Mirjana Laušević. *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America.* Oxford University Press, 2007. With CV/DVD. Bibliography and index. 299 pp. ISBN-0-19-517867-X (hardcover) [1]

In 1970, a friend and I went to former Yugoslavia, and discovered Macedonian dancing. On returning home to Montreal I discovered that there were groups of people who were not themselves from these cultures but were meeting regularly to learn and sometimes perform dances and songs from them, and, ever since then, have been one of them. When *Balkan Fascination* appeared, my interest was piqued both as an ethnomusicologist and as one of the people whose decades-long Balkan fascination I looked forward to having discussed and perhaps even explained.

Laušević begins engagingly, describing her own perplexity as a graduate student recently arrived in the U.S. from Sarajevo, upon finding herself at one of the now legendary annual folk dance parties in New York City. The music, the dancing, the food were all familiar to her, she writes, and she assumed that as she met some of the people involved, they would turn out to be second or third generation Serbs or Croats or Macedonians, Bulgarians, etc., for, she reasoned, why else would they be so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about so many aspects of these Balkan cultures? Upon realizing that in fact the vast majority of the people she later dubbed "Balkanites" had no family background at all in any of these cultures, she was astonished, an astonishment which was to become the first step into her own fieldwork and research. Effectively, this fieldwork turns a good deal of ethnomusicological scholarship inside out – an "other" studying "us."

Part One, after the introduction, presents the main aspects of the Balkan "scene," as the author refers to it, especially the summer camps devoted to teaching, learning and performing – indeed living – Balkan arts and related aspects of culture. Into this discussion are woven various key concepts in ethnomusicology and anthropology, including the persistent spectre of authenticity, "peasantry and preservation", affinity and identity, and the dilemmas of (mis-)representation.

Part Two focuses on the antecedents of this Balkan dance scene. It deals with issues of idealization, neighbourliness, approaches to the "other," and so on, in the contexts of immigration settlement and also recreation and physical education classes, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially, but not exclusively, in the New York area. Laušević offers a very interesting,and also long overdue, history of the folk dance movement in the U.S., beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The ideology behind immigrant settlement houses and pedagogy, the first established folk dance teachers, the production of recordings for use in teaching dances, the role of Worlds Fairs, are only some of the issues ably narrated and discussed. Besides its historical interest and the insights it provides into how the Balkan dance scene developed, the study yields such gems as facsimiles of music notation and dance instructions for an early twentieth century "Bulgarian Folk Dance" set to a "Hungarian melody": as Laušević succinctly puts it, "the fact that Bulgarians never danced to Hungarian tunes was not a concern for Chalif" (101). The section closes with a discussion of the implications of the "reenactment of the peasant world," not, as the author says, conceptualized as appropriation but rather as a bridge to a lost, inner sort of human past (129). It is worth

---

[1] Editor's note: As this review was in press, we received the sad news of the author Mirjana Laušević's tragic death from a recurrent illness. She leaves her husband, Tim Eriksen, and two small children, Luka (age 5) and Anya (age 3). Her husband passed on her message to her many friends and colleagues, that she wanted to be remembered for her life, rather than her passing. Her book will help us do that.

remembering this conceptualization in the context of our tendency to glibly ascribe a nefarious or potentially nefarious neo-colonialism to activities which may be quite innocent of it.

The author goes on to describe the transition from "international" to Balkan-centred folk dancing, leading from the mid-1950s up to the present. The move to bringing in teachers from the Balkans, the move from recorded to live – when possible – music, the early and ongoing forays to the Balkans themselves, the development of dedicated centres and eventually of the now flourishing camps are all presented, never losing sight of the central issues outlined in the first chapters of the book. The "magic," the "special space," the alternative to the "real" world or the creation of an alternative "reality" are all explored, often in the words of the "Balkanites" (as the author dubs them) themselves.

