

Jewish Advocate 11.9.2011

For Billy Novick, all the world's his sound stage From 'Gatsby' ballet at Kennedy Center to klezmer at a local simcha

**By Susie Davidson
Special to the Advocate**

It was a match made in jazz heaven. But it took a special student to make the shidduch. Mort Speck, an octogenarian instructor in orthodontics at the Harvard University School of Dental Medicine, was taking his usual clarinet lesson from Lexington based musician Billy Novick. The next thing Novick knew, he was onstage at the Kennedy Center in Washington with his band, The Blue Syncopators, performing his score for The Washington Ballet's original version of "The Great Gatsby."

Well, not exactly the next thing. It happened like this:

Following the lesson, Speck forwarded Novick a copy of an email from his son Scott, the ballet company's conductor and musical director. The younger Speck was curious how a 1920s jazz band might interpret F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel of decadence and tragedy on Long Island.

Novick emailed the music director asking if the ballet needed an arranger/composer, not that he expected to be taken seriously. Turns out, a little chutzpah can go a long way – Novick got the job.

The ballet debuted in a sold-out run in February 2010. Novick returned to Washington earlier this month for an encore production.

The production features songs of Fitzgerald's era by Ellington, Dorsey, Berlin and other greats, augmented by Novick's compositions. "Two of my songs that I use for Gatsby originally appeared in a film score I wrote, but I re-arranged them significantly to make them more appropriate for the ballet," Novick said.

Now Novick is talking with the company's artistic director/choreographer Septime Webre about adapting other great American novels.

Chances are, you've probably heard Novick's music or his performances on television or at the movies.

In 1992, Novick's jugband adaptation of "Peter and the Wolf" premiered at New York's Lincoln Center. He contributed to the soundtrack of such feature films as "Eight Men Out," "Lone Star," "The Opposite of Sex," and "Seabiscuit."

The 60-year-old Long Island native picked up the clarinet at age 8 and the sax at 15. "My parents were big-time Israeli folk dancers, fluent in Yiddish," Novick said.

As a student at Carleton College in Minnesota, Novick played in Midwest jazz festivals. He then moved to Boston to study at Berklee College of Music.

He joined the Dave Bromberg Band in 1973 and went on to tour with such familiar names as Leon Redbone, Jonathan Edwards, Martha and the Vandellas, Herb Pomeroy, and J. Geils. With guitarist partner Guy Van Duser, Novick has made nine recordings and appears regularly on public radio's "Prairie Home Companion" radio show. He's also recorded CDs with Safam and with singer-songwriter Peri Smilow.

For a quarter of a century, Novick has performed and recorded with the New Black Eagle Jazz Band. His repertoire spans the globe, including Brazilian, Celtic, French cabaret and klezmer.

For the simcha circuit of bar mitzvahs and weddings, he often teams up with Moshe Feldman, aka Moshe from Russia, in a klezmer-jazz duo.

"I was surprised by how many klezmer songs I knew from some 40 to 50 years ago," Novick said. He even remembers the steps for Israeli dances, though he admits that he's not much of a dancer. At his own bar mitzvah, while a folk dancer led the guests in "Mayim" and other standards, he was listening to the World Series and playing craps with sugar cubes from the dinner tables.

"I'm a total klutz," he said. "I'm used to being on the other side of the music."

Among Novick's soundtracks is one for a 2002 video on Holocaust artist Samuel Bak, "The Art of Speaking About the Unspeakable."

"To prepare for it, I stared at Bak's vivid collages in his books and at the Pucker Gallery [in Boston], and waited for

the ideas to flood me," he said. He came up with a mix of modern sounds and Eastern European themes, many performed on solo clarinet.

On television, Novick's clarinet can be heard in the theme songs of PBS' "Antiques Roadshow" and "This Old House," as well as in dozens of commercials. He has also performed pieces used in Ken Burns' documentaries. In fact, while he was at a recording session with Burns, Novick's wife, Barbara, went into labor with son Ben. Perhaps it was destiny that the younger Novick has become a musician.

"He is very active as a professional sax musician, and does gigs all over the Northeast with various jazz, funk, pop, and indie rock bands," Novick said.

Daughter Rose, who lives in Brooklyn, teaches history at an international school in Queens.

Meanwhile, Papa Novick can be found every other Tuesday at the Franklin Cafe in Gloucester. "It's kind of my home gig," he said. "Relaxed atmosphere, great food and really interesting music – just myself on clarinet and string bass, doing American Songbook standards like George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Arlen...." He's next there Nov. 15.

Also on Novick's calendar is a Nov. 20 show with Van Duser at Club Passim in Harvard Square, where the duo has been playing for 35 years, and a Dec. 2 show at Amazing Things Arts Center in Framingham with Sunny and Her Joy Boys, an acoustic swing jazz group led by Duke Robillard.