Cultural links through music

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As Jews have spread from the Middle East to Europe and the New 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 many homes.

Exploring those links is the Guava Ruge"Lach Festival, which takes place at Next@19th, an alternative Jewish cultural center at Temple Israel in downtown Miami.

In its second year, in 2012, 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 month-long musical work, Mauer, that celebrated the relationship between Iraq and Jewish culture.

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

THE KLEZMER COMPANY ORCHESTRA: A group led by Aaron Kula (with accordion) will perform children's and adult programs.

GUAVA RUGE"LACH FESTIVAL

Exploring musical links of Jews, blacks

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pop culture is enormous," says Jenin 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." Numerious early and mid-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 Libraries 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 parts north resulted in the creative explosion of blues, jazz and the Harlem renaissance, Kula says. The two groups heard each other's music on the radio, and the common ground between raucous klezmer and jazz rhythms, and the appeal of 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.

This 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 "This Little Light of Mine" and "O Happy Day," are inspired by the story of Exodus, a biblical tale of liberation from slavery in Egypt celebrated in Passover.

"There's a lot of thanksgiving 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 other than the norm." Kula's klezmer orchestra will play original tunes with another surprising musical mixture: between Latin and klezmer music — that Kula says also arose from an American immigrant mix. In this case it's coming not 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 Bamba, made famous by Xavier Cugat, which opens with the line "I started out to go to Cuba/Soon I was at Miami Beach/There not so very far from Cuba/Oh, what a rumbah they teach!"

Kula has taken the connection further with songs such as Second Avenue Mambo, Klezmengerluse and Tumbaflalaika. In the last one he puts a Cuban style cha cha cha rhythm into an old Russian klezmer song. "When we tour, people get up and dance salsa," he says. "We're not Jewish 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, just to want to dance."