

A Guiding Spirit

An Interview with Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig

Ralph Rinzler (1934–94), founding director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, worked over the years with a host of gifted musicians and folklorists, doing fieldwork, issuing recordings, and presenting concerts. This concert series honors Ralph by highlighting his work and the work of his colleagues in conserving and extending traditional expressive culture.

This year's concert is curated by Ethel Raim.



From 1970 to 1974, Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig conducted fieldwork for the Smithsonian Festival as program directors for Balkan and Slavic cultures. Their research brought them to Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Illinois, and New York, as well as Yugoslavia and Greece. For Ethel and Martin, Ralph Rinzler's reputation preceded their meeting him. Raised on Folkways records and as music editor of *Sing Out! Magazine*, Ethel had heard about Ralph and his work with legendary artists Bill Monroe, the Balfa Brothers, and Doc Watson. Likewise, over ten years before undertaking in-depth field research for the Smithsonian, Martin remembers attending a folk festival at Swarthmore College in 1958 where he heard Ralph perform.

This year's Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert features New York-based immigrant musicians with whom Ethel and Martin — and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance — have worked in

recent years. This concert led Ethel and Martin to reflect on the profound influence Ralph had on their lives and their work.

Ethel Raim: In 1968, Ralph Rinzler invited me to the evaluation meeting at the Newport Folk Festival. I was raised in a Yiddish-speaking home in the Bronx, and the music and accents that I grew up with weren't represented at the festival. I was given \$3,000 to bring other types of music to Newport and the Smithsonian. Back in New York, I hadn't the foggiest notion of how I would connect with these artists. So Ralph and I did field research together. Ralph was only two years older than I was, but it felt like he was much older. I was in awe of his experience. He was my mentor. I had spent years listening to and transcribing traditional music, but I didn't come with academic training in field research techniques. Neither did Ralph, but he was steeped in traditional music. Ralph gave me space to learn and even

Festival visitors join participants from Yugoslavia in a kolo at the 1973 Festival program Martin Koenig and Ethel Raim co-curated. Martin is in the circle at the right. Photo by D. Sutherland, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

flop on my face. It was a hands-on experience in asking about tradition and music in people's lives.

We started out in lower Manhattan. We went into a Galician Spanish shop on 14th Street and found recordings of Antonio Mosquera, a Galician bagpiper. Tony was a baker on Long Island, and we went to visit him. I believe we were the first non-Galicians who took any interest in him, his music, and his community. He performed at the Smithsonian in 1969.

We also went to Greek music shops on 8th Avenue and asked about local musicians. A man pulled out a newspaper and said, "Let's see what's happening this weekend." A Pontic Greek celebration was taking place at Crystal Palace, in Astoria,



Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig (on stage) observe activities at the Greek program they co-curated for the 1974 Festival.

Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution

Queens. We walked in and almost walked out. Greek Americans playing guitar and amplified music. Ralph hated amplified music — not that I loved it — but I had an instinct to stick around. Sure enough, a little later, a single musician got up with a three-stringed *lyra* and started playing Pontic music. Everybody was dancing. I thought the floor would cave in. It was magical.

After that initial trip to Crystal Palace, I learned from Ralph that you need to identify a liaison in the community to let you know about celebrations — someone who will introduce you and vouch for you. These were people inside the community but with a certain perspec-

tive to share with someone on the outside.

As Ralph's responsibilities and commitments at the Smithsonian increased, his time in the field grew shorter. Ethel remembers what it was like to do fieldwork without Ralph as a collaborator.

ER: The questions to ask weren't difficult, but it was knowing when to back off and when to move forward. Part of research is bolstering people's self-esteem, and Ralph brought out the best in people. He had a way of becoming the people he was with. Ralph inspired people to look at the root forms of tradition. He was genuinely in love with tradition, and with people as the carriers and the practitioners — those lessons are almost more important than what questions you ask and how you draw out information.

From 1969 to 1974, Ethel undertook fieldwork for the Smithsonian Festival.

Early on, she invited Martin Koenig to join her. Having founded the Balkan Arts Center in 1966, Martin had spent much of the following years documenting music and dance in Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia, but he had returned to the United States and was living in Philadelphia, ten minutes away from Ethel.

