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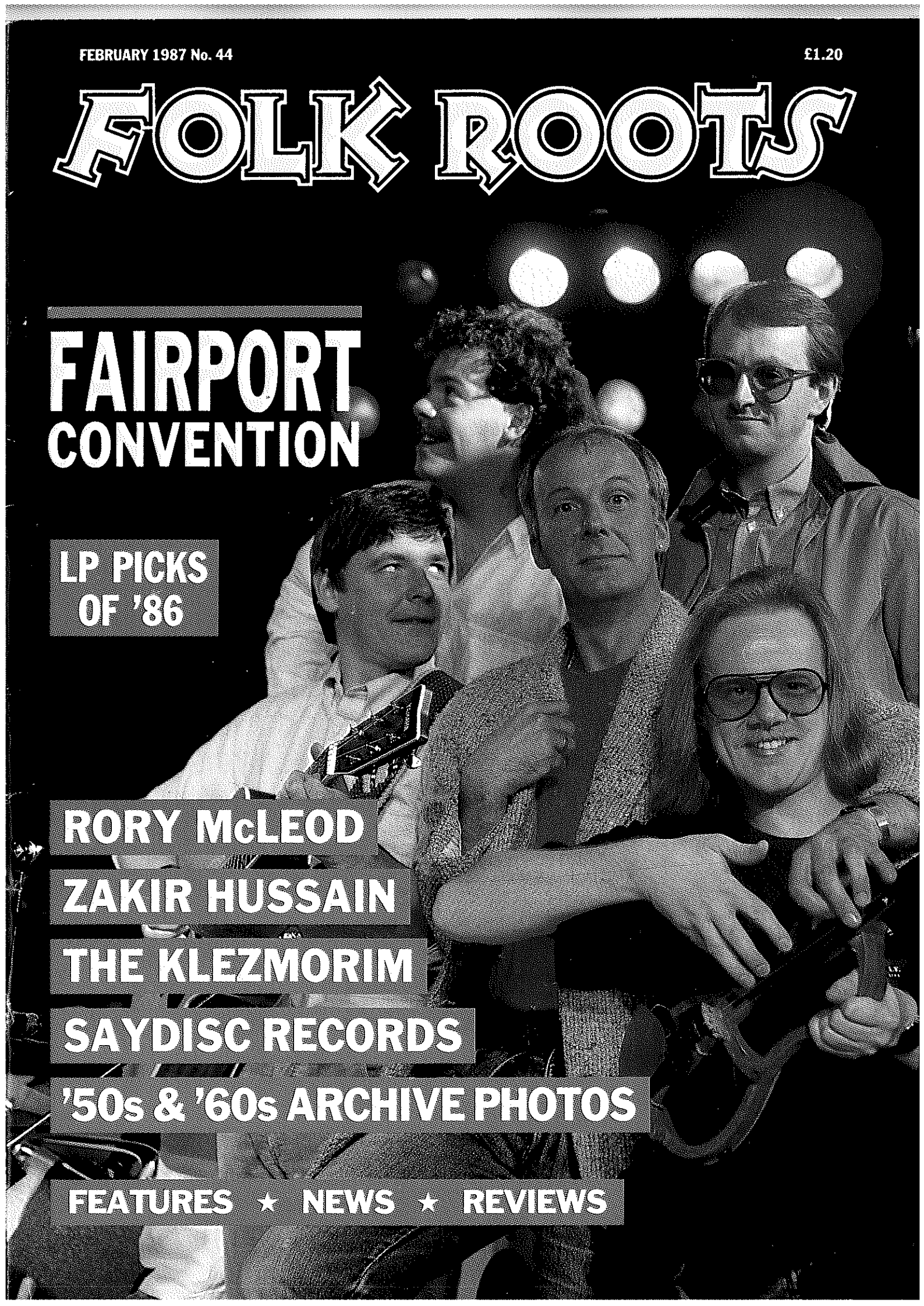
ZAKIR HUSSAIN

THE KLEZMORIM

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THE KOMLETE KLEZMORIM

Mike Grenfell on an American band with, er . . . , sax appeal

"IN THE BEGINNING . . ." a voice intones ominously, "was the saxophone. And Man blew it, and it was good." The audience shift uneasily in their seats. Several turn to neighbours and exchange puzzled looks. "What am I doing here?" someone mutters behind me.

Before anyone can answer, though, the band burst out through stage curtains, instruments at full throttle – six musicians swirling around at an insane pace, beefing up a frantic syncopated rhythm. The saxophonist is twitching to the beat, the tuba man's cheeks are about to burst and the trombone player has developed a fixed stare. Only the drummer manages to maintain any sense of composure – between duck calls and whoopee whistles!

