Note, this discussion is not suggesting to permit listening to the <u>original</u> non-Jewish singers singing their songs in their original non-Jewish context, rather discussing listening to Jewish people singing the same tune in a Jewish context, please see the editor's note #2 at the end.

Note, I am not a halachic authority. This is more like a research paper. For the discussion I had (on a closely-related topic) with Crown Heights Rav Rabbi Braun, see end of doc.

Yechidus about Yidden using non-Jewish tunes

Prepared by Moishy Goldstein who interviewed Mrs. Wilhelm (London) in 2014. Mrs. Wilhelm then reviewed and confirmed the transcription below

Mrs. Wilhelm from London relates:

When I was about 18-19, it disturbed me for years how many of the Jewish songs we would sing, particularly songs that were made up in camp, were very often non-Jewish tunes. Furthermore, even Lubavitcher tunes such as Shamil and Napoleon's March weren't composed by Yidden. How can we sing their tunes?

I wasn't satisfied with the answers I was given, so Rabbi Shmuel Lew suggested that I ask my question to the Rebbe himself.

It was the day after Yom Kippur when I had my Yechidus with the Rebbe and I handed him the note with my question.

In my question, I asked about the songs that we sing in camp and the current songs that we sing to non-Jewish tunes. I also specifically mentioned Shamil and Napoleon's March as examples.

The Rebbe answered me: (The Rebbe's words are fresh in my mind)

א ניגון איז א ניוטראלישע זאך. אזוי ווי אן אעראפלאן וואס פארט קיין ארץ ישראל, מ'קען עס ניצן אויף געוויסע צוועקן:

Translation: A tune is something neutral. Like an airplane flying towards Eretz Yisroel, we can use is for different purposes:

[Missing the Yiddish for this part but this was the Toichen:]

You can have a Yid traveling to Eretz Yisroel to visit the מקומות הקדושים to be מתפלל, you can have a Yid going on the same plane to tour Eretz Yisroel, and then you can have a Yid going on the plane for a דבר שלא בקדושה. The plane is neutral and it is being used for 3 different purposes.

אזוי ווי ניגון שאמיל…

(And the Rebbe went on to explain the history of this tune, of the Georgian officer named Shamil who was imprisoned, how he longed for his homeland, and he composed this Niggun. This is symbolic of the Neshama which is longing for Hashem and we sing it in this context.)

Similarly, the Niggun of Napoleon's March which was composed by Napoleon, we sing it ווייל מיר האבן מנצח געווען נגד דעם יצר הרע.

[This Yechidus was right after Yom Kippur, and that year by Napoleon's March, the Rebbe encouraged the Niggun for 10-15 minutes. It was extraordinary.]

The Rebbe concluded with:

און א ניגון פון פריצות – indecent - קען מען גארנישט טאן מיט דעם.

[That's how the Rebbe said it, inserting the English word "indecent" in the sentence, like an inline translation of "Pritzus"]

I got my answer: A neutral tune can be used by us in a positive context, but an indecent song can never be elevated.

_____

Editor's notes:

1) There's a letter to the Rebbe to Rabbi Velvel Marantz OBM of Kfar Chabad who asked the Rebbe if he can use non-Jewish tunes for Pesukkim. The Rebbe answered that he should discuss with a Rav Mei'anash Moreh Hoira'ah V'askan Ho'efshar U'chedai L'hachshirom. Translation and elucidation: a lubavitcher rav who is also an askan (someone who knows torah, halacha and also the world, "with it") whether it is (1) possible and (2) worthwhile to koshrize the song. The Rebbe concludes that letter saying "Sfeiko, Lchumra" - if the Rabbi is unsure, be stringent and don't Kosherize, only Kosherize it if he's sure it's possible to and worthwhile to Kosherize. (the letter is printed in the back of Lku"s - לקו"ש חכ"ד עמ' 429 and in Shulchan Menachem vol 4 page קה)

That's where the letter ends. In the end he went with new tunes, as boasted on the album cover "לחנים חדשים". Here's the album.

