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FAMILY ALBUM

- Andrew Gilbert

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Woody Guthrie was many things in his life -- Dust Bowl troubadour, lefty activist, tireless tunesmith whose songs helped define an inclusive vision of America forged by the New Deal and World War II.

But who knew that he was also a mensch who celebrated Hanukkah and doted on his mother-in-law, Aliza Greenblatt, a noted Yiddish poet? That side of the iconic Oklahoma folkie is the subject of "Holy Ground: The Spiritual Music of Woody Guthrie," at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Tuesday. The concert features Woody's oldest son, Arlo Guthrie, the enthralling Irish vocalist Susan McKeown and the Klezmatics, a remarkable klezmer ensemble that has collaborated with many creative figures, including John Zorn, Pilobolus Dance Theatre, Allen Ginsberg, the Master Musicians of Jajouka and Itzhak Perlman.

It was a concert with Perlman that led to the Klezmatics' connection with the Woody Guthrie Archives. After a 1997 performance at Tanglewood, the group's vocalist, Lorin Sklamberg, noticed Woody's daughter, Nora Guthrie, in the audience, and introduced her to Perlman as Greenblatt's granddaughter. Unaware of her grandmother's reputation in Yiddish literary circles, Guthrie was amazed to discover that the concert she had just heard featured a poem by Greenblatt that had long been part of the Klezmatics' repertoire.

"Nora says, 'Listen, I have these archives and Woody wrote all these Jewish songs,' " recalls Klezmatics trumpeter Frank London. "We're like, 'right,' and being the fools we are, we did nothing about it. But years later we were brainstorming about a big new project, and I suggested doing a concert of these Woody Guthrie songs."

Actually, since Woody didn't know how to write music, his unrecorded work survives as lyric sheets, often with notes he scribbled in the margins. Born in Okemah, Okla., in 1912, Guthrie was an amazingly prolific artist until the mid-'50s, when Huntington's disease incapacitated him, leaving him hospitalized for more than a decade before his death in 1967. He left behind thousands of songs, which in recent years have flowed like wine from the seemingly bottomless Woody Guthrie Archives. The treasure trove gained widespread attention in 1998 with the two-volume "Mermaid Avenue" project, pairing British protest singer Billy Bragg with Wilco, when the band was still in an alt-country mode.

"What's beginning to emerge is a picture of him as a compulsive writer who wrote about anything and everything that was going on in his life at the time," Arlo Guthrie says. "We're getting a broader picture as time goes by, and there's more to come."

"Holy Ground," which premiered last year at Manhattan's 92nd Street Y, explores the Jewish side of Guthrie's life, a chapter opened by his relationship with Martha Graham dancer Marjorie Mazia, whom he married in 1945. The daughter of Greenblatt and the mother of Arlo, Joady, Nora and Cathy, who died at age 4, Mazia settled with Woody in Coney Island, where the family gave annual Hanukkah parties. Woody fully engaged with the vibrant cultural and political world of Brooklyn's Jewish community, and often conferred with Greenblatt, who saw him as a kindred spirit. This little-known period of Woody's life is thoroughly covered in "Ramblin' Man" (Norton),

published in February, a penetrating biography by Ed Cray, the first journalist with full access to the Woody Guthrie Archives.

"The first surprise for me was that he lived the biggest chunk of life in Coney Island, across the street from his mother-in-law," London says. "His wife was a modern dancer with Martha Graham, so here's this hobo Okie troubadour, hanging in the Yiddish world, and part of the downtown art world. That's pretty mind-boggling."

In combing through the archives, Nora Guthrie had noticed dozens of lyrics with Jewish references. She sent them to the Klezmatics, who went about composing music for the pieces. In some cases they wrote recognizably Jewish melodies for specifically Jewish songs, but in other cases the melodies don't sound Jewish at all. More than anything, they were amazed at the vast range of topics he covered.

"If he's reading the newspaper and something bothers him, he writes a song," London says. "If there's a Hanukkah celebration, he writes a song. Woody was a really spiritual person, and there are some songs that reflect that. In 'Holy Ground,' he wrote, 'Every spot is holy ground. Every speck of dirt is holy ground. Everywhere I walk is holy ground.'

"Then there's a lot of songs about New York and Brooklyn, so while they may not be specifically Jewish, they feel Jewish. On 'Mermaid Avenue' -- a different song than the one covered by Wilco -- he wrote that it's 'the place where lox and bagels meet/ where the borscht sounds like the sea.' I love that line."

The Klezmatics homed in on his holiday songs, recording a self-produced album, "Woody Guthrie's Happy Joyous Hanuka," that's available only on their Web site and at gigs. Hand-printed on an antique printing press, the booklet folds into a dreidel.

As a champion of unions and the author of the unofficial American anthem "This Land Is Your Land," Woody Guthrie was already considered an honorary member of the tribe as far as many Jews are concerned. Discovering the Brooklyn connection will only deepen the attachment, just as new generations were turned on to his music by Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska" and the recent "Mermaid Avenue" albums.

A classic self-invented American character, Woody Guthrie honed a studied folksiness that was no less authentic for being carefully fabricated. It's now clear that upon closer inspection, the image of him as a progressive folkie carrying a guitar emblazoned with the words "This Machine Kills Fascists" is only a small piece of a much larger story.

"You would think that over time the picture would get distorted, but in his case, the picture is becoming more clear," Arlo Guthrie says. "More and more people can find a piece of him they identify with. It's incredible. He's more popular now than he has ever been."

ARLO GUTHRIE & THE KLEZMATICS perform at 8 p.m. Tuesday at Zellerbach Hall, Bancroft Way at Telegraph Avenue, UC Berkeley. \$28-\$56. Call (510) 642- 9988, www.calperfs.berkeley.edu.

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"We're getting a broader picture as time goes by, and there's more to come." -- Arlo Guthrie on discoveries about his father, Woody Guthrie.

