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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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You Can Hear Strains of Klezmer in Benny Goodman

by Susan Van Dongen

You might think of them as minstrels who played in a minor key. Instead of the lute, they played violins and clarinets. These were the klezmirim, Ashkenazi Jewish musicians who wandered through central and eastern Europe playing klezmer music for weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other joyful occasions. If you can't get an immediate audio fix on this sound, try thinking of the theme song to "Fiddler on the Roof," a very Americanized version of klezmer.

Columbus resident and accordionist Ed Goldberg, klezmer musician



The Odessa Klezmer Trio

extraordinaire, says you can also hear strains of the sound in the old Benny Goodman recording "And the Angels Sing." BG and his big band do their thing until about the last third of the song, when it sonically switches to this syncopated rhythm, staccato trumpet, and wailing clarinet. That's a "frallich," Goldberg says, klezmer music with a German flavor.

For years now, the peripatetic Goldberg and the Odessa Klezmer Band have been passionate about introducing klezmer to a broader audience, turning the public on to this expressive genre of world music — so expressive in fact, musicians imitate sobs and laughter on their instruments.

The group performs on Thursday, December 2, at the annual Menorah Lighting at Palmer Square in Princeton (festivities begin in front of Mediterra restaurant on Hulfish Street), and a Chanukah/klezmer concert on Friday, December 3, at the Record Collector in Bordentown.

This is typical business (and busyness) for Goldberg, who has been described in print as being as adept at juggling as a member of Cirque du Soleil. "Odessa Klezmer is my first love, though," he says. "I'm able to reach out and do some nice things. One of my missions is to bring this music to the forefront."

In addition to klezmer, the band also plays a variety of eastern European, Ladino, and middle Eastern music, as well as polkas and czardas (Hungarian dances).

It's ironic that Goldberg is so effusive at making klezmer popular, and that the style has entered more and more into the mainstream consciousness with bands like the Klezmatiks, the Klez Dispensers, and the all-woman Isle of Klezbos recording and performing. The irony is that, for centuries in Europe, this music was underground, forbidden at worst and frowned upon at best. There was even an edict in 19th century Ukraine forbidding the playing of loud instruments — and klezmer is definitely not soft, music to dine by. It's "get up and dance, already!" music.

"It has its roots in the eastern European Jews who played in the shtetls," Goldberg says. "They went from town to town and played what they wanted, but it was always under the covers, the music was really suppressed. It wasn't written down, either, more likely handed down (by ear) from generation to generation. At first, the violin was very important, but in the 1800s, the clarinet became the predominant instrument, and it still is. It just has more feeling and force.

"Then, at the turn of the 20th century, we had so many Jews migrating to the United States, many, many to New York City," he continues. "These musicians came over and got integrated

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in the jazz bands and big bands in the city. They were very good musicians, and they went into famous bands like Goodman's."

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And so, you began to hear traces of klezmer in performances and recordings. Some American classical composers with Jewish roots incorporated the sound into their works: the opening clarinet solo in George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" has a flavor of klezmer, perhaps recalling the Yiddish music of Gershwin's youth.

However, traditional klezmer performances waned and didn't have much of a comeback until about 40 years ago, when such talents as Zev Feldman, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, and the Klezmerim sparked a revival.

For Goldberg, it was a natural transition from the music he heard on the radio and the records his parents played, when he was growing up in Elizabeth. The son of an upholsterer for Simmons (makers of Beautyrest beds) and a homemaker, he was encouraged to play music from an early age and took up the piano at age eight.

"When I got to Elizabeth High School, the pianos were so badly out of tune, I learned to play the accordion," he says. "Then, my music teacher wanted me to play the string bass, and that became the first instrument I played when I played in bands."

