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Tumblers to liven Hanukkah party

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BIDDEFORD — Festive dancing will once again highlight the annual York County Hanukkah Party at Etz Chaim synagogue, Sunday, as the Casco Bay Tumblers perform.

"We must have played in Biddeford for 20 years, for that congregation," said Julie Goell, who plays double-bass and sings with the group. "The music is anticipated as much as the latkes by now."

Casco Bay Tumblers (pronounced toom-lers) is a five-piece band formed in 1987 by Nancy 3. Hoffman, Carl Dimow and Goell. Steve Gruverman and Phil McGowan have since joined the band.

The Tumblers perform a unique type of music known as klezmer, which is secular Jewish folk music influenced by European and Middle Eastern roots. Flute, drums, clarinet, guitar, accordion and double bass are used to create the music – and folk dancing is encouraged.

"Our music is played for life cycle events," said Hoffman. "I would have to say that playing for the Biddeford congregation is like our life cycle event. It's become an annual touchstone in our musical lives."

Etz Chaim gives the band a sense of "heimish," said Hoffman – the Yiddish term for feeling at home.

The band's repertoire covers all aspects of life, from work to grieving, as well as the history of the Holocaust and immigration, said Hoffman. For Hanukkah celebrations, however, they try to keep the mood upbeat.

"Dancing is the key," said Goell. "We play all the Hanukkah music we can, plus dance tunes. It brings a kinetic expression of Hanukkah."

Julie Campisi, an organizer of Etz Chaim's Hanukkah party, said the music draws everyone to the dance floor, from grandparents to small children.

"They're wonderful," she said Wednesday, of the Tumblers. "We're very lucky to have a band like that in the area. This is the one time of year for a lot of folks to get to hear that music and make that connection."

For most of the band members, music is part of their regular jobs, whether it be through directing or teaching, said Goell. She was drawn to klezmer music because of the "quality of joyfulness and sadness embodied in the same music," she said.

"For me, the exploration of the music brought me back to my roots."

Hoffman, who grew up in a reformed Jewish household, said she was asked to play klezmer music for Julie's wedding, after avoiding requests to play it for years.

"I saw how it affected people," she said. "It served as a catalyst for a lot of joy."

Most of the songs are in Yiddish, though the band has recently expanded its repertoire to include the Sephardic Jewish dialect of Ladino, which is based on Spanish and Hebrew.

"At a standard concert, we do not have many people who know Yiddish," said Hoffman, but many people still know the songs.

The band often plays weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs, as well as doing residencies at schools to teach the music and culture. In 2001, the band visited Lithuania, where they received a "resonant response," said Goell.

"We worked with school kids there who knew they lived in a Jewish home but didn't know what had happened to them," she said. For others who lived through the Holocaust, the klezmer music "brought out a lot of memories," she said.

Not all of the band members are Jewish, said Goell, and none of them are particularly religious.

"We're not necessarily practicing, but we all love and appreciate the music and the culture," said Hoffman.

"It's more expressive," said Goell, with a focus on Jewish culture. The Tumblers have even been requested for non-Jewish weddings, she said.

"People just love to dance to this type of music," said Goell.

Campisi, who plans the party with renowned latke chef Marc Feldman and his wife, Maureen King, said that they book the Tumblers for the following year as soon as the party is over. The Tumblers play almost every night during Hanukkah, and once to twice a month during the rest of the year.

"They are definitely in high demand," said Campisi.

Hanukkah is a festival, rather than a holy day, noted Campisi, so the focus is on celebration – which means eating and dancing.

"It's a wonderful event," said Campisi. "People come for the Tumblers and the latkes. You can't leave there not being happy and not carrying that music with you."

The York County Hanukkah Party is open to the general public, with a small admission fee at the door. A potluck supper of dairy and vegetarian items begins at 5 p.m. and the Tumblers will begin performing during the meal, through 8 p.m. Congregation Etz Chaim is located at 36 Bacon St., Biddeford.

— City Editor Kristen Schulze Muszynski can be contacted at 282-1535, Ext. 322 or kristenm@journaltribune.com.

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The Casco Bay Tumblers, a Portland-based klezmer band, is pictured with current members: Julie Goell on bass and vocals; Nancy 3. Hoffman on accordion and vocals; Carl Dimow on flute and guitar; Steve Gruverman on clarinet; and Phil McGowan on drums. The band will perform Sunday, Dec. 5 at the Etz Chaim synagogue on Bacon Street in Biddeford as part of the annual York County Hanukkah Party. PHOTO BY DEANNE HERMAN- submitted

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