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The Bay Area's Balkan Beat

The music of Southeastern Europe has deep roots in the area.

By j. poet

On a recent evening at Amnesia in San Francisco's Mission district, a young, hip, tattooed crowd packed the dance floor as the musicians onstage played high-energy music. But it wasn't rock 'n' roll. They were folk dancing to a tune in 7/16 by Brass Menazeri, a nine-piece band that plays Serbian dance music. The dancers snaked around the floor holding hands in a long line as the ancient sounds of Eastern Europe filled the air with uncontained joy.

Brass Menazeri may be the most visible group of musicians playing the music of Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia in the Bay Area, at least to people outside of the folk music community. But the region, particularly Berkeley and Oakland, has long been a hotbed of Balkan music.

The Bulgarian women's choir *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (aka the Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir) came on the scene in the late 1980s and is largely credited with kicking off a worldwide surge of interest in the music that continues today. Its first hit album, *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (originally recorded in the mid-Fifties but released in 1986), featured traditional songs sung in complex polyphonic arrangements. But even before the group's performance in Berkeley in 1988, Balkan music was being played here.

"There was a significant community in the Bay Area that was deeply involved in Balkan folk music and dance," said Shira Cion, executive director of Kitka, the Oakland-based women's choir that is internationally known for its renditions of Balkan, Slavic, and Caucasian vocal music. "Some of these folks had been teaching and practicing this music since the Fifties. At that time, the Balkan scene was mostly Americans captivated by the beauty, complexity, and community-generating power of the songs and dances from that part of the world. Some of those folks went to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to study from indigenous masters there, but most learned from recordings and each other." When Cion first came to the Bay Area in 1987, she says there were two women's choirs, Kitka and Savina; a number of Balkan dance bands; and the Westwind International Folk Ensemble.

After *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares'* Berkeley performance, however, Balkan music became more popular locally. "Kitka had just booked the Oakland Ensemble Theater for what was to be our biggest ever production, a joint concert with the Russian folk dance group Neva, for the week after *Le Mystère's* Berkeley date," recalled Cion. "We were nervous; we didn't think anyone would be interested in another Eastern European choral event right on the heels of *Le Mystère*, but we had a sold-out show and turned away hundreds of people. Those songs and vocal techniques suddenly captivated people."

Many people in the Bay Area Balkan scene first met as members of the Westwind Ensemble, including David Nadel, who later founded Ashkenaz. "David started Ashkenaz because he got interested in Balkan folk dancing," said Lise Liepman, a former Balkan music consultant for and member of the Ashkenaz board. Liepman also plays in two bands — Edessa, which performs the music of Macedonia, Armenia, and Bulgaria; and Ziyiá, a group that plays traditional Greek music. "At first, people were dancing to records, but when people started learning how to play the music, David invited them to come and play Ashkenaz," she said. "He gave everybody stage time when they were beginners."

Kitka also helped launch the careers of many talented musicians over the years, including Juliana Graffagna of Janam, formerly known as the Black Olive Babes. "There's something deep and elemental about the music for me," said Graffagna, who sang with Kitka for twenty years and continues to do so occasionally. "I don't know if it's a past life thing, but I'm drawn to it. I always wanted to be in a rock band, but never found music I wanted to do until I discovered Balkan rhythms and tonalities. I started Janam to blend traditions and play this exciting, rhythmically challenging music."

Graffagna, who is Italian, studied Russian in college before joining Kitka. "My natural singing voice has a folksy open-chested quality," she said. "It was suited to Balkan music." When she started Janam (meaning "dear one" or "sweetheart" in Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Turkish), Graffagna pulled together some of the Bay Area's best Balkan musicians, including Peter Jaques, founder of Brass Menazeri, and Tom Farris of the Helladelics and Izvorno IcePick.

Graffagna met Farris at a Balkan music camp in Mendocino that's sponsored by the Eastern European Folk Life Center. "They put on a gathering every summer where people sing, play traditional music, and dance," she said. "You take classes from musicians from the Balkans during the day and, at night, there are big dance parties. That got me hooked. The rhythms are in 7, 9, 18, and 11. When I danced to them, I understood the music on a deeper level."

For Farris, who had always played drums in rock bands, the Balkan camp came as an epiphany. "The music took over my life," he said. "Being a rhythm-section kinda guy, the rhythms grabbed me. I grew up with prog rock, which sometimes added or dropped a beat. In the Balkans, there's a rationale to the odd time signatures. The feel is directed at the dancers, with tunes that can be slow, slinky, and trancey or fast and energetic. Melodically, there are a lot of ornamentations, those wiggly notes you never see written on the page. The Balkan masters can take a simple phrase and play it over and over again and still make it compelling."

Jaques, too, was attracted to the odd time meters. As a member of a clown cabaret performance group, he was trying to write music that broke out of the standard 4/4. An accordionist friend he was playing with asked him to attend that year's Balkan camp. "I went and had my mind blown by all the incredible talents, including Michael Ginsberg of the Zlatne Uste Brass Band, one of the groups that kicked off the current Balkan wave, if you can call it that," said Jaques.

With Balkan music being played regularly in the Bay Area, is the genre getting more popular, or are more people just aware of it? "It's hard to know," said Jaques. "I've been playing it for twelve years and there does seem to be a current wave of interest, maybe because you have bands playing this traditional music with an American perspective. Brass Menazeri plays rock clubs, New York's Slavic Soul Party adds soul and funk to Balkan beats, and Janam blends in American folk music. That wouldn't have happened twenty years ago."

