

Trio brings world Jewish music to Houston

By AARON HOWARD

Jewish music is a window into the history, migration and transplanted of Jews in all areas of the world. That's why Robyn Helzner casts a wide net when she puts together her musical repertoire: music of the Spanish troubadours, Yemenite and Arabic-sounding music, and tunes with Eastern European influences.

She calls it world Jewish music. "Jewish music has an incredible amount of melodies, keys, rhythms, instruments and colors," says Helzner. "We've lived in areas all over the world so we have music that brings with it a rich sense of place."

"What really defines our music is not necessarily the tune but the text. When you hear something in Hebrew or Yiddish or Ladino, these are languages specifically spoken by Jews around the world. I can sing love songs, family or community songs, children's songs. It doesn't have to be religious-based to be Jewish. By focusing on the language and the text, I can keep the music interesting and varied but always Jewish."

There's a growing audience, especially among young people, for world music. Some of the interest has been piqued by exposure to Afrobeat or Irish musicians. Others come to world music through exposure at the Houston International Festival.

Helzner thinks her world Jewish music can be appreciated in the same way. Her songs include liturgical texts, texts from the Bible, holiday songs and secular material. Most of the material is sung in Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino.

Making these songs accessible to modern audiences that don't understand the languages is not problematic. As an American Jewish woman and an artist, Helzner says she seeks songs that have meaning and then finds a way to present the songs that speak to an audience. That's part of her artistry.

On another level, Helzner's music reminds us that Jews are not monocultural. Some Jews may cringe at the sound of klezmer. Others, who have lived their lives in Houston, may have never experienced anything in Ladino or Yiddish.

Cultural identity in the United States is a matter of choice. We can choose to be aware of our cultural diversity. We can choose to understand our heritage extends far beyond the familiar pop world. That's what Helzner brings to the table.



Members of the Robyn Helzner Trio—Dov Weitman, Robyn Helzner and Matt Holsen.

Helzner's concerts are interwoven with stories about the songs and her experience as a world performer in the former Soviet Union, China, Hong Kong and the United States. She brings the perspective of a world performer to the Jewish communities where she is invited to sing.

"Jewish songs celebrate those things that are unique to us. It's an exciting intersection of music, community and identity."

The Robyn Helzner Trio will perform Sunday, February 25 at Brith Shalom.