

## NEW ORLEANS HOSTS SECOND ANNUAL "RUSSIAN WINTER FESTIVAL"

by Irene Perloff McCullough

Two weeks after participating in New Orleans' Second Russian Winter Festival, I am still wallowing in the afterglow of one of the most exciting, fun-packed weekends I can remember, saying "Ooooh" and "Wow" every chance I get.

Maybe the high point was parading through the French Quarter in a horse-drawn carriage, wailing on my zhaleika while Nan Nelson sang and played 'Barinya' on her alto domra, Max's contrabass bouncing as we sped along the cobblestones. Up ahead, Czar Balalaikas' coach comes alive with a bayan riff from Valery Poimenov, and Eddy Svetlovsky's voice fills the sky! Our coach lurches, the contrabass sways. "Hey-eeey," Nan and I shout, Balkan-style, as the mimes and street musicians wave back, "Follow us to the Russian Winter Festival!"



*Czar Balalaikas — (l-r) Valery Poimenov, David Cooper and Eduard Svetlovsky.*

*photos courtesy of Irene Perloff McCullough*

Or maybe the best part was leaving the mom and pop radio station WWOZ that morning after a live music promo, and running into singer Aaron Neville.

Or Danny O'Flaherty himself, dressed in Russian costume, doing a jig in the back of his pub while Czar Balalaikas brought the house down, then later playing an Irish tune on Zhenya Tochenaya's domra, and dancing "Korobushka" with Natasha. "That's right," our emcee Mikko reminded the audience, "A Russian Festival in an Irish Pub in the French Quarter!" And why not? Isn't that what you'd expect in a city known as The Big Easy?

But while such magical moments seemed to appear spontaneously throughout the weekend, nothing was by accident. Everything was the result of Natasha Ramer's tightly organized festival planning machine, Moscow Nights Inc., a non-profit organization started by Natasha to promote Russian cultural events in New Orleans. Made possible by grants from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation, the Georges Lurcy Charitable and Educational Trust, Danny O'Flaherty, and Stolichnaya Vodka, the New Orleans Russian community and arts community joined forces to become Natasha's festival team. A steady stream of artists, actors, musicians, dancers, bazaar organizers, and sign-makers poured through her house all weekend.

"Natasha's a great mobilizer of people," her husband Sam told us, "and the Russians here all pitch in and help each other. If Natasha needs someone else in the kitchen to make piroshki, she just calls a friend who calls another friend, and soon someone we've never seen before shows up to help." Particularly amazing was the 24-hour-a-day Russian food preparation that took over Natasha's kitchen, thanks to Ilonka Band (who also managed ticket sales) and Atlanta's Zhanna Poimenov (wife of Czar Balalaikas' bayanist Valery Poimenov) who jumped in and became an incredible non-stop piroshki machine!



*Festival Organizer Natasha Ramer*

As with the first Russian Winter Festival, O'Flaherty's Irish Channel Pub was the perfect place to make the event happen. Despite the cold weather, the crowd showed up early to enjoy the Russian bazaar in the pub's courtyard. While sampling piroshki and sipping vodka, guests enjoyed displays of Russian art and photography, could purchase Russian matrushka dolls, or experience a taste of New Orleans by watching an artist create exotic Mardi Gras masks. Particularly hot items were the collectible posters created for the festival by Russian artist, Larisa Ivakina. And all the while, from the courtyard balcony, the Komenka Ethnic Dance and Music Ensemble provided lively pre-show vocal entertainment.

In keeping with the festival concept, many events happened simultaneously. Guests could wander back and forth between the show and the bazaar, and could, during intermission, go to the other side of the pub to participate in informal Russian folk dancing. When the young "market waifs" weren't providing local color at the bazaar, they could participate in a children's corner of Russian storytelling and language games. And, on hand for the weary musician or bazaar vendor, was a chair massage therapist, himself a local jazz musician.





