

Ethnic Dance Music in Northern Indiana

United Serbs

IH215 Hammond & Calumet City, Illinois - May 24, 1987. Serbian dance band.

Dan Danilovich (accordion), Milan Kalaba (accordion-vocals), Rade Ostojic (lead vocals), Rodney Vezmar (electric guitar) & George Mihajl (drums)

Dance in Serbian Hall of St. Elijah's Orthodox Church in Merrillville; recorded by Paul L. Tyler

The event the band played for was a Sunday evening dance ending a one-day folk festival at St. Elijah's Serbian Orthodox Church near the southern city limits of Merrillville, just north of Crown Point, Indiana. Folk Dance troupes were in attendance from a half dozen churches, most from within the Diocese headquartered at Grayslake, Illinois. One group had come from Toronto. All of the groups performed on the large stage before an enthusiastic crowd of a hundred fellow folk dancers and about 250 parents and other adult spectators. The adults in the audience sat mostly at round tables, while children and other folk dancers sat in the five rows of chairs set immediately in front of the stage.

The dance performances lasted for about three hours as each church's troupe appeared in two ten to fifteen minute segments. Most troupes had separate groups for children and teens (or young adults): for example, St. Nicholas' in Waukegan, Illinois; St. George's in Schererville, Indiana; and St. Elijah's. The last two groups are taught by Dan Danilovich [see St. Sava Folk Dancers]. (The group from St. Sava did not participate because they are "on the other side" of the political division in the church.) The largest and most polished troupes, those from Milwaukee and Toronto, brought only their teens and young adult dancers. All the troupes danced to tape recorded music, except for the Milwaukee group which had an accordionist and a bass drummer.

There was an hour-long break when the performances ended around 6:00 P.M. Serbian food prepared by the church women was available in the hall's kitchen. Meanwhile, the dancers changed out of their colorful costumes and the United Serbs set up on the stage. The social dancing began at 7:00 and was finished by 10:00. Since the dance ended at a reasonably early hour, a number of people remained in the hall's well-appointed barroom. A number of men, who had drunk a good amount, sat around a table singing Serbian songs.

The social dancing was dominated by the young dancers present. There were always at least a hundred dancers on the floor, three-quarters of which were in one of two lines of teens and young adults. The adults usually danced in their own lines, but the dance lines wove around each other as they moved through the hall. Most of the numbers played were kolos, a fast dance in duple meter, and a slower walking step that sped up and became a hop at the end. A few tunes played had specific dance steps: for example, Ravno Oro.

The music of the United Serbs is not tamburitza music, the style of music favored by the older immigrants who came to the US before the war. They speak English--only a few know any

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Serbian--and are not as concerned about Slavic politics. The post-WWII immigrants prefer the accordion-led Kolo music which they brought with them from Yugoslavia.

Dan Danilovich

Of the United Serbs four lead musicians (drummers come and go), only Dan was born in this country. His parents came here from Yugoslavia, where his father fought with the Chetniks for Serbian independence during the second World War.

Originally, Dan and Rodney had a band, Slavuj, that was well-known among Serbs in Chicago and up north. Milan and Rade, from near Crown Point, had a band Srbska Omladina, that played mostly at St. Elijah's and St. George's in Indiana. When the latter band broke up, Milan was left with a lot of bookings to fill in Indiana. Dan's dad had worked with Milan at the Republic Steel Mill and told him his son played accordion. At the time, 1981, Dan was still a senior in high school. (Rodney is 28--three years older; Milan and Rade are in the 30's.) The four of them got together and played once; then Milan called up and invited Dan and Rodney to leave Slavuj and form a new band. Since the two original bands had been from opposite sides of the political division in the Serbian Orthodox Church, Rodney came up with the idea to call the band the United Serbs. According to Dan:

"It would kind of bring the two sides together, at least as far as the kids are concerned. They're still far apart in politics. ...Besides the church, dancing, the music is the only thing that brings us together."

The Serbian Orthodox Church in America into Raskolnik and Federal sides over the question of the authority of the Patriarch in Yugoslavia. Both sides are opposed to the sovereignty of Yugoslavia and the reign of the communists. But the Free Serbian Orthodox Church was formed as an American polity that owes no allegiance to the Patriarch in Yugoslavia. Each Serbian congregation has a sister congregation nearby that left the mother church in Yugoslavia: Raskolnik St. Sava in Gary split from St. Elijah's, St. George in East Chicago from Federal St. George in Schererville, St. Simeon's in Chicago from St. Archangel Michael, and so on. The monastery in Libertyville, Illinois was owned by the Chetniks, but the Federals claimed that since the Rastkolniks were splintering from the older church, they should give up their claim to the land and find a new site. The Federals won in court and the Rastkolniks built a new monastery nearby at Grayslake.

The United Serbs are very popular with young people in Serbian churches in the Chicago area. They are often invited to play in Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Hot Springs, Arkansas; but they are seldom able to travel that far because either the money is not good enough, they're already booked closer to home, or they don't have enough time for both the travel and their jobs at home. They play frequently for Chicago-area churches on both sides of the conflict, except for a few Federal congregations who are closely tied to other bands.