The 2007 CD album *Becoming*, by Linda Hirschhorn, is a retrospective potpourri of her work to that point. “Becoming what?” I wondered when I saw the title and before I heard the album. What does this title signify? The inside liner notes labeled “playback” from her memoir “Running Into Myself,” explains some of the thinking that went into this album. She is recording many of the songs over tracking herself from older albums. Due to new digital technologies, Hirschhorn was able to play back her 1987 albums, remix the tracks, and have new vocal backups to the songs. This album features several of those thirty-year old works, along with some songs newly written at the time of the making of this album. While reading this dialogue with self, I was reminded of a few other artists who laid down new tracks with older albums, such as *Unforgettable*, a 1991 album by American singer Natalie Cole singing with her father, Nat King Cole.

Looking at this body of work through the lens of a ten-year retrospective window, we can see the importance Hirschhorn’s music gave to the nascent but growing feminization of Jewish folk and sacred music. Not all the selections of this album are Jewish music and the album came 20 years after the first female cantors were ordained. Yet, *Becoming* has music that parallels the history of the rise of women cantors, and represents the burgeoning Jewish women’s music movement that ultimately spurred innovations in liturgical and Jewish secular music, and the vast changes now taken for granted in many aspects of American Jewish culture.

Several of the songs are influenced not only by Hirschhorn’s familiarity with Orthodox Judaism, but also the Zionist camps of her youth. For example, she combined both in “Hafoch V’Hapech,” which has the most “Israeli” sound, including a traditional Israeli folk music phrase structure and modal phrase endings. In one interview, Hirschhorn recognized this melody going in “two opposite directions.” She is quoted, “I...
had the harmonies express the song… embody the words in that way.” (Barenblat, 2012). These two separate influences are strong: her explored melody even has a similar melodic phrase structure to the “Nigun Atik,” a well-known Israeli folk dance melody. Her song ends in a classic Jewish musical cadence ending in Ahavah Rabbah mode (also known as “Freygish mode) with lowered second tone and augmented step to the third tone.

Some materials in this album are practical in application to choral music, especially for female voices. Since being a teen, Hirschhorn had sung in Jewish chorales. As a professional, she has been a choral director and arranger, and several of the pieces on the album reflect that aspect of her background. Her signature style seems to be close harmonies, superb choral writing, and a penchant for the round. This is evident in “Bishiva,” a text based on the Yom Kippur liturgy. The piece is first presented as a very traditional line with dyad harmony, and then is repeated in choral arrangement with expanded very tight harmonies, yet maintaining the tone and simplicity of the opening phrases. The album contains several rounds including “Dodi Li,” a familiar text that is classic Hirschhorn. In her rounds and canons, Hirschhorn insures that no one voice outweighs the others, creating a balance of vocal community. She also employs polyphonic writing juxtaposed to supreme simplicity in heterophonic music. For Hirschhorn, such songwriting is partially part of her political world-view. Through musical structure, she is showing respect for differences and coming together in equality.

The lack of hierarchical structure musically is a reflection of political beliefs integrated and codified into sound. Her feminist perspective is completely integrated into many songs. For example, singing in both Hebrew and English, and carrying musical elements of Israeli and American accompaniment, the opening song “Kumi” is one actualizing a feminist-focused interpretation of text. The passage is taken from the story of Hagar and Ishmael, who is assured, will become a great nation. Hirschhorn’s lyrics go “Come and carry your children, hold on, don’t let go.” The accompanying album liner notes, in a rare annotation, states: “We must protect our children so that they may grow to actualize their fullest potential.” Clearly, this message reflects a modern sensibility and woman’s interaction with the text.
Hirschhorn also employs a style immersed in, and imitative of, mid-century American popular folk. “Mountains of China,” “Bountiful Love” and “Talia’s Lullaby” are such musical descendants of sixties and seventies American folk-country. “Mountains of China” begins with her signature tight harmonies as refrain, and then smoothly transitions to a vocal line leading a choral group and American folk style instrumental accompaniment, including the tried and true country violin echoing riffs. “My Beloved” is a song that reflects the blend of American and Jewish idioms. It is adapted from Biblical texts, sung all in English, and constructed in an American folk musical idiom. Still, the Hirschhorn signature close back-up vocal harmonies are there. Also, the violin is again presented with an American country sound. By contrast, there is an absence of Jewish or klezmer style violin or any Yiddish-heritage accompaniment in this album. This absence strongly reflects the stream of Jewish American music Hirschhorn represents, which is a very separate one from that of New York’s Jewish cultural scene and the large Yiddish music following of the same time period.

Her ability to mimic multiple musical styles from country to jazz to beatniks lends variety to the album. One of the outstanding pieces is “Blue,” a cut that may explain the mystery of the title. “Blue” employs unexpected 1950s style ‘beat’ poetry, where a recited poem is set over a jazz sax, piano, and percussion. The text of “Blue” encompasses Jewish American historical and sociologic moments and is seemingly autobiographical:

It’s quite becoming on you.
It brings out the color of your eyes,
Becoming what, I wondered.
I’m wearing a lime green sweater,
Most of my life I’ve worn Navy blue.
Blue…

This green is too light-hearted,
This green accuses me: You are a phony.
This green captures me up in store windows and yells:
Who do you think you are?
Go Home! Do Something! Go Home! Be Somebody!
What ever will become of you? Become of you? ...

The act of self-reflection and self-analysis that guides this album is but one aspect. The artist continued to grow, create new pieces, and move forward. Clearly, here in this collection is a presentation of self. Here is a movement blending feminism and Judaism, self-identity and community structure -- all developed in a musical sound. Listening to this album with ten years of distance, it’s a wonder at its freshness. While American popular culture has definitely moved on to a great degree, this music still has currency in Jewish circles. Its value and importance will probably only grow as a marker of a time that encouraged women’s potential in music, especially Jewish American music. Becoming is an album in which a mature artist looks and reviews their own work, and as a true artist, revises and reworks it. In Becoming, Hirschhorn retained her rich and clear voice, anchoring each track with the dominance of her personality and vision of who she will become.

Bibliography