Barely ninety minutes later, the now converted audience are being led through another round of simultaneous clapping and foot stamping. By the third encore, even the doormen have forgotten the late hour and are jigging in the aisles.

The Klezmerim had taken this year's Summerscope Folk concert by storm. But what is the nature of the beast?

Imagine, for a moment, we could climb inside a time-machine and travel back some four centuries to eastern Europe. There, among the various folk cultures of the time, we would find the first klezmer musicians. Originating in Jewish communities, these travelling players based themselves on a circuit of towns, where they would turn up to perform at social occasions: weddings, feasts, fairs, etc. Although completely proletarian, many maintained links with every level of society, gaining entry into the underworld and aristocracy alike. It was a twilight existence, forcing them to be constantly on the move: adopting disguises and fake names in order to travel, and being chased by the taxman or the authorities. Their style of music was always instrumental, improvised and largely based on Yiddish folk dance music; although through their travels, this became heavily overlaid with Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian and even gypsy music. In fact many of the early gypsy bands, it seems, were klezmer musicians dressed up as gypsies.

IF WE CLIMB back on board our time-machine and alight in America at the turn of the century, we come across klezmerim once again among the Jewish immigrants crossing the Atlantic. By now, and in the process of migration, their original folk tunes had been influenced by circus and military band music, as well as theatre and cabaret. Thrown into the musical melting pot of urban America, the klezmer musician absorbed many of its styles: working with folk, blues and jazz musicians from both the white and the black communities. Yiddish melodies were never abandoned, however, but rather became interwoven with the various musical fashions.

Klezmer music contributed to the growth in popularity of ragtime and vaudeville at the time. Indeed, most available recordings were made in the 1910s and 1920s. With the arrival of economic depression in the 1930s, though, the style fell out of fashion. The best of the

musicians went into popular jazz bands or classical orchestras, the less accomplished withdrew to their communities.

To bring our time-travelling to a close in the early 1970s, in Berkeley, California, we meet up with one Lev Liberman, founder member of The Klezmerim (now with a capital 'T' and 'K'), searching around for the origins of that special sound he couldn't get out of his head. Since then, and becoming a leading figure in the revival of klezmer, Liberman has taken his band around the world to critical acclaim. Once he had come back to earth after the South Bank stop of this summer's European tour, and had tucked up his saxophone for the night, I asked him how he had first become aware of klezmer music.

"Ever since I was eight years old there had been certain composers and styles of music that turned me on. When I was twenty, I realised that it was no accident that I liked all these disparate things. They must have had a common denominator or single link that tied them all together. Mainly they were cartoon sound tracks, the music of Kurt Weill, Prokofiev, George Gershwin, early jazz and Russian folk music. Klezmer was the link between these genres: each composer and style was exposed to it and borrowed ideas from it. It's a combination of infectious rhythms and bizarre flights of musical fantasy. I found the creative tension between the meeting of eastern and western ideas more stimulating than either one in its pure form."

HOWEVER, REALISING THIS and tracking it down was a whole different matter.

"I thought that the common denominator must have been played in eastern and western Europe. It must have been a folk tradition, and Jewish. I spent several years trying to find it and getting more information about it, but nobody knew. Reference books didn't speak of it and there were no recordings commercially

available. People that were about eighty might recognise it, and people of sixty thought they knew what it 'should' sound like. But they were infants when it was dying out. Finally, in a museum, in a box, in a closet, I found a whole box of 78s. And it sounded exactly as I thought it would sound – but only ten times better. The players were amazing virtuosos."

There are, of course, many elements in the Jewish musical tradition: work song, political and protest songs, topical satire, but after playing klezmer music for some eleven years, Liberman feels that the genre has unique characteristics. "You get moments of vertical harmony in the western tradition," he says, "but then a few seconds later, there's an eastern drone or dissonance, or perhaps the whole band playing the melody in unison. So the music is always spreading out or closing back in. It's full of tensions that are foreign to the western ear, but the underpinning is a danceable march rhythm which is common to western musical traditions."

WHEN I SAY the music is fast, I mean it is very, very fast. They must surely play more notes per minute than any other band, making rock 'n' roll appear positively snail-like in comparison. It's hard to believe that most of what's going on is improvised. But Liberman insists; "Although solos are generally in the same order and we know how much time it is going to occupy, we never play the same thing twice. Not only in the lead but in the back-up. It's a sort of collective ensemble improvisation. Out of six of us, four are making up parts. But it's not supposed to be flashy – it's supposed to create a constantly changing rhythmic background for the soloist to ride over and get new musical ideas from."

