

Fiddler on the bimah: Klezmer musician previews major new work

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It started as a fantasy in the mind of bassist Stu Brotman. He imagined a synagogue filled with jamming klezmer musicians, collectively creating a new kind of Jewish liturgical music.

He dubbed the fantasy "Klezmer Shul," and now, 15 years after the idea first began to take shape, Brotman is oh-so-close to turning it into a reality.

By summer, he and his band, the popular klezmer trio Veretski Pass, will officially premiere the 45-minute suite. Meanwhile, Brotman will preview the piece in "Creating Klezmer Shul," a lecture and demonstration Tuesday, May 12 at San Francisco's BJE Jewish Community Library.



Stu Brotman will perform passages from his new klezmer suite and snippets of music that influenced it.

He will perform passages from the work-in-progress and play snippets of music that influenced the composition.

All that's missing from "Klezmer Shul" will be an actual shul. The piece draws on klezmer strains stretching back a century or more. Though he intended to invoke the devotional feeling of Jewish worship, Brotman deliberately passed on any vocals or religious text.

"From the beginning I had this intuition that text is a problem, because it's divisive," says Brotman, 66, from his Berkeley home. "I'm a stickler for not reminding people what prayers they're in. I don't want a sing-along. We're hoping clapping along is enough of an interactive experience."

Thus Brotman and his Veretski Pass colleagues — violinist Cookie Segelstein and multi-instrumentalist Joshua Horowitz — imported into the piece all kinds of Eastern European music, Jewish and non-Jewish.

Their goal with "Klezmer Shul" was to create "musical states of being that were comparable to religious experience that were deep and absorbing," Brotman says.

He credits scholar Zev Feldman with sparking the idea of a klezmer shul. According to Feldman's research, they actually existed. Says Brotman, documentation exists of Eastern European towns "where there were enough klezmerim [klezmer musicians] to have their own shul. They established them."

Establishing a real-life klezmer shul may be the one thing Brotman has not done in the realm of the klezmer revival. Equally skilled on bass, cello and other instruments, he has been a performer, arranger and recording artist for more than 35 years.

A native of Los Angeles, he has childhood memories of listening to his grandfather, a chicken farmer and cantor, singing Jewish melodies. He earned a degree in music from UCLA, and has taught at KlezKamp and KlezKanada. He also has been affiliated with the klezmer band Brave Old World since 1989.

In the pop world, he has played with artists like Maria Muldaur and Ry Cooder. Most significantly, he has played a leading role in the klezmer revival, having produced CDs for the Klezmerim, and shared the stage with artists such as Andy Statman, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, Davka, the San Francisco Klezmer Experience and Itzhak Perlman.

Seeking funding for the "Klezmer Shul" project, in 2003 Brotman earned a grant from the Creative Work Fund, which supports the arts in the Bay Area. He and his Veretski Pass colleagues began writing music for the piece.

Brotman has presented the work to the public twice before. The upcoming BJE event is one more chance to get feedback as he and his colleagues put the finishing touches on the piece.

Whether "Klezmer Shul" ever becomes the soundtrack to real-life liturgy remains to be seen. But Brotman remains confident that everyone — Jewish or non-Jewish, religious or non-religious — will come away from the music spiritually uplifted.

"Darwin said he had been religious in his younger days," Brotman recounts, "but when he became a non-believer he found music put him in states of mind that were very much related to the religious states of mind. [Studies] found that any musical reverie, whether listening, imagining or performing, are indistinguishable in the brain."

"Creating Klezmer Shul" takes place 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 12 at the BJE Jewish Community Library, 1835 Ellis St., S.F. Admission is free. Information: (415) 567-3327 or <http://www.bjesf.org/library>.