It is possible that for using tunes for Pesukkim, it may be a more cautious endeavor than using a non-Jewish tune for "stam" a song. This possibility is extensively explored in point "B" of this document

2) Another very worthy point would be to distinguish between listening to originally-non-Jewish songs in a Jewish context vs listening to the original non-Jewish songs themselves: When listening to a once-non-Jewish song as it's being sung in a Jewish context, in a Jewish environment, by a Jewish singer, one is practically more likely to experience the "neutral" song in a holy context as described in this Yechidus, whereas listening to the song (to go to an extreme for example's sake) in a non-Jewish pub with a non-Jewish singer, or in the original non-Jewish music video with indecent visuals, it is less

practical to be having a holy experience, to say the least. I don't see this Yechidus permitting listening to original non-Jewish music, but rather (cautiously) permitting the song to be re-sung by Jewish people in a Jewish context. I say "cautiously" based on the above-mentioned answer to Rabbi Marantz who wanted to actually go ahead and Kosherize non-Jewish tunes.

In the great words of Avraham Fried "A Jewish Song is one that makes you feel more Jewish and closer to Hashem." Watching the original non-Jewish music video or concert is likely very far from making you feel more Jewish or closer to Hashem. Whereas if you were listening to a Frum Jewish singer at a Frum Jewish event singing a song, it's more possible that you are experiencing something holy, riding the neutral airplane with a holy intention.

Update: Please also see this new doc listing [8 possible practical reasons why one should not listen to non-Jewish or non-religious singers]

3) Another takeaway I would emphasize from this Yechidus is that just like certain tunes, despite the composer not being Jewish, can still possibly be used in a holy way, the same would be true for the flip side of that same coin: a song, just because it was composed by a Jewish person doesn't automatically make it holy to listen to, we need to pay more attention to how we USE a song and how it affects us, more than just blindly judging by the religion of the composer.

I propose that certain songs that are technically called "non-Jewish" can often be better to listen to than other songs that are called "Jewish music." (More on this below)

4) Jewish and non-Jewish songs have been around since forever (Parshas Bereshis 4:21 Yuval was the father of music). Surely it has already been discussed whether there's an issue of composer, right? What does it say?

The gemara stating the reason why Acher went off the Derech states "Zemer Yevani Lo Posak Mipumei" Greek songs were always coming from his mouth.

חגיגה טו ב: אַחֵר מַאי [מפני מה בא לידי כך ולא הגינה תורתו עליו - רש"י]? זֶמֶר יְוָונִי לָא פְּסַק מִפּוּמֵיהּ.

רש"י: **זמר יווני לא פסק מביתו** - והיה לו להניח בשביל חורבן הבית, דכתיב "בשיר לא ישתו יין".

מהרש"א: **אחר מאי זמר יוני לא פסק מפומיה כו'** פרש"י "והיה לו להניח משום חורבן הבית משום שנאמר בשיר לא ישתו וגו'" עכ"ל. ולא הל"ל זמר יוני אלא סתם זמרא לא פסק כו', כדאמר התם במס' גיטין זמרא מנלן דאסור כו' גם אינו נראה דמשום זמר דלאחר החורבן יהיה נגע בו משום מינות. ונראה דנקט זמר יונית דהיה בו מינות בזמר גופיה...

ונמצא דלדעת שניהם, לא היה נוגע שורש המנגינות (שהיו מגויים) אלא או משום תוכנם (מהרש"א) או משום בעיה צדדית (רש"י).

ואולי יש החולקים עליהם.

According to Rashi the issue of singing Greek songs was (not the composer, rather) the fact that we aren't meant to be happily singing any songs after the Churban.

Maharsha argues and says the reason singing the Greek songs was an issue was not either because of the Churban, rather because the content of the songs were heretical.

Both Rashi and Maharsha understand the issue of non-Jewish songs being something else, not taking issue with the obvious fact that the composer wasn't Jewish.

There's also a fascinating letter of the Rambam in response to the question: "Is one permitted to listen to Arabic songs, and to music?" (The answer begins "It is well known that music itself and all songs, even without any words, are all assur…" read the rest in the link). In response to the question about Arabic songs, the Rambam responds: "I already explained in my Pirush on Pirkei Avos (1:17) that there's no difference between the languages of the songs, the Hebrew and Arabic. Because they are either forbidden or permitted solely based on the content of the lyrics in that language." If we look at what he wrote in his Pirush on Avos, it gets even better, see comment for Hebrew text and Sefaria's English translation. Just like in our times, people have a "hangup" about the religion of the composer, in the Rambam's community, the hangup was about the language of the song. Songs written in Lashon Hakodesh were listened to without giving it a second thought (like people today who listen to any song by a Jewish composer) while songs in Arabic were stigmatized without giving it a second thought (like people today who won't listen to a song because of the composer). The Rambam corrected this wrong notion, "It's the content of the song that matters."

