

Local artist brings music to ears of area children

By **Tonyia Cone**

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Neal Kassanoff begins each month singing and playing guitar for an exuberant crowd — about 40 wiggling, dancing young children and their parents — at Ruta Maya Coffee House in South Austin.

Since starting the event a year ago, Kassanoff said, it has gained its own momentum.

“When you do good kids’ music, there’s a void,” he said. “People flock to it.”

While the local musician has played in various bands and composed music for films, including “Hands on a Hard Body,” a 1997 documentary about an endurance contest in which contestants compete to win a truck, he devotes a lot of time and energy to his belief that music is an essential basic need that can enrich kids’ lives. To fulfill that need for children

who might otherwise not have access to it, he founded the nonprofit organization Groundwork Music Project.

“Music is basic nourishment for children’s early experiences,” he said.

On the first Saturday afternoon of each month, he and various other local musicians play at Ruta Maya to raise money for his group. The event has featured, among others, Guy Forsyth, David Garza of 8 1/2 Souvenirs and Oliver Steck.

With a sampling of Austin’s pool of amazing musical talent, Kassanoff said, the event appeals to parents as well as children. Aside from the volume being kept down so it does not hurt little ears and it being easy to sing along with choruses, adults might not even know the songs were written for children.

“It’s real loose and fun. The musicians are such high caliber, I give the band the

key, chords and a beat, and they just start. I don’t even look behind me; they just nail it,” he said. “I encourage them to get up and have fun themselves.”

A Midland native, Kassanoff began performing in the early 1990s and realized he had a better chance of earning an income as a musician if he played for children. That decision went hand-in-hand with his work in the school psychology master’s program at Texas State University-San Marcos.

In 1996 and ’97, Kassanoff put his love of music and knowledge of child development together and began working part-time at Congregation Beth Israel’s preschool.

He completed training through Music Together, an early childhood music program, and wrote his own material to perform for

the children. Before long, he began working for a few schools in the area and teaching parent-child classes.

Since then, Kassanoff has recorded children’s albums — “Neal’s on the Bus” and a two-CD set, “Toy Box” — as well as “Over and Over,” an album intended for an adult audience. This spring he will record an album featuring guest appearances by renowned local musicians. The album, which is scheduled for release in the fall, will be created under the Groundwork Music Orchestra moniker and produced by John Michael Whitby of the Western swing band Asleep at the Wheel.

“It will be a centerpiece of children’s music in Austin,” said Kassanoff, who also performs for private events, such as birthday parties.

To provide music education to all children, including those whose schools lack the funding for it, Kassanoff two years ago began providing services at Open Door Preschool, an inclusive program



Neal Kassanoff (clapping) performs with Kullen Fuchs (bells), David Lazaroff (behind Fuchs), Nina Singh (drums), Gray Parsons (bass) and Tucker Livingston (keys).

PHOTO BY EMILY FAGAN

for children of diverse abilities and backgrounds. He now teaches four classes each Tuesday at the school and, through Groundwork Music Project, would like to expand his program to serve more schools with more teachers.

“It’s a very simple, valuable, non-complicated way of enriching people’s lives,” he said.

Music education should be a staple for young children, Kassanoff said. It is not expensive to provide, is a positive influence for kids and provides meaningful work for musicians. Studies have shown that when children are exposed to a rich musical experience early in life, they acquire the ability to carry a tune, keep a beat and develop other basic musical skills, he said, and it also affects other areas of development.

“It should be something every family takes for granted,” he said.

Kassanoff is operating on a shoestring budget that barely covers his weekly day of work at Open Door Preschool, grant writing and accounting. Whip In convenience store, along with some other local companies, sponsors the monthly Ruta Maya event, and the rest of the funding for Groundwork Music Project comes from community and board members, mostly people who grew up with his music and classes, as well as friends who

support his cause.

“It’s very grassroots,” he said.

As a child growing up in West Texas, Kassanoff said, he was not around many other Jews.

“It was me and the Methodists,” he said.

To attend synagogue, his family traveled 20 miles to Odessa. Nevertheless, he was able to join B’nai B’rith Youth Organization, which consisted of about seven kids from Midland and Odessa, and became bar mitzvah in Dallas.

While Kassanoff said he does not deliberately write Jewish music, exposure to it may influence his work because he employs minor scales and modalities that are commonly found in Eastern European music. David Lazaroff, his band mate in Neal Kassanoff & the Infidels, has experience with klezmer, a type of Ashkenazi music, so he said that band also borrows sounds from that tradition.

“Not everything’s in C major,” he said, noting that he left the last event he attended with Chanukah music wanting to learn more about it, just for music’s sake.

“I love the way klezmer spins around the same way dancers do,” he said.

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group has a regular gig playing Wednesday nights at Tic’s Lounge and will be appearing as part of SXSW this month. Dvorin, however, is equally at home with Latin, jazz and classical.

After graduation from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., Dvorin moved to Colorado accepting a position as grill chef at a prestigious restaurant and to hone his skills as a musician. He expanded his musical arsenal from flute to alto, tenor and baritone saxophone, playing with the Boulder-based Cabaret Diosa, touring salsa band.

The enthusiastic and energetic Dvorin recounted one of the highlights of his musical career to date, while on tour with Cabaret Diosa:

“My mom’s good friend took me to see Tito Puente. I had my flute with me. They invited me to play in the second set. I even took the solo for ‘Oye Como Va.’ A few months later we were on tour and I had the opportunity to sit in with them again.”

A chance meeting at a Cabaret Diosa show with his now-wife brought him



Irish fiddler Heather Gilmer also plays the flute, performing in the duo Gilmer & Moore.

to Austin, where Dvorin splits his time between catering and music. Despite Austin’s large and lively music scene, he admits it can be frustrating.

“I play three to four nights a week,” he said. “It’s a little discouraging when you spend so much time and energy practicing with your band and then at the end of the night you’re handed \$100 to \$200 for the whole band.”

HEATHER GILMER

Irish flutist Heather Gilmer moved to Austin a decade ago to attend graduate school in civil engineering at the University of Texas.

“I’m on the ‘I’m only here for two years’ plan. I’m still planning on leaving in two years,” Gilmer joked with a wry smile.

She reconciled the economics of music

a number of years ago: “In grad school at one point I tried to formulate a plan on how to live off of music. I chose to be an engineer, which in the end makes me a much happier engineer.”

A classically trained, self-described “Suzuki infant,” when asked how she came to play Irish music, Gilmer said, “I tripped and fell over it! A local pub was having an Irish music session and advertised that anyone who could play the tin whistle would get a free drink.”

Over the years, Gilmer has played in various “Celtoid” groups. The main group she plays with now is the Irish guitar-flute duo Gilmer & Moore. The duo has a regular Monday night gig at Genuine Joe’s Coffee House.

“I also play on and off with Istanpitta — a Medieval group,” she said.

Being a Jewish-Irish musician might seem rare, she said, but “there’s a Jewish-Irish fiddler in Dallas and one out in Arizona. All of us will wind up at the same North Texas Irish Festival each year.”

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An Austin writer, Andrea Abel is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook.