

THE OLD-TIME WAY



By Dan Levenson

Boy, it's been a busy year so far. As I write this I'm getting ready for Mt. Airy Fiddler's convention (yes, lots of banjos there too!) and realizing that it has been since early April that I've even had

time to update my webpage. So I'm kind-a glad we're getting this issue of the Old Time Way to you in time for your mid-summer reading. Festival season is in full swing, and I'm sure lots of you are planning on attending at least one or two.

This month we key in on several CD's as sources of inspiration. First, a something a little different. Old-time varies from region to region and came here from many sources. Andy Rubin of the Freilachmakers convincingly mixes southern old-time clawhammer with eastern European music to give us this unique sound. Enjoyable music, with a twist.

Also in this issue is the long delayed review of Mark Schatz's "Steppin' in the Boiler House." Mark is not nearly as well known in the old-time scene as he should be, and I'm sure you're going to enjoy this CD as much as you'll enjoy playing the tabs he has given us.

Next, a tune from Bob Carlin and his time with the John Hartford band. *Wild Hog In the Redbrush* was requested by a member of Banjo Hangout

(www.banjohangout.org) and Bob has transcribed his banjo playing of the tune as well as provided us with John's fiddle version in John's own hand.

Finally, a story about a local jam in Northeastern Ohio. Clawhammer jams and support groups are springing up more and more, in response to the desire to play old-time while staying in the same key for a while, and also without having to always explain what the music is to the uninitiated. I hope to have more of these vignettes in future issues as well as

provide you with some ideas for setting up your own jam session. Remember, it's the social situations which make old-time music what it is, so you'll want to know about those opportunities.

Well, that's what's happening this month. My banjo camp at the Ohio homestead is coming up next month and I hope to see many of you at Clifftop next month. My complete schedule is at my website, www.ClawhammerBanjo.us. Until next time, play often and *Play Nice!* —Dan

Klez-hammer Anyone?

An interview with Andy Rubin

By Dan Levenson

If old-time is considered to be whatever old music your parents and grandparents played and passed on, then Andy Rubin's brand of clawhammer Klezmer certainly belongs here. If we

limit ourselves by saying that old-time is synonymous with music from Southern Appalachia, mostly from the early 20th century and only played by rural musicians who (allegedly) had no formal music training, then perhaps not. *The Old*

Time Way is intended to primarily focus on southern clawhammer style. *But*, as I have traveled, both in this country and others, I've found that a broader definition of old-time must be reckoned with. I love—in fact, my favorite type of music is—the string band music of Southern Appalachia. But perhaps we cut ourselves off from some wonderful opportunities by holding such a narrow definition. So, with the intent to broaden your perspectives, I present to you a review of The Freilachmakers latest CD and an interview with their founder and clawhammer player, Andy Rubin of Sacramento, CA.



Dan Levenson: Could you tell me about you clawhammer banjo history—the folks you heard first, who made you want to play clawhammer.

Andy Rubin: I picked up a banjo for the first time around the age of 16 on the suggestion of a friend of my sister's. Having grown up during the sixties in Berkeley, California, I was exposed to a fair amount of folk and folk-influenced music. Joan Baez, Judy Collins, The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, Herb Alpert, Trini Lopez—they were all played on the stereo in my house. My parents and sister were good singers, and my father and sister accompanied themselves on guitar, so I thought the banjo idea was worth investigating (though I think my main contact with the instrument to that point was Flatt and Scruggs doing the theme to *The Beverly Hillbillies* and John Hartford playing *Gentle on My Mind* on the Glen Campbell Show).

OTW: How did you actually go about learning to play?

AR: I rented a Kay 5-string at the local band shop for five dollars a month, while finding my way to copies of Pete Seeger's instructional manual "*How to Play the 5-String Banjo*" and Peggy Seeger's "*The 5-String Banjo: American Folk Styles*." It was through these books that I first really encountered old-time music. I remember picking through *Sourwood Mountain* from Peggy's book and thinking what an absolutely gorgeous tune that was, even though my only experience of it was my own meager attempt to play it from her tab. Of course during that very early period I was trying to *up-pick* everything, sort of like I'd seen other people do with guitars. So it came as a complete surprise when I reached the chapter on frailing in Pete's book and found him telling me to hit the string on the way *down*. I mean, wasn't that totally bassackwards?

