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Golem puts on a klezmer cabaret

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GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. - The mohawked singer preps for his last song. Relatively sober so far, he takes a swig, and suddenly he's channeling a Yiddish rabbi and a whole lot of schnapps, lurching about the stage, cutting off the violinist at just the wrong moment, and sending the folks in the back row into gales of laughter.

Klezmer, the music of Jewish immigrants from tiny Eastern European villages, is most widely associated with crazy clarinet riffs and turn-of-the-20th-century tenements. Thirty years ago a new generation discovered klezmer, riddled it with jazz and quick-step beats, and brought it to stages like Carnegie Hall.

Now an even newer generation is taking over, the children of those rediscovers. They are tweaking the traditions even more, and among their number is Golem.

The six-member New York City band filled Club Helsinki in Great Barrington, Mass., Sunday night to mark the season of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, which falls this time of year (this year, the holiday begins the evening of Dec. 25). The 7 p.m. show sold out, and demand was so high the club added a second performance in the afternoon.

To honor the season, Golem tossed a few musical holiday coins in the mix.

"I always wanted a Christmas tree when I was little, but maybe if I heard that song ..." said bandleader Annette Ezekiel, referring to a counting song cheering on a spinning dreidel, a toy top special to the holiday.

Klezmer embraced diverse musical cultures, and Golem demonstrates how malleable the music remains. The band sang in Yiddish, Russian, English and Ladino, a Spanish-Hebrew-polyglot of an ancient Jewish language. Often described as klezmer punk, the Massachusetts show was more of a raucous klezmer cabaret. But the spirit of the past remained intact.

There were no clarinets, but instead a trombone, a violin, a bass and a drum, channeling Gypsies, Ukrainians and Romanians. It brought the folk music up to a more modern speed with the pounding drums and occasional tango beat.

There was Aaron Diskin, over-dramatizing everything, a ham and a jokester and an entertainer, just as the Yiddish storytellers were. There was Ezekiel, the band's driving spirit, her accordion broader than her shoulders, offering literal translations of off-color lyrics.

A heroine wonders why there is war, when everyone gets along on the main street in one Russian town, Ezekiel said. And then there's the chorus: "I drive a very nice carriage, and I am a very bad girl."

Another, "Grine Kuzine," or "Greenhorn Cousin," describes in detail a beautiful girl fresh off the boat, who America turns ugly. Diskin translated: "She's stacked!"

In a Gypsy song, a family tries to wake a father because the daughter is being carried off. The punch line: She's about to be married.

Before the music, Seth Rogovoy presented an hour-long history of klezmer with slides, musical examples, and a few bars from the band.