He joined Walt Lesniak's polka band as a bassist while still in high school and explored a number of musical styles he had absorbed growing up in ethnically diverse Elizabeth. The much-older Lesniak mentored Goldberg and to this day, they remain friends. Being in a band meant arriving home from concerts in the wee hours, but Goldberg says his parents didn't worry as long as he was "with Walt." Lesniak's younger brother, John, a clarinetist, was a high school friend of Goldberg's and is one of the current core members of the Odessa Klezmer Band.

The Odessa Klezmer band adds and subtracts personnel for different gigs, and the semi-regular players also include Dennis Ionata on trumpet, Bob Mehlman on clarinet, and Joel Pecchioli (who is married to Goldberg's daughter, Vicki) on drums.

After high school, Goldberg pursued a degree in electrical engineering at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, but still kept playing in polka bands. In the late 1950s or early '60s he began graduate work there, balancing a new family, his studies, and performing with various bands.

When Jimmy Sturr, who would lead his polka orchestra to numerous Grammy awards, asked Goldberg to join his band, he didn't realize it would turn into a 25-year "side career." All the time he was on the road with Sturr, Goldberg was also working as an electrical engineer for the New Brunswick Board of Education. His tremendous energy and love for music allowed him to maintain this crazy schedule for two and a half decades, but around 2000, he partially retired and took up teaching, first at Middlesex County College, then at the College of New Jersey, where he is an adjunct professor of computer programming and other technology courses.

Meanwhile, Goldberg had already launched a musical career as a one-man-band (he still makes appearances in the region), and had joined the Odessa Klezmer Band, taking the accordion more seriously. He had only dabbled on the instrument until the band toured Israel in 1989. There was another musician in his life now, his current wife, Barbara, who had picked up the darbuqua, a Middle Eastern hand drum distantly related to the Indian tabla. Her steady beat is also part of Odessa Klezmer's signature sound.

The band has played lively concerts at army bases and kibbutzes in Israel, at Gracie Mansion in New York City, and, most notably, at Carnegie Hall. More recently, they have been embraced by the town of Cape May, performing at its Jazz Festival, Oktoberfest, and at Jazz Vespers in the seaside resort town. Odessa Klezmer's live performances there were so good, Goldberg is in the process of putting together a live album from those summertime shows. A few years ago the band also released a CD, "Who Stole the Kishka?!" available through CDBaby.com, Amazon.com, and at their live performances.

As musical as he is, some of the talent had to be handed down: his daughter, Vicki Pecchioli, is a flutist. A resident of Lakewood, Pecchioli is also employed as principal planner for Ocean County's Department of Planning. Daughter Bonnie Kostrzewa lives in Hamilton and is a dental assistant to Howard Spielman DDS in Plainsboro. Son Jerry Goldberg lives in Burlington, and works in the support/audio-visual technology department at BlackRock in Princeton. Daughter Lori Zagarella also lives in Burlington and works in accounting for the New Jersey Department of Economic Development in Trenton. Dave Kneiter (Barbara's son) teaches middle school English and reading in St. Louis, Missouri.

Goldberg's wife, Barbara, is retired from the Trenton school system, and she also taught in the Edison school system, as well as in schools in Long Island. "I like to say I imported her from Long Island," Goldberg says. Besides music, he says his life is "filled with family and grandkids. In fact one of my grandkids was my roadie for awhile. As far as my playing in polka and klezmer bands, they like to say, 'oh, that's Dad!'"

Menorah Lighting, Palmer Square, North Hulfish Plaza. Thursday, December 2, 5 p.m. Klezmer music by Ed Goldberg and the Odessa Klezmer Band, hot latkes, donuts, and Chanukah gelt. In front of Mediterra Restaurant. Rain or shine. Free. 800-644-3489 or www.palmersquare.com.

Ed Goldberg and the Odessa Klezmer Band, The Record Collector Store, 358 Farnsworth Avenue, Bordentown. Friday, December 3, 7:30 p.m. \$12; \$10 in advance. On the Web: www.odessaklezmer.com 609-324-0880 or www.the-record-collector.com.

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