Being an actress and theater director, Natasha created a program and cast of guest artists that evolved right up to the last moment. The Winter Balalaika Ensemble was an ad hoc ensemble of musical friends created especially for the festival which included Zhenya Tochenaya, prima domra, Nan Nelson, alto domra, Ray Kane, bass domra, Irene Perloff McCullough, prima balalaika, David McCullough, alto balalaika, and Max McCullough, contrabass. Opening the show, the ensemble performed 'Ryabinushka' with Natasha Ramer and Nan Nelson vocals, and three numbers from the repertoire of the Balalaika Orchestra of Detroit: 'Malchiki', 'Luchinushka/Troika', and 'Old Gypsy.'



*"Winter Festival Ensemble" musicians Nan Nelson, Zhenya Tochenaya, Irene Perloff McCullough and David McCullough entertain patrons at O'Flaherty's Pub.*

New Orleans' own Komenka Ethnic Dance Ensemble, directed by John Rodi, performed three dances, 'Karusel', 'Khorovadnala' and 'Gypsy Heart', making the most of the intimate pub space to charm the audience with graceful moves and captivating leaps and spins. (Komenka performs dances from around the world throughout the U.S. and abroad, and was the only non-gypsy group to be invited to the International Gypsy Festival in Hungary last year.)

Did we say gypsies? Yes. New Orleans' guitar virtuoso Tony Green and his Gypsy Jazz trio performed several compositions, including a 'Russian Lullaby,' a Django-style rendition of Franz Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsody #2', and superb accompaniment to Natasha Ramer, performing "Night is Bright" and 'Dark Eyes.' Then, a change of pace, Pushkin poems read by the noted New Orleans actor, Donald Lewis.

And did someone say...Czar Balalaikas? When we heard that Eduard Svetlovsky, Dave Cooper and Valery Poimenov were coming from Atlanta, we knew it would be a great weekend. Eddy brought the house down with vocals, 'Two Guitars,' 'Gari, Gari,' and 'In the Blacksmith Shop,' winning the audience with his gusli playing and some new jokes. Dave Cooper played an impressive rendition of the balalaika solo 'Russki Napievi,' then amazed the audience with his skill on his ever-growing collection of Russian folk instruments, which includes zhaleikas, sopilkas and the captivating Glad sandwich bag. Valery Poimenov's expressive bayan playing both supports and sings out, giving this trio a truly Russian sound.

Then, intermission, more mingling in the courtyard, folk dancing with Eliot Raisen, then a repeat of the program for the next show's audience.

When was it over? I'm not sure. But it was well after we all left O'Flaherty's. Well after we rode through the streets at 1 am with gypsy tapes blasting out of our mini-van. And sometime after the party at Tony Green's apartment...where we stood looking out of his window at the lights of the French Quarter, the buildings of the city beyond, and the twinkling stars beyond that.



*Singer/guitarist/pubowner/festival patron Danny O'Flaherty tries his hand on Zhenya Tochenaya's domra.*

[Editor's note: Russian Festival organizer Natasha Ramer and Komenka director John Rodi are co-chairing the host committee for the 24th annual BDAA Convention to be held in New Orleans during the summer of 2002. Danny has invited us all back to O'Flaherty's. This will be an event you won't want to miss!]



## THE WASHINGTON BALALAIKA SOCIETY

The Orchestra rang in the (Julian) New Year in grand style, playing for royalty and commonfolk alike at the annual Russian New Year's Eve Ball at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. Princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses were dressed in their fancy (and often ancient) finery for the annual event which raises funds for the Obolensky-Saltykoff orphanage in Russia.

An expanded ensemble of WBS musicians entertained at the Maslenitsa celebration at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in a program which included gypsies from New York, dancers from the Embassy children's program, mimes and a classical cellist. Something for everyone. Later in February the ensemble provided the music for a Russian Tea sponsored by the McLean (Virginia) Choral Society.

As part of a program to broaden our audience base, the WBS annual Spring Concert will be presented twice this year – once in Virginia and once in Maryland. Featured on the program will be balalaikist David Chrapkiewicz, pianist Sandra Uphill, vocalists Yuri Dobrovolsky, Vladimir Rozenblat and Anya Titova, and special guest artist Alexander Tsygankov.