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Janam

BY JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Considering the naturally eclectic Bay Area group Janam's admitted span of influence — from the Balkans to Turkey to the Appalachians and elsewhere — one might suspect theirs is a project run slightly amok in the multicultural global village. But that's far from the case, as we can hear on the band's debut album, released last year. And no doubt we will witness it when the group makes its Santa Barbara debut at UCSB's MultiCultural Center on Saturday night.

The overall impression is one of cohesive musical vision, making the more relevant point that there are certain interactive realities of music from different regions and ethnicities. Janam is a proudly unplugged and accomplished sextet — with such left-of-typical instruments as oud, ney, accordion, clarinet and hand drums — and makers of a sound well worth checking out.

At the center of the group is its founder, the glowingly fine vocalist Juliana Graffagna, who has sung in the famed cross-cultural group Kitka among other musical endeavors. She recently discussed her fresh and formidable new project.

Can you give me a bit of history on how the band came together? Was it with a clear idea of what you wanted to be, stylistically, or an evolving identity?

I knew I wanted to play Southern Balkan music with instrumentalists. I had spent 20-plus years singing a cappella harmonies from Eastern Europe with Kitka Women's Vocal Ensemble, which was lovely and amazing and made me hungry to create a sound that mixed voice and other instruments I adore, such as clarinet and oud. I also wanted to delve deeper into the intricate and rockin' odd-metered dance rhythms characteristic of this music.

So, one by one, I invited my favorite players — who also happened to be friends — to start a band, and they all agreed. Balkan music was the impetus for the band, but it's been really exciting to explore Sephardic Jewish music and to juxtapose Balkan with American folk songs and look for the commonalities. In these past three years since we formed, our sound and repertoire have definitely evolved as we've gotten to know each other as musicians, put our spin on these traditional tunes, pushed the boundaries a bit and interwoven original material.

Were there any particular models, in terms of other groups tilling similar ground, when you started out — or presently?

There are American groups that play Balkan music, some few right in the Bay Area, and try to mix it up a bit, adding other influences. We've all spent years listening to traditional groups from the Balkans and draw our main inspiration there. We then each bring our own backgrounds — pop, jazz, rock 'n' roll — and play around and see what happens. While we are the product of our influences, we strive to create a unique, fresh sound.

Yours is a roots band, in a sense, but a complicated roots system, from Eastern Europe to Appalachia and back. Is there a kind of musicological and cultural investigative aspect to your work, beyond the music itself?

Absolutely. I think you have to learn about the cultures from which the music is drawn in order to understand it and give it the respect it deserves. We've all spent time in the Balkans studying and playing with master musicians: Gari (Hegedus), our oud and violin player, goes to Greece and Turkey just about every year.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Bay Area has been the lucky recipient of many immigrants from the Balkans, so there is a treasure trove of great musicians right here at home. We also attend Balkan music and dance camps where folks who are similarly smitten with this music come together to learn, play and dance and be immersed in the sound and spirit of the music. Ironically, it's been the Appalachian tunes that have demanded a lot of focus. We've all be doing these odd meters for decades and joke that we have trouble playing in 4/4.

Would you say that your work with Kitka helped lay the groundwork for this project, and do you see this as an extension of that project?

Kitka definitely helped lay the groundwork. It was through Kitka that I became interested in roots music and was able to travel to Bulgaria, Ukraine, Greece and most recently Georgia and Armenia. Kitka was also my introduction to the larger Eastern European music community in the states and the reason I fell in love with this music in the first place. With Kitka, I got to explore the rich a cappella women's singing traditions common in the Balkans, and with Janam, I get to taste the dance music and develop solo voice repertoire with awesome and soulful instrumentalists. I feel very fortunate.

It does seem that the Bay Area is especially rich in terms of musicians from different places and traditions, who also are interested in fusing and stretching those traditions. Have you found that to be the case, and do you have any ideas why that region is gifted in that way?

I think the Bay Area attracts people with diverse and eclectic tastes, as well as a lot of free thinkers. There is a sense that you don't always have to follow strict rules about music — you get to make it up as you go along — so there's a lot of room for experimentation. I do believe you have to have grounding in the traditions before you can stretch the music, and this area really is blessed with talented folks who do the work and then just get to play. Or maybe it's just the weather.

You will be performing at the UCSB MultiCultural Center, a great little haven for sounds from around the world. Would you say that the general public awareness of things multicultural and sounds from the so-called "world music" scene is stronger and broader than it has been in years past?

I think so. You can hear every kind of music imaginable on YouTube. These ancient folk styles you used to have to travel to remote villages across the world to hear are now literally at our fingertips. This wasn't the case when I was growing up. We're such a global culture now, and this country is rich in so many different cultures. It's hard to avoid "world music." And we are so much the better for it, in my view.

Where would you like to see this band go, artistically and otherwise? Do you have any particular goals or future notions?

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We love playing together and have had lots of wonderful shows and made great connections in our relatively short time together as a band. We recently released a CD, which we're very proud of, so I'm happy with our success so far. As far as the future goes, I'd like to write more music for us and do more collaborations.

I guess my main goals are to continue to dig deeper into the traditional music, which is our mainstay, and take more risks stretching and fusing different styles, which our audiences seem ready to embrace. People have described being transported by the music we make, and I like that. If we can move people and help usher them into a beautiful, alternate space, then we're doing our job.