Guava Rugelach Festival explores musical links between Jews, blacks

BY JORDAN LEVIN
JLEVIN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

As Jews have spread to the Middle East to Europe and now the World over the centuries, they've become known for holding tight to their culture and religion. What is less well known are the ways in which constant immigration has allowed Jewish culture to affect their many homes.

Exploring those links is the aim of the Guava Rugelach Festival, which takes place Saturday and Sept. 2. At Next@19th, an alternative Jewish cultural center at Temple Israel near downtown Miami.

In its debut in 2007, in the wake of a surge in Jewish immigration from Argentina and Venezuela to Miami, the festival focused on cultural connections with Latin America. Last year, the main event was a musical performance, Monajet, that celebrated the ancient relationship between Iran and Jews.

This year, several performances highlight unexpected musical links closer to home: between Jewish klezmer and liturgical music with African-American jazz and spirituals, and with U.S. Latin dance music. Among the more startling revelations are that jazz classics such as Cab Calloway's Minnie the Moocher and songs from George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess derive their melancholy melody and feeling in part from Jewish religious songs.

"The influence of Jewish composers on 20th century pop culture is enormous," says Jenni Person, director of Next@19th. The experience of previous festivals and ongoing programs at Next@19th have bolstered the Guava event, Person says. "The festival has become more articulate conceptually, and there's more depth and meaning to the program. It's like "yes, it's cool to hear this mix on stage, but let's also talk about where it comes from."

Numerous and early-20th century jazz, Tin Pan Alley and Broadway composers were Jewish, including Irving Berlin, Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Leonard Bernstein. But there are deeper connections, says Aaron Kula, director of the klezmer Company Orchestra and of music performance and education at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. His group will perform children's and adult programs this weekend.

Jewish Tin Pan Alley and klezmer musicians, children of the first generation of Jewish European immigrants growing up in a new country, flourished from the 1920s to 1930s — as the flow of blacks from the South to New York and other points north resulted in the creative explosion of blues, jazz and the Harlem renaissance, Kula says. The two groups heard each others' music on the radio and found common ground between raucous klezmer and jazz rhythms, and the aching major keys of the blues and yearning minor keys of traditional Jewish liturgical chants and songs.

"Both the Jewish immigrants and black artists moving up from the South were running parallel worlds of Improvisation," Kula says. "Jews began to incorporate American sounds and black music... in the other direction, when black musicians heard these Eastern European improvised melodies, they started using those modes."

That cross-pollination will be celebrated in a performance by Next@19th's 2nd Avenue Jewish Chorale with jazz drummer Reuben Hoch, doing songs by Berlin and Al Jolson. "You find Jewish composers writing every possible type of music from jazz to Broadway to Hollywood soundtracks to classical art music," says choir director Coreen Duffy. "A Jewish choir doesn't only have to sing in synagogue."

Another black-Jewish link will be exposed in spirituals sung by Lloyd Reshard, based on a program Reshard created for his job as director of Arts at St. Johns, a Miami Beach arts series. A number of popular spirituals, such as Wade in the Water and By the Waters of Babylon, are inspired by the story of Exodus, the biblical tale of liberation from slavery in Egypt celebrated in Passover.

"There's a lot of thanking God for deliverance and freedom and redemption," Person says. The trading of inspiration goes both ways, she says. "In progressive congregations spirituals are sometimes used in place of liturgy, because they're often the same."

Kula's klezmer orchestra will play original tunes with another surprising musical connection — between klezmer and Latin music — that Kula says also arose from an American immigrant mix. In this case it's Jews picking up from Cuban and Latin musicians and the rise of mambo in the late '40s and early '50s. One famous example is Irving Fields' Miami Beach Rhumba, made famous by Xavier Cugat, which opens with the lines "I started out to go to Cuba/Soon I was at Miami Beach/There not so very far from Cuba/Oh, what a numba they teach!"

Kula has taken the connection further with songs such as Second Avenue Mambo, Klezmornerge and Tropicalelita. In the last one he puts a Cuban style to tango rhythm into an old Russian klezmer song. "When we tour, people get up and dance salsa," he says. "Whether we play for Jews or non-Jews, everybody thinks there's something in it for them. It's very American. They don't know why they want to dance to it, they just want to dance."