

BALKAN BRASS

BLASTING IN NEW YORK CITY



BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Brass is big in the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia, where Slavic and gypsy traditions mix to create complex rhythms and melodies that you can't help but dance to.

Michael Ginsburg first discovered Balkan brass music when he took part in a week-long folklife music and dance seminar organized by the East European Folklife Center in the summer of 1982. He was originally drawn to attend the seminar for accordion lessons. "When I saw there would also be brass stuff, I dug around in my closet and found my trumpet and dusted it off," says the 62-year-old gym teacher. "I ended up having the time of my life playing this music."

It turned out there were quite a few other people in the class who were in the same boat. "After the seminar ended, we all just decided to keep doing it," he says, explaining how the Balkan brass band, Zlatne Uste, which means "golden lips," got its start. "But, it turned out that we needed more to sustain it than just playing every week. I also belonged to a group that organized a weekly folk dance and my turn was coming up. I called everyone together and said, 'We have a gig coming up.'"

"The music is very rhythmically intricate and kind of forces an athletic type of dancing," says Ginsburg, attempting to describe the music

they play. "It's highly influenced from the East—Turkey—and a great deal has been transmitted by the gypsies, who have an unbelievable knack for writing music that bypasses your brain and hits you right in the heart."

Zlatne Uste band members had such a great time at the first gig that they wanted more, but there were few places to play. Undiscouraged, the group decided to create their own audience. "We were one of maybe two or three bands in New York

City that played some form of Balkan music," says Ginsburg. "We decided, as a promotion, and a way to have another gig, we would make a festival."

That first year the Golden Festival had three groups and about 150 people attended. Ginsburg says that the popularity of the music has mushroomed in recent years. "At the last festival there were 60 groups and about 2,500 people in attendance," he says.

Following the tradition of Balkan brass

New York City based Balkan brass band Zlatne Uste.





bands the 12-member group, aged from 30 to 72, includes a tubas, baritone tubas, bass tubas, clarinet, alto saxophone, tupans, baritone, bubanj, and trombone. “*Truba* is the Serbian word for horn,” explains Ginsburg, in other words, rotary-valved flugel horns. The *bass truba* is a tuba, a *tupan* is a two-sided drum, and a *bubanj* is a two-sided drum that has a cymbal built onto it.

Beginning in 1987, the band has made six pilgrimages to Guča, Serbia, where trumpet is king, to participate in its Dragachevo Brass Festival. “In Serbia, especially in the gypsy neighborhoods, you find trumpet players just hanging out everywhere,” Ginsburg says. “You see kids with trumpets, just like in Harlem you see kids with basketballs.”

RESOURCES

If you are interested in sampling some Balkan Brass music, Ginsburg recommends these albums.



Zlatne Uste’s album *In the Center of the Village*, is a good example of the full-blown sounds of Slavic and gypsy brass.



L’Orient Est Rouge by Kokani Orkestar, from the Republic of Macedonia, draws from traditional dance sources in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey.



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