OTW: Who were your teachers?

AR: After several months of effort coaxing my right hand to move in the right direction, I signed up for lessons with Mac Benford, who was living and teaching in the Bay area at the time. I ended up taking two lessons from Mac at \$4/hour (!). He got my hand properly straightened around and told me to point my fist up the neck a touch more prominently than I was doing. But other than those two lessons, I'm pretty much self-taught. Interestingly, once I caught on to clawhammering, I never seriously considered 3-finger styles. I guess the signature plunk was just too compelling a sound to leave alone.

OTW: Wow, Berkeley in the 60's! And lessons with Mac! What else was happening out there at that time?

AR: A couple of other musical things were happening. I'd spent some summers during high school working in a camp for mentally disabled children near Santa Cruz. Two or three other counselors there happened to be wonderful guitar-picking folk musicians. We used to gather all the campers in the shade of a tent platform every day after lunch and belt out these great old songs (or at least now they're old)—*St. James' Infirmary Blues*, *Irene Goodnight*, *Tom Dooley*, *Four Strong Winds*, *Summertime*, and the like. I absolutely loved that time of the day—I'd hang onto every word they sang and note they picked, trying to re-create the sounds on my Kay. Right about the same time, probably 1969, my mother bought me a Kingston Trio live double album (which I still have). I thought, hey, *nobody* could hit a banjer like Dave Guard (a frailer) and John Stewart (a finger picker). To this day I can still hear Nick Reynolds



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yelling "Frail pardner!" at Guard as he launched into his Seegeresque solo on

Darlin' Corey.

slacking off on the banjo during college.

Funny thing, though—I started

I was playing mostly guitar and fiddle,

Odessa Bulgar

Traditional. Tuning: g DGBD, capoed at 3rd fret (5th string to Bb)

Arranged by Andy Rubin

A Part

The A Part consists of three staves of guitar tablature. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various fret numbers (0-7) and rhythmic markings. The second staff continues the melody with similar fretting and includes a 'p' (piano) marking. The third staff concludes the A Part with a repeat sign and a key signature change to one flat (Bb), indicated by a double bar line with a sharp sign and a flat sign.

B Part

The B Part consists of two staves of guitar tablature. The first staff starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). It features fret numbers and rhythmic patterns, including a 'p' marking. The second staff continues the piece with similar notation and concludes with a repeat sign.

C Part

The C Part consists of four staves of guitar tablature. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notation includes complex fretting patterns and rhythmic markings. The second staff includes a 't' (trill) marking. The third staff continues with similar notation and includes a 'h' (hammer-on) and 'p' marking. The fourth staff concludes the C Part with a repeat sign and a key signature change to one sharp (F#), indicated by a double bar line with a sharp sign and a flat sign.

Contact Andy through his website: www.freilachmakers.com or by e-mailing him at andyrubin@comcast.net.

Discuss this article online at www.banjohangout.org/

and collecting folksong lyrics. I'd pick up my banjo (a Gagliano that I'd bought for \$75, a slight step up from the Kay) only occasionally, keeping up this pattern through college, graduate school and six years of post-doctoral work in Boston. Through this whole period I was slowly becoming infused with Jewish folk-musical traditions—I actually met my wife doing Israeli folk dancing at MIT in the early eighties. We moved back to the Bay Area in '88, ending up in Sacramento in '92. It was then that my interest in Jewish music exploded and the 5-string came back into my life in a big way.

OTW: How did that happen?

AR: It turned out that among the members of my small Sacramento synagogue were two traditional musicians of some repute. The first was Rick Abrams, one of the best clawhammerists of our generation and the founding father of The Piney Creek Weasels string band [*BNL* featured Rick in July 1994]. Rick's spectacular clawhammer attack—he's the only one I'd ever seen start his downstroke from two feet above the string—not to mention his encouraging personality and wry humor, helped start me back down the banjo trail. When a melanoma claimed him in 1997, I lost a good friend and we all lost an elemental force in old-time music.

The second was Celtic fiddle and pennywhistle master David Kidron. Dave had moved to Sacramento after performing during the seventies with the famed Australian bush band, The Bushwackers. One of the great things about Dave, besides his inimitable musicianship, was his ear for finely rendered traditional music. I soon realized that the recordings Dave listened to—particularly Budowitz, Alicia Svigals and other modern traditionalists of the klezmer revival—were the very ones I could really learn from. That said, Dave and I decided to try our collective hand at klezmer, the Eastern European Jewish instrumental tradition. Thus was born The Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band (still going strong after 12 years) and with it, my great desire to apply the clawhammer technique to this lovely music.

