! to all you men who had the monopoly, but that's not what makes her so fascinating. And that's not what makes me lucky, you know. And it's not what makes her an amazing musician. And it's not what makes her a great teacher. And it's not what makes Marco Farnese hire her. I mean, it's this one thing that happened to her. And, because she is the kind of woman that she is — very strong— people saying things to her goes in one ear and out the other, you know. I mean, anger motivates her. And that's what she's done from the beginning. So she's getting all this attention because she's this woman musician, and woman drummer, which is rare. And she's still playing. She's never stopped. She's full-time. All these wonderful things about her. And, you know, she doesn't see that what she's done has made a difference. And, fine. But it has. Do you know what I'm saying? I mean, it has made a huge

difference. You throw a pebble in the water, and the ripples and the ripples and the ripples. Well, she has sixty years of ripples! Do you know what I'm saying? She's still rippling! So it's still happening. . .

my child," you know. "Cause he's the same as anyone else. His momma just wasn't married, that's all," you know. I said, "But that is not their fault, and the sins of the parent I would never allow, in my view, to fall on the children —if there was a sin." And so that was my position.

I know folks even said I was arrogant, or whatever. But I just was adamant about it, you know. That these children had no right to be stigmatized, or no right to be discriminated against. And above all, not even have their parent's name on their birth certificate? Nobody's child? And that's what I wrote to Hardy Williams. I just couldn't accept it. And Hardy introduced the law. And then we needed some more legal help. So then we went to Community Legal Services. It was Jonathan Stein. And we end up getting the Women's Law Project involved with it. There was Jonathan Stein, who was a beautiful legal mind, and another woman— Ann Freedman.

And with that, the long legal battle began, you know, with things back and

forth. And Ann Freedman from the Women's Law Project, she came to me one day and said, "Lois, they're saying that the woman gonna have to prove that the fathers are the fathers." And I said, "Why?" You know, "Are they calling us a bunch of whores, like we don't know who we laid down with?" I said, "Now I don't like that." I said, "So let the fathers disprove that they're not the father. Why not put that on them? Everything's on the woman. She got to prove this. The men don't get stigmatized; they're still Mister so-and-so. I don't accept that either. They're Mister. I'm Miss. Therefore, they don't get no stigmas, and I ain't takin' none," you know. "And I ain't gonna let nobody think that I'm just choosing some guy to father my baby. No, I laid down with him," I said. "I wasn't raped. It was conception by consent, and I know who fathered my children. And that's it. That's definitive. I ain't got to qualify nothing; let him prove that he ain't. That's what I'm saying. I'm tired of the women carrying this weight." Too long; women had to sack their babies, killing

babies 'cause they didn't want to be stigmatized if people knew. Women had to go through hell. She went with that strategy, she did.

It took seven years. We started in '71; we won in '78. The Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania wrote a legal opinion, I think it was, based on laws and precedents that had been set in other states, and then they filled in all the other gaps. But we won; that was a big one.

That's the one with the picture where you see Ade and Bumi. Bumi is four years old and Ade is eleven. And we won. And I was just — I mean, it brought tears to my eyes to see it in my lifetime, for my children being able to benefit and the millions of other children that it had affected, you know. I said, "Oh my God, this is just a gift. This is just a wonderful gift," you know.

*Interviewed and edited by Debora Kodish
Transcribed by Thomas Owens*