

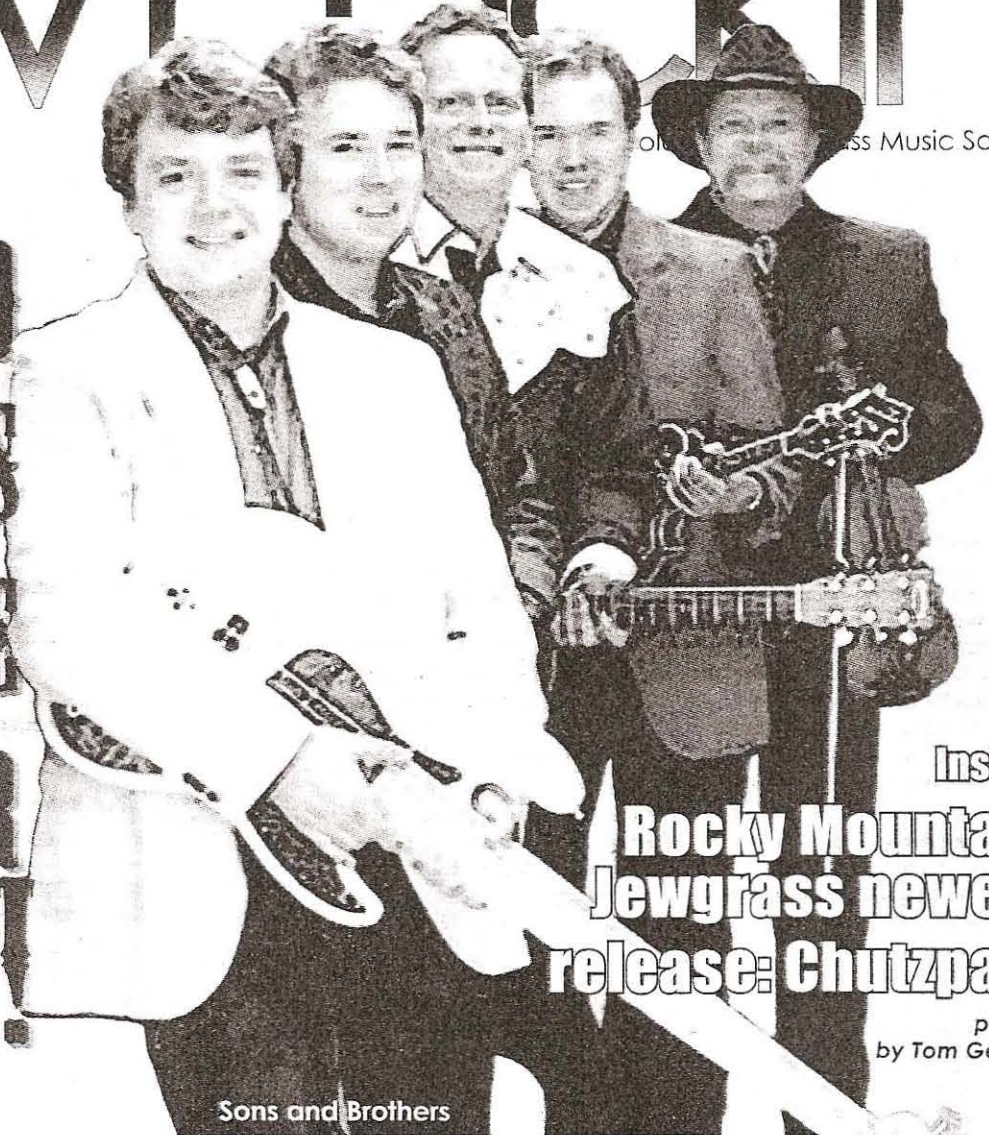
May 2011

Dow'r Pickin'



Colorado Bluegrass Music Society

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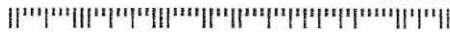


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Sons and Brothers

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**Rocky Mountain
Jewgrass's newest
release: Chutzpah!**

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CD Review



By Tom Geissler

Some things are consciously invented, like the light bulb or Post-It notes, while others just seem to come out of nowhere. So it was four and a half years ago when four musicians in a Denver synagogue's band were spending some down time during rehearsal by messing around with the rhythms on a few of the prayers. Much of the Jewish prayer service is either chanted or is in 3/4 time.

More by accident than design, the quartet started playing one of the hymns in 4/4 time and much faster than usual. With guitar, fiddle, mandolin and bass all in play, the first strains of what would become Jewgrass music were born. A few months later the band debuted at an event featuring two other Jewish groups, a Klezmer band, The Klez Dispensers, and local Jewish world beat musicians, Los Lantzmun.

Jewgrass founding members Saul Rosenthal, Gail deVore, Ben Cohen and Manny Ladis soon invited Sandy Reay to join the band and Shalom Feivel and Rocky Mountain Jewgrass was officially launched.

"The Jewgrass name just kind of came to us in a moment of cockeyed insight," says Rosenthal. "We were aware of other variations on the bluegrass name, like newgrass and RockyGrass. As we sat around talking about what we were creating—the intersection of bluegrass and Jewish—the name popped up and we immediately agreed that was it. And,

It takes a little **Chutzpah** to create Jewgrass music

Denver-based Jewish bluegrass band, Rocky Mountain Jewgrass (RMJ) have released their second CD, *Chutzpah*, on the Feivel Music label. Before I share a review of the CD, some background on this unusual group is in order.

we trademarked it." Rosenthal points out that there is also a weed called Jewgrass—but it apparently can't play music.