OTW: How long did you play what might be called traditional clawhammer?

AR: My exclusively "traditional" 5-string phase didn't last much beyond high school. In those days I listened to recordings of old-timers like Roscoe Holcomb and Fred Cockerham, and revivalists like The New Lost City Ramblers and The Old Time Banjo Project. But I was also keen on Lester and Earl and other bluegrassers, not to mention the more pop-oriented groups like The Kingston Trio and The Chad Mitchell Trio. I also fell in with the musical traditions of Ireland and Scotland—people like Liam Clancy, the Chieftains and Archie Fisher—and the maritime music of the American northeast, particularly as interpreted by Gordon Bok.

OTW: What was the historical or perhaps better, regional sense of your goals (Southern Appalachian, New England, Irish, Yiddish, etc.)?

AR: Through those years I'm not sure I had exclusively historical or regional goals. I *will* say that I never lost my love for the Appalachian style; when I "returned" to the banjo in 1994-5 as part of my accelerating interest in klezmer music, I thought

I could make a contribution by playing freilachs and horas in the old-time American string band style.

OTW: When did the Irish bug hit?

AR: My parents were listening to Irish music through the mid-sixties. Little did they know that once their interest in the music waned, mine would go on forever. For a number of years I tried to become an Irish fiddler. I even played fiddle for a Jewish band in Seattle in the eighties (fiddle, keyboard and drums—how's *that* for instrumentation?), but we concentrated on what we now call "simcha" music (*i.e.*, celebratory Jewish music with strong American and Israeli influences popular largely in modern Orthodox Jewish circles), not on klezmer *per se*. It wasn't until the mid-to-late nineties that I picked up the tenor banjo and mandolin to play Irish traditional dance music. Irish is not my main gig, but it's sure a lot of fun. At my workplace (the California Environmental Protection Agency in Sacramento, where I work as a toxicologist) we formed a group of five Celtic musicians. We call ourselves "Clan Eire" (a play on "clean air", which we're supposed to be maintaining) and sit on the Cal-EPA plaza for an hour at noon each week to assault other employees with Irish music as they walk by. (The security personnel really like it...)

OTW: How about the klezmer?

AR: That started in 1994-5. The Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band played its first concert in December of 1995 on the Delta King, a riverboat with a small theater parked on the river in Old Sacramento. That gig was so much fun we kept right on


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with it.

OTW: How does clawhammer fit into klezmer music? I mean, the tenor, okay, but a five string?

AR: Well, let's start with the more general question of how the *banjo* (5-string, 4-string, whatever) fits into klezmer. And my answer? Quite nicely, thank you! Its incisive tone is a fitting complement, both melodically and rhythmically, to the klezmer leads usually taken by the clarinet, fiddle and accordion. It takes the place of the *tsimbl* (or *tsimbalom*), the Eastern European form of the hammerdulcimer, which was common in klezmer bands through the 19th century, and which can be heard now in several revival bands. (In fact, Pete Rushefsky, the author of an instructional manual for bluegrass-klezmer banjo that I reviewed in *BNL* in 1999, is a terrific klezmer *tsimbalist*—so there's even precedent for musicians using both instruments.)

Now to the more specific question of the use of clawhammer in klezmer. It has been argued that the clawhammer banjo's strong southeastern US cultural roots make it contextually invalid for

klezmer music, which, after all, grew out of the Yiddish speaking world of Eastern European Jewry. Clearly this is not so much a musical as a sociological argument—and one with which I have a great deal of sympathy. After all, the sound of a frailed banjo really does stir cultural memories of hardscrabble Appalachian farms. To drop those memories, or at least to squeeze memories of Bessarabian *shtetlach* [villages] onto the shelf beside them, may be asking a lot of listeners.

