Legacy of jazz and spirit in honor of late cantor

Innovative jazz concert for High Holy Days

By James D. Davis, Sun Sentinel
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The concert was to be unique enough: jazz, blues, Latin, Yiddish and other genres set to the solemn prayers of the upcoming High Holy Days. But the plaza gained still more depth for the two main performers when their father died last weekend.

On Saturday, Aaron and Irwin Kula will present Jazz Wisdom Spirit at Boca Raton. They’ll go straight to dress rehearsal from the last day of shiva, the seven-day mourning period, for Cantor Morton Kula. He helped his son design the concert, but died on Saturday at 62 before he could hear the result.

"I’ll be part of this legacy," said musician Aaron Kula, who will lead the concert along with his twin brother. "He wanted us to create something different and new that would touch people — not just from a religious standpoint, but cultural and spiritual." The concert at the Courtice Horseshoe Theatre will blend the talents of the Kula brothers. Aaron is director of the music collections and performance at Florida Atlantic University’s libraries. He also heads the Klezmer Company Orchestra, FAU’s professional ensemble in residence, which will accompany him at the Concert for Peace.

Irwin is president of Col, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, a think tank in New York. After each 16-minute set, he will contribute brief talks on themes of the High Holy Days.

The show will take a series of creative risks, combining jazz with traditional European cantorial melodies. One number will be an instrumental treatment of the Unetach Torah, a prayer said on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, which starts at sundown Wednesday. Another will be a Miles Davis-style version of Kol Nidre, the prayer of repentance commonly recited on the eve of Yom Kippur.

Why jazz?

"It’s purely American," Aaron Kula says. "It’s another generation of music for people in the 21st century. We want to get an emotional response. Get the message of the High Holy Days: forgiveness, hope, love, looking to the future. These are universal messages, things that everyone needs to practice."

Irwin Kula agrees.

"America is unique in the opportunity to share wisdom, both musical and spiritual. And Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are probably the most powerful holidays on either side. They have some of the deepest spiritual insights, especially that we can change our lives. We can be grateful and joyous about life. We can be the people we aspire to be.

The ethos he said he wanted to make these messages available to everyone, as well as to serve as a "bridge of understanding, of sharing, of love, of joy, of the common humanity that we have." And for that, he said, "We are all here together." The concert will be free for all, and the proceeds will go to the Yeshiva University Memorial Hospital and the University of Miami Children’s Hospital.

Also on the program will be Daniel Codran, a tenor who has sung with the Palm Beach Opera. Codran has also sung with the Dolphins Voices, a cappella group for the Miami Dolphins. For the Sunday program, he will sing in both English and Hebrew.

The program was put together by Irwin and his father in the spring. As the brothers decided on a pre-High Holy Days program, their father helped them decide which music would best with which tempo. "We put the concert poster in his bedroom," Irwin recalls. "He said 'Terrific!' three times. He wanted to see the reactions of the audience.

That was not to be, but the music and ideas that he and his son created will continue on after him. Tickets for the 3 p.m. concert sold out; another concert at A has been added.

"His whole life, he was a role model for interfaith and multicultural outreach," Aaron says. "This program will be completely dedicated to him."

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