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Vagabond Opera Band Biography

European Cabaret! Vintage Americana! Balkan Belly Dance! Neo-Classical Opera! Old World Yiddish Theater! Welcome to the six-piece, Portland, Oregon-based Vagabond Opera.

Bohemian Cabaret ensemble Vagabond Opera is described by the Washington Post as “A band of ceaseless charisma, boundless energy, impeccable musicianship and more than a little touch of both the naughty and exotic.” The group delivers passionate offerings of Bohemian cabaret for young and old. Paris hot jazz, gut bucket swing, tangos, Ukrainian folk-punk ballads, klezmer and vigorous originals meet a world of riverboat gambling queens, Turkish belly dancers, and the enigmatic Marlene Dietrich. Weaving elements of Kurt Weil, Duke Ellington and Edith Piaf with absurdist flair, theatrics and an old world mood, Vagabond Opera presents the new wave of opera—lusty voices singing in 13 languages and presenting a cabaret of rich musical phrasing, sparkling lyrics and indomitable stage presence, all played with exuberance, skill and a gritty Vagabond edge. This is Opera liberated and reinvented for everyone!

The band’s lineup features trained operatic tenor and soprano vocals, accordion, tenor saxophone, 2 cellos, stand-up bass, and drums. Guest performers often appear with the ensemble.

Vagabond Opera is at the vanguard of a growing popularity in the Neo-cabaret phenomenon, and through their theatrical performances, lyrics in 13 languages, and an eclectic repertoire, they liberate opera from its usual construct, expanding musical and theatrical biodiversity. Vagabond Opera has performed all over the USA and in Europe. They have been featured on NPR, in the Washington Post and Jazziz Magazine, and have shared stages and players with Pink Martini, The Decembrists, Al Franken and the Oregon Symphony. Vagabond opera has three full-length albums and will be releasing their fourth album in 2011.

Vagabond Opera was created in 2002 by European-trained opera singer and composer Eric Stern. Then disillusioned with the classical opera world, Stern created a new context for opera: Performance on a more intimate scale incorporating not only opera but elements of Weimar Cabaret, Arabic and Balkan forms, and the original music that springs from the ensemble’s fertile creative work. This is not your granny’s opera, but a visceral artistic ensemble that features powerful instrumental and vocal performances coupled with a highly eclectic and theatrical experience.

Vagabond Opera is composed by:

Eric Stern

Vagabond Opera's founder and bandleader is classically trained tenor and composer Eric Stern. Stern, who has appeared with the Decembrists, Pink Martini and Balkan Beatbox, also plays accordion and piano; is a composer, lyricist and arranger for the band's wildly imaginative songs. Stern also composes for theater and opera, including the score for Tears of Joy Puppet Theatre's *Pinocchio*. Most recently he composed the full-length opera, *Queen of Knives*, produced by Vagabond Opera and Wanderlust Circus.

Jason Flores

Bassist Jason Krivo Flores brings much of the Middle Eastern and Balkan influence to Vagabond Opera's sound. Flores studied jazz at the University of New Mexico and with Armenian master clarinetist Souren Baronian. In addition to electric and acoustic bass, he plays gypsy jazz guitar, melodica and the traditional Mexican *guitarron*. Flores also performs with the 1920s jazz group Trashcan Joe and Saloon Ensemble. He is the creator of Krivo Pickups, amplification devices for acoustic instruments.

Ashia Grzesik

Classically trained cellist and vocalist Ashia Grzesik began her professional performing career at age 21 with a four-year stint as a musician with Cirque du Soleil's "O" in Las Vegas. She launched a successful solo career and now performs with the Portland Cello Project and is active in the Portland area theater community, where she recently won a "Drammy" for best original music for Third Rail Repertory Theatre's *The Gray Sisters*. Grzesik was born in Wroclaw, Poland, and immigrated to the U.S. when she was a child; she grew up in the Bay Area.

Mark Burdon

Jazz drummer and composer Mark Burdon is a graduate of the Berklee College of Music and studied with drummers Bob Gullioti and Alan Dawson. He worked several years as a musician in Boston and New York, before returning to his native Oregon and joining Vagabond Opera. Burdon, who is half Brazilian, has spent extensive time in Brazil, studying both modern and traditional Brazilian music, and has studied with Ghanaian drummers Abu Bakari and Godwin Agbeli. He leads the Mark Burdon Trio and Ensemble of Strategic Information.

Robin Jackson

Robin Jackson is a mostly self-taught musician. He began with violin at age 4 and added saxophone at 13. He also plays clarinet, marimba, mbira, didgeridoo and drums. Jackson also composes and placed second in the prestigious International Songwriting Competition in 2007. He has a degree in ethnomusicology from University of Oregon and spent seven years working as a street performer in New Zealand. He also performs with the March Fourth Marching Band.

Skip vonKuske

Cellist Skip vonKuske began playing at age 8 and has studied with renowned cellists William Stokking of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Lorne Munro of the New York Philharmonic. VonKuske has performed with the Oregon Symphony, Smokey Robinson, Judy Collins, Crystal Gayle and others and is a frequent studio musician for numerous recording artists. His current interest is cellotronik music, layering cello with electronic elements. He released his debut solo album in September.

Xander “Gerrymander” Almeida

Xander “Gerrymander” Almeida rounds out the band, providing a variety of stage theatrics and comic bits to the live performances and helping define Vagabond Opera’s distinctive steampunk image. He is a student at Portland State University.