

Jimmy Joe Hadžikajmaković Interviews Peter Lippman

For the last few years, someone called Jimmy Joe Hadžikajmaković has written a regular ethnographic column for the weekly newsletter of the Seattle Balkan Dancers. The caption for the column reads, "Tales from places where folkdancing comes from: Ethnographic history and mystery, embroidered with love and garlic, from Anatolia to Zenica."

A few people knew who Jimmy Joe was, but a lot of people had no idea. Then someone spilled the beans and it turned out the column was ghost-written by Peter Lippman. At that point, Jimmy Joe had the idea to interview Peter, and here is that series of interviews.

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Jimmy Joe Hadžikajmaković: It has come to my attention that of those who read this column, neither of them were aware that it is actually you, Peter Lippman, who is the author of these lines. So what gives? I am, like, your alter ego or something?

Peter Lippman: Well, that's not possible, since I have no ego whatsoever.

JJ: Whatever. Let's get down to the business at hand. Why do you write this column?

PL: I was raised from an early age by folk dancers. For a time, that was all I knew. It was a lovely experience, of course. My mother took me to the dances a couple of times a month, when I was, say, seven or eight years old. There I was amidst all those grownups, the only kid, or one of two perhaps. (There was also Michele Anciaux.) I heard this great music, and I discovered that there were people in other countries, where they didn't speak English. It was fascinating to me. And I loved the dancing. I remember my mother having me clap out a Daichovo rhythm. It's all down to my mother. And there's all this razzmatazz lately about NFDI [Northwest Folkdancers Inc]. Well, I was a card-carrying member of NFDI in 1961.

JJ: Gosh, you're older than dirt.

...Then what happened?

PL: I remember at age ten resolving that I would learn languages and travel. That is what happened, although it took me a while. I didn't get to Eastern Europe until I was almost thirty. As a teenager I had danced with the Koleda Balkan Ensemble under Dennis Boxell, and later participated in the founding of the Radost Folklore Ensemble. We toured Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania in '81 and then I defected and stayed in Yugoslavia for about a year. And then moved to Turkey and did the same.

JJ: Did what?

PL: Studied music and language. And while I was in Yugoslavia, somehow, I stopped calling myself a folk dancer - though I never stopped being a dancer. My mother made me that, and that can't be erased.

JJ: What. Why not a folk dancer?

PL: Don't get me wrong, folkdancing is a lovely thing and I still enjoy it. But while in Yugoslavia and vicinity, I left behind me a limited vision that only connected with some dances and the steps of those dances. It became very important to me to know more about where those dances came from, and not just as a collector of dance steps, but also to know something about the lives of the people who dance those dances. Or used to. There was so much more going on – and culture is not static in the Balkans, by any means. For example, no one wore opanci. Maybe in 35 years since then I've seen two people in the Balkans wearing opanci [traditional handmade leather shoes] outside of a folklore ensemble.

So, what changed for me? Post-World War II urbanization as a major shift in ways of life, and many other kinds of cultural phenomena, became as interesting to me as learning a new folkdance.

And while I was living there, it was fascinating to me to see who sang, and when, and who didn't, and why not. First, I was in Novi Sad, Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia. And I traveled throughout Serbia and around much of the rest of Yugoslavia. I saw that people in Serbia sang a lot. A couple of guys would be sitting at a bus stop late at night and they would be singing with that lovely vibrato, wide enough to drive a Mercedes truck through. Or at a wedding, everybody sang. There was no DJ. And my friends, I had a group of friend who were musicians, musicologists, and people who worked in various positions at Radio-TV Novi Sad. Every week we would get together and have dinner, drink some špricer. That's the Vojvodinan specialty, half Banatski Risling and half soda water...there's a whole culture associated with that drink. And we would sing till past midnight. It became normal to me to sing after dinner, and when I came back home eventually, and no one sang, it was a very uncomfortable feeling. It still doesn't feel right.

