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Community sing

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The music festival was just about over when Ann Polunsky, chair of the Arizona Jewish Historical Society board's Concert Committee, took the stage to give thanks to the various people and groups who helped make the fundraiser happen.

"This shows that Jews have rhythm," Polunsky told the audience of about 450 gathered at the Tempe Center for the Arts on Jan. 11 for "Rhythm & Jews."

Many themes ran through the show, which raised just under \$20,000 for the society's project to transform the building that housed the Valley's first synagogue into the CutlerYPlotkin Jewish Heritage Center. However, Larry Bell, the society's executive director, summed things up best when, speaking after Polunsky, he said that the center wasn't just about Jewish identity but specifically about an Arizona Jewish identity.



Enjoying coffee after the "Rhythm & Jews" music festival Jan. 11 at Tempe Center for the Arts are, from left, Judy Stern, Dr. Barry Stern, Barbara Kretchman, Dr. Graham Kretchman and Jerry Lewkowitz.

Photo courtesy of Judy Stern

"Many of us have come from other places," so learning about this place and how this community was built is important, he said.

Almost echoing that theme, the event's master of ceremonies, Brahm Resnik, weekend anchor at Channel 12, coyly asked the crowd if they really wanted to know who won the Philadelphia Eagles-New York Giants football game, which ended while the concert was in progress. Even though they were from many places, the members of the audience were clearly Arizonans when they almost as one said, "Yes," to find out that the Eagles won, setting up the Arizona Cardinals as the home team for the National Football Conference Championship game to be played Sunday, Jan. 18.

Underlining the broad Jewish identity, the event included expressions of solidarity with Israel as the Gaza battle proceeded.

And the diversity of music provided a living textbook on how divergent threads of culture weave a cohesive tapestry today.

Whether it was Temple Emanuel's Rural Street Klezmer Band getting people humming and singing along with "Bei Mir Bist Du Schein," in the original Yiddish, or Temple Solel's Todd Herzog and his band rocking up Noam Katz's "Am Yisrael Chai," a tune inspired by the Abayudaya people of Uganda, or Shalom Feivel and Rocky Mountain Jewgrass, from Colorado, proclaiming their gastronomic ties to Judaism with "I'm in It for the Food," all showed that it's fairly impossible to define what Jewish music is, but you'll know it when you hear it.

The concert also shone with Or Lagoyim (the call to be a "light unto the nations"), as Rocky Mountain Jewgrass did its bluegrass thing with "Turn, Turn, Turn," a setting of Ecclesiastes verses by Pete Seeger, who is not Jewish. In light of current events, singing, "A time for peace, I swear it's not too late" seemed especially poignant.