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Klezmer returns to the Catskills

Revival celebrates mix of music, culture

By Steve Israel

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Swan Lake – Henry Sapoznik is swigging moonshine from a Clorox jug while the fiddler he's visiting in the hills of North Carolina fries up eggs in bacon grease.

"Want some?" the fiddler asks.

"No, thanks," Sapoznik of New York replies.

Seems the fiddler has asked this question before to visitors from New York. And many of those visitors in the late '60s and '70s have been Jewish; college kids like Sapoznik interested in roots music; kosher kids who wouldn't eat bacon.

"Are you Jewish?" the fiddler asks.

"Yeah," Sapoznik says.

"Don't you Jews have any of your own music?" the fiddler asks.

Sapoznik remembers his days in the Catskills, when his cantor father sang at resorts like the Normandy and Majestic. He thinks of musicians who worked the Borscht Belt, guys in powder-blue tuxedos who played cha-cha's and "The Twist."

He combs the old hotels to find them. He tracks some of them down to Brooklyn. He discovers that back in the '20s they did have their own music – the Eastern European dance music known as Klezmer. Much of it has gone the way of 78 records.

Ulster County's Henry Sapoznik finds the music – often at record collector conventions, where the 78s were used as the outside packing for rare records by stars like Caruso.

Sapoznik rerecords the Klezmer music and publishes it.

That's how he becomes the Grammy Award-nominated father of the Klezmer revival – a revival that came to the Catskills this week in the form of KlezKamp, a celebration of Klezmer music and Yiddish culture at the Swan Lake

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Resort that runs through Monday.

Part of it will be broadcast live Saturday night on public radio station WJFF-FM (90.5).

"Like a Jewish 'Prairie Home Companion,'" says Christine Ahern, station manager of WJFF.

Like that folksy variety show, KlezKamp features a mix of music and culture – ranging from one of the hottest Klezmer bands around, the Klezmatiks, and what may be the world's only Klezmer band with twang, Nashville's Klezmer Kids, to classes about the Catskills.

All of this will be featured in what was once one of the top Catskills resorts, the Stevensville, which now features a Japanese-Korean restaurant and such antiques as life-size medieval armor standing beneath glittering chandeliers.

This smorgasbord makes sense, once you know about 50-year-old Henry Sapoznik.

All the son of Polish immigrants heard at home in Brooklyn was Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jews. When he learned English, he spoke with a Yiddish accent.

"Like a 48-year-old immigrant," he says.

Like so many immigrants, he headed to the Catskills – to sing with his cantor father, until his voice changed.

Then, in the '60s, he grew his hair long, picked up a banjo and got hooked on folk music – and the Yiddish folk music, Klezmer.

As Sapoznik discovered more of it, he realized you couldn't separate Klezmer from its culture.

So 19 years ago, he brought the music back home to the Catskills. Today, KlezKamp is so popular that some 500 folks of all ages will attend its mix of concerts, classes and jams – all because of that North Carolina fiddler, Tommy Jarrell.

Jarrell, who died 10 years ago, never did hear the music he indirectly helped to unearth. If he did, he probably wouldn't played it, Sapoznik says.

Jarrell couldn't pronounce many Jewish names, so he gave the kids nicknames.

Henry Sapoznik's?

"Hank Snow."

For information on KlezKamp classes and concerts, call 292-8000.