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WITH THE KIDS

Sounds Yiddish

■ Yiddishkayt's festival blends music traditions to celebrate a shared history.

By Lisa Rosen, Special to The Times

MARIACHIS, check. Japanese taiko drums, check. Gospel singers and hip-hop artists, check. Oh, and add some klezmer to each, check. And that's only part of the scene at Yiddishkayt L.A.'s Family Festival on Sunday.

The music mash-ups are the brainchild of Aaron Paley, who founded Yiddishkayt L.A. in 1994 as a nonprofit cultural organization that promotes Yiddish language and culture in Southern California. The group's fifth biennial festival, which runs through Oct. 15, is called "LA Confidential: The Hidden Story of Yiddish in Los Angeles." The week includes singing, dancing, and poetry happenings all over town.

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The family day will celebrate that past in a truly contemporary manner. Held at the plaza of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Little Tokyo, the festival offers a wide range of novel performances — including decidedly contemporary presentations of klezmer, the celebration music of Eastern European Jews.

Paley, with partner Katie Bergin, also founded Community Arts Resources, which is producing the festival. "One of our favorite things to do is put groups together who don't usually perform together," Paley said. "We've done taiko with Indian dance, taiko and bagpipes — taiko drumming seems to go well with things."

Paley wanted to do something musically that paid homage to the festival's Little Tokyo location, and to honor the shared history of the Japanese American and Jewish communities, who lived side by side in Boyle Heights in the 1930s and '40s. Hence the first act — and the world's first collaboration of taiko and klezmer.

Clarinetist Leo Chelyapov will join the Taiko Project, led by Bryan Yamami.

Next up, another Boyle Heights community is celebrated as klezmer meets mariachi. Paley brought together Barry Fisher's group Ellis Island and Adam Ramirez's Los Dorados for the 1998 Yiddishkayt festival. The group worked so well that it has performed since then, garnering national attention for its originality.

Josh Dolgin, performing under the name Socalled, first came to Paley's attention through his hip-hop EP "The Socalled Seder." Dolgin, based in Montreal, combines hip-hop with samples of old Yiddish music to great effect. Working with local musicians including Joey Derusha, Claire Bergen and Doris Gaspie, the ensemble combined to form a dizzying mix of styles.

"So we had this hip-hop/klezmer/gospel fusion which just blew people away," Paley said. The local group was

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named the Alef Project, and they've been doing gigs on their own since forming. With Socalled, they were the hit of the Santa Monica Festival last spring. In addition to playing Sunday, they'll open the week of festivities with a performance Friday night at Sinai Temple.

Also included at the festival will be a Jewish folk music singalong, as well as tunes from a roving klezmer trio.

The day will feature storytelling by Carl Weintraub, founder of the Los Angeles storytelling group We Tell Stories. Benny Ferdman and Shari Davis of Creative Ways will host an interactive workshop and art installation.

"Benny grew up in L.A. speaking Yiddish," Paley said, "and he believes Yiddish in L.A. is a very domestic, private thing."

So he and Davis decided to re-create that home environment — living room, kitchen, family room, backyard — out on the plaza. "The television will be showing old Yiddish movies, and there might be a radio with Yiddish on, and everything will be labeled in Yiddish and English," Paley said. Children will be able to make crafts to take home.

And for those interested in returning to the old country — Boyle Heights — a bus tour will be departing five times during the day for hourlong tours of the historical neighborhood.

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Yiddishkayt Family Festival

Where: The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center Plaza, 244 San Pedro St., L.A.

When: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

Performances: 11:45 a.m.-12:15 p.m., taiko / klezmer; 12:45-1:45 p.m., klezmer / mariachi; 2:15-3:15 p.m., Socalled & The Alef Project; 3:45-4:15 p.m., Cindy Paley sing-along; 4:15-5:00 p.m., klezmer / mariachi. All day: strolling klezmer with Mike Stein, storytelling with Carl Weintraub, interactive workshop and art installation and Boyle Heights bus tours (departing every half-hour starting at 11:30 a.m.)

Price: Free; parking \$3 across San Pedro

Festival info: Yiddishkayt events run Friday-Oct. 15. For complete schedule, call (323) 692-8185 or visit www.yiddishkaytla.org

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