And people knew each other. In Novi Sad, a mid-sized city of about 250,000 at that time, there were no six degrees of separation. It seemed that everyone had some connection with everyone else. And that connection came down to the personal level, where it was more important to stop and share a coffee, maybe play a game of cards, and catch up on the news, than to hustle off to work or the (non-existent) mall. So I learned something, by contrast, about alienation and about what sociologists call "thick society." I learned something about what we are missing here, and maybe we don't even know it.

JJ: So that's why you don't call yourself a folk dancer? I don't get it.

PL: All I'm saying is that there's so much more out there, in real life, in the former Yugoslavia and the rest of Eastern Europe where these folkdances come from. That's why we called this column "Tales from places where folkdances come from." And the point is that I decided to share some of those experiences, some ethnography, if you will, behind the façade. I consider it a matter of respect that we, so enriched by the various folkloric treasures we have received from abroad, should try to know more about the people who created these magnificent traditions. I am interested in helping other people, if they choose, to see what's behind this lovely recreation.

JJ: But lots and lots of folk dancers know a lot about these things, some of them also know languages.

PL: Obviously! And I'd love to hear from some of them; my e-mail address is at the top of this column every week. I know other people have much to share as well.

JJ: I'm sure they do.

...So then what do you think about folkdancing now?

PL: It's fantastic! You get to meet people and form a lovely little community. People meet, they get to move their bodies. They get to touch each other. They get to hear music. They share. And compare it with other forms of recreation in our Western, consumer-oriented society. So much is tied up with acquisition, shopping, getting and spending - and now, with digital technology that creates another veil of separation between people and turns contact into a virtual thing. Folkdancing is friendly, not aggressive like paintball. But at the same time, there can be a virtual element. A level of remove from the reality of Eastern Europe, a decontextualization.

JJ: You seem moved to continue writing about these things.

PL: I'd like to honor the people who introduced to me what I mentioned before, the rich traditions of Eastern Europe: First of all, of course, my mother. Then Boxell. And Mary Hoagland, the second woman who taught me to dance. And Dick Crum, Mirko Spasojević...Omar Batiste, Alexander Eppler who inspired a whole generation of musicians and continues to do so, and many, many more. Mary Sherhart, a beautiful singer if there ever was one. Atanas Kolarovski, and Ljupka Kolarova, in her time an exquisite dancer.

JJ: Do you do other writing?

PL: Well yes, I'm writing a whole book.

JJ: I suppose it's about Bosnia. Is it non-fiction?

PL: I hope so. But make that "Bosnia-Herzegovina."

JJ: What's it about?

PL: Life since the war, and what human rights activists are doing.

JJ: What's the title?

PL: Oh, c'mon...

JJ: Never mind.

PART II

Jimmy Joe Hadžikajmaković: I was thinking about what you said last week about respect, and about knowing more about the lives of the people where these folkdances come from. Can you expand on that connection?

Peter Lippman: Respect, sensitivity, these are things that are important. We in the folkdance community are demographically, on the whole, part of the most privileged population on the planet. We are enriched both by the cultural and the material "contributions" of so much of the world. So I would ask, how much do we take this for granted? What do we know about the people who created these riches, and how much do we acknowledge their gifts? These are not only questions that apply to the lovely pursuit of folkdancing. My brother Dave wrote a book called Bleaching our Roots about the contribution of African-Americans to mainstream American culture - a contribution that is so much more vast than people know, acknowledge, or pay back. That's another huge example, but just one of many.

JJ: Aren't you being rather politically correct?

PL: Yes. You call it political correctness, but I call it sensitivity and respect, and my parents taught me to be that way. I'm not ashamed of that.

JJ: You play music too, don't you.

PL: A little bit.

JJ: I heard a pleasant rumor that the Bucharest Drinking Team is going to play for us here. You're in that outfit, aren't you? And speaking of respect, just how respectful is that group?

