

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: *Aaron Kula, 48*

Life has been musical journey for klezmer orchestra conductor

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Music is in Aaron Kula's blood and has been a part of his life since the day he was born.

His father Morton was a musicologist, composer, conductor and cantor at a Conservative synagogue near Roslyn Heights, N.Y., where Kula grew up. So it comes as no surprise to his friends and family that Kula, 48, is now director of music collections and performance at Florida Atlantic University and conducts the Klezmer Company Orchestra, the university's professional ensemble in-residence.

"My life is like my music, a journey," said Kula, who lives in Boca Raton.

In the first grade, he began playing piano. He later picked up the recorder, guitar and accordion.

In addition to music, Judaism was a big part of his life. He and his five brothers would walk to temple each week for the Sabbath with their father.

"We were his little teammates," Kula said. "We would fight over who got to hold his hands. I have very warm memories of that walk."

He attended the University of Minnesota, where he earned a bachelor's degree in music and Judaic studies in 1980. From there, he moved to Boston and went to the New England Conservatory, where he earned a master's in music theory and conducting in 1984.

To make a living, Kula began what he calls a "composite career." He conducted many professional ballet orchestras and youth orchestras. He also performed with klezmer groups, playing the accordion.

But when orchestras began to cut their budgets, Kula started looking elsewhere for work. When the opportunity arose at FAU in 1997, he decided to give it a try.

"I wanted to experience new things," he said.

During his first year at FAU, he commuted weekly from Boston, but by his second year, he



ELIZA GUTIERREZ/Staff Photographer

Aaron Kula leads the Klezmer Company Orchestra during rehearsal at Florida Atlantic University in preparation for its next concert at 3 p.m. Sunday.

was working there full-time and moved to Boca Raton.

Kula has been extremely happy with his job. "It could not be more ideal," he said.

That same year that he began working at FAU, he created the 22-person Klezmer Company Orchestra.

"It's sort of my child," he said. "Right now, it's in its adolescent stage."

Kula's job is to blend tradition with innovation.

"I'll take a 100-year-old melody in the library collection and transform it into a hip piece of music," he said. "I make it so

that it relates to people living in the 21st century."

He said that his pieces are a musical fusion, blending jazz, Latin American and Arabic music. It often takes him weeks or months to compose one piece.

Although the group has been around for nearly 11 years, it only recently released its first CD, *Beyond the Tribes*. Its next performance is 3 p.m. Sunday at FAU's Carole and Barry Kaye Performing Arts Auditorium in the University Center.

Since the group's inception, Kula has found that the audience has become younger. But he still

finds it challenging to connect with students.

"Once I expose them to it, they think it's very cool," he said. "But for the most part, they're limited to what they're comfortable with and what they know."

Kula said that klezmer music has nothing to do with Judaism as a religion, even though that's the popular belief. It was simply played by traveling Jewish musicians and is, therefore, a part of Jewish culture and history.

Kula's daughter Katya, 21, plays piano and composes music, and his son Mario, 16, plays electric guitar and loves to mess

around with the music recording program GarageBand.

Today, Kula's parents live in Boca Raton, and he stays in close contact with his brothers, one of whom is a rabbi and cantor in Miami.

As for his goals, he hopes to take the Klezmer Company Orchestra to Carnegie Hall within the next two years.

But even after that, his job won't get old.

"When I perform, it's always like the first time," he said. "I always have that child-like excitement."

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