CULTURE

A Musical Legacy Through Klezmer

Veretski Pass plays klezmer music with a difference.

By Lee Hildebrand

As a child growing up in Kansas City, Cookie Segelstein was often trotted out of her bedroom by her Holocaust survivor parents to entertain family and friends with violin renditions of the old Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Carpatho-Russian Ukrainian tunes her dad regularly sang around the house.

"I couldn't stand doing it," she recalls from the Berkeley home she now shares with her husband, accordionist, pianist, and cimbalom player Josh Horowitz. They comprise two-thirds of the boldly eclectic, internationally renowned klezmer trio Veretski Pass. They're joined by bassist Stuart Brotman, who is also a member of the klezmer band Brave Old World.

Veretski Pass was named for a mountain pass

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Photo courtesy Veretski Pass

Veretski Pass includes, left to right, Josh Horowitz, Cookie Segelstein, and Stuart Brotman.

that connects Ukraine to Hungary. Segelstein's father was born and raised at the base of the pass in what was then Czechoslovakia.

Her attitude about the old-world music "that was shoved down my throat," as she puts it, "changed when I had my own kids and started getting in touch with the music of that region."

"There were Hungarians, Russians, ethnic Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Hutsuls, and, of course, Jews" in the geographical Veretski Pass of her father's time, explains Segelstein, who alternates between violin and viola in the trio. "It was a major crossing area of a lot of cultures. Because of that, the style of music is a real mixed one.

"We enjoy being able to put similar but different stylistic elements into what we play. Our ideas are informed by that history by also by our exposure to other styles that are even more outside that area and time."

> "You can recognize the tunes, but it's not like jazz where you'll play the melody and then you'll improvise over the harmonies that go with that melody."
>
> —*Josh Horowitz*

Many musical styles, including elements of jazz, mix on Vertski Pass' 2011 CD *The Klezmer Shul Live!*, an album of original, deeply emotional, and often elegant chamber music that draws on both religious and secular aspects of Ashkenazic culture. The trio's previous release, 2008's *Trafik*, is more traditional and decidedly danceable. A new album titled *Polys* is made up of Polish klezmer music.

"The klezmer music scene has been obsessed with the areas of Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine," Horowitz says. "Left out of that whole construct is the music of Poland. I think partly that's because some of it is not as exotic-sounding."

Although all three members of Veretski Pass are classically trained, much of their music is improvised. "Every phrase that we play, we'll do it in different ways at different times," he explains. "You can recognize the tunes, but it's not like jazz where you'll play the melody and then you'll improvise over the harmonies that go with that melody. You won't hear necessarily the tune anymore in a jazz solo, but in our music, you'll usually be able to identify the tune."

The trio will give a half-hour concert beginning at 5:30 p.m., following by an hour of music for dancing, on Sunday, Nov. 8, the second day of the two-day KlezCalifornia Yiddish Cultural Festival at the Jewish Community Center East Bay, 1414 Walnut St., Berkeley. More information can be found at www.KlezCalifornia.org or by calling 415-789-7679.

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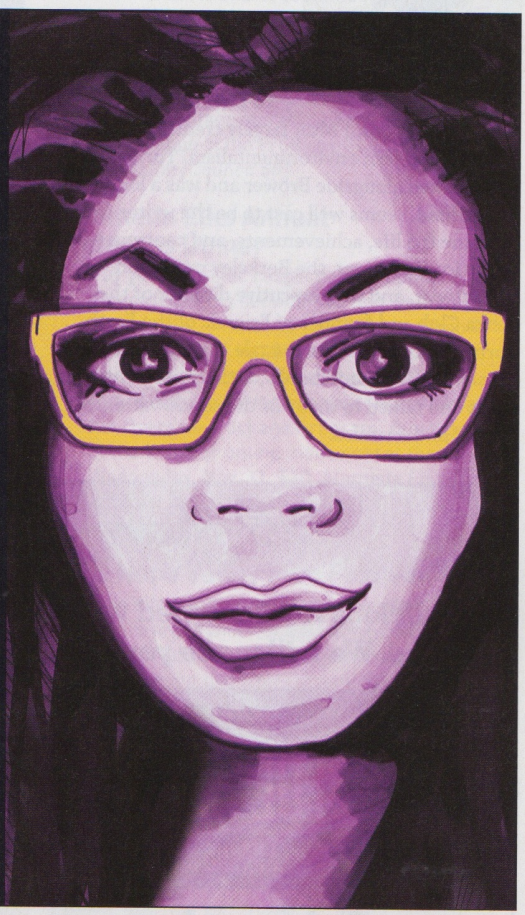

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