Questionnaires were used to gather much of the data in the book; in fact, I remember being sent one to complete at an earlier stage of the author's research, during the years I directed a Balkan singing group. Census-type questions are always tricky to set up and analyze. Laušević 's conclusions about "Balkanite" backgrounds are confusing because there is so much overlapping among categories. Perhaps it is better to summarize an impression of them than to quote numbers: basically they were almost all Caucasian and of European descent, with a fairly large percentage of Jews, and rather few people from the Balkan areas themselves. Although Montreal dance teacher and folklorist Yves Moreau's survey is cited, it is presented confusingly, and without any explanation of the Francophone demographics of Montreal. Less confusing was the high percentage of Balkanites with doctorates: 43% of the men and 23% for the women (23). Only 3% stopped formal studies after high school, and none at all worked in manufacture, transport, trade or unskilled labour (25)

The disc which comes with the book is a CD on one side and a DVD on the other. All the examples on the eight-track CD are interesting and some quite beautiful, but it could perhaps have been a little more generous. One track which caught my attention was track 5, from a vinyl called "Happy Folk Dances" produced during the 1950s folk dance era. The text which refers to it in the book merely comments that it might sound "pallid" for contemporary listeners (161) – I thought it sounded not pallid but sort of innocent, so happy it was somewhere between laughable and sad. The DVD has fourteen tracks, and is much more satisfying. Surprisingly, only one track shows folk dance instruction (#11). A couple offer scenes from the camps which are a central part of the book, and two (#7 and #10) feature legendary Macedonian Roma singer Esma Redzhepova (whose emblematic song "Charariya shukariya" was appropriated in the opening scene of *Borat*.) The Zlatne Uste festival which started off the author's fieldwork appears only briefly (track 4). Roma virtuoso clarinetist Ivo Papasov appears (track 12) and considerable time (some 9 minutes: too much, in my opinion) is devoted to the Zlatne Uste ensemble at a festival in Serbia. The comments (48) explain why they are given so much time, but not entirely convincingly. There is a scene with a particularly good American vocal and instrumental ensemble, and a fine, all too brief, bit of Bosnian *ganga* singing filmed by the author in her native Bosnia. *Ganga* is not the Balkan singing style most typically practiced in America, and so, as it is the only rural singing tradition shown in its natural setting, perhaps it should have been explained more clearly in the text (60). One small mistake: the song which has become the Roma anthem, "Đelem Đjelem" (pronounced, roughly, *dzhelem*) appears as "Delem Delem" (298, track 10). The song's provenance should be explained somewhere in the text, even though the purpose of the book, as the author is careful to point out, is not to describe Balkan music itself.

Laušević did not extend her research to Canada, except for the briefly referenced statistics from Yves Moreau, mentioned above. I make this comment not because Montreal and Toronto are "my" "Balkan scenes," but rather because the Balkan scene in Montreal is quite different from those she describes in the U.S., and might have provided

some interesting points of comparison. One of the main differences, of course, is the cultural-linguistic background of many people involved in Montreal. While among Anglophones, the mix is similar to what she describes in New York – including the large number of Jewish dancers – in Montreal, and of course elsewhere in Quebec but Montreal is the main centre – there is the Francophone majority, who were in fact the main impetus for Balkan dancing there, and still are, even though many individuals and performing ensembles have moved from Balkan to Québécois dancing. Their history and their approach merit their own study, both before and after the historic Parti Québécois victory in 1976. Going into this in any detail would have obviously been beyond the already ambitious scope of this book, but a brief explanation of the significance of Moreau's survey findings with respect to Francophone Canada would have been helpful. Differences between "America" and Canada might also raise questions about the author's conclusions: "Whatever the fictions of its relationship to some village...the Balkan scene [is] ...more real to many, perhaps, than the American culture that is its deepest cultural wellspring" (240). I found myself wondering whether one could say anything similar about the Balkan scene in Francophone Quebec, and what, in turn, the answer to that question might mean for Laušević's vision of its meaning in the U.S.

This book deals with a very specific topic and goes well beyond it to examine broader questions. Reading it, while referring to the audio and video examples, as well as the many excellent photographs and facsimiles, suggests approaches to other musical cultures, and stimulates reflection on whether they have been learned, appropriated, or both - and why. Laušević writes in a fluid, engaging style, avoiding jargon while effectively exploring many concepts which jargon often obscures rather than illuminates. I look forward to going back to it several times, and focusing on several issues it raises for discussion with students, colleagues – and fellow Balkanites.

Judith Cohen