

Like Meeting Somebody I Wanted to Meet: Millie and the Mentshn Play Jewish History

by **Laural Ringler**

“Did you know George Gershwin was a hoodlum and his name wasn’t George?” Millie Johnson asks. She has researched Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and other composers that immigrated to the United States in order to chronicle Jewish music from late 1800s Russia to the influences of jazz and gospel on the new arrivals and her enthusiasm for their work is evident. Presented as a multi-media concert at Western Washington University on Sunday, April 22, “Songs Never Silenced” will be Millie and her band, the Mentshn, playing a range of music, as she says, “from rompin’ stompin’ klezmer, to folk songs from Jewish troubadour Eliza Greenblatt, plus classical, swing, jazz, and heart-wrenching Holocaust songs.”

This is Millie and the Mentshn’s second foray into multi-media concerts with significant historical context. From “a little concert at the Whatcom Museum in 2002,” remembers Johnson, where she read from a relative’s early 1900s journal describing his immigration experience, Millie and the Mentshn created “Homeland to Heartland.” The journals describing life in Russia and the boat that brought her relatives to America became a lens to amplify the changes in Jewish music through those times. Well received, Millie and the Mentshn performed “Heartland to Homeland” as far away as Minnesota and Alaska.

Having grown up in a ten-person traditional Jewish family exposed to Yiddish from her elders and Hebrew in Saturday School, Johnson sang opera in her 20s, even trying her luck in New York at one point. Practicality eventually won out over waitressing and working to make it in opera, so she finished her math

degree and taught high school. Johnson went on to teach at Western Washington University, and is now in her thirty-fourth year of teaching.

Fellow WWU professor Lou Lippman learned Johnson sang and with persistent encouragement got her involved in What The Chelm, the klezmer group he played piano with. “What The Chelm brought back my childhood and I unearthed my grandfather’s cousin’s journals,” says Johnson. Reading the vivid writing, “I feel like I can see what’s going on and I can hear the music.” Sometimes her relative even mentioned particular songs. She created Millie and the Mentshn with What The Chelm players and other musicians to explore the development of Jewish music Old World to New World. Her classical training was in use again.

The new concert, “Songs Never Silenced,” will expand Johnson’s family’s experience to include the stories of other Jewish immigrants – and those who remained in Europe. Research led Johnson to poet Schmerke Kaczerginsky, who survived the Holocaust and in 1948 wrote down over 200 songs he remembered or heard from others. Johnson saw his book of lyrics with a few handwritten notations, and was inspired to revive some of the songs. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done – guesswork,” she says, “trying to stay true to the spirit of the words and creating harmonies that won’t overshadow those words.”

Reviving a song in that way takes about a month of painstaking work. Johnson writes a line of music for Lou



Ken Bronstein, Phil Heaven, Millie Johnson, Warren Palken & Lou Lippman. *Photo by Jerry Johnson*

Lippman’s piano, singing with it and modifying, then slowly adding Ken Bronstein’s oboe, Phil Heaven’s violin or viola, and Warren Palken’s drums. The arranging and creating continues, until it feels right. When it is right, Johnson says, then “it’s like meeting somebody I didn’t know and this is just who I wanted to meet.”

The “Songs Never Silenced” concert will combine stories, music, and a slide show of historical photographs. The music will include instrumentals, and Johnson singing in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, with translations of every song printed in the program. The group plans to include the recognizable, Irving Berlin’s “Blue Skies” and the Depression-era “Brother Can You Spare A Dime?” as well as those Schmerke Kaczerginsky writings for which Millie and the Mentshn have arranged the music.

In April there will be three opportunities to experience Millie and the Mentshn’s musical connecting of the past to the present: April 4 through the Bellingham Music Club, April 14 as part of the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival, and the full “Songs Never Silenced” concert debuting at WWU’s Performing Arts Center Concert Hall Sunday, April 22. See their website, www.millieandthementshn.com, for information about all of these. Tickets for the WWU performance are \$5 or \$3 students/seniors and are available from the WWU Box Office, Village Books, and the Community Food Co-op.

Laural Ringler is a frequent contributor to Entertainment News Northwest. Her articles have also appeared in Adventures NW Magazine, the Bellingham Weekly, Organic Press, Toledo Area Parent, the Journal of Adolescent Research, and Rhapsody in Writing: An Eclectic Collection.