

Tumbalalaika

JEWISH · Walter J. Kin · Rigli Publishing

<https://jewishthemovie.com/music/russian/tumbalalaika>

← Jewish Songs in Russian

Russian Songbook · Sung by Elechka

Тумбалалайка

Tumbalalaika

A simple Yiddish riddle-song that still brings strangers to tears.

Tumbalalaika is one of the best-loved Jewish folk songs in the world. It began as a traditional Yiddish riddle-song, passed from voice to voice long before anyone wrote it down. In it a young man turns over the old questions of the heart: what can grow without rain, what can burn for years and never end, what can yearn and cry without a single tear. The answers come back gentle and sure, a stone can grow without rain, love can burn for years and never end, and a heart can yearn and weep with no tears at all. The title itself is almost wordless, a happy nonsense refrain that imitates the strum of a little balalaika, so that the song carries both a serious riddle and the lightness of a dance.

For generations the song lived at weddings and kitchen tables across Eastern Europe, simple enough for a child to learn and deep enough for an old person to feel. That double life, playful on the surface and tender underneath, is a large part of why it has traveled so far and lasted so long.

In this recording the song is sung in Russian by Elechka, with a Russian text set to the traditional Yiddish words. It was the first release for the RIGLI channel, which set out to carry these Jewish songs to Russian-speaking listeners who grew up hearing the melodies but never the meaning. The warmth of that idea comes through in the singing, which keeps the riddle's quiet and its smile at the same time.

From these Russian recordings grew the English-language musical film JEWISH. The film is the later chapter, but its roots are here, in songs like this one, sung plainly and from the heart. Tumbalalaika has gathered more than a million views in this version, and the comments beneath it read like a small gathering of people from many places, brought together by a tune that asks what can burn without ending.

Lyrics, line by line

The full Russian text of the recording, with a plain English translation under each line.

Парень над думкой бьется опять

A young man struggles over a thought again

Как бы жениться не прогадать

How to marry without making a bad choice
Много на свете девушек встретил
He has met many girls in the world
Где ж мое счастье вот бы понять
Where is my happiness, if only I could understand
Тумбала тумбала тумбалалайка
Tumbala tumbala tumbalalaika
Тумбала тумбала тумбалала
Tumbala tumbala tumbalala
Трень балалайка брень балалайка
Strum the balalaika, twang the balalaika
Вот балалайка такие дела
There is the balalaika, that is how things are
Милая дай ответ на вопрос
Dear one, give an answer to a question
Что нас согреет в лютый мороз
What will warm us in the bitter frost
Что без дождя в душе расцветает
What blooms in the soul without rain
Что пред тобою плачет без слез
What weeps before you without tears
Как это просто глупенький мой
How simple it is, my silly one
Греет любовь холодной зимой
Love warms in cold winter
Сердце пусть плачет но это не значит
Let the heart weep, but that does not mean
Что я твоею стану женой
That I will become your wife
Тумбала тумбала тумбалалайка
Tumbala tumbala tumbalalaika
Тумбала тумбала тумбалала

Tumbala tumbala tumbalala
Трень балалайка брень балалайка
Strum the balalaika, twang the balalaika
Вот балалайка такие дела
There is the balalaika, that is how things are
Парень над думкой бьется опять
A young man struggles over a thought again
Как бы жениться не прогадать
How to marry without making a bad choice
Много на свете девушек встретил
He has met many girls in the world
Где ж мое счастье вот бы понять
Where is my happiness, if only I could understand
Тумбала тумбала тумбалалайка
Tumbala tumbala tumbalalaika
Тумбала тумбала тумбалала
Tumbala tumbala tumbalala
Трень балалайка брень балалайка
Strum the balalaika, twang the balalaika
Вот балалайка такие дела
There is the balalaika, that is how things are
Listen on YouTube
Back to Songs

What listeners say

Real comments left under the recording on YouTube, translated into English, with the original Russian beneath each one.

Even though I'm not Jewish, I listen to these songs as if they were my own. Long ago in my childhood we had a Tumbalalaika record, and everyone danced to it, children and grown-ups alike. Greetings to all the Jewish people!

Я хоть и не еврей а слушаю как родную песни, в далёком детстве у нас была пластинка Тумбалалайка, и танцевали все и дети и взрослые. Евреям всем привет!

@ОлиТерентьева

I'm listening and I can't tear myself away, over and over. I'm delighted by it, even though I'm not Jewish.

Слушаю не могу оторваться, по кругу. Я в восторге, хоть и не еврейка.

@ПётрКоржиков-х3л

Thank you for spreading Jewish songs. I'm Russian, but I have great respect for a people that honors its roots so deeply. I enjoyed this enormously.

Спасибо за то, что распространяете еврейские песни. Я русская, но с уважением отношусь к народу, так почтительно относящемуся к своим истокам. Получила огромное удовольствие.

@СветланаГринько-ю9н

I'm Russian going back God knows how many generations, and I can't hold back my tears. Maybe other peoples cry at our Russian songs too?

Я русская до Бог знает какого колена, слез не могу сдержатъ. Может от наших русских песен другие народы тоже плачут?

@БыковаЕлена-ц9й

As an old Russian, I liked it very much too.

мне как старому русскому тоже очень понравилось

@vladimirbratersky4930

Thank you! I listened with great pleasure, and more than once. Then I listened to everything else I could find. I loved it, thank you! What a clever, talented people. Be free and be happy!

Спасибо! С огромным удовольствием прослушала, и не один раз! Потом, все подряд, что нашла. Очень понравилось, спасибо! Умный, талантливый народ! Будьте свободны и счастливы!

@marinavolendam2624

My grandmother came from Gomel in Belarus, and when I was a child she sang this to me. I loved it, because in those days songs like this weren't played on the radio. I didn't even know such songs existed. It's good that now you can hear everything.

Моя бабушка родом с Белоруссии г. Гомель, она в детстве пела мне её, мне очень нравилось, потому что эту песню в те времена не пели по радио, я даже не знала, что есть такие песни, хорошо что сейчас можно услышать всё.

@ЛидияФедорова-л9щ

In my student years I was always traveling from Leningrad to spend my holidays with my friend in Odessa. I remember all these songs. The whole of Odessa used to sing them, and there wasn't a restaurant where you wouldn't hear them. It's moving to tears to listen to you. Thank you! Greetings from Spain.

В студенческие годы постоянно из Ленинграда ездила на каникулы к своей подруге в Одессу! Помню все эти песни. Их распевала вся Одесса и не было ресторана, в котором бы не пели эти песни) До слез приятно Вас слушать. Спасибо! Привет из Испании)

@arinadovg

When you really listen to this performance, you begin to feel how vast and great the world is.

Когда вслушиваешься в это исполнение песни, то начинаешь чувствовать, что мир огромен и велик.

@АлексейХолин-п4д

Such a simple little song, and yet there are tears in my eyes. I can't explain it.

Незатейливая песенка, а у меня на глазах слёзы... не знаю как объяснить...

@apacheapache50

At heart I'm a Jew myself, even though on the outside I'm an Asian, a descendant of the unconquered Khazars. And 'bala' (which means 'child' in Turkic) in 'bala laika', plus 'tum', sings inside my soul. A wonderful performance!

Я сам в душе еврей, хотя снаружи азиат 😊 потомок непокорных хазар, однако. И Бала лайка (ребёнок в переводе с тюрского) плюс Тум в душе поёт...Отличное исполнение!

@alekssenov7380