

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Zebrina's all-star musicians play a world of tunes

By EZRA GLINTER


Going by the roster of musicians that make up Zebrina's six-piece Toronto band looks to be an eclectic outfit.

With members from Klezfactor, Beyond the Pale, and the Flying Bulgars (formerly the Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band), it would be no surprise if Zebrina's repertoire consisted of the usual *bulgars* and *doinas*, albeit top-notch versions.

But klezmer is only one of the items in composer, pianist and bandleader Jonathan Feldman's bag of tricks. Taking in jazz, reggae, Latin music and an array of other influences, Zebrina aims to meld "eastern melodies" with "western grooves."

"Our music is a mosaic of western music styles flavoured by eastern-sounding melodies. There is a lot of jazz-sounding stuff, as well as pieces that have rock beats,

the rhythmic side of his personality. His background in computer science and mathematics, which he teaches part time at TAIE Institute, helping to prepare international students for admission to Canadian universities.

The relationship between his weekend jams and weekday calculations might not always be apparent, but the two sides of his life are connected, Feldman said.

"I think the kinds of things we use to solve problems in math and in music are very similar. When you're improvising in music, you're trying to react in the moment, and you can think of that as trying to solve problems really quickly,

which is the same kind of thing you're trying to do when you're solving problems in math."

It wasn't until after he had completed his master's degree at MIT, however, while he was playing with a seven-piece jazz-funk group called Megalodon in Boston, that Feldman discovered Jewish music.

His main inspiration was avant-garde saxophonist John Zorn, whose *Masada* compositions blend Jewish inspirations with a cutting-edge musical sensibility. In addition to his own work, Zorn also produces like-minded artists as part of the Radical Jewish Culture series on his Tzadik record label.

"Zorn started playing Jewish music that could be played by jazz musicians. This was the inception of many Jewish musicians to write music that was modern and post-modern, something radically different from traditional klezmer or Israeli folk music," Feldman said.

"I grew up Conservative and went to Zionist camps, so I was always surrounded by Jewish culture growing up. And as I learned that music and played those scales, there was something that resonated in me, it seemed like a natural part of what was already inside me. So in a way the music wrote itself. But I think the neat thing about this that is different, and what John Zorn does that is different, is that you can play music that isn't hokey, that can be taken seriously as art music."

Inspired by Zorn, Feldman wrote a piece for his Boston band that he called *Wandering Jew*. Later, when he learned that there was a plant of that name, called *Tradescantia zebrina* or *Zebrina pendula* in Latin, he



With members from Klezfactor, Beyond the Pale and the Flying Bulgars, Zebrina knows how to infuse "eastern melodies" with "western grooves."

[Asli Alin photos]



Jonathan Feldman, Zebrina's composer, pianist and bandleader, likes to experiment with different styles.

Latin beats, a reggae piece – I've tried to experiment with lots of different styles, and see if I can make something Jewish out of them," Feldman said.

Feldman, 35, grew up in a Conservative Jewish household in Hamilton, Ont., where he attended Hamilton Hebrew Academy. Later, he studied computer science at McGill University and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as education at the University of Western Ontario and jazz piano at the University of Toronto.

Currently, in addition to his work with Zebrina, Feldman plays private engagements and in a jazz duo with bassist Bret Higgins, who also plays with Zebrina and Beyond the Pale.

While Feldman finds an outlet for his musical creativity on Toronto stages and bandstands, he complements

decided to use the title for his new band.

When Feldman moved back to Canada to study music and teaching, he continued his exploration of klezmer and Jewish music, first as a saxophone player in a nine-piece Hamilton band called Touch of Klez, and later at the University of Toronto. It was there that he met Higgins and, with his encouragement, continued writing music in the style he had absorbed from Zorn, producing the pieces that would eventually become the material for Zebrina.

"At U of T, I had written some music that would fit into that mould, and we started talking about putting together a band," Feldman said.

"Originally, I wanted to form a band to play Zorn's *Masada* music, but Bret said that we should write our own music."

In the fall of 2008, Feldman put the band together and they began playing in Toronto at the Free Times Café, Trane Studio, Tranzac, and Gate 403. This fall, the band heads into the studio to record its first album, thanks to a recording grant from the Ontario Arts Council.

Though Feldman is responsible for writing and arranging Zebrina's material, the band's unique sound is largely due to its eclectic assortment of instruments. Drummer Colin Kingsmore and percussionist Max Sennit lay down rhythms that draw on a range of sources and styles, while Joel Schwartz's guitar and Feldman's electric keyboard provide a distinctly rock 'n' roll feel. On top of that, Mike Ankiewicz's clarinet contributes the characteristic wails, trills and ornamentation of classic klezmer.

When he gets into the studio, Feldman said, one of his priorities is to record pieces that use his bandmates' skills to maximum benefit.

"I'm really blessed to have some of the best musicians around, and since they're such great soloists and have their own voices, one goal is to pick the pieces that are going to showcase their talents," he said.

Zebrina isn't all klezmer, but it may be an all-star band after all.

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