If you haven't heard Jewgrass music before, let me describe it a bit. Start with the traditional instrument array playing bluegrass rhythms—guitar, banjo, bass, fiddle and mandolin—and add the vocal harmonies. So far you have bluegrass music played by Jewish musicians. Not quite Jewgrass. What complete the picture are songs with words that come from Jewish sources. It could be Old Testament text, Yiddish translations of folk tunes, Psalms, prose from the prayer book or even Leonard Cohen's lyrics. If it has Jewish content, it's fair game for the band.

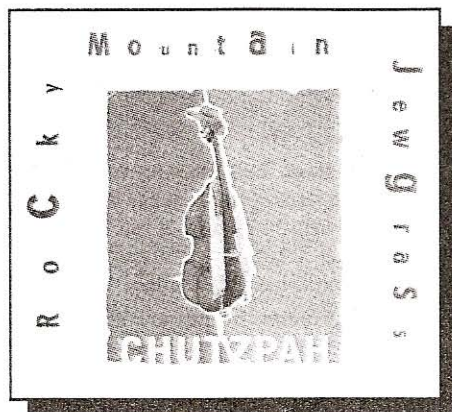
And then there is the humor. Not content to focus merely on the serious side of Judaism, the band began writing and collecting songs that, through parody, poke a little fun at the culture and traditions. Among the first of these was "I'm in it for the Food," an ode to gastronomic Judaism penned by Sandy Reay. Soon to follow were versions of Allan Lieberman's "Thank

God I'm a Jewish Boy" and "The Yom Kippur Blues" musically based on Alton Delmore's "Big River Blues" with lyrics by Saul Rosenthal.

Over the years there have been a few personnel changes and the band's name was shortened to just *Rocky Mountain Jewgrass*.

"It stopped being fun listening to people try and say Shalom Feivel, which happens to be my own Hebrew name," said Rosenthal. "Today the four of us, Ben and Gail, from the original band and our newest member, Eric Roberts, are clearly full partners in producing this music. So Rocky Mountain Jewgrass really is who we are today."

Speaking of Eric Roberts, his addition to the band completed the full harmony range for the group. Eric provides what the band calls "the high lonesome kvetch." He sings tenor, of course, and plays the bass guitar.



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Chutzpah

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Now what about the Chutzpah? The word, which is Hebrew, means audacity or nerve. To illustrate, a woman and her son are walking on the beach when a huge wave washes the child out to sea. The mother cries out desperately to God to save her child. Soon the child washes back up on the shore safe and sound. The mother looks to the heavens and says, "My son had a hat." That is chutzpah.

The band's second album, recorded at FTM Studios in Lakewood, is called *Chutzpah* for good reason. Fiddle player Gail deVore explains, "It took chutzpah to come up with the idea of Jewgrass music. And anyone who has heard our songs would agree it takes some chutzpah to write and perform many of the songs we offer."

The new CD includes 12 Jewgrass tunes that illustrate the band's versatility and range. Included are the songs representing the band's humorous side including a terrific cover of David Buskin's "Jews Don't Camp" along with "The Yom Kippur Blues." Leonard Cohen's "Who by Fire," which is a modern version of the confessional prayer Jews recite on Yom Kippur, gets a beautiful vocal rendition by Rosenthal and outstanding solo performances



on mandolin and guitar by Ben Cohen and Eric Roberts, respectively.

Cohen's contributions to the band include the creation of a number of scores in the pastiche style—combining a bluegrass classic or contra dance tunes with a Jewish melody. This genre is represented in grand style on the CD in "St. Timothy's Nigun."

"A nigun is a wordless melody commonly used to convey an emotion or feeling as part of prayer or preparation for prayer," Cohen explains. "I paired a Sabbath nigun with two contra dances—Belknap's March and the March of St. Timothy. We call it St. Timothy's Nigun, another moment of chutzpah." The song is primarily instrumental and features deVore's fiddle playing against Cohen's mandolin and banjo tracks.

Also included in the CD are several Hebrew songs, all originally written at different tempos and converted to bluegrass rhythms and instrumentation. "Hebrew is the ancient language of the Jewish people and preserved today in our prayers and services," explains

Rosenthal. "Since most in our audiences don't speak Hebrew, we provide translations during our shows and we add some English lyrics to many of these songs."

Over the years RMJ have performed in a variety of locations in Colorado, Arizona and Wyoming. They are regulars on the stage at Swallow Hill and the top draw for the Swallow Hill Four Mile Park Summer Concert Series. They'll be back there on August 10. And they will be helping to launch the new Denver County Fair at the National Western Stock Show Complex on July 28.

Just last month the band took their chutzpah to a new level—performing in costume at Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret in Denver. "It was a Purim concert," says Eric Roberts. Purim is a Jewish holiday that celebrates the escape from extermination of the Jewish people in Persia thousands of years ago. It is characterized by dressing in costumes and consuming large amounts of alcohol.

"In honor of the holiday we dressed as characters from Star Trek for the first set and Amish farmers for the second set," said Roberts. "To top it off, we wrote a new song called 'They Tried to Kill Us, We Won, Let's Eat.'"

The Chutzpah keeps on coming.

The new CD is available through the band's website www.rockymountainjewgrass.com, Digstation, CD Baby and OySongs.