There are many signs suggesting that this aversion to non-Jewish composers did not exist in previous generations. Many great Chassidim sang Russian and Ukrainian songs, sometimes with new lyrics (like Nyet Nyet) and other times in their original lyrics (like Nye Zhuritzi). Nye Zhuritzi is a drunken pub song, but can also be used as a Moshol in Avodas Hashem, and it was with this holy intention with which Chassidim song this song. Exactly like what the Rebbe describes in this Yechidus.

You may have heard the Yiddishe Gems song "Kol Nidre". Reb Mendel Futerfas though was famous for singing the original non-Jewish Russian song from where that tune taken. He would sing the original non-Jewish song at Chasidishe Farbrengens. Reb Bentche Shemtov making a Jewish parody "We're the Rebbe's Army" (Mi Armia Admura) using the Russian tune "We're the Red Cavalry". Der Rebbe Zohl Gezunt Zayn, Nyet Nyet Nikavo, the list goes on of songs taken by Chassidim (not rebbeim) from the common non-Jewish songs around them (see "Non-Jewish Sources of Jewish Songs" for complete list). No one ever had any hesitation. The Rebbe's yechidus above describing how a song is neutral and can be used in a positive context (composer irrelevant) seems to have always been obvious. All the concern around composers seems to be new. Please add a comment here if you have a source otherwise.

Update: After my correspondence with Rabbi Braun and studying the sources he pointed to, and many more sources, I have seen a LOT more about what Rabbis of the past have said on this topic, much of which can be found in the document with my correspondence.

5) FAQ: “But I heard that by listening to a song you connect to the Neshama of the composer of the song! How come the Rebbe in this Yechidus doesn't mention that concern!”

The idea that the composer wrote the deepest facets of his Neshama has only ever been said in a positive context, in the context of connecting with a Rebbe. The statement, as far as I know, has never been said in the negative. Not in regards to connecting to a non-religious Jew, nor in regards to connecting to a non-Jew. In fact this Yechidus seems to say exactly the opposite, that the composer is not relevant rather the usage and intent of the listener.

Some additional points on that: If it were true that listening to EVERY song connects you to the neshama of that song’s composer, are you an expert on Neshamos to know who's Neshama to connect to? You will freely listen to any song composed by any Jew without knowing the level of that neshama and whether that's a step up or down for you. We are talking here about the deepest facets of the Neshama, right? Will you assume that a Jewish sinner has a lowly soul? Perhaps his soul is loftier than yours and it’ll be a great idea to listen to his tunes.

I finally found ONE story in which can prove that a composer of a song (at least in this one instance) was able to bring a “Ruach Hatumah” upon his composition (seemingly even if he’s Jewish! So again, religion doesn’t play a role here):

The story in short: there was a really amazing song (as the story describes it) that all Yidden would sing, however the Baal Shem Tov couldn’t stand the song at first, then he changed his mind. He explained that the composer was a bad person and therefore the song had an evil spirit resting over it which he couldn’t stand, but after Yidden sang the song so much, the spirit left and now he likes it.

> [Before we use this story to prove the composer not being Jewish makes a tune bad, consider this: The composer of the song was seemingly Jewish! Also realize how all Yidden would sing this song, so how would YOU even know which JEWISH song not to listen to? Only the Baal Shem Tov was able to detect this Ruach Tuma resting on the song while all the greatest Talmidei HaBaal Shem Tov(!) didn’t know there was anything wrong with this song. Judging by the religion of the composer would not have helped here! So this story doesn’t show that the religion of the composer matters, all we know is that in this one single instance (yep, this is the ONLY instance I came up with in ALL my research) there was a composer who succeeded in getting a Ruach Tumah to rest upon his composition. And we wouldn’t even know how to judge that ourselves, only the Baal Shem Tov was able to. Also the mere fact that the same tune, the same exact notes, without any changes, can one day have a unholy spirit and the next day be holy, itself proves that a tune itself is not objectively good or bad, rather circumstances surrounding the tune can make that tune be attached to purity or impurity. Perhaps that’s the reason the Besht described it as “an evil spirit resting over the tune” meaning, the tune itself isn’t impure, there was impurity attached TO it, which was subsequently detached]

