

Freilachmakers: Klezmer unplugged

By Jim Carnes -- Bee Staff Writer

Close - X Recent Stories By Jim Carnes

"You don't have to be Jewish to like Mrs. Levy's rye bread," Andy Rubin says. Nor do you have to be Jewish to appreciate his band's brand of klezmer music.

Nor do you have to be Appalachian, or Brazilian, or...anything other than open.

"The music is infectious," Rubin says by phone from the "quiet room" at his Sacramento workplace. He's a toxicologist by day, a clawhammer banjo player by night and the occasional weekend afternoon. His Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band will perform at 3 p.m. Sunday at The Palms in Winters.

Rubin founded the Freilachmakers band in Sacramento in 1995 with fiddle player David Kidron. Rubin was a traditional folk musician out of Berkeley, Kidron a "top-of-the-line Celtic fiddler - and Jewish, too,"

Rubin says. They played Irish music together until "at some point we said, 'Why don't we play Jewish music?'"

Klezmer is frequently referred to as "Jewish folk music."

The word, Rubin explains, is a contraction of two Hebrew words: kle, meaning instrument, and zimmer, meaning song. "It literally means instrument of song," he says.

The music originally was performed at weddings and was inherently celebratory. The primary instruments were the fiddle, clarinet and tsimbl, or Jewish hammered dulcimer. The definition of klezmer expanded in the 20th century to include just about any Eastern European Jewish folk music.

Klezmer music was first played about 600 years ago. Jewish immigrants brought it to New York in the late 1920s, but, Rubin says, "the music almost died out with the Holocaust and the restriction of Jewish immigration."

"As the first-generation immigrant groups began to die out," Rubin says, "so did their music. Yiddish-speaking 'seeds' didn't pass it on to their offspring, which was almost the death knell of the music."

The American folk-music boom of the late '50s and '60s led to a rediscovery of klezmer music in the 1970s, with musicians in Boston and Berkeley, especially, "discovering the music of their parents, unearthing it, playing it."

But klezmer music - particularly the music played by the Freilachmakers band - isn't staid, historic or stuck in the past.

"Things change. They evolve. That's a better word for it," Rubin says.



The Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band is, from left, Andy Rubin, Lou Ann Weiss, Felipe Ferraz, Wayne R. Lutzow and Annette Brodovskiy.

Contemporary klezmer musicians introduced new instruments and lyrics to the music. Freilachmakers (the name means "makers of freilach," the Yiddish word for joy) is no exception.

There has never been a clarinet in the band - "we're horn-free," Rubin says. The instrumentation, except for the accordion, perhaps, resembles a standard bluegrass band.

"We think that maybe this is the way the music would have been played in the Appalachians, if it had been played in the Appalachians," he says, only partly joking.

"We really wanted to bring that old-timey string band sound to klezmer. There's not much of that going on (in the klezmer music world). And we've gone more into vocals - because it's so much fun to sing."

Co-founder Kidron left the band about five years ago and was replaced by classically trained violinist Annette Brodovskiy.

Bassist Lou Ann Weiss - "the heartbeat of our ensemble," Rubin says - is a classically trained cellist and an original band member.

Felipe Ferraz joined the group in 2000. A Brazilian guitarist and vocalist, he has allowed the group to expand its repertoire to include Sephardic music (music of Jews from Spain and Portugal, who were displaced by the Spanish Inquisition).

The band was without an accordionist for a while but recently added Wayne R. Lutzow.

His playing "complements the strings very well and provides a fullness and little bit of pizzazz that we really love," Rubin says.

But an accordion in a string band?

"Why not?" Rubin asks. Appalachian Jewish folk music with Brazilian, gypsy and Celtic influences - why not, indeed?

Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band

WHEN: 3 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: The Palms, 13 Main St., Winters

TICKETS: \$12

INFORMATION: (530) 795-1825

About the writer: The Bee's Jim Carnes can be reached at (916) 321-1130 or jcarnes@sacbee.com.