

TAMBURASHI TRADITION IN AMERICA

Ethel Raim-Zinser and
Martin Koenig

When we speak of Tamburashi music in America, we are referring to the musical tradition of Croatian and Serbian-Americans, going back to the late 19th century. The community that it serves numbers some two million persons in such diverse places as Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Southern California, the New York City area, Galveston, Texas, Chicago Gary and Detroit. The population concentrations are either at seaports, near docks and fishing industries, or close to steel mills and coal mines, and, in the past, in the lumber and railroad-building camps of the West.

The term *Tamburashi* itself derives from the name of the instrument played—the tambura, as shown in the accompanying photographs. It is a family of instruments varying in size, tonal color and function.

There are two types of Tamburashi music in the United States—the large trained Tamburitza ensembles developed by church groups and community organizations, and the smaller bechar groups that play for weddings, as well as for social gatherings within the community such as picnics, boat rides, bowling and basketball tournaments, celebrations and social gatherings. Bechar refers to a particular life style—that of a free-wheeling person who loves to make music and enjoys life to its fullest.

It is from the bechar that we draw the inspiration for the focus of this year's Festival. The gatherings and celebrations of these American communities are derived from events which still exist in their European homeland, such as the Sunday afternoon *kolo* (dance), music made in local *kafanas* as they are

known in Serbia, or *gostionas*, the Croatian equivalent.

How does this music survive and flourish within a strange, unfamiliar and frequently hostile surrounding? Or is it precisely this aspect that has contributed to the nourishing of this tradition? Functional by definition, the music has served as a common bond providing a shared emotional expression. This music represents one of the most powerful links with the past, and as such, continues to help define the identity of these communities today.

Who are these musicians? As so frequently happens with traditional, community music, the family unit tends to be the nucleus of the musical groups. And so the historically important names in this tradition belong to family groups such as the Popovich Brothers, Crlenica Family, Jezdimir Family, Markulin Brothers, Djokich Father and Son, Skrbina Father and Son, Trifunovich Sisters and many others.

There are no full-time musicians in these communities. You put in a full week's work in the factory to feed the family, and on weekends you gather with friends and family to sing, to dance, and to make music. The sounds and movements make you feel alive, important and real. The most significant fact is that when the traditions were transplanted to the United States there was no departure from the tradition of the musician serving the community as opposed to performing for it.

One of the most meaningful experiences for us took place one Friday evening at the bar of the Serbian Club in Lackawana, New York. Several members of the Balkan Serenaders, men in their mid-forties, were jamming, and two teenage third generation Croatian-Americans were playing along with them. What impressed us deeply, was the way in which these two young boys were soaking in everything around them—musical riffs, singing style and words, social and musical interaction between the older musicians, the emotionality of the music and of the moment. What we witnessed on that occasion was the actual process of how this music is handed down complete with musical values and esthetics. That scene provides insight into the essence of how folk music traditions have been generated throughout history. It is a scene that is being constantly repeated—learning from a living situation in a traditional way instead of having classes with a teacher, or learning from a recording.

It is significant that in this age of instant, push-button, produced and packaged entertainment that Tamburashi music survives as a vital force in communities dotted across the nation. It stands as a tribute to the tenacity and enduring values of self-assured communities wishing to retain something that is distinctly theirs and which forms a basic element of their group pride and identity.

Ethel Raim-Zinser and Martin Koenig are Research and Program Directors for Balkan and Slavic Cultures, Festival of American Folklife, Division of Performing Arts, Smithsonian Institution.