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## Rocky Mountain Jewgrass brings 'high mountain kvetch' to Bay Area

by patricia corrigan , j. correspondent

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The way Saul Rosenthal tells it, he and some friends started out playing music at services at their synagogue and the next thing he knew, the group was on a stage pickin' and grinnin' all the way through David Buskin's "Jews Don't Camp," a very funny paean to the indoors that includes the line, "If your sleeping bag is tiltin' you can find me at the Hilton, 'cause Jews Don't Camp." (Don't take my word for it: Watch the video at <http://www.tinyurl.com/JewsDon-tCamp>.)

Rosenthal sings lead vocals, plays guitar and writes songs for the Denver-based Rocky Mountain Jewgrass, coming soon to the Bay Area for two concerts. Ben Cohen, Gail deVore and Eric Roberts make up the rest of the group, which specializes in what they call "the high lonesome kvetch." The group comes to the Bay Area for a June 28 fundraiser at Congregation B'nai Emunah in San Francisco and a June 29 concert at Freight & Salvage in Berkeley.

The band's particular brand of Jewgrass is not the typical fusion of Appalachian bluegrass and klezmer. "We've laid bluegrass music over Jewish content, with a little bit of rock and roll," Rosenthal said. "Klezmer, we haven't done. That's a different sound, with different instruments."



Rocky Mountain Jewgrass (clockwise from left) Ben Cohen, Eric Roberts, Saul Rosenthal and Gail deVore.

So what exactly do they play?

"We play bluegrass-style instrumentation and singing but with a Jewish folk style," Rosenthal said. "We also take prayers or psalms and write our own music to go with the words." Other tunes in their repertoire include covers of pop songs and ballads, played in a bluegrass style.

"I also write humorous songs, such as 'Saying Kaddish at the Roadkill Café' and 'The High Holy Days.' Remember, this is Colorado, so you can get high every day," Rosenthal said, laughing. He took the Beatles' "Eight Days a Week" and reworked it as "Three Days a Year," for "those times when Jews go to synagogue." He also parodied Leslie Gore's "It's My Party," transforming it into "It's the Kiddush," about "how people run over each other to get to the buffet."

Rocky Mountain Jewgrass started by accident.

"Ben, Gail and I all are members of Congregation Rodef Shalom in Denver and we play at services. One day back in 2007, we were warming up on 'Adon Olam.' Ben had a banjo with him and he started playing it," Rosenthal said. "Then we started jamming, singing and playing to a bluegrass beat, and we liked the sound of it. That was our first taste."

Over time, the musicians tried playing other

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songs from a typical service in a bluegrass style. "We thought we had something," Rosenthal said. The group's first public appearance was later that same year. Rosenthal remembers they all thought it was great fun, that maybe they would get bookings for a couple of months and then go back to their regular lives.

"Eight years later, we still travel around the country doing 15 to 20 shows a year, playing mostly to full houses everywhere from San Diego to Toronto and parts east," Rosenthal said. They have recorded three CDs: "Chutzpah," "Bupkes" and "Enough Already." What about the next CD? "I guess we'll have to call it 'We Were Just Kidding,'" he said.

As a kid, Rosenthal played piano for 12 years. Then he picked up a guitar and has been playing that ever since, for 45 years now. Of Cohen, he said, "Ben has a lot of talent — he plays banjo, mandolin, electric bass, the lute and more." Cohen also writes tunes the band calls "shmooshtas," their word for "pastiche."

DeVore is a self-taught fiddle player. "Gail is from Kansas, where she played a lot of bluegrass and old-time music, and one of her fiddles belonged to her late father," Rosenthal said. She also sings. "Eric is a trained professional musician. He plays guitar and bass and does a lot of Brazilian music."

The three founding members all have day jobs. DeVore is a computer systems consultant, Cohen is a lawyer and Rosenthal owns a public relations firm. Roberts, who used to work as a legal assistant, is now a full-time musician. The band members range in age from mid-40s to mid-60s.

Rocky Mountain Jewgrass rehearses every other week, on Tuesdays. "We have a lot of fun sitting in a circle, playing, listening to each other, putting harmonies to the music, figuring out who will play solo, how a piece will start, how it will end," Rosenthal said. "I think we sound better than we did five years ago — at this point, we are all foot-stomping fun!"

**Rocky Mountain Jewgrass**, 3:30 p.m. June 28 at Congregation B'nai Emunah, 3595 Taraval St. at 46th Avenue, S.F. \$10, \$20 families or \$36 per sponsor, which includes autographed CD. <http://www.bnaiemuahsf.org>. Also 8 p.m. June 29 at Freight & Salvage, 2020 Addison St., Berkeley. \$17 advance or \$19 at door. <http://www.thefreight.org>

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