

VBC: A Wealth of Folk Dance Festivals

By Kathy Sandstrom

Over the past months, the Lyrids Folk Dance Festival Committee has pursued articles to give you a thorough history of a series of festivals in the greater Vancouver, B.C (VBC) area. Preceding the Lyrids Folk Dance Festival, Rosemarie Keough put on the Salt Spring Island Festival for 10 years, bringing in many varied international instructors and a variety of bands for live music. Her fabulous article was in the January NFDI issue.

Next, Bev Neilson put together another great article about the history of the Lyrids Folk Dance Festival, which took it over with a new name and committee, and made it their own for the ensuing 12 years. This was published in the February NFDI issue. For the March NFDI issue, we sent in a story about the Balkan band Zakuska from Seattle, which we had play for us several years, and we wanted to spotlight their wonderful talents.

As I thought about this Lyrids Folk Dance Festival being our final one, I mused that there was another rich series of festivals in VBC that preceded all this in the 1980s and 1990s, put on by the Vancouver International Folk Dancers (VIFD). I attended all of these marvelous festivals and wanted to celebrate them as part of the excellent legacy of folk dance festivals in the greater VBC area. But before this happened, I must digress a little. In October 1982, Vancouver IFD put on a workshop with Marcus Moskoff, where he taught wonderful Bulgarian dances, including Vrabčeto, Tropanka, Trâgnal mi sturčo, Pirinska Igra, Oj Jovane, Jankinata, and Sitno Vlaško Horo. What a great workshop!

On with the story! I contacted several of the Canadians I knew were involved and asked a lot of questions. It was alternately called a Bulgarian Festival or a Balkan Festival and, affectionately, BBB for Big Bulgarian Bash or Big Balkan Bash. According to Lynda Spratley, it “grew out of talks Yves had at Stockton in 1983 with Ric Spratley and his daughter Sarah. Yves was envisioning a festival that had more than dance workshops and instead included a whole culture—the dances, songs, food, customs, languages, history—everything that could be organized into a long weekend.” —*Email from Lynda Spratley to me, 2/06/2026.*

Yves wrote a long letter to Ric in February 1984; Lynda found that letter and sent a copy to me. There were 12 people on the original Festival Committee involved with the planning. The first Bulgarian Festival was held soon after on June 8–10, 1984, at the Douglas Park Community Centre. Teachers that first year were Yves Moreau (Vlach and Dobrudžan) and Jaap Leegwater (Šop and North Bulgarian). Musicians were Mark Levy (gajda), Erik Butterworth (accordion), and Carol Silverman (vocals and singing teacher). Pickled Herring was the band (Vancouver Folk Dance Orchestra). Some of the dances Yves taught were Batuta, Šira, Izručanka, Kucinata, Silistrenski Opas, and Sej Sej Bob. Dances Jaap taught included Levo Horo, Graovsko, Petrunino Horo, Sitno Severnjaško Horo, Mâri Mariikino, and Kucaj Kucaj Mome. In addition, there were



Jaap & Yves (left) and Mark & Carol Silverman (right)
BBB 1984 Festival

some special features: “(1) The Festival banquet was attended by Stoyan Dragov, Consul General in Canada of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, who provided numerous LP recordings of Bulgarian Folk Music and two cases of Bulgarian wine; and (2) Festival Hall decorations were designed by Bulgarian-born artist Vassil Popov, who also exhibited original paintings of Bulgarian Dancers in regional costumes.” Lynda remarked, “The enthusiastic participation of the Bulgarian Consul was an unexpected pleasure, and everyone cheered when he finally took off his suit jacket and joined the dance line.”—*Email from Lynda to me, 2/06/2026.*

After such a rousing success, the Festival was held again in 1985, with the same teachers. After that, the schedule was changed to being held every two years, due to the tremendous amount of work required to put it on. It continued to be called a Bulgarian Festival until 1993, when it became known as the Balkan Festival, due to a change in the scope of dances taught. For the last two years, 1997 and 1999, it changed back to being called a Bulgarian Festival.

The caliber of instructors was always top notch and the live music was stellar. The parties were so full of life and lively. There was always impromptu singing going on somewhere down a hallway. The food was fabulous. The Cultural Sessions were always engrossing.

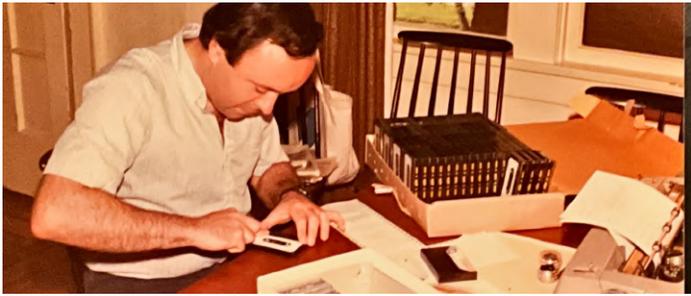


Yves & Jaap Cultural Session (1984)

You could always find something in the Festival Shop to make you part with your money. The Hall was always decorated beautifully. There was a Festival t-shirt you could buy, a syllabus, music from the teachers, and song words were available. I loved that part!

There were different articles written up at each Festival on aspects of Bulgarian or Balkan dance, music, and instruments, as well as bios of each of the teachers. There were maps and information about Bulgarian and Balkan food, culture, and language. Such a wealth of information! The first Festival also included a cross-stitch embroidery class by Johanna Brouwer. The Festival drew great crowds from the greater Northwest, some from California, and beyond. The “Mexana” coffee shop had all kinds of snacks, juice, coffee, and great schmoozing, plus casual music.

Wearing costumes was encouraged. The Festival was also sometimes located at the Polish Hall or at Trout Lake Community Centre. If you needed help finding local overnight accommodations, the Committee was ever so kind to help you with that, too.



Yves organizing his dance tapes for sale at the Spratley's.
Photo by Ric Spratley.

Other dance teachers over time included Marty Koenig, Anastasia Moskova, Petur Iliev, Steve Kotansky, Joe Graziosi, Nina Kavardjikova, and Tihomir Donchev. Ventzi Sotirov was supposed to teach in 1997, but was injured at the last minute. He still came and played tupan with some of the musicians. The musicians list is quite long and includes people from the Seattle area, California, plus others, as well as bands directly from Bulgaria. Singing teachers throughout the years included Carol Silverman, Mary Sherhart, Dinka Ruseva, Ruth Hunter, Christos Govetas, Loren Brody, and Maria Bebelokova. I hope I didn't miss anyone.

For the 1991 Bulgarian Festival, when Bulgari came direct from Bulgaria as the main band, "the Festival Banquet was built on the theme of a Bulgarian Wedding, with all aspects of the Wedding fully performed and participated in by dancers and musicians. Special guests participating in the wedding celