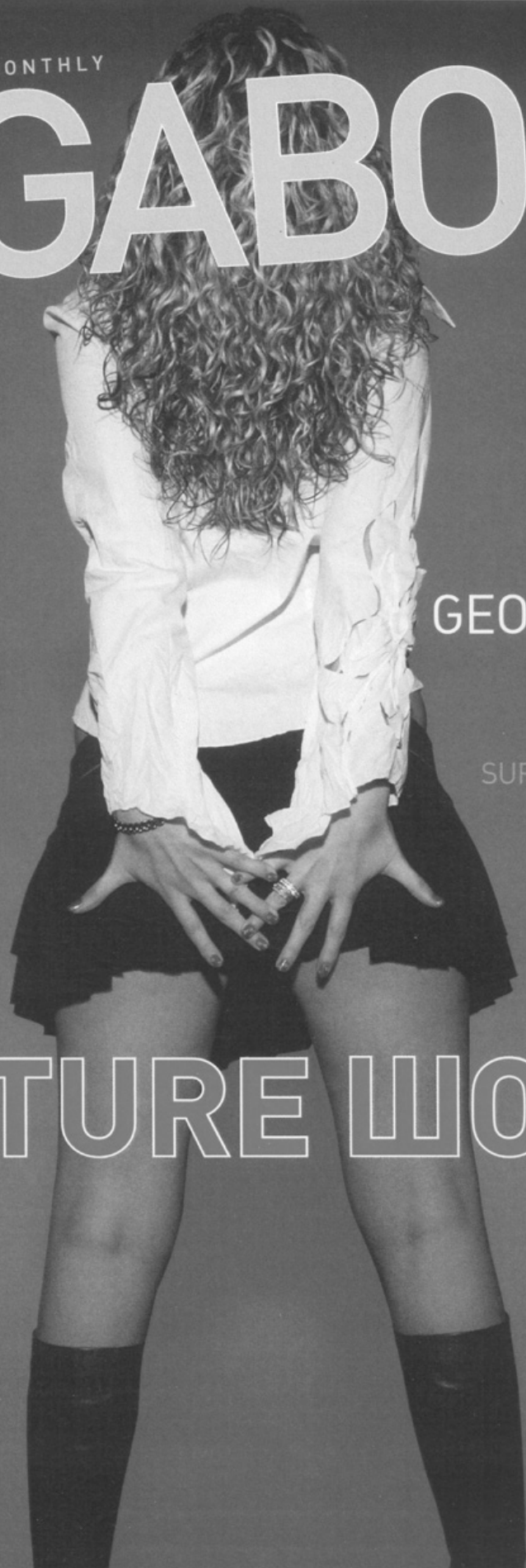


BULGARIA'S ENGLISH MONTHLY

# VAGABOND

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# CULTURE WOCK!!

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MARTIN KOENIG'S BULGARIA IN 1966



# Art

BY LUCY COOPER; PHOTOGRAPHY BY DRAGOMIR USHEV

# DIFFERENT WORLDS

**S**omewhere in outer space the voice of Bulgarian folksinger Valya Balkanska is hurtling toward the stars. The recording of her singing the folksong *Izlel je Delyo Hajdutin*, the Bulgarian Shepherdeses' Song, was one of 27 tracks included on a gold disc that was launched into space onboard the Voyager spacecraft in 1977. It was part of a NASA project in collaboration with American popular scientist Carl

Sagan, to bring a greeting from Planet Earth to any alien life forms out there in the far reaches of the universe. Martin Koenig is the man who made the original recording of Balkanska, but he had a more earthly purpose in mind.

The story begins in the 1960s, when Martin, a specialist in traditional ethnic dances, was teaching at a school in New York, the only one at that time to offer Chinese and Russian classes. Two of his pupils were Bulgarians. They sparked his interest to travel to their home country to learn about its traditional folk dances. It would be easy for him to travel to Bulgaria, they told him. "This was both naive, but maybe not so naive," he reflects. Martin arrived in Bulgaria, an American in Sofia at the height of Communism, armed with two letters of introduction: one from anthropologist Margaret Mead and the other from New York cartoonist Dr Zhivko Angelushev to his brother, Boris Angelushev, who lived in Sofia.

His arrival was received with modest disbelief among the cultural community in the *Commitet za vrazki s chuzhbina* and the *Institut za muzika*. Could this foreigner really be interested in working on a project to record Bulgarian traditional →



Masked Bulgarian dancers, village of Caugagia, Dobrudzha, Romania, 1968



Martin Koenig in front of the Bulgarian National Gallery, October, 2006



Bulgarian wedding party, village of Ivanov, Yugoslavia, 1968

folk tunes? He was lucky to meet a supportive, understanding team of people, who were invaluable in assisting him in his fieldwork.

Unsurprisingly, given the political situation of the time, this disbelief manifested itself as suspicion in some quarters as to what this American's real purpose was in venturing behind the Iron Curtain. Martin got wind that certain government agencies were questioning his motives for being in the country. So he went and presented himself, along with his documents from Columbia University, to the government agency to prove his good intentions. The agency subsequently denied that there had been any doubt as to the nature of his activities in the first place.

Unlike his dealings with the establishment, Martin found that gaining the trust of the people he had come to work with wasn't an issue at all. "I found them very open. I would arrive with a letter from the *komitet*. This letter would be presented to the local authorities, saying this person is working here, help him in any way you can. But I didn't have to show a letter, people were just very open." He is moved by the memory of this.

Summer roadside *sedenka*, 1967



Bagpiper and friend, Thrace, 1979

He travelled to the remote mountain villages of Bulgaria to record the villagers performing their traditional dances. "They were happy to be recorded. My work in America as director of an institute for immigrant and ethnic music and dance is the same. When you work with people dealing with their strengths and their basic being, they love to display themselves. It's their essence. I was not asking them to do something foreign to them. I was asking them to do something that was basic to their identity."