ER: In 1970, the order was "Do Ohio — all the ethnic traditions of Ohio." It was nuts. I called Martin and said, "We are featuring the state of Ohio. We can hardly do a fraction of the research that has to be done, but why don't you join me?" He agreed. We took a two-week trip to Ohio, and barely slept; those days were long and intense. In Cleveland, we came into a Serbian hall, and a guy came over immediately: "What are you doing here? What do you know about us?" I thought it was the end. This guy was tough. We tried to transmute into Ralph. We said, "We are

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here from the National Museum.” This didn’t mean a thing. “What National Museum? The Smith-what? What do you know about our culture?” Martin said, “She sings your songs.” The next minute the guy has me on stage with the local orchestra. I sang “*Niška Banja*” (a Serbian Gypsy song), and the man’s jaw dropped. Sometimes you had to prove yourself to be allowed to ask your questions.

When field research brought them closer to D.C., Ethel and Martin invited Ralph to come along.

ER: In 1974 we worked in the Karpathian Greek community in Baltimore. When a *glendi* (community celebration) was going to happen, we’d call Ralph. He was always eager to widen his knowledge of tradition and communities. Yes,

work work. It was not necessarily the most agile singers, not necessarily the ones with the fastest fingers, but those who sang and played from the heart.

For Ethel and Martin, the context of Festival programs became increasingly important. You couldn’t have the performance without the community from which it came, says Martin; without one, the other didn’t work.

ER: Ralph was extremely receptive to our ideas about contextualizing traditions. We were learning about traditions and documenting repertoire, but also asking: how do we translate this to a context outside of the community that still preserves the integrity of the tradition and the people involved? For the Greek program, we imported the entire Olympian

matter what the odds were — if he believed in it, he went to great lengths.

Ethel maintains that her relationship with Ralph was critical to her work today.

ER: My direction was so formed by my association with Ralph. Ralph was a mover and a shaker, but my relationship with him was personal. Ralph was someone who got excited about traditional music and how it fit into people’s lives — the extraordinary artistry of ordinary people. He had an incredible disposition and enormous optimism. He could find humor in all situations. If things didn’t work out, you hardly ever knew it because he managed to turn adversity into something positive. It’s easy to feel isolated doing this work, and it was wonderful to have a kindred spirit.

Compiled by Emily Botein

This was music from the heart, and Ralph was bowled over.

—Martin Koenig

it was his work. Yes, it was his job, but it was his passion, so it came before anything. If he had dinner plans and something came up, he canceled. In Baltimore, Ralph saw tradition in a way that he had never seen it — a first-generation immigrant community: three musicians sitting on top of a table in a small community hall, playing *lyra*, *tsambouna* (bagpipe), and *laouto*.

Martin Koenig: This was music from the heart, and Ralph was bowled over. Music and dance had a role in the welfare of the Karpathian community, and Ralph was touched by the community and the people who made the music. He didn’t have to be familiar with the form to understand it; Ralph had a great set of ears. Ethel and Ralph and I shared an orientation that put us in good sync together. The same music resonated for us. We’d hear a particular instrumentalist, and we’d all be moved. That trust made our

community from Baltimore to host the *glendi*. The Smithsonian didn’t know why they needed to bus people down. “Why don’t you just bring musicians?” Ralph supported us and went to bat for us. I am sure he took a lot of flak, but he knew it would be a coherent program.

After 1974, Ethel and Martin’s focus shifted from the Smithsonian to their own work in New York City. The Balkan Arts Center was expanding and soon became the Ethnic Folk Arts Center. Ralph remained a close collaborator, however, but now it was Ralph who traveled to New York as a board member of the center. Martin’s respect for Ralph only grew.

MK: He was a romantic, but had his feet on the ground. Margarita Mazo once said that Ralph could be like a tank when dealing with bureaucratic obstacles. He was an excellent strategist. He had romantic principles, encased in stately formality. He was a champion of traditional musics. It didn’t

Founder and former co-artistic and executive director with Ethel Raim of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, Martin Koenig has recorded, filmed, and photographed music and dance in Balkan villages and in urban immigrant communities in the United States since 1966. He has taught Balkan dance for the past 30 years throughout the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.

Koenig retired from the center in 1994, and has directed the King County Performance Network, a touring program of contemporary dance in the Seattle, Washington, area, for the past two years.

As artistic and executive director of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance since 1994, Ethel Raim is a leading supporter of and advocate for community-based traditional arts and has conducted extensive field research in urban immigrant communities in the United States. Since the early 1960s, Raim has frequently performed traditional Balkan, Russian, and Yiddish vocal music, and was founder and musical director of the Penny-whistlers, a seven-woman vocal ensemble that recorded for Nonesuch and Elektra Records.