

PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE AWARD 2018

Ethel Raim

In 1986, the NFO was organized to unite individuals and organizations that support folk arts in the United States. Membership includes members of recreational folk dance and music groups, performing ensembles, researchers, choreographers, managers, teachers, foundations, institutions, camps, community ethnic festivals, and international festivals that host folk ensembles from abroad.

The purpose of the National Folk Organization is to advance and preserve folk arts representing both national and local ethnic customs as they exist throughout the United States; to promote and encourage the exchange of folk dance and dance related folklore in the United States of America and abroad, and to effectively network those who support these objectives.

Peter Rushefsky, Ethel's successor as current executive director of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in New York writes: *[Ethel] Raim has been one of the leading pioneers in researching and presenting ethnic music and dance traditions in the United States, and [has] assisted thousands of immigrant artists to preserve and nurture the distinctive artistic voices of their communities.*

Beginning at a time when "folk music" was practically synonymous with rural and Anglo-Saxon, Ethel Raim drew her inspiration from the lilting, unaccompanied Eastern European melodies she grew up with in New York City.

Nancy Groce, from the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, explains: *It seems obvious to us now that traditional culture flourishes in a variety of settings, but when Ethel began her journey, many folklorists and folk supporters argued that traditional culture – and by that, they often meant British-American folklore – survived only in the remotest regions of rural America. Her initial interests in Balkan music and dance led her to document and collaborate with an ever-widening panoply of urban ethnic performers, master artists, and communities.*

In 1959, with a freshly-minted music degree from City University of New York, the then twenty-three-year-old Raim went to work for *Sing Out!* Magazine. By 1965 she was their music editor. She was involved with the early Newport Folk Festivals (the first 3-day Festival was held in 1960).

In 1963 she co-founded, directed, and sang with the Pennywhistlers, among the first to bring traditional Balkan and Russian Jewish singing traditions to the folk music world. They laid the seed for the Klezmer revival that followed and were the early inspiration for many of today's Balkan choral groups.

Ethel attended the very first Koprivshitsa Festival in Bulgaria in 1965. Martin Koenig, a folk dancer, teacher and documentarian of Balkan traditional music and dance, met with her to learn whatever he could from her before going there himself. They became friends and traveled to Bulgaria together in 1968. The recordings they collected were released in a two-album set on the Nonesuch Explorer Series, Village Music of Bulgaria.

Peter Rushefsky tells this story: *A revelatory moment for immigrant music in America came at the close of the 1968 Newport Folk Festival. The Pennywhistlers had performed, and the festival's director, Ralph Rinzler, asked Ethel for her impressions of the festival. After pausing for a moment, she*

asked Rinzler why she didn't hear any voices on stage with accents like those she had grown up hearing in the Bronx. Rinzler was moved and charged her with identifying leading immigrant performers for the next Newport festival and then to do the same for the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife (now the Folklife Festival).

Ethel asked Martin to join her at the Smithsonian and from 1970 to 1974 they worked as co-directors of the Slavic and Balkan Cultures Program. As Martin explains: *Up until this time, there were few immigrant ethnic folk performers presented on any American stages – local, regional or national. Ethel has been a leader helping to shape the progress that the public sector folklore field (versus the academic folklore field) has made over these past fifty years in presenting these performers. They can now be seen and experienced in festivals and concerts held across the country.*

In 1974, Martin invited Ethel to join him in getting a fledgling organization he had founded in 1968 off the ground. She became co-director of the Balkan Arts Center in 1975, eventually expanding the organization's scope to include work with a diverse array of performing arts traditions through festivals, tours and fieldwork documentation. The organization's name changed in 1981 to the Ethnic Folk Arts Center as its reach broadened, and since 1998 has been called the Center for Traditional Music and Dance (CTMD).

For more than 4 decades, Ethel Raim worked to build the Center for Traditional Music and Dance into one of the country's foremost organizations supporting traditional arts. She was the chief developer and driving force behind most of the Center's programs, particularly Community Cultural Initiatives, a model program that worked with immigrant artists, especially recently arrived artists and ensembles, to provide them with the skills and strategies they needed to be successful in the American musical landscape.

All this while also demonstrating a unique ability to teach others how to produce the authentic sounds of Balkan and Yiddish singing; writing and receiving grants to produce several documentary films; nominating many National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Award winners; and receiving awards herself from the American Folklore Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology.

Nancy Groce makes sure to point out that, in addition to her amazing administrative and fieldwork skills, throughout her career Ethel has always done her work with an unflinching dedication to social justice, making sure the artists with which she worked were properly paid and respectfully treated.

As Martin Koenig says: *Her 60-plus years of work giving voice to the arts of America's immigrant communities – this has truly been her life's work.*

Ethel Raim's work as an advocate for and supporter of the preservation and celebration of traditional arts within immigrant and ethnic communities is a prime example of Alan Lomax's appeal for "cultural equity" – the right of every community or ethnic group to express and sustain its distinctive cultural heritage. One can witness this daily at CTMD, and across the country, as communities are empowered to take pride in their traditions, clearing space in the cultural landscape for their voices to be heard, and passing those cultural treasures on to the next generation.

Ethel, please come up to receive your Preserving Our Heritage Award.