But I personally never drew as forbidding a cultural line as that. Maybe it's my Berkeley-in-the-sixties upbringing or my lumper-over-splitter personality. Or maybe it's just the fact that I could clawhammer a few notes, so why shouldn't those notes be D-minor bulgars? In my klezmer musical journeys I've found people who really love the klezmer clawhammer sound. And it's certainly true that, despite being well received in some quarters, the sound hasn't exactly tsunamied the klezmer world (though I might mention that clarinetist Margo Leverett's bluegrass-klezmer band, The Klezmer Mountain Boys, very deservedly

received great acclaim with their initial—alas, banjo-free—recording). But this hasn't deterred me, as I think the clawhammer banjo does fit well into this musical style. Or at least, it has its place.

Admittedly, there are certain aspects of klezmerology that are difficult to re-create with clawhammer. Tying together groups of triplets, daily bread for the klezmer clarinetist, is quite the challenge. So are upward arpeggios—though these can be negotiated with Galax licks and hammer-ons onto unplucked strings. And there are important rhythmic points that don't easily lend themselves to the standard clawhammer handstroke. In any event, I've found that a modicum of melodic and rhythmic creativity can be useful in such circumstances. My attitude is that until it becomes unconstitutional to frail a freilach (and you all wondered where the term "frailing" comes from!), the field is open.

OTW: What tunings do you most utilize in your playing?

AR: I use two tunings most of the time: first, gCGCD, often capoed up two frets due to the fact that many freilachs,

Dem Trisker Rebn's Khosid

*gCGCD, capoed to 4th fret (5th string to G).
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A Part

B Part

C Part

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bulgars and horas are, or start in, D-minor, and secondly, gDGBD, which is great for tunes, interestingly enough, in G-minor (another common key). I'm including tabs for two tunes from our CDs that use each of these tunings. I've also used gCGCE (again, capoed up two frets) and, especially recently, gDGBbD, which is useful for playing in G-minor and capoed up into A-minor.

OTW: So, what banjo(s) are you playing these days?

AR: The 5-string I usually play nowadays is a 1988-vintage Bart Reiter Standard. It gets a beautiful, clear tone and stands up well to hard clawhammering in full band contexts. This particular instrument actually belongs to a friend of mine who has lent it me on a longterm basis. My impression is that it's heavier than the BR Standards available today. Bart told me that he made a few back in '85 with extra heavy tone rings—I think this is one of them.

I also play a wonderful instrument made in 2000 by Dave Godwin, who now lives in Mountain Home, Idaho. It's

got two metal tension rods in the pot, an unusually wide neck and responds well to a more delicate downpick, producing a beautiful tone with lots of interesting overtones.

OTW: Finally, could you give us a brief definition of klezmer?

AR: In its more specific usage, the term *klezmer* refers to the instrumental folk music of Eastern European (or *Ashkenazic*) Jewry, particularly as played for weddings. The music encompasses a plethora of time signatures and scale modes, and grew both to accompany various dance styles and as a source of straight performance pieces. Both the music and the dance were related to the regional styles common in heavily Jewish areas of Eastern Europe. Given the long period of co-evolution of Jewish and non-Jewish folk music, it is difficult to discern what aspects of klezmer music derive from which culture. Even so, what has come down to us today as klezmer is consummately Jewish. Part of the reason for this is that klezmer is in many ways the musical counterpart to the Yiddish language, which was spoken by virtually all Ashkenazic Jews until the Holocaust. It also contains the musical inflections used by generations of cantors to intone the Jewish prayer service.

The Yiddish word, *klezmer*, is actually a conjunction of two Hebrew words: *kle*, meaning musical instrument, and *zemer*, meaning song. In the old country the term usually referred to the musicians themselves, and was not always complimentary ("Oh, he's not a real musician—he's just a klezmer."). This reflected the view that the klezmer (*i.e.*, the musician) did not rise to the level of the formally trained musician. Of course such societal views did not countenance the actual ability of the klezmer, which was considerable in many cases. In fact, several of the most prominent Jewish classical musicians of the 20th century, particularly violinists, were influenced by the klezmer music of their youth, Itzhak Perlman being only the most recent example.

Klezmer music nearly died out with the abrupt end of the Ashkenazic migrations to the U.S. in the 1920s, and with the

Holocaust in the 1940s. Fortunately, groups of young Jewish American musicians began to rediscover this music in the 1970s, taking advantage of archival recordings, sheet music collections and the few European-born klezmers still around to convey their art. The resulting "klezmer revival" is now over 30 years running, with the music continuing to live and breathe and grace the lives of many of us right down to the 21st century.