PL: I'm so very glad you asked that question. I'm familiar with all the comments and criticisms, of course...and some praises too. First of all, for background for those who may not have had the pleasure of experiencing our show, we are a rather large band that performs a mix of Balkan, Romani, Romanian, and other music from the region, with a tinge of modern pop elements here and there, so, some disco, some reggae perhaps, all kinds of things. In the mix of folk and pop, there's a similarity to the Europop genre, for those who may be familiar with that spectacle.

And we have a sports motif - it's a Team, after all. Much of our aesthetic inspiration springs from the intuition of Marchette DuBois, our Coach. Although she might not stop to expound at length on the meaning of what we do, nevertheless the message is there in our stage act. And I've found that that is something that really engages people, our sometimes quirky, never staid, combinations and inspirations.

I was just reading a long essay by Max Cafard, the legendary "surre(gion)alist" philosopher from New Orleans. In his "Surre(gion)alist Manifesto," first published in 1990, he writes some things that really resonate for me with respect to the artistic approach of the Team. I'm going to quote a bit of that here:

"The word 'Dionysian' means: an urge to unity...an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction."

There, go chew on that a while.

JJ: You're not "faithfully replicating," as another band expressed it, the folklore of the old country, are you.

PL: Someone has to be out there on the edge* - and we're not the first nor the last to combine different elements and let the aesthetic evolve, as it inevitably will. And in that space, of course you're going to get criticized. We have been criticized for being disrespectful, and I don't resent that; it keeps us mindful of that necessary sensitivity that I've talked about. But I disagree; most of that kind of criticism comes from Americans who are purists, rather than from people who come from...places where folkdances come from. Yes, we mix up sportswear and traditional "costume" elements. I prefer to think of that as light-hearted and fun, rather than mocking. And you might be surprised, but in our group, we have had some of the most searching discussions about racism and sensitivity that I've ever experienced in some decades of playing with bands.

* ("If you're not on the edge, you're taking up too much space" - Bob Brozman. h/t RL)

JJ: What about all the drinking?

PL: There's actually less there than meets the eye. You'll notice that there has been movement away from the portrayal of drunkenness. Many of our songs have been drinking songs, especially earlier on. So there's a celebration of that way of being together. But beyond that, to my mind, the "drinking" in the name of our group has different meanings, and interpretations grow as time goes on. After all, coffee and tea are for drinking, too.

It's about people being together and sharing good times. When people get together, they drink things. In the part of the world where our material comes from, rare is the social interaction

that takes place without the imbibement of liquids in a communal fashion. The importance of that sharing as part of a wholesome hospitality was driven home to me in my years in Eastern Europe. You arrive at someone's house, and you are immediately offered a drink: coffee, tea, water...and sometimes something stronger. That liquid hospitality is another custom that, for me, came to feel right as I spent more time in Eastern Europe.

JJ: You mentioned Romani influences just now. That's Gypsy music, right?

PL: Well, we really try to avoid using the "g-word," if you don't mind. That evokes such demeaning stereotypes about a group of people who have real lives, real feelings, and who have lived through some of the most tortuous times over the centuries. And the stereotypes are really unfortunate. You can't get away from them. We were just in Austin and I saw a sign in a shop, "Gypsy junk." And another shop named "Gypsy Wagon." There's plenty of that in Seattle, too. It's as if the Roma, let's call them by their real name, were characters out of some cartoon strip. And people cavalierly call themselves "Gypsies" without a thought to the depth of that culture - nor to the contribution, the enrichment of our lives from that culture.

JJ: But some people who are, ok, Roma, do call themselves "Gypsies."

PL: That's their business. But we have the responsibility to err on the side of sensitivity - and we, all of us, have been asked to be careful about this terminology. This is, actually, a good topic for a future column. Let's come back to this.

Part III

Jimmy Joe Hadžikajmaković: Here's another question: do you ever think about why people are drawn to folkdancing?