However, it's not all pace. On sub-genre of klezmer, called the doina, is certainly more introspective. It originates from the Rumanian gypsies and is considered to be a kind of Jewish



Photo: Michael Ian

... These pieces do have a structure, but one that is much more in the eastern style. So a player will stretch them out as long as s/he wants; making it very simple, or complex and convoluted. They are designed primarily for solo performers with a drone accompaniment, and create an emotional, sad atmosphere before the band move on to brighter, faster music. A normal concert sequence might be to present a doina, followed by a slow dance and then a fast, up-tempo dance to form a mini-suite.

The Klezmerim are now a purely wind band, but the klezmer tradition includes the whole range of folk instruments. In its early stages, string instruments predominated: cello, bass and violin. And in the case of the latter, not only the standard instrument with a curved bridge but a chord fiddle with a flat bridge where strings, all tuned the same, were played at once as a rhythm instrument. Various hammer dulcimers, and its later development – the tsimbalom – were also included. Once klezmer musicians had passed through military bands during the nineteenth century, most urban instruments were available to them. So trumpets, cornets, piccolos, euphoniums and sax were finally all used in klezmer bands; where they were played alongside traditional instruments and various noise makers. Even in the 1920s, some percussionists were still using spoons.

KLEZMER MUSIC COULD, therefore, just as well be played on violins, dulcimers and the like. "The only instrument that would be inappropriate," Liberman says, "would be any chording instrument, because you don't really have chord changes as the intersection of certain intervals. For people who have a lot of western music in their ear, they want a lot of chord changes in order to follow the melody. In klezmer music chord changes are often distorted. Sometimes they work against the melody or go through unusual changes to create tension."

Where piano or accordeon have been used,

it has mainly been in a boogie-woogie style for rhythm and bass accent. There is also a mandolin tradition, but mainly as part of mandolin orchestras. Apart from which, the predominance of wind instruments seems to have come about purely for pragmatic reasons. In early recordings, violins just did not have the necessary volume to make themselves heard. Similarly, as klezmer musicians often played unamplified in street corners or at social gatherings, string instruments were simply submerged.

Referring back to their stage show earlier in the evening, I wondered how the overt theatrical presentation had started. Liberman places The Klezmerim, along with The Brass Band and The Flying Karamazov Brothers, firmly in the new vaudeville movement that has recently been sweeping the U.S. All these groups started 10 to 15 years ago in the San Francisco Bay area playing in the streets. Faced with the age-old problem of attracting and keeping a crowd, they all came up with the same solution; that they could not confine themselves to one mode of presentation. If you were a juggler, for example, it wasn't enough just to juggle – it had to be done on roller-skates or whilst carrying on a humorous banter with onlookers. Similarly, The Klezmerim performances include acting and comedy, dance and pantomime, and all manner of visual buffoonery whilst the music is going on. The effect is very 'hit-and-run' as the show transforms itself rapidly, creating a rather surreal, cartoonish atmosphere.

ETHNIC PURITY IT ain't, therefore. But Liberman makes no apologies. "People in the U.S. who think they know a lot about folk music say, 'How can you play folk music with this humour, this theatre?'. But folk musicians did not present themselves in an academic manner: they were just making a living. These musicians entertained or they died. Just because music is

old, it doesn't mean it's old people's music. After all, it was played at weddings where young people were dancing and feeling lustful, or village fairs where neighbours met and carried on romances. It's a passionate music!"

Indeed, although klezmer was an instrumental, not a vocal, tradition, Liberman explained that klezmer bands often worked with a stand-up comedian. His job was to make up rhyming couplets or sing parodies of religious music and generally clown around. His humour included vicious satire and mockery of the existing social order, and an awareness of topical political events. The accent on humour is, therefore, very much a part of the klezmer tradition, the idea being to make people go through strong changes of emotion.

Liberman: "We try to amuse them, to feel strong emotions of every sort. It's partly something intrinsic in the music. It has a very wild and almost insane sound to it sometimes. It can seem very humorous, but in our own way, we are trying to shock our audience, to shake up their preconceptions."

Judging by the reaction that night, they had succeeded on both counts. This was the first time The Klezmerim had been to England – it certainly will not be their last.

Apart from early ('experimental') recordings on *Arhoolie*, The Klezmerim have two records currently available on *Flying Fish* and one on *Le Chant Du Monde*.

Metropoljjs FF258
Notes From the Underground FF232
The Klezmerim LDX 74854

Anyone wishing to sample the original 78s should try the following compilations:

Klezmer Music 1910-1920 Folkways FSS 34021

Klezmer Music – Early Yiddish Instrumental Music; The First Recordings 1910-1927 Folklyric Records 9034

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