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## Octopretzel embraces the whimsy of Jewish kids' music

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What do a children's music teacher, a member of the klezmer band Kugelplex, an emergency room doctor, a children's theater troupe founder and a puppeteer/prenatal belly dance instructor have in common?

They are the five Bay Area musicians who comprise Octopretzel, a family-friendly folk band that performs at Jewish venues throughout the Bay Area, in addition to after-school programs, birthday parties and group music classes.

Strumming tunes like "Dance Around and Jump Around" and "Ladybug Dreams," band members Melita Doostan, Sarita Pockell, Jen Miriam Kantor, Dave Rosenfeld and David Doostan call themselves, "fantastically folksy, magically musical, dreamily danceable and sweet for humans of all ages."



Octopretzel members (from left) Jen Miriam Kantor, Dave Rosenfeld, Melita Doostan, David Doostan and Sarita Pockell.

"We started out as a secular folk band and started finding a niche in the Jewish community," said Melita Doostan, who teaches music for kids at Netivot Shalom, Congregation Beth El and Gan Shalom Preschool, all in Berkeley. "We love doing Jewish

songs for kids and make a point to engage the children. It is definitely not background music.”

Octopretzel is scheduled to perform at 10 a.m. Sept. 12 during Preschool Gallery Hour at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Preschoolers and their families can tour the exhibits, make their own hand-stamp work of art and enjoy the music that day. Doostan also has a new CD, “Shirei Gan Shalom,” featuring Jewish songs and blessings, educational songs with Hebrew words and plenty of kids chiming in. Part of the proceeds from album sales will go toward a building fund for Gan Shalom Preschool.

Also, the PJ Library, which provides families with Jewish-themed books and music they can share with their children ages 7 and younger, will distribute “Shirei Gan Shalom” nationwide this winter.

“We really try to make our music accessible for everybody,” Doostan noted. “We love music and want to instill in parents that they can and should sing with their kids, even if they think they can’t.”

Inspired by Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Ella Jenkins and other American folk singers, Octopretzel’s tunes cross generations and genres, weaving together styles such as bluegrass, rock ‘n’ roll, lullabies and nursery rhymes.

They play original songs and traditional folk favorites, adding a whimsical and fun spin to the melodies. An underlying sensitivity for nature, feelings and story comes through in their lyrics, which incorporate words of Hebrew, Spanish and Quechua (a Native American language). “Hinei Ma Tov” and “The Aleph Bet” are crowd pleasers at Jewish-themed appearances.

“Many of the songs we perform were sung to us when we were children,” Pockell said. “They are part of our personal and collective history. Our original music comes to life with the harmonies and instrumentation of the group.”

And while there’s no typical performance, Octopretzel aims to captivate its young audience through interactive music. A camel named Raizel (played by puppeteer Kantor) urges the kids to get up, wiggle, sing along and shout out their favorite animals and colors.

“Once you see what works for kids, you realize they want visual stimulation,” said Doostan of Berkeley. “When kids are engaged, parents are happy. We’re changing the energy and keeping it fresh.” The members of Octopretzel — the combo of “octopus” and “pretzel” — have known each other for 10 years. “We are five good friends caught in an amazing circle,” Pockell said.

Their decision to transition from secular folk music to family-friendly entertainment evolved as they had children. Doostan was a singer/songwriter before her daughter, Leilah, was born five years ago. Before, she says, “performing was more stressful, as was baring my soul.”

Entertaining kids is another matter. “I find it so joyful to perform for kids,” she explained. “They are present, right there in the moment and you know when they’re enjoying it. I feel like it’s what I’m meant to do.”

For more information about **Octopretzel**, visit <http://www.octopretzel.com>.