Peter Lippman: I read the book *Balkan Fascination*, by the late ethnomusicologist Mirjana Laušević. While I've long had my own thoughts on this, I expected to find her answer in there. Early in the book she described how she moved to the United States from Bosnia, and at some point she went to a folkdance in New York. There, she was astonished to witness that ordinary Americans were engaged in the culture of the Balkans. So she researched the whole phenomenon and wrote about it. She went back to earlier phases of the folkdance movement in the early 20th century, well before World War II and before the living memory of most of us. She wound up by discussing at length the whole subculture based around the Mendocino dance camp. Ultimately I felt that the book was stronger on description and history than on explanation of why people are drawn to Balkan folklore. So I offer my own opinions.

First of all, over the last century mainstream American culture has been so blanched, commercialized, and homogenized, that ordinary human interests and passions have just been wrung out of it. There is always much more variety behind the scenes, but I'm talking about what is presented through the nearly omnipotent media as "American culture." That behind-the-scenes varied culture, in all its glorious diversity, is constantly – for generations now –

under pressure from commercialization and mass media to homogenize, and so much of that variety has simply been lost.

You could say that this mainstream culture is powerfully represented by the safe, clean portrayal of American life as seen on television. Now, perhaps, that portrayal is changing, gradually and only in "safe" ways, catching up with the times – but always lagging behind. But especially in the time that folkdancing became a "craze," between one and two generations ago, the ideal of mainstream culture as delivered through the media was overwhelmingly white, middle class, and bland. Millions and millions of people were comfortable with that virtual representation of a lifestyle that they aspired to. The ideal in this culture still seems to be arrival in the middle class and acquisition of the material trappings associated with that economic status.

But that mainstream ideal has left so many people out of the picture. It leaves out the immigrants and the people who are not white and the people who make music in the subways or dance in the Mardi Gras or other street festivals. It leaves out young unpropertied people and debt-ridden students whose prospects are drastically reduced in comparison with people coming up a couple of generations ago. It leaves out artists; it leaves out creativity generally. Those categories are erased from the dominant portrayal of American culture; they are subversive with respect to that portrayal.

Some people have always felt the absence of the possibility of something richer – even if they didn't know what they were missing. I didn't know much about what was missing from our culture until I went to live in Eastern Europe. I think we are all missing something that is more locally particular than the massive, homogenized mainstream culture that dominates in the United States. Something with more of a taste of garlic, figuratively speaking – and with more love!

So those left-out people all over the country have been, for generations, looking for something that they can get engaged in on a more spiritual level than what is offered in our mainstream, dare I say "commodity fetishist," culture. So some people become born-again in one religion or another; others join the military; others become fanatical sports enthusiasts, and some look for their enrichment in other cultures.

That is a fruitful exploration; however, enthusiastic involvement in those other cultures is in danger of replicating mainstream American activities: shallow recreation, or acquisitiveness. In referring to that urge to acquire, in this case I am speaking of, for example, the collection of dance steps or costume parts, rather than shiny products from a department store. But still, the activity of folkdancing can become commercialized, that is, stuffed back into the dominant form of our mainstream culture, with a different, "exotic" content. To the extent that is the case, then folkdance and folklore enthusiasts are missing the richness of the cultures "where folkdancing comes from."

In that vein, I'll share here an excerpt of a written by the writer and social commentator Fredy Perlman (1934-1985), who was born in Czechoslovakia and immigrated to the US. This is from his essay, "The Reproduction of Daily Life" (click [here](#) for the whole thing):

"In capitalist society, creative activity takes the form of commodity production, production of marketable goods, and the results of human activity take the form of commodities. Marketability or salability is the universal characteristic of all practical activity and all products. The products of human activity which are necessary for survival have the form of salable goods: they are only available in exchange for money..."

But on the other hand, in a better scenario, folkdancing is a step towards a more substantial spiritual enrichment. The elements are really there, as I've mentioned before. People are touching each other and moving their bodies; that's already something that's rather rare in our uptight mainstream culture. And some folkdancers are really dancing, learning to move their legs and other parts of their bodies in a very expressive way.

