

Jewgrass comes to Temple Beth Sholom

Denver-based group plays both serious, humorous bluegrass songs

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When you think of Jewish musical styles, bluegrass may not be the first thing that comes to mind.

In fact, it may be about the last.

That's what makes Rocky Mountain Jewgrass one of the more unique groups going today.

The Denver-based group will perform a free, pre-Hanukkah concert at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5, at Temple Beth Sholom, 4200 S.W. Munson.

Saul Rosenthal, the group's lead singer, said in a recent phone interview that Rocky Mountain Jewgrass got started eight years ago by chance.

"Three of us knew each other through our synagogue here in Denver," Rosenthal said. "We were all part of some musical activities at the synagogue.

"One day we were just kind of fooling around, waiting on people to arrive for a rehearsal, playing some songs bluegrass-style. We kind of looked at each other and we said, 'That's not half bad.' So we got the idea of trying to create a bluegrass sound that laid over Jewish content."

The group began practicing about once a month in members' basements and before long was ready to take its act on the road — if only across town in Denver.

"One thing led to another," Rosenthal said, "and we found ourselves playing 15 to 20 gigs a year."

A few years ago, Rocky Mountain Jewgrass branched out from playing only in Denver and other towns in Colorado, "and began playing around the country," Rosenthal said.

Word is out about Rocky Mountain Jewgrass. In early 2016, the group will travel to the Pacific Northwest for concerts in the Portland and Seattle areas.

"We're going to a big music festival in Toronto in May," he added. "They had us there three years ago and they want us to come back."

The group's members all have other jobs, so Rocky Mountain Jewgrass limits itself to "three or four shows out of town" at a time.

"We're not young spring chickens," Rosenthal said. "We're not like these young musicians that throw everything in the VW bus and take off on long tours."

Rosenthal, who has performed on stage with Larry Karol, former rabbi at Topeka's Temple Beth Sholom, said Rocky Mountain Jewgrass plays both serious and humorous music.

The more serious tunes come from Jewish texts and biblical themes. The humorous songs take a look at Jewish culture and traditions.

"We do both," said Rosenthal, 65, who has been a cantor since 1985 at Rodef Shalom, a Conservative Jewish synagogue in Denver. "We've developed a reputation for more of the humorous songs and parodies and that sort of thing."

One of the group's most popular tunes is "Jews Don't Camp," Rosenthal said.

"It's all about how it's not a Jewish thing to go camping," Rosenthal said. "A lot of people come up to me after a show and say, 'I camp,' and I say, 'God bless ya — there's 5 to 6 million Jews in the United States, and I don't think that many of them camp.'"

Another favorite song is entitled "I'm Only in It for the Food" — relating to those who have

come to love Jewish food.

Then there's the song "Three Days a Year," a parody of the Beatles' "Eight Days a Week," which is about how a lot of Jews go to synagogue only three times a year for major holidays, he said.

"We do a lot of serious stuff — we take our content from all types of sources," said Rosenthal, who works full-time in public relations. "It may come from Jewish prayers in the synagogue or something from the Psalms or the Prophets."

While the quartet performs songs with Jewish themes, its message appeals to people of various backgrounds, including Christians, Rosenthal said, adding that everyone is welcome at Saturday night's performance.

"Absolutely," Rosenthal said. "We have played in places where half the audience isn't Jewish — and sometimes more than that."

"There's a church here in Denver that brings about 30 people to hear us any time we play. The stuff we sing about — the biblical stuff — it's kind of 'roots music' for Christians. They know the Old Testament. But it's also bluegrass music, and they like that."

Rosenthal said Rocky Mountain Jewgrass is working in some Hanukkah selections for Saturday night's program. Hanukkah, the eight-day Jewish festival of lights, starts at sundown Sunday, Dec. 6, and concludes the evening of Monday, Dec. 14.

He said he and Rabbi Debbie Stiel of Temple Beth Shalom "have worked it out so some of the children from the synagogue are going to come on stage and sing with us."

Rosenthal said that to his knowledge, no other Jewish group does bluegrass music on a full-time basis.

"There are a couple of other Jewish bands in the country that occasionally will do some bluegrass, but we're full-time bluegrass-style," he said. "We tell people we're the world's first, best and perhaps only Jewish bluegrass band."

Rocky Mountain Jewgrass CDs will be available at the show and a reception will be held immediately after the performance.



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