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KLEZMER GETS A HIP-HOP VIBE

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"This is not your zayde's (grandfather's) klezmer," says clarinet virtuoso David Krakauer, who has insistently expanded the idiomatic possibilities of contemporary klezmer music. Krakauer has turned his band Klezmer Madness into a thriving sonic laboratory in which elements of jazz, funk, rock, blues and hip-hop seamlessly fuse with old-world forms.

Fully versed in klezmer's roots as the celebratory dance music of Eastern European Jewry, Krakauer is committed to creating a sound that flows out of his experience as a 21st century American Jew living in multiethnic New York, always mindful of the overwhelming historical forces that whipsawed Yiddish culture in the 20th century, from the black hole of Hitler's "final solution" to the haven of North America.

"It's always been an interesting aesthetic position and struggle for musicians of my generation playing klezmer because we're faced with this three-prong interruption of the Holocaust, the impact of Stalin and the assimilation of the Diaspora," says Krakauer, who plays a San Francisco Performances family matinee with Klezmer Madness at Herbst Theatre on Saturday afternoon, then crosses the bay to open the Berkeley Richmond Jewish Community Center's 19th annual Jewish Music Festival at UC Berkeley's Wheeler Auditorium that evening.

"When one makes music one always wants to try to make something new and different. But because of this big gap, this big hole in the middle, we have to go back and examine the past as we carry on the traditional art form."

Nothing better illustrates Krakauer's expansive sensibility than the way he has incorporated Montreal DJ Socalled (a.k.a. Josh Dolgin) into Klezmer Madness. A hip-hop artist who also works as a magician, cartoonist, photographer, pianist, accordion player and choir director for an Orthodox synagogue, Socalled has developed a wild repertoire of beats, loops and samples drawn from old Yiddish records. His 2002 collaboration with British violinist Sophie Solomon, "Hiphopkhasene" (Piranha), which features several blazing Krakauer clarinet solos, became an underground sensation with its kaleidoscopic mash-up of a traditional Yiddish wedding (khasene) and hip-hop hoedown.

But it was on Krakauer's 2003 album "Live in Krakow" (Label Bleu) that Socalled's loopy aural art fully meshed with the clarinetist's unorthodox klezmer cast of accordionist Will Holshouser, guitarist Sheryl Bailey, drummer Michael Sarin and bassist Nicki Parrott, (whose chair is being filled by Trevor Dunn on the band's West Coast tour).

"In a way it's one of my easiest gigs as a performer," Socalled says from Montreal. "I come and play the phat beat. Usually I sing and play accordion and do magic tricks, but I've been finding these records in the garbage, this whole Yiddish culture treasure trove, and I love this music so bad I want to play it, too." Krakauer has come a long way since he first began exploring his Jewish musical roots. In the late 1980s, the recent Juilliard graduate was a frustrated jazz musician and a rising star in the world of chamber music. When a klezmer band took up residence in front of the gourmet delicatessen Zabar's, across the street from his Upper East Side apartment, he soon joined the group and the music took over his musical life. He joined the Klezmatics, a force in the klezmer revival started in the mid-'70s by the Berkeley ensemble Klezmorim, and began exploring the music's disparate sources.

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Klezmer originally referred not to a musical style but to the musicians who played at the celebrations after weddings, bar mitzvahs and holidays like Hanukkah. With Jewish communities scattered across Eastern and

Central Europe, klezmer repertoire came to include a huge range of material, often drawn from the folk music of neighboring peoples, particularly Gypsies, or Rom. The music evolved and thrived in the early 20th century as Jews poured into the United States and encountered jazz, blues and Broadway, though by the 1960s klezmer was largely seen as sentimental ethnic kitsch.

With such a rich and long-neglected store of tunes, the Klezmatics at first tried to re-create the past by studying old recordings. But gradually the band began incorporating elements of jazz, funk and Afro-Caribbean music into the mix. By the time Krakauer left the Klezmatics in 1996 and formed Klezmer Madness, he realized that he could satisfy his creative impulses with klezmer, but he hasn't cut all his previous musical ties. He recorded Osvaldo Golijov's "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" with the Kronos Quartet in 1997, teaches at Manhattan School of Music and often performs his solo recital featuring works by Brahms, Messiaen and Steve Reich.

He brings all of these experiences to bear in Klezmer Madness, a band drenched in Yiddish feeling and capable of going in any musical direction.

"Adding Socalled is part of the natural evolution of what the band is all about," Krakauer says. "His samples come from old Passover instruction albums and records from the Yiddish theater ... and then he's using beats, what people are dancing to today, so we're carrying on the tradition of klezmer as dance music. My mission has always been to keep the music alive and out of the museum."

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