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What, Where & When in the Pacific Northwest.



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Klezmer Band Goes South Features Multi-Media Performances

by Christopher Key

Mentioning klezmer music and Buenos Aires in the same sentence would seem to be either a non sequitur or an oxymoron, depending on your point of view. The Argentinean city, however, will be hosting the First Annual KlezFiesta this September and Bellingham band Millie and the Mentshn (MTM) is one of just 20 groups from around the world invited to perform.

MTM was founded in 2002 and is an offshoot of the popular local klez band What The Chelm. Four of the five members of MTM play in the larger group. To say that MTM is nontraditional is an understatement. Lead singer Millie Johnson describes the group as "chamber klezmer."

"Unlike other klezmer bands, those in the MTM ensemble are all classically trained," Johnson said. "The configuration of instruments is not typical. The musical arrangements are far more elaborate and sophisticated."

In addition to Johnson, members of the group are Ken Bronstein on oboe, Phil Heaven on viola and violin, Lou Lippman on piano and Warren Palkin on drums and percussion.

The KlezFiesta in Buenos Aires was organized by Pedro Banchik, a chemical engineer who directed a documentary entitled "Immigration from Bessarabia to Argentina: 1905-2005." That phenomenon is part of what is generally referred to as the Jewish Diaspora, an essential ingredient of the music played by MTM.

Another innovative part of the MTM approach is that it involves much more than just music.

"We perform multimedia concerts that are based on solid historical research that becomes the narration, original arrangements of reconstructed music from the various eras and places (in original languages: Yiddish, Russian, etc.), and slides with relevant photos," Johnson said.

KlezFiesta organizers will provide the band with all the necessities once they get to Argentina, but it's up to the band members to provide their own transportation. That will run about \$6,000. MTM held a fundraising concert at Fairhaven College on March 8, but is still seeking financial help.

"MTM would be receiving no performer honorarium; we would be playing purely for the sake of bringing our programs to the communities," Johnson said. "Most of the other 19 bands are able to get support through government agencies that sponsor the arts and outreach. In the absence of

such sources, MTM is in search of possible donors (individuals or corporations)."

Those potential donors would get more than just the warm fuzzies associated with such an endeavor.

"MTM expects that any donors would receive mention in media coverage, which, we hope, would include articles summarizing the event," Johnson said. "Furthermore, Pedro Banchik, director of KlezFiesta, has assured us that any sponsoring individuals or organizations would be listed in the KlezFiesta program materials. Hence, a corporation with



Local klezmer band Millie and the Mentshn have been invited to participate in the First Annual KlezFiesta in Buenos Aires this September.

business dealings in Argentina could be assured of some favorable publicity."

The most recent CD from MTM is entitled "Mentshn It" and includes everything from a Polish dance to a tango to the Depression-era ballad "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

Local reviewer Jack Frymire gives the CD an unqualified rave.

"The songs bear on their back a great sack of grief, yet they are never maudlin," he said. "Just reading the dates of the composers and poets (1916-1943, 1916-1945) breaks your heart. Johnson has elected not to weep, but to celebrate and to witness. Working from bare sketches, she has used simple means to craft loving arrangements of great skill and imagination. It's hard to imagine a more spellbinding interpreter."

Sales of the CD, available online (www.MillieAndTheMentshn.com) and at Village Books, will help support the band's trip to Buenos Aires. Their next CD, "Another di Mentshn," will be released in April or May and the group will appear in concert at Central Washington University on May 8. Oh, and about the band's name. Mentshn means "dudes" in Yiddish.

Christopher Key is an actor and director who lives in Bellingham and writes to help support his theatrical addiction.

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