

Austin-based Jewish musicians play every musical genre

By Andrea Abel

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The American stereotype of a Jewish musician most often conjures up an image of someone strumming a guitar a la Debbie Friedman, a klezmer performer or a cantor intoning sacred music. But, with Austin being the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World,” musical Jewish Austinites play everything from folk, funk and world beat to Western swing, Irish and jazz.

One thing is for sure: The life of a musician is never an easy one. Perhaps that is a necessary evil to create the words and sounds that represent the apex and depths of human emotion, the ebb and flow of life’s journey. Passion for the craft tugs at the musician’s very being, compelling these artists to structure a lifestyle to make music a priority.

Flexibility to allow the time to perform and the space to practice and create seems to be a common element among the musicians interviewed for this article.

DANNY SCHMIDT

When Danny Schmidt moved back to his hometown of Austin, it was not to pursue his craft as a folksinger/songwriter.

“I moved back here without the intent of making music; I’m here because this is where my family and friends are,” said Schmidt, whose soft-spoken, humble personality belies the poignant lyrics and complicated guitar licks of his music.

Schmidt, a Kerrville New Folk finalist in 2007, travels the world for his music.

Being on the road, he said, is “a mixed bag. I like seeing a lot of places that I want to see. ... I have a lot of friends that are scattered around. I like keeping things fresh. My favorite thing is playing songs for people who’ve never heard the songs. It’s interesting culturally. An audience in Seattle feels different than an audience in Wisconsin. Certainly, European audiences are different.”

Across the Atlantic, the reputation of his hometown precedes him.

“Where I tour in the Netherlands and England, the folk scene in Austin is Mecca to them, especially in the Netherlands. (They know the music of) Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. They really know Austin,” Schmidt said.

Jewish musicians in Austin

Want to hear talented Jewish artists while taking advantage of Austin’s live music scene? Learn more about the musicians and their upcoming performances, get on their e-mail lists or hear their music on their Web sites:

• **Ari Dvorin and Flyjack**

www.aridvorin.com

www.myspace.com/flyjacktheband

• **Heather Gilmer**

www.fiddlista.com

www.gilmermoore.com

• **Mark Rubin**

www.MarkRubin.com

• **Danny Schmidt**

www.DannySchmidt.com

• **Steve Schwelling**

www.myspace.com/steveschwelling



Folksinger/songwriter Danny Schmidt (above) and jazz drummer Steve Schwelling (left).



Mark Rubin (above), marching with the Panorama Brass Band in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and at left, Ari Dvorin (far right) and funk band Flyjack.

“Down side is that I don’t have any kind of home life here,” he said. “I’ve been here four years, but I don’t feel any sense of community: one day unpacking, one day working on business, one day getting your stuff together to get ready to go. This year I’m scheduling myself different. There’s three whole months — October, March and one in the summer — where I’m home the whole time.”

Schmidt will be playing at the SXSW Music Festival in Austin, scheduled March 12-26, as well as at an April 9 show at the Cactus Café. His new album, “Little Grey Sheep,” was officially released in February. The songwriter also recently published a song book with words and music of all his recorded works. Both are available on his Website (www.dannyschmidt.com).

MARK RUBIN

Native Oklahoman Mark Rubin is at the epicenter of Austin music both Jewish and not and has a worldwide reputation. An enormously talented tuba, baritone horn, string bass, guitar and banjo player, the larger-than-life and always entertaining Rubin is equally at home playing New Orleans Jazz, bluegrass, klezmer and Western swing. He is at once musical matchmaker, cheerleader, mentor and inspiration to a slough of Austin-based musicians, many with whom he makes music.

Despite his seemingly boundless enthusiasm for music and his fellow musicians, Rubin acknowledged the extreme difficulty trying to make a living as a performer. He began February in New Orleans with the Panorama Brass Band marching in Mardi Gras parades and ended the month teaching Jewish music in Germany. In between, he appeared at least eight times throughout Texas performing jazz, bluegrass, Polish polka, Western swing and much more.

Rubin sucks up the chance to perform on the road, posting witty and enthusiastic entries on his blog recounting everything

from excellent barbecue to uplifting musical experiences with fellow artists. At the same time, though, he admitted that Austin’s cost of living has made the life of an artist untenable.

“I no longer make a living at it and am actively looking for gainful employment elsewhere,” Rubin wistfully remarked.

STEVE SCHWELLING

Music brought drummer Steve Schwelling to Austin.

“I was playing at the time with the brilliant mandolinist Paul Glass in upstate New York; we had a Western swing band. He talked me into coming here to make a band with a little-known country singer named Shawn Colvin,” Schwelling recalled. “She gave us a spaghetti dinner and told us she was moving to New York. The rest is history.”

He remembers fondly the Austin music scene in the late 1970s.

“It was awesome,” Schwelling said. “You could play a couple \$50 gigs here and there and not only pay your living expenses but (also) make a car payment. It was very diverse (musical scene). I hooked up with Bill Averbach right away. He introduced me to Alex Coke. I played with Beto and the Fairlanes and Asleep at the Wheel.

“There was just so much going on. It was a really nice scene.”

In the early ’80s Schwelling moved to

New York City to pursue his dream as a jazz drummer.

“After seeing how all my musical idols were struggling in New York, it made me change from having my music support me to me supporting my music,” he said.

“I came back here and enrolled at UT and began to figure out if there was another career path for me,” Schwelling said. “I never stopped playing music. Music paid for an undergraduate degree and two master’s degrees. And it kept my soul together — and still does.”

After freelancing with the likes of Rubin, Denia Ridley, Tina Marsh, Rich Harney, David Stevens and others in 2007, Schwelling is devoting this year to his own projects, including performances with Bruce Saunders and Jacob Wise. Schwelling describes his music as “modern straight-ahead jazz.” He’s playing with the Jacob Wise Trio at 12:30-3 p.m. Sunday, March 9, at Central Market Westgate, 4477 S. Lamar Blvd.

ARI DVORIN

Having come here in 2005, Ari Dvorin is a relative newcomer to Austin. Some might know Doran for his other job as a chef and owner of the company Chef Boy Ari Catering. But by night, Dvorin is a flute and sax player, who lays down the groove with the funk band Flyjack. The

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