Freilachmaker discography:

"*And I in the Uttermost West*" (2005)

"*The Flower of Berezin*" (1998);

"*Shalom Ireland*" (2003), their

collaborative soundtrack by Ceilizemer

About the tablature: The Odessa Bulgar. First, the 5th string is tuned up to Bb—I spike capo to A and then tune the string up the remaining half-step with the 5th string tuner. But since the 5th string isn't fretted on that tune, it doesn't really matter how you get the string up to Bb (as long as you don't break it, of course...).

The full Freilachmakers version of this tune appears on our "*Flower of Berezin*" album. It can also be heard on my Banjo Hangout site (www.banjohangout.org/myhangout/home.asp?id=16336). Bulgars are fast circle dances, usually in 2/4 time, derived from a Bessarabian/Moldovan dance form. They are very popular in American klezmer circles. This particular clawhammer version should be accessible to intermediate players—it is indeed fast and moves up and down the neck, but doesn't involve a lot of double thumbing.

The Trisker Rebn's Khosid (The Hasidic Dance of the Rebbe of Trisk). In this tune, the 5th string is tuned to the conventional G (*i.e.*, no capoing), even though the rest of the strings are capoed to the 4th fret (so the actual final "tuning" of the banjo is: g-E-B-E-F#).

The Freilachmakers' version of this tune appears on our "*And I in the Uttermost West*" album as a fiddle-banjo duet and can also be heard on my Banjo Hangout site. A *khosid* is a slow-to-moderately paced Hasidic dance. Warning: this version is not easy, as it requires a fair amount of thumbfretting of the fifth string to negotiate the scale runs. But it's quite fun once you get the hang of it. —AR

Dan Levenson



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REVIEW

And I in The Uttermost West by The Freilachmakers. ALAF 05 CD. Contact: www.freilachmakers.com; andyrubin@comcast.net; 916-484-1176

Review by Dan Levenson

Imagine my surprise hearing clawhammer on this one! What a hoot. Needless to say, "Uttermost West" is not your average Klezmer album. As they say in their notes, it is their "latest attempt to interpret Jewish folk music in the far western United States." Yes, these folks are from California, yet their music is still traditional in nature and well grounded in what makes an old-time music survive the many years and hands through which it passes.

In truth, these folks are from all over the world. Annette is a Swiss native, Felipe is from Brazil, and Andy and Lou Ann are U.S. natives. And as a collection of musicians and their music, this CD holds up pretty well.

Andy really gets a chance to shine on clawhammer in the first two tunes, the second being *A Freilach for Rick Abrams*, which is appropriate since the late Abrams was such a fine and influential clawhammer player in the area.

A great strength of this album are the strong and well-done Yiddish vocals, as exemplified by *Mayn Rue Plats* (My Resting Place), an earthy ballad sung by Annette with heartfelt pain and grounded so well by Lou Ann's cello playing.

The nylon string guitar shows its value with *Oriental Melodies*, which then lets the banjo take it again in the second version of the tunes. Annette really gets to show what she is made of with the *Isador's Doina*, where she positively makes her violin sing. Wish I could sing that well!

A couple of tunes just don't seem to fit and are more along the lines of an old Israeli folk music album than an old world Klezmer one. Another interesting observation was the weakness of English language singing. Perhaps it's an old-time thing. That didn't blow it for me, though, and you may like more variety in a CD than I do. All in all, I would say this disc has a lot of good music in its favor.


If you want to broaden your definition of old-time, or just want to hear clawhammer in another setting, this album would be a good one to get—and to hear what is happening to Klezmer music as it grows with respect to its roots.

Other tunes: *Pedotsur's Tants*; *Puncha la Rosa*; *The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel*; *Rumeynishe Sirba*; *Ten and Nine*; *Onga Bucharesti*; *Lament for a Burned Shul*; *Arvolicos d'Almendre*; *Di Grine Kuzine*; *Sonya*; *Annushke*; *Tsur Mishelo*; *Bendigamos*; *Dem Trisker Rebn's Khosid*;

Kvar Acharey Khatsot.