7) If we want to talk about issues in songs that there are MANY sources for caring about, it would actually be to care about who the MUSICIAN is, not the composer… In this article, there are MANY stories, one after the other, in which Tzadikim were sensitive to the MUSICIAN playing the song and

were able to sense everything the musician has done in his life, regardless of who composed the song. (Of all the stories, there is only one story in which the composer of the tune is considered, as mentioned in the note above). Yet we don't see anyone caring about who the musician is… As long as we put a Yarmulka on his head for the show, we're good…

8) My grandfather Rabbi Yosef Goldstein once needed to pass through the Friediker Rebbe's room to deliver Schach to the porch sukkah and heard Russian classical music playing for the Frierdiker Rebbe. Specifically the song that he heard in his room was Korobeiniki (AKA the tetris song). The phonograph player with these songs playing was set up by his daughters, the Rebbetzins, to cheer him up (this was during WW2). Rabbi Marlow A"H as well was known for listening to classical music and instructed my father as well that it is permitted.

I must conclude with what I opened with, because it's a very important distinction and I don't want people walking away with the wrong message:

The takeaway from this Yechidus is that the composer doesn't matter <u>but the effect it has on you DOES</u>. For the same reason that Napoleon's March can be positive in the context of "Victory over the Yetzer Hora" it can be negative in another context (like Napoleon's original context).

In simple thinking, when people think of the term "listening to non-Jewish music" people don't always distinguish between "listening to a a tune that has a non-Jewish composer" and "watching the original non-Jewish music video" and even "going to a non-Jewish concert." They call all of it "listening to non-Jewish music."

But there's a huge difference between the discussion whether a tune composed by a non-Jew is inherently ok and what people call "listening to non-Jewish music." An indecent music video, or the atmosphere of the non-Jewish concert would be problematic even if all the tunes happen to be composed by Jews!

There needs to be a category of saying "I listen to tunes composed by non-Jews (in a Jewish context), but I don't listen to non-Jewish singers singing their songs in their original context." Like saying: "I'll sit at a Bonei Olam event and listen to Shulem Lemmer sing "A Million Dreams" in the context of the future children. However I won't watch "The Greatest Showman" movie, the original of that song."

Or "I will sing the tune of the French Anthem in Shul on Shabbos ("Hoaderes V'hoemuna"), but I won't sing the French Anthem at a French football game."

If you will ask: "But if intention is what matters, why can't I listen to the original non Jewish singers and have good intentions?" While this question may make sense on paper, in real life however, if we are honest with ourselves, it is much less practical to have a holy experience when listening to the

song in its original context. Try having the same holy intentions of a Tallis-packed room singing “Hoaderes V'hoemuna” on Shabbos, while you're at a French football game… Or try intending the “Million Dreams” of the Bonei Olam recipients while sitting in a theater watching the Greatest Showman… Try intending “victory over the Yetzer Hora” while listening to Napoleon's army invading Russia as they sing Napoleon's March… The context and environment does matter very much.

No one can say that watching Skylar Grey singing "I'm Coming Home" feels exactly the same as watching two Jewish teens in November 2023 singing "I'm Coming Home" for the hostages and IDF soldiers, despite the lyrics and tune being identical. In fact, if it didn't feel different, these Jewish teens wouldn't have recorded the song altogether, they could have just shared a link to the original "Skylar Grey" recording. But it's obvious that when you hear the song coming from Jewish teens who went out in Nov 2023 to record the song for the hostages and soldiers, it is subjectively different, and that subjectivity matters since songs aren't objectively good or bad. Similarly, here’s Shulen Lemmer singing “Bring Them Home” (referring to the hostages) to a room full of holocaust survivors, which obviously feels different than listening to the same song in the movie where this song comes from. And that difference in feeling matters. The effect it has on you matters. That’s precisely the point, that’s it’s not a black-and-white objective matter of the tune’s composer, rather how you use it.

So when the Yechidus is (de-emphasizing the composer of the song and instead) emphasizing how you USE the song, I think it allots value to not listening to non-Jewish singers singing the song in their original context, even though you may listen to Jewish singers singing those very same songs in a Jewish context.

Now here’s a completely separate and important angle to this topic:

Association. Affiliation. The Statement.

There is precedent of the Rebbe being very against the usage of a song. The Zionist anthem, Hatikva. In fact, the Rebbe was so upset that Hatikva was sung at the Tomchei Temimim dinner that as a result he removed his name from the stationery of Tomchei Temimim.

