We are not just diagnoses'

uneasiness picks up where the psychiatrists left off

by Stephanie Mann

When the shadow of Con-
egregation Kehillath Israel in
Brookline, several dozen white
long-haired sit facing a collect-
ion of sound equipment. A
man croons a Joni Mitchell
song, her clear voice lifting in-
ne with the crisp strums of
acoustic guitar. A row of tall
edges separates the garden
from the hustle of Hadd
Street, where dozens of
visitors stop to smile and
wave over the bushes to catch
a glimpse of the musician.

This was the scene one
recent Sunday afternoon as Tune-
oolery took the stage. The per-
sonal organization of musicians
with psychiatric disabilities.
Tunoolery gives them a way to de-
se themselves by their musical
lents, rather than by their
is psychiatric challenges. The
youth also helps educate the
rader community about men-
"illness.

The musicians usually enter-
nt at mental health facilities,
ospitals and nursing homes, stair-
ing to people who rarely get
to hear quality live musical re-
. Its two-hour outdoor con-
ert at Kehillath Israel came
out thanks to a chance sug-
ession from Fern Fisher, presi-
cent of Tunoolery's board.

Jesse Rebo, Tunoolery's ex-
cutive director, traces the
roup's beginning to 1999, when
he was an intern at the
bridge-Storrow Social
lab, a drop-in center for adults
ith psychiatric disabilities.

"We began as a few people
playing music together, just for fun," Rebo said. "Then, some-
thing wonderful happened if we
could turn it into something
ore organized."

Just beginning his career as a
mental health counselor at the
MCY, Rebo had managed bands
indistinctly, and at the end of
the first year, we realized that
our performance was universal, whether we
ave a mental health condition or not," he said.

Harold F. Rabin, a music
person consultant for people
ith psychiatric disabilities to
nd employment (musicians are
aid by the gig), musical train-
g, and a creative outlet. This
oney is important, as
ny members otherwise get by
ly on Social Security.

By 2004, Tunoolery had
40 musicians who played 50
gigs a year. Today, it has 60
performers playing 100 gigs a
year. While most of these per-
ances are geared toward
ersed communities, Tunoolery
also has a history of playing for Jewish audi-
en. Nine of the 60 members
of Tunoolery are Jewish
themselves, one of them
trained in klezmer music.

"A lot of the Jewish artists
nd musicians we work with
ave a very strong pride about
the Jewish tradition," he said.
"So, over the years we have
played at numerous Jewish holi-
day gigs."

The performance at K is de-
ically secular, drawing on fa-
miliar American tunes. Nancy
Applebaum's voice fills K's
yard, picknicking families
anter over to listen. Her two
ks include tunes by Joni
Mitchell and Cat Stevens, but
the standouts are her own
compositions.

The first original is charged
with emotion, its chorus catchy
nd soaring, like a ballad by the
Indigo Girls. "This road leads to
your heart, and sanctifies your
existence," he wrote. "The more we
, the more we breach the
distance."

Applebaum smiles graciously
fter each song, her
black curls bouncing as she
acknowledges applause.

Applebaum, a Tunoolery
member for five years, lights up
when she talks about the group.
"It's a great outlet for me, cre-
atively, and I get to showcase
all of the songs I write." She
has written about 50 in all.

Many Tunoolery members
have been confined for stretch-
es in mental health centers and
hospitals, where their voices
ere seldom heard.

"We turn the axis upside-
down so that those with mental
illness are the ones making de-
cisions for themselves," said
Rebo. "People who spend time
in mental health centers often
feel a sense of helplessness
with no say in what goes on.
Tunoolery shows them that
they can, and should, have a say
in what their lives are about."

The program does not have
licensed musical therapists, its
members don't dwell on their
mental illnesses in rehearsals or
classes. Rather, Tunoolery
serves as a confidence builder,
providing the musicians with a
sence that they are competent
adults with a valuable talent.

Dan Martin - a five-year
member who goes by the stage
name Ramblin' Dan - breathes
a bouncy chorus of notes into
his harmonica while his fingers
jump across his guitar strings,
sporting a green fedora and
dark aviator-style sunglasses, he
sings with Woody Guthrie's
"This Land Is Your Land."

"Ramblin' Dan's voice is rich
nd raspy, ideal for a folk singer.
He peppers his performances
with nuggets about the origins
of the music and his own life. He
's been composing music since
was 12, combining a rockabilly
nd sound with heartfelt lyrics
plays an up-tempo original in
his second set. "I think a few
years of homelessness in the
1970s inspired the tune about
what it feels like to have
place to go," he reminisces
bout entertaining crowds at the
Pine Street Inn years ago.

"At Tunoolery, we are not
just diagnoses." Ramblin' Dan
said. "We are musicians."

Rebo said he believed that
many Tunoolery musicians
might have had successful musi-
cal careers had it not been for
their illnesses. "Maintaining a
serious mental illness is a full-time
job," he said. "In the mental
health field, there's a tradition
that doctors treat the illness
the best they can, and then patients
are on their own to make it in a
competitive world. We're provid-
ing a service that helps those
with mental illness create posi-
tive identities to deal with the
rest of their lives, after they've
been diagnosed and treated."

Tunoolery's repertoire ranges
from folk and blues to
jazz and classical - and not just
anyone can join.

We hold competitive auditions
because we need to have a
certain threshold for who we let
in the group," Rebo said. "We
want to have high quality
music."