

JOHN FILCICH AND THE KOLO FESTIVAL

Caroline Kingsley

The 44th annual California Kolo Festival, the premier Balkan dance festival of the West Coast, hosts a celebration of dance and music Thanksgiving weekend at the San Francisco Russian Center, 2450 Sutter Street, near Divisadero.

The Kolo Festival was started in 1952 by John Filcich as a fundraiser for Vyts Beliajus, a nationally known folkdance teacher who was seriously ill with tuberculosis. It was held in a hall on Castro Street about 3/4 block down from Market. This first festival consisted of two parties, one on Saturday night and one on Sunday. Half the participants were Croatians, Serbians and a few gypsies and the other half were folkdancers.

By the second year the festival was evolving into a bigger event. Vyts had recovered (and would live another 42 years). He attended and taught dances from Lithuania and also introduced Makedonka Kolo. Madelynn Greene, another well-known folkdance teacher, used to have a pre-party on Wednesday night and those who arrived early from out-of-town also attended. She held it in her dance studio and served pizza, wine, and soft drinks. Anatole Joukowsky, in the early years, put on a Sunday ethnic dance concert with dances predominantly from Eastern Europe. Also, at the second festival, syllabi were provided by John, who mimeographed and collated them with friends before their Thanksgiving dinner. A Saturday night dinner was cooked by Mrs. Frances Filcich, John's mother. Spaghetti, sarma (a Croatian stuffed cabbage roll and strudel were some of the foods served. Cecilia Benrath was very helpful with the preparation and as a hostess. Edith Cuthbert brought her records to play for the Thursday evening party and when needed during the festival.

In time John organized a committee to help him run the festival. The first committee consisted of John, Chairman; Gene Teatum, Treasurer; Wilma Hampton, Secretary; Walter Grothe, Master of Ceremonies and Counselor to the Committee; Al Bahr, Concert and Bands; Bob Shin, Decorations; and Edith Cuthbert, Records. Among those who have attended every festival are John Filcich, Ed Kremers, and Edith Cuthbert.

This year, Joanne Splivalo and Sharen Skorup, John's niece, are Co-Chairs. The festival features teachers: Dick Crum, Balkan kolos; Mihai David, Romanian folkdance; Nina Kavardjikova, Bulgarian folkdance; Ventsi Sotirov, Pirin folkdance; and Tatiana Sarbinska, Bulgarian singing. The many bands will be announced soon.

The Kolo Festival also provided seminars and workshops: "Costuming", "Promoting Your Dance Group", "Folkdance in the Schools", and "Preventing Dance Injuries". The vendors offer costumes, folkcraft, instruments and music for sale. Ethnic food will be served through the day and evening. Wearing costumes is encouraged at the parties, especially Saturday.

Another highlight is the Saturday evening concert of Dance and Music, where, each year, various dance groups, music groups and individuals entertain, thrill and inspire us for the party to follow. It is an exciting way to end the weekend and leaves the participants looking forward to next year.

The full weekend package costs \$55 pre-registration, \$65 at the door. The Saturday evening Dance and Music Concert is \$18 in advance, \$20 at the door. For those wanting to go to only part of the festival, there are separate prices for each event.

For more information, pre-registration, scholarships, or to help out, contact: Joanne Splivalo, (510) 652-7859 or 1-800-730-5615 or P.O. Box 20181, Piedmont, CA 94620.



"Young John" circa 1955-60 during the height of teaching folk dances of the Balkans. Photo by Ace Smith during the Stockton Folk Dance Camp.



John circa 1985. Costume top is Croatian from the Zagreb area. Photo by Ace Smith at the Stockton Folk Dance Camp.