Let’s analyze this. Do you think the Rebbe was against that song because of its composer or rather because of the statement and associations of that song, which (at least in that time and context) meant supporting secular Zionism?

It’s similar to the song Hava Nagila. The tune is originally a Niggun from the Sadigorer Chassidim and Chassidim would sing this Niggun. However, after the song received words (Hava Nagillah…) and

became a popular song in Zionist circles, the Chassidim stopped singing the tune, even without the words. Is there something wrong with the composer? No. It's a matter of association and affiliation. Once the song became affiliated with Zionism, the Chassidim left it. See, the associations of what the song means to people at a given time and place in history matters, even if the tune itself is intrinsically fine.

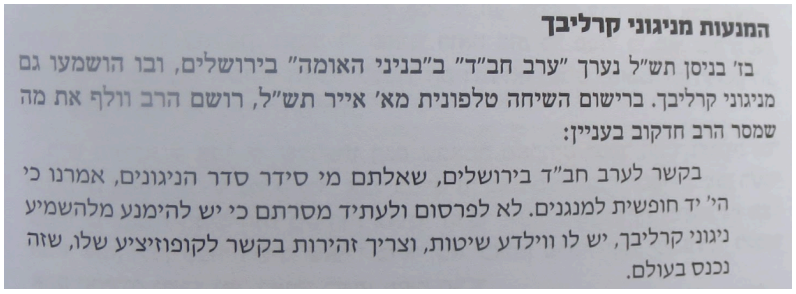
[It is like the Magen David. The Magen David dates back 2,000 years. Yidden have always used the symbol. The Rebbe even has one on his Menorah and Becher. But once it became a symbol of Zionism, Chabad (and others) pretty much doesn't use Magen Davids as far as I know. The Rebbe even asked Gan Yisroel (Ellenville, NY) to remove the Magen David pattern that they had on their fence (if I remember correctly hearing this from Rabbi Seligson). Is there something inherently unholy about the shape? No. In fact, some Seforim speak of the mystical Kaballa behind the shape. It's a matter of association, affiliation, a statement of support.]

Now let's think for a minute how this translates to listening to non-Jewish music.

Even if we established that there is nothing inherently wrong about the fact that the composer isn't Jewish, but what are the connections, the associations, the affiliations and support of? (Please don't get offended by the example chosen) While there may not be anything intrinsically wrong with a given Taylor Swift song, and even if the composer of that particular tune happens to be Jewish, but if it's more than a song, if it's a culture and an association, subscribing to "the club", becoming a "Swiftie", it becomes not just about the composer of the tune, but the culture it invites you into, and what's the next song that it brings you to... So even if you identified a specific song that is inherently ok, it can still become "not ok" because of the context and atmosphere in which it is being played.

So if let's say we establish that there's nothing inherently wrong with the song "A Million Dreams" that Shulem Lemmer sings sometimes, at max that would mean that it's OK to hear HIM singing it in that Jewish venue etc. However it would not be the same as permitting someone to watch the original movie from which the song was taken. And even if you're not live at the Jewish venue at which he sang it rather watching it online: Think about what is the next song in the playlist when you're watching Shulem Lemmer sing it, versus the next song "suggestions" that would follow if you were listening to the original singer singing it…

So I cannot emphasize enough how the question of whether a song itself is intrinsically good or bad is different than the question of "Can I listen to non-Jewish singers" for even if a song is intrinsically good and even composed by a Rebbe, one still should not be listening to it in a non-Jewish context, like at a non-Jewish concert. Context matters. The associations matter.



המנעות מניגוני קרליבך

בז' בניסן תש"ל נערך "ערב חב"ד" ב"בניני האומה" בירושלים, ובו הושמעו גם מניגוני קרליבך. ברישום השיחה טלפונית מא' אייר תש"ל, רושם הרב וולף את מה שמסר הרב חדקוב בעניין:

בקשר לערב חב"ד בירושלים, שאלתם מי סידר סדר הניגונים, אמרנו כי הי' יד חופשית למנגנים. לא לפרסום ולעתיד מסרתם כי יש להימנע מלהשמיע ניגוני קרליבך, יש לו ווילדע שיטות, וצריך זהירות בקשר לקופוזיציע שלו, שזה נכנס בעולם.

