FAU sets aside eight days to celebrate Jewish culture

Like many Jewish holidays, this year's Jewish Kultur Festival at Florida Atlantic University will celebrate for a full eight days.

Sponsored in part by the Jewish Cultural Society of FAU, the festival, now in its fourth year, provides a celebration of Jewish cultural, concerts, theater, film and book art designed to showcase FAU Libraries' Special Collections.

The library has a large print music collection of manuscripts and published music, including vintage publications and sheet music dating from the 18th century to the mid-20th century, including religious music from Catholic masses, Yiddish songs, Negros spirituals and American patriotic songs.

"We have everything except the kitchen sink," said Aaron Kula, the director of Music Collections and Performance at FAU and master of the Kudlitzer Company Orchestra.

Kula, a musical alchemist, adds his own touch to period pieces, blending jazz, classical and ethnic music to create an original fusion composition.

"This year I am excited to present all new events, which explore contemporary Jewish issues relating to multiculturalism," Kula said.

"Our programming, events and guest artists have become the standard for attracting larger audiences. There is no other Jewish cultural arts festival like this in the state of Florida, hosted by an academic library at a state university."

One of Kula's goals at the university is to preserve and manage the music collection, perform the music and conduct the KCO, a 25-member klezmer group that plays Kula's arrangements of traditional Jewish music.

The highlight of this year's festival is the Roots, Rhythm and Soul concert, a transformational concert that connects and reimagines cross-cultural melodies.

The concert honors the memory of Cantor Morton Kula, Kula's father who died at age 92 last September.

One of the concert's recordings, Shabbat Menuchah/Abudayah/Day of Rest, will be performed in English by Daniel Coodman, a tenor from West Palm Beach, and in Hebrew by Cantor Mark Kula, one of Aaron Kula's three brothers.

Kula reviewed hundreds of pieces of sheet music from the vintage print music collection before creating the Roots, Rhythm and Soul compositions.

His adaptations are influenced by American and Latin jazz, swing and klezmer influences. The orchestra will perform 22 new compositions adapted from songs and folk music.

"My goal is to bring these new creations from the shelf to the stage, breathing new life into forgotten musical legacies," said Kula. "We want to honor the music and composers of this heritage."

Among the concert's highlights are KCO's reunion with Coodman, and a performance by KCO vocalist Raidi Fischeln, who will be joined by the full orchestra in recently discovered holographic photographs.

Fischeln, who plays rock violin with her own group, Blue Fire, has worked with Kula for the past 15 years.

The concert and festival mark KCO's 15th anniversary season celebration with Kula as musical director and the release of the orchestra's new CD, featuring new classics such as "Bongo Bulgar," "2nd Avenue Mamba" and "Rabbi's Cumbia."

Other festival highlights include: a program by storyteller Carol Heeke, Ph.D., and in-residence, FAU School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, renowned Sephardic ballad singer Yojiyagoda, performing Ladino songs and a lecture and workshop by master guitarist and author Louise Shiff, who uses spoofed theories, photo transfers, recycled clothing and embroidery in her creations.

Selt will discuss the diverse aspects of quilting as defined by the mystical practice of Kabbalah in search of higher levels of spiritual realization, personal fulfillment and a quality quilted product.

In addition, the festival will provide the Florida premier of the play, "The Gospel According to Jerry," co-written by Richard Kovel, son-in-law of Yassar Sulayman, an award-winning professor of U.S.C. School of Cinema and TV and Rabbi Fischeln Kula, Aaron's brother and president of OAS, the Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership founded in 1974 by the Weiss.

The play reading stars local actors Jeffrey Bruce and Leila Elas.

The idea for the play evolved fortunately when Kovel and Kula met at an airport, struck up a conversation and decided to collaborate on a joint project. Although Kula has written numerous books and a short film, this is his first play.

The two-person play, which is both serious and funny, recounts the story of a black man who deserts to lose weight who becomes romantically involved with a rabbi and how their cross-cultural relationship heals each of their lives.

"The play is a mitzvah, a medley of freedom and love. Cross-cultural relationships are difficult, but can provide profound insight into one's self," Kula said.

"The Gospel According to Jerry" will be performed at the Florida Atlantic University Jewish Theater at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. on Monday, April 1, 2013. Ticket prices will be $10 and $5 for students.

Selt will also have the lecture, "The Quilting Path: A Guide to Spiritual Discovery Through Fabric, Thread and Kabbalah," at 2 p.m. on March 19 and a workshop "Making Quilts with Meaning and Memory" at 12 p.m. on March 10. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit library.fau.edu or call 561-496-5535.