

South Slavic American Musical Traditions

by Richard March

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In one of the important migrations in human history, South Slavs joined millions of southern and eastern Europeans in a risky journey across the Atlantic to North America. Leaving behind overpopulated villages or barren mountain pastures, they sought a new life in the smoky industrial cities and stark mining towns of the United States. This migration began in the last decades of the 19th century and has never really ceased. Though the rate of immigration has fluctuated widely, depending upon conditions in the homeland and the varying needs of America's industries, South Slavs came – and continue to come, often from the same villages as the earlier immigrants and often to the same cities and towns in America.

Like other ethnic or immigrant communities, South Slavs (Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Macedonians of Yugoslavia as well as Bulgarians) cherish, nurture, and thoroughly enjoy the musical traditions of their homeland. If you should happen to be in any city with a South Slavic community, on almost any weekend of the year, you will more than likely find a variety of ongoing musical events. Something is sure to be going on at one of the churches or lodge halls. At a Slovenian or Croatian Catholic church, there might be a performance by a button-box accordian group, a choir, or a *tamburitza* ensemble, while at a Serbian or Macedonian Orthodox church musicians play an accordian or clarinet backed by rhythm instruments for dancing. In addition, there are fraternal lodge halls and taverns that feature similar kinds of music; here one can listen to a song, join in a *kolo* or *oro* line dance, or grab a partner to enjoy a polka or waltz. Throughout the summer, there is sure to be a lamb roast at a church or lodge picnic grove. The strains of a *tamburitza* combo playing sad love songs is a feast for the ears.

For the South Slavs, music and musical events are a focus for community activity and social life. Actually this ethnic music may take on many meanings: to a musician it is a medium of self-expression, a role of positive status in the community, a pleasant pastime, or a total obsession. To a member of the audience the music may be the most important aspect of a community event replete with food and drink, good company, an opportunity to speak in the mother tongue, and the celebration of a traditional fête.

One of the more persistent clichés about ethnic folk music is that it is slowly but surely dying out. Only a casual visit to a South Slavic community is needed to gain the opposite impression that the music is flourishing, gaining new practitioners and fans. Veteran musicians whose bands in the 1930s recorded 78 rpm records still perform and receive the starry-eyed adulation of teen-aged musicians. Young musicians study tapes of the old timers' songs, memorizing the lyrics when they no longer understand the original language. One young *tamburitza* player, when I asked if he could speak Serbo-Croatian replied "no, but I can sing it."

As members of veteran ensembles drop out, owing to health or personal reasons, their places are often filled by players young enough to be their sons or daughters. In many cases they are in fact sons or daughters of musicians. It almost seems that musical talent is a dominant genetic trait. There are family combos entirely composed of parents and children or siblings. There are ensembles of young musicians in which every member is the child of an ethnic musician. Even the children of "mixed" marriages, that is of a South Slav to an individual of some other ethnic group, seem to gravitate more to the South Slavic traditions than to those of their other parent. Thus it is not uncommon to



1 *Sarajevo*, a tamburitza orchestra from Milwaukee performs every Saturday in a local restaurant & bar. Instruments from left to right are *bugarija* and *brac*.

2 The lead instrument of the orchestra is the *prima tamburitza*, also called the *prim*.



find South Slavic musicians with Irish or Polish last names, children who grew up absorbed in the South Slavic community through ties in the maternal line.

Though the music is certainly not dying out, it definitely is evolving. A sure sign that something *is* dying out appears when the tradition ceases to respond to changing stimuli in its cultural environment. South Slavic musicians play the music of their own nationality, and whatever other music is pleasing to them. American popular songs, country and western numbers, and big band jazz tunes have entered the repertoires of South Slavic bands, but not in a willy-nilly fashion. Only certain melodies from other genres are appealing and meet the aesthetic criteria of the musical traditions. These find a lasting place in the repertoire, sometimes even becoming translated into a Slavic language. This filtering process assures that South Slavic American music will remain distinct from other American music while sharing some musical traits and repertoire with other traditions.

1 Patrons enjoy doing traditional Balkan line dances such as the *kolo* or *oro*. The more skillful dancers perform *cacacko*, a fast and intricate *kolo*.

2 Dancing is also popular at outdoor events such as picnics and festivals. At the 1973 Festival of American Folklife festivals goers join South Slavs from Yugoslavia in a line dance.

Suggested Readings

Govorchin, Gerald G. *Americans from Yugoslavia*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1961.

Colakovic, Branko Mita, *Yugoslav Migrations to America*. San Francisco: R & E Research Assoc., 1973.

Clissold, Stephen, *A Short History of Yugoslavia*. Cambridge: C.U. Press, 1966.

Discography

Slovenian:

Button Box Polkas, Johnny Pecon and Lou Trebar, #DI 7022 Marjon Records, available from: 159 Easton Road, Sharon, Pennsylvania 16146

Prav Lustno Je Pozim, Violet Ruparcich, Greyko Records LPS 1015, available from: 159 Easton Road, Sharon, Pennsylvania 16146

Tamburitza Records:

Any records by the Royal Tamburitians (*Royals are Here Again*, *Royal Tamburitians*, *More from the Royals*) available from: J.A. Trosley, 557 George Street, Wood River, Illinois 62095

Any records by the Popovich Brothers (*Popovich Brothers*, *40th Anniversary Album*, *Golden Anniversary Album*) available from: Popovich Brothers, 11110 Ave E., Chicago, Illinois 60617

Dave Zupkovich Memorial Album, Dave Zupkovich, Balkan Records DLP 5011, available from: Balkan Music Company, 6917 W. Cermak Road, Berwyn, Illinois 60402

Accordian Groups:

Orchestra Balkan Orchestra Balkan, 9850 West Edgerton Avenue, Hale's Corners, Wisconsin 53130

Srpske Melodije Various Artists, 22436

O'Connor, St. Clair Shores, Michigan 48080

Macedonian Horos Joe Tricoff and his Orchestra Jay Tee Record Company, 714 Ardmore Drive, Dearborn Heights, Michigan 48127



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The program at the Festival of American Folklife conveys a hint of the musical traditions vibrantly alive in South Slavic American communities. But it can be only an inkling. For anyone who would like to hear, see, or taste more, I recommend visiting a dance, a picnic, a concert, or a musical tavern in the South Slavic community in your area.