They are, ideally, creating a community that's not based on commercial transactions - that's a subversive activity in this alienated, atomized, ever more virtual society. So these are some of the attractions of folkdancing, reasons people are drawn. And when we arrive at Balkan music and dancing, well, we have an outlet for an expression of passion that is quite absent in mainstream North American culture.

There's a curious situation there, however. It's not our culture. It's something that's different and, perhaps, exotic. We're involved in that search for "more garlic and more love" because so many of us don't have our own version of a rich, deep, evocative, let's say, "folkways," for lack of a better word...ways of doing things together. And so in replicating someone else's traditions, it is as if we are getting warmed by the reflection of a fire, rather than by the fire itself.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Western society, other people are inventing and reinventing their own ways of passing spare time together, all in synthesis of the elements that are in our cultural atmosphere. I'm referring to other creative, non-commercial activities. For example, people are playing Irish music, joining African marimba ensembles, and participating in a Mexican fandango community, just to name a few. And there are more overtly political outfits such as Bread and Puppets Theater in Vermont, and the Rude Mechanical Orchestra in New York City.

To the extent that we see a fusion between these artistic endeavors and the political work of the heirs to the Occupy movement – that includes supporters of Bernie Sanders – then you have that much more possibility for cultural evolution, the development of organic local culture in North America. That's something that's simultaneously subversive and healing. Those creative activities are the cultural hope of the future, over the long term.

JJ: What do you mean by "virtual society?"

PL: Even in rehearsals I participate in, people are pulling out their cell phones and poking at them. I went into a café in the University District the other day and out of nine people, ten of them were operating their laptops. No one was speaking to each other. You can't call that a kafana atmosphere; it's rather the opposite. I have the impression there's more actual socializing going on in a graveyard.

I think the problem with "virtuality" is obvious. Of late, there is ever more comment in the media on the barriers people put up between each other through the use of electronic forms of communication. People think they are so much the more in contact with each other, but what's the nature of that contact? The range of emotional interaction – not to mention physical contact – is limited to emoticons. We *become* emoticons – what a dreadful fate! And especially with younger people, this kind of constraint over the long term becomes hard-wired into their neural pathways and confines the parameters of more fruitful, intimate interaction. It becomes uncomfortable for people, those hooked on gizmos, to venture into direct contact with people in a sustained manner, let alone to confront and resolve potential conflicts.

Don't just take my word for this; here's an interesting article on that subject: "We Are Hopelessly Hooked," by Jacob Weisberg ([here](#)).

JJ: I would admonish you not to be a fuddy-duddy; electronic technology and social media are here to stay.

PL: Of course, and there's much to be said for their possibilities. The forms are new; what we make of them is our choice, as it has been with all other media before them. But the tension between being creative with those forms and giving in to their control is heightened.

So it becomes a brave struggle to break through those virtual barriers and actually do something together. It's a healthy thing when people are doing something in the same room together – dancing, playing music, singing, and so on – and keeping their "pocket TVs" in their pockets.

JJ: To wind up this series of interviews; are you going to be writing this column in perpetuity, or...?

PL: Since when can you end a sentence with "or?"

JJ: I'm the one who's asking the questions here. Let me ask something else: We've been doing this column for a few years, but some people may be new readers. Can they see your past articles somewhere? We did a whole series on Sevdalinka, another on Serbian and Romani brass music, and another on Bosnian Jews. And lots of other interesting stuff: "esoteric presuppositions," sunnets, etc, etc.

PL: Not that I know of. I think the material is not on the internet anywhere other than this interview. But maybe if someone writes with a specific request, I can send them some past material. And for that matter, no, this column will not be going on forever.

JJ: You mean I'm going to die?

PL: What's it to you. You're just electrons. But, inshallah, this will all go into a book someday.

JJ: I'm going to be famous!!

PL: Yes, and as my father used to say, before inflation: "That and a nickel will get you on the subway."