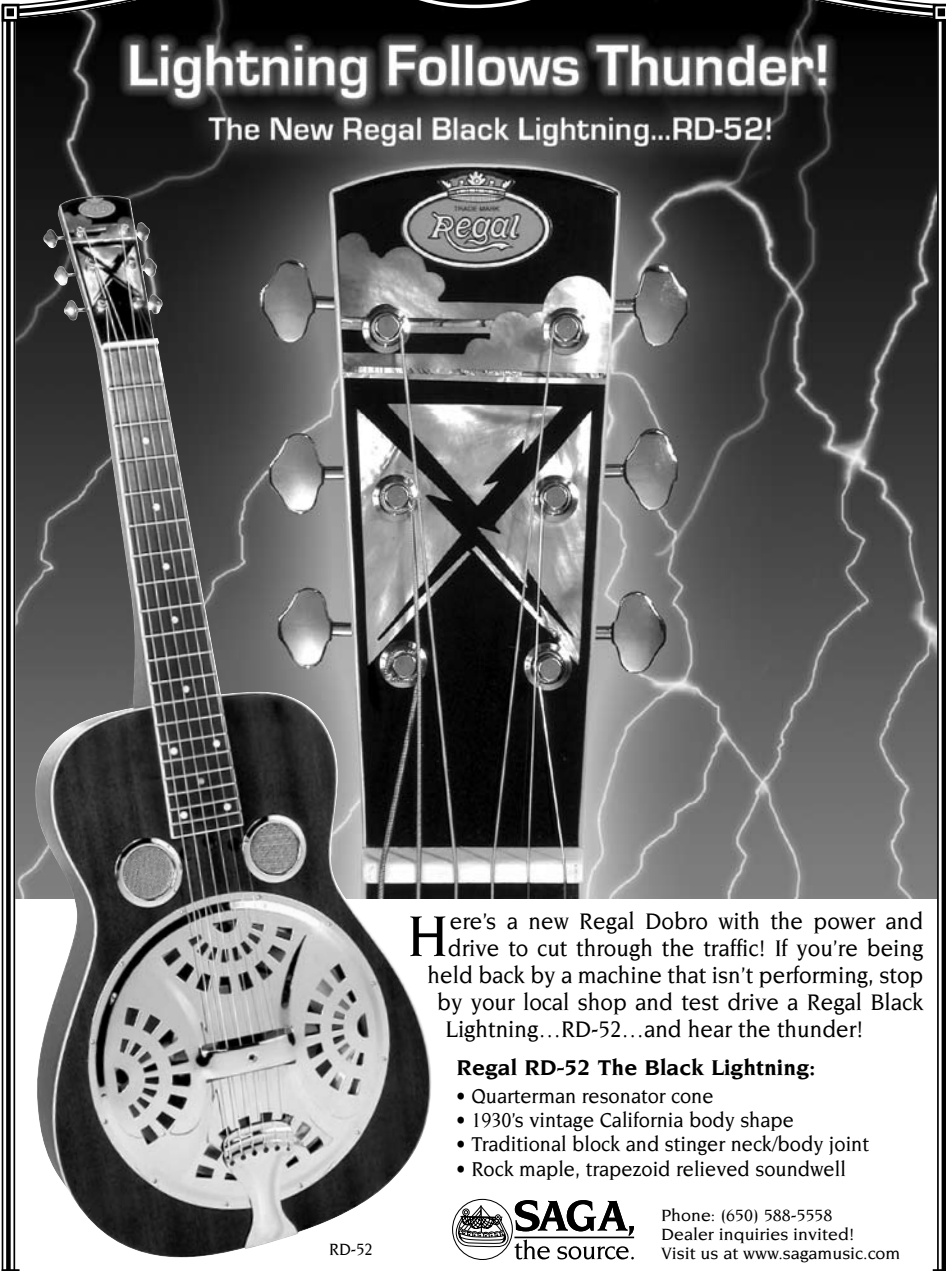
Klezmer String Band: Annette Brodovsky: fiddle, vocals; Felipe Ferraz: guitar, vocals; Rubin: 5-string, mandolin, guitar, vocals; Lou Ann Weiss: bass, cello, vocals, Dave Kidron: fiddle; Elaine Fingerett: accordion; Vince Wolfe: flute, whistle.

Note: Annette Brodovsky, who was the Freilachmakers' fiddler between 2000 and 2005, was killed by a drunk driver on April 2, 2007. For more about Annette, go to the Freilachmakers website.



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