He soon realised that his work would extend far beyond the recording of dances. "I was coming here to learn dances and at some point that first year that shifted. I understood this was a very special time, a time of transition, that what I had come across was very finite and was going to be gone."

The project became one of documenting and memorialising a culture, through recording songs and music, filming dances and photographing people, the like of which had not been attempted on such a scale before. It was a labour of love for Martin. "Every year I'd go home and be selling my cameras to raise the money to be able to come back again. I wasn't paid. We borrowed money to make the records." The

Bulgarian *gadulka* player, village of Caugagia, Dobrudzha, Romania, 1968





Veliko Tsvetkov Tsonev and wife, village of Garvan, Dobrudzha, 1979



Villagers, village of Obidim, Pirin-Macedonia, 1968

two records that were made as a result of his fieldwork were *A Harvest, A Shepherd, A Bride: Village Music of Bulgaria* (May 1970) and *In The Shadow of the Mountain* (October 1970), part of the Nonesuch Explorer series. These introduced a Western audience to traditional Bulgarian folk music for the first time, many years before the genres “world” or “ethnic music” existed.

Another result to come out of the project was the “Images and Voices of Bulgaria, 1966” exhibition which was held at the National Ethnographic Museum in Sofia this November. Renowned Bulgarian photographer Ivo Hadzhimishev – you can see his photos of nude celebrities in an anti-piracy campaign around Sofia – invited Koenig to return to Bulgaria to exhibit the photographs he had taken 40 years before.

On returning to Bulgaria for the exhibition, Martin found that much has changed since the 1960s. Communism has been swept away by

### **If you look at the faces of the people, you can see they have a sense of self**

the “New World” wave. Of the way of life that he captured in his photographs, audio recordings and films, Martin says that now only remnants survive. “I don’t think it’s a living thing now. It is a totally different society. Bulgaria’s entered the new world. The new world overwhelms everybody. It’s like a huge wave that comes along and it is very hard to resist.”

Maybe the new world has brought more material wealth to some, but Martin believes the way of life he saw had “a richness beyond money-richness”. “If you look at the faces of the people, you can see they are people who have a sense of self, they are people who have a sense of community. They’re intact. In this new world that we are in it’s alienation, it’s separation, you do it yourself. It’s a totally other approach to life than that old approach.” This old way of life wasn’t present only in Bulgaria, he says, but it persisted for longer here and in the Balkans than in the West or in America. →

**Martin Koenig recording village musicians at the Yambol Folk Festival, 1967**

Returning to Bulgaria with his daughter in 2005, Martin took the night train from Greece and recalls being struck by the abandoned, derelict buildings in the countryside, while at the same time he was overwhelmed by the sheer volume and speed at which new construction was underway in the cities and resorts. On his most recent return, he is saddened to see that the villages are now composed almost solely of old people. The younger generations have moved away to seek employment in the cities. "It's become a different world."

"Then, the streets were empty. There were no private cars, only official cars," says Martin. "Now..." He gestures toward the window of the café where we are sitting. It is mid-afternoon, but the cobbled central Sofia street outside is clogged with cars, taxis and jeeps, sitting bumper to bumper. "Then, it was paradise," he says in wry half-jest.

The world Martin captured through the lens of his camera certainly seems alien to the *chalga* scene of today, which is about as far removed from the music and culture Martin was recording as the Voyager is from Earth. But change is always present. Even when Martin was making his recordings in Bulgaria's remote mountain villages of the 1960s he noted the rivalry between the older and younger generations of musicians. "The younger musicians laughed at the music of the older generations as quaint and old-fashioned". The old musicians felt offended by the younger ones incorporating music from outside influences like TV and radio into the traditional music of their village. They felt pushed aside and marginalised.

This process of change is ongoing. Before Martin embarked on his project, world music was not even a genre. Balkanska was unheard of. He and his colleague even met with resistance when they chose to record her, rather than someone else's, voice. "We wanted Valya because we thought she was spectacular and, overcoming much



opposition, we succeeded in recording her. We'd never met her before. We set up in an ordinary one-room school. We brought over a technician and all the equipment. We bought a brand new car, which wouldn't break down going to all these places, from Germany and drove down here so that we weren't dependent on anything. My colleague Ethel Raim and I went to Smolyan, in southeastern Bulgaria, and met Valya, sat and talked to her for an hour and then recorded her. She did one take for that song and it is absolutely spectacular."

When Martin and Ethel Raim co-founded The Balkan Arts Centre in New York in the 1960s (now the Centre for Traditional Music and Dance) it was the first

of its kind. Now there are several such centres in cities across the US. World and Ethnic music can be found on the shelves of every music shop. Gypsy music is reviewed in the *Rolling Stone*. And you don't have to venture into space to hear Valya's voice. As well as the original recording, the track appears on *The World Behind You* by Yaku, United Ethno, a collection of traditional Balkan music mixed with modern influences. Ethnic has become mainstream. But remembering and understanding its roots is key, Martin believes.

No one knows where the Voyager will end up, or whether its message will be heard. Just as no one really knows where the New World wave will take us. The Voyager project was as much an exercise in understanding ourselves as it was to make ourselves understood by whatever lies out there. It is only by looking back that we can understand where we are now and where we want to go; what has been lost and what has been gained.

**The world Martin captured through the lens of his camera certainly seems alien to the *chalga* scene of today**

"You must know where you come from in order to know where you are going," says Martin. It is his hope that the people he photographed, the culture he has memorialised, "may provide a link to a vibrant way of life which is gone, but which should not be forgotten because it reveals a dimension of strength and beauty in the human spirit, which we, in our longing, may not even know we are missing." ■