# take5

## Aaron Kula
### CONDUCTOR, KLEZMER COMPANY ORCHESTRA

Most university libraries don't have a musical ensemble in residence, and most klezmer ensembles don't integrate elements of jazz, bebop and salsa into their repertoires. Leave it to Aaron Kula, maestro of the Klezmer Company Orchestra at the Florida Atlantic University library, to think outside the accordion.

Kula's orchestra, which plays two concerts a year at FAU and numerous public and private events in season, is not your grandfather's klezmer—the style of celebratory ethnic music that dates back to Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews of the late 19th century. The Klezmer Company Orchestra fuses these traditional folk melodies with diverse styles incorporated from the university's massive print music archive. The result is revisionist klezmer that continues to grow in notoriety. Later this spring, five years since the band's award-winning "Beyond the Tribes" album, the orchestra will release a new record, "Klezmerology."

A veteran teacher, arranger and performer for 30 years, Kula grew up surrounded by music—his father was a cantor, and his mother was a pianist. After a number of years with the Boston Ballet, Santa Fe Symphony and others, he arrived at FAU in 1996 for a freelance job around the same time the university was looking for an orchestra director. Kula took an adjunct position, developed the idea for the Klezmer Company Orchestra and joined the library full-time a few years later, where he continues to glean inspiration for his novel approach to klezmer.

**Q1 What is the biggest misconception about klezmer music?**
I think it's that people know only one type of klezmer music; they associate it with their narrow experience of celebratory party music from 1950 to 1970. But the truth is, klezmer music is almost undefinable by its nature. It comes from so many different geographic locations and time periods.

**Q2 What is the intention behind combining these traditional folk compositions with modern elements and a mix of genres?**
There are plenty of five-piece, cookie-cutter klezmer bands around the country, playing in that mid-20th-century style. My goal is to find transformational approaches to the melodies. I'm updating arrangements and melodies so that whatever culture you come from, you can enjoy it: a little Latin, a little bebop, a little orchestral, a little gypsy. The bottom line is that all art is reinvented for each generation.

**Q3 How is conducting this kind of klezmer style different from that of a traditional symphony orchestra?**
When I conduct the music that falls under the klezmer umbrella, I'm playing my accordion. So I'm doing double duty, leading from the accordion. Musicians understand my gestures when I use my head or elbow. I often hear that people enjoy watching me as much as listening to the music.

**Q4 How do you plan each season?**
Think of it as LEGOs; I have piles of music, and every year I go through [upward of] 4,000 pieces of music to select about 20 songs or melodies that I will transform and bring to the concert stage. Every year we bring a title that reflects what we're trying to do. We're calling this March's concert "Rhythm, Roots and Soul."

**Q5 How was your residency earlier this year at the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix?**
We all thought we were in heaven. The audience didn't want the concert to end. When I came to the last piece, one of the audience members said, "Take this music outside!" We got a 10-minute standing ovation.