

Celebrating music through family ties

By **KAREN ZIMMER**
Staff Writer

It's all in the family, or close to it anyway.

On April 8 and 9, a family of five will play international folk on 13 instruments and sing tales of the new world in 12 languages at the ArtsCenter.

The Small Family Orchestra consists of founder Elise Witt, Elise's sister Mary Witt, Mary's husband Rick Ruggles, Rick's lifelong friend Steve Harris and Steve's neighbor and friend Beth Heidelberg.

"Our getting together was a kind of organic process," Elise Witt says. The family started playing for fun and gradually became a professional group. They've stuck together for eight years — even though they've often been packed together in a small van on their tours.

"Traveling in a van brings out the worst and the best in people," Witt says. "We have been able to work out our differences because we're family. You're with your family, whether you like it or not, so you'd better make it work. Mind you, I like it."

But the group's unity is not only due to family ties. Its members also share in their musical versatility and their views on today's world.

Quite a few of their songs deal with contemporary issues. "Music in most cultures was traditionally used to express celebration or

sorrow or things happening in a community," Witt says. Negro spirituals are a good example, she says, because they were all about slavery, escape, or religion, and carried significant social meaning at the time of their creation.

Witt says music is a gentle way to talk about social problems. "But we don't want to hit people over the head with issues," Witt says. "A lot of our music is just fun."

The band plays upbeat tunes, like swing and jazz, which Witt considers a middle ground for people who crave music for entertainment only.

"Here (in the U.S.) it's really funny: people separate music from other things in life," Witt says. "I see things as being linked. Music is my life." And like life, it is varied.

In its music, the Small Family Orchestra gathers eclectic elements from around the world. This international orientation is largely a result of Elise Witt's own background: born in Switzerland of German parents, Elise later moved to the States. She speaks perfect German, English and French (which she studied at UNC) and sings in many more languages.

Lately, the band has focused on new Southern folk music and Nueva Cancion from Latin America, a result of a recent trip to Nicaragua. Nueva Cancion is based on traditional musical patterns, but deals with contemporary issues. New Southern folk deals with the



The Small Family Orchestra will perform at ArtsCenter April 8 and 9

with the Southern scene, and everything that personally affects people, from love to food.

One song, "The Cackling Hen Cafe," is about the importance of nourishment in Southern life. Another, "Cities of Gold," is about leaving the mountains to move to the city. It sounds like Appalachian Gospel singing. Witt has to hum the tune to recall one of the song's poetic lines: "You can lose your very soul living in the cities of gold."

"Many people have told us that they were very moved by our music, because it expressed things which they could personally relate to," Witt says.

But if people like the band's performances, it is also largely because the musicians are exceptionally talented. Every member of the orchestra sings, and plays about three instruments. Their versatility allows them to experiment with musical themes in a way that other groups don't.

One of the innovative pieces in the band's repertoire is a clarinet-fiddle duet. Also new is the use of French horn, clarinet, flute and violin in folk songs. The orchestra even uses French horn to underscore swing and jazz themes. In string band songs, French horn and flute smoothen the percussive effect of plucked and picked string

instruments, forming a kind of blanket over the usually harsher tones.

Musical diversity is enhanced by original choices of vocal harmonies, which range from Andrews Sisters trios to a cappella ensembles.

But what really adds the finishing touch to the Small Family's music is the electricity of the musicians' enthusiasm. "We really have a good time when we play," Witt says.

As you may have guessed, the only way to get a real feel for the whole is to go to a performance. "The performance is the real fun experience," Witt says.

General College

When pressed to explain the change in her personality, an unkempt Meg lies to Paige about her depression. Confident that she's cheered her roommate up, Paige leaves to meet Kirk who asked to wait downstairs.

During an appointment with her gynecologist, Mary-Catherine expresses concern about hereditary pregnancy complications, explaining that her mother had

two miscarriages before she and her twin were born.

After Anne and Courtney hold an early morning snort session, Jason is all too aware of Courtney's unusual vigor.

When Mary-Catherine stops by Sarah's hospital room, she is astounded to find her best friend is blind. She is quickly relieved to find Sarah is coping because she and Joseph have reconciled.

Brendan surprises Billy with the news of the wedding by asking him to be his best man.

After Meg finds herself unable to defend herself against a group of guys' insensitive comments, she returns to her room only to replay the events before the rape in her head.

When Anne visits Tessa's to try to get a "loaner" gram of coke, Trevor tells her that her toot is going to cost her. As she leaves he smiles, confident she'll be back.

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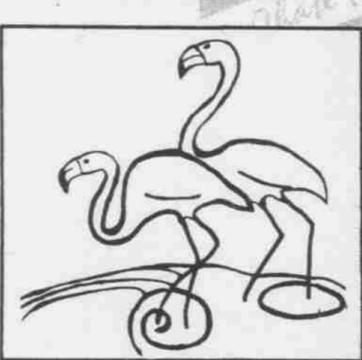


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