I think this is also the explanation behind the Rebbe's hesitation towards Carlebach songs. I think perhaps there is nothing "inherently unholy" about the tunes because of the composer. I think the distancing from Carlebach songs was a distancing from the "Carlebach movement" and his approach (in the words of Rabbi Chadakov, which may be the words of the Rebbe יש לו ווילדע שיטות). "Carlebach" was a lot more than the last name of the composer of the songs. "Carlebach" was a movement. I think the Rebbe's hesitancy to Carlebach songs was not because of the composer. It was about the Carlebach movement, the Carlebach concerts, the Carlebach approach to Yiddishkeit and Kiruv. Meaning, if there was a "Carlebach song" that someone else happened to have composed for him and associated with him, the same hesitancy would apply even though he's not the one who composed the notes of the tune, it would still be "a Carlebach tune" associated with "the Carlebach movement."

At the same time, some songs that were composed by Shlomo Carlebach, DID become accepted. People don't associate the songs with the Carlebach movement, even though he is technically the composer of the tune. Since the association isn't there, the hesitation isn't there, even though the composer is the same. See, it wasn't about the composer, it was the association. Such songs include:

1) "**Ani Maamin… We Want Moshiach, We Want Moshiach Now**" which is the Carlebach tune "Mekimi." It was even sung in front of the Rebbe and with his encouragement.
2) "**Sheyiboneh… Yiddelach Shrai Aaaad Mosai**" which is originally "Yismechu… Yiddelach Shrai Shaaabos." This song too was sung in front of the Rebbe and the Rebbe was seen singing along "Ad Mosai" (אחש"פ תשמ"ח)
3) The "**Oholei Torah Chai**" chant, sung by the most Chassidishe kids in town is actually a Carlebach tune "Od Avinu Chai… Am Yisrael Chai." And I feel like people don't even see "Am Yisrael Chai" as specifically a "Carlebach Song" even though he is the composer.
4) The famous "**I'm a Jew and I'm Proud**" is originally "Tov L'hodos Lashem."
5) "**Veha'er Eineinu… V'loooi Neivoish, V'looooi Nikoleim…**" that's sung in many classrooms in Davening is a Carlebach song (same words).
6) The album Oh Rebbe has 2 Carlebach tunes:
   1) "**The Rebbe lives...**"
   Originally "V'eineinu"
   2) Days of Moshiach (Yiddish song "**Gelt vet zain uhn a shiur...**")
   Originally "Uva'u Ha'ovdim... Yeruuuushalyim"

If there was something inherently unholy about the tunes because he composed them, then we would need to avoid the above as well. However, as I suggested, it's about the association. When someone is listening to the album "Oh Rebbe" there's not even a remote association to a mixed concert here.

[Update: I was sent a collection of WhatsApp messages from a Gezh group discussing the topic of Shlomo Carlebach. Click here to read. There are many interesting interactions with the Rebbe on the topic to be found there. Of course, WhatsApp messages of what people remember hearing from someone else's memories isn't some type of solid source, as evident from the very fact that on the chat you will find the same anecdotes repeated by different people with different details… So take it all with a grain of salt.]

There's an interesting discussion about Carlebach songs in Igros Moshe (which is often misquoted when people claim Reb Moshe differentiated whether the song was composed before or after, but the truth is that Reb Moshe actually REJECTS that in his own continuation). And a lot of the discussion there revolves "Leaving a legacy to a Rasha's name" - sound like what I'm saying, it's not about the tune itself but the support of such a person, so if the song for some reason was not associated with him, even if he technically composed it, the song isn't inherently bad and singing it isn't considered supporting someone you shouldn't. If Shlomo Carlebach was famous for a song that he didn't even compose, I would think all the sensitivities against a "Shlomo Carlebach song" would exist for that song as well, even though he didn't compose it. In Halacha this concept is called "שלא להניח שם לרשע" ("Not to leave a legacy for a Rasha"), though I'm unsure if it's discussed how bad of a person one needs to be to deserve his name to be erased.

There's a great article on the topic by Rabbi Yaakov Goldstein (not related to me afaik) on the topic: Carlebach music and the view of the Rebbe and Halacha

Related: Link to my discussion with Rabbi Braun on the topic of reusing a non-Jewish song, complete with its original lyrics, for a Jewish context

8 possible practical reasons why one should not listen to non-Jewish or non-religious singers