

Judy Dicks

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Mentshn It!, by Millie and the Mentshn, is a terrific album, in fact, it is downright addictive.

It's klezmer music, mostly salvaged from the former Jewish enclaves of Eastern Europe obliterated in the Holocaust.

The Fiddler finally fell from the roof, still playing. But when that swinging beat starts to pick up speed, a vanished community springs to life and invites us to join the dance. Our feet take on a life of their own and we have no choice but to come along for the ride.

The "Mentshn" (Yiddish for "guys") are a four-man combo and they're fine players. But this is Millie Johnson's show. Her soprano voice is as fresh and clear as spring water, and she is a master musician and an enchanting storyteller.

The songs bear on their back a great sack of grief, yet they

are never maudlin. Just reading the dates of the composers and poets (1916-1943, 1916-1945) breaks your heart. Johnson has elected not to weep, but to celebrate and to witness.

Working from bare sketches, she has used simple means to craft loving arrangements of great skill and imagination. It's hard to imagine a more spell-



Millie and the Mentshn's latest CD is called *Mentshn It!* and will help support their trip to the First International Klez Fiesta in Buenos Aires this September.

Photo courtesy of Millie and the Mentshn

binding interpreter.

This is no mere anthology; it has great bone structure.

The album is bookended by two songs written as vehicles for the legendary Molly Picon, queen of the Second Avenue Yiddish theatre on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The first one introduces the performers. The lyrics of the last, a kind of Hun-

Special Mentshn

garian rhapsody, sum up the allure of the music:

*When you hear it, it seems so simple,
And you have no idea
How deeply it moves the soul...
You want to hold on forever
To the strains of the melody.*

At the heart of the album are two songs as haunting as Schubert's "Lieder."

Both poets, a man and a woman, were partisan fighters. She was captured and executed by the Gestapo at age 26. He survived and lives in Israel at age 96.

His poem, entitled "Under Your White Stare," is a cry from out of the depths. Her's, "Birds Dozing," is a lullaby, sung by Death to an orphaned infant. Both melodies are wreathed in Ms. Johnson's beautifully wrought counterpoint.

These songs are separated and surrounded by rousing, strategically placed instrumental dances.

There is even a Yiddish tango, played and sung to the hilt, followed by the anthem of the Depression, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" commemorating America's own Diaspora back in the Dust Bowl days. It's in English, delivered in the

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loose-gaited, swinging style of Sinatra. The rest of the songs are sung in Yiddish.

Line-by-line translations appear in the handsome black-and-tan booklet.

The album's logo is a recum-

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bent figure eight, enclosing the motto, "Fun Dor Tsu Dor," meaning, "From Generation to Generation." That expression suggests both continuity and a gift. This album succeeds brilliantly on both counts.

Millie and the Mentshn is one of five American klezmer ensembles invited to play at the First International Klez Fiesta in Buenos Aires this September. Sales of *Mentshn It!* will help finance the trip and the rest will be raised in a double-header concert with their larger parent band, What the Chelm, at the Fairhaven College Auditorium on March 8. Both the CD and concert tickets are available at Village Books. ■WI

Mentshn It!

**\$16 at Village Books or
online**

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