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FROM SOUTH JERSEY TO YOU

Klezmer band's roots lie in education

By **BARBARA S. ROTHSCHILD** • Courier-Post Staff
• November 27, 2010

MANSFIELD —

has its roots in the old Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, has been making its way into the mainstream.

Fans of Woody Allen movies and HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" may not know it, but much of the music used to bridge scenes is based on the often frenetic, occasionally mournful, but usually joyful sounds of klezmer.

In South Jersey, klezmer is even making its way into classrooms thanks to a local band that includes several active and retired college professors and public school teachers. The Odessa Klezmer Band -- under the direction of Columbus resident Ed Goldberg -- teaches students life lessons through its ethnic music.

"It brings another aspect -- a real-life aspect -- to the kids," said Goldberg, a 60-something professor of computer sciences at The College of New Jersey.

Goldberg said it's helpful for children to be taught by people with other real-life gigs, so to speak. The most effective teachers are often cited for presenting subject matter dynamically to capture and hold students' attention.

"Being on the bandstand when we play gives us good presence in the schools where we teach," said Goldberg, who plays accordion and bass fiddle with the band and arranges its selections.

"I look at my teaching as having another show, and I get excited with my students."

A former teacher at both Burlington County College and Middlesex County College, Goldberg believes his band experience helps him breathe excitement into his often dry computer science classes. Interacting with audiences at weddings and other community venues makes his band members better teachers, he believes.

Vocalist Barbara L. Rothschild of Sewell agrees. The former French and Spanish teacher, now retired from Overbrook Senior High School in Pine Hill, saw

the band perform at the Burlington County Library in Westampton about a year ago and was invited to sing along.

"The rest is history," said Rothschild, who early in her career moonlighted as a nightclub songstress while teaching at Atlantic City High School.

"I always liked entertaining the kids and would teach them ethnic French songs and generic holiday songs. I liked to see smiles on their faces. This is happy music."

Goldberg, who grew up playing Eastern European and polka music in Elizabeth, toured with well-known polka artist Jimmy Sturr for 25 years before joining the Odessa Klezmer Band when he moved to New Brunswick. He has played with the band since 1989 and eventually took over its management.

Today, the troupe also includes Ed's wife, Barbara, who plays a Middle Eastern drum called the darbuqua. She recently retired from the Trenton school district, where she taught first grade.

Hamilton resident Joe Golding, who teaches music at Pond Road Middle School in Robbinsville, plays drums, as does Joel Pecchioli of Lakewood, a research scientist with the state Department of Environmental Protection. Steve Kaplan of Ewing, who teaches music in Trenton, plays saxophone and clarinet.

Bob Mehlman of Princeton, a retired English professor who taught at The College of New Jersey, plays clarinet in the band. Goldberg's high school

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chum John Lesniak of Toms River -- an oil industry retiree -- plays clarinet and saxophone. Dennis Ionata of Columbus, who is in the pharmaceuticals field, plays trumpet.

While the group plays traditional Yiddish music at its Jewish venues, it is Goldberg's mission to move the genre solidly into the mainstream. At town fairs and folk festivals, they perform like strolling gypsies, mingling with the crowds. At Memorial Day and Fourth of July parades, they play patriotic songs. The band is even booked to play in a First Night event on New Year's Eve in Scranton, Pa.

"We bring in other happy music that everyone can relate to -- fast, happy music," he said.

The troupe plays everywhere from nursing homes to nursery schools.

"The little kids love this music, even though they don't know what it is," Goldberg said.

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Hanukkah/Klezmer Concert at The Record Collector, 358 Farnsworth Ave., Bordentown, 7 p.m. Friday

A Season for Peace World Music Concert, Plainsboro Municipal Complex Courtroom, 641 Plainsboro Road, 3 p.m. Dec. 5

For more information on the band, visit www.odessaklezmer.com.



IF YOU GO

The Odessa Klezmer Band will perform at the following venues:

Annual Palmer Square Menorah Lighting in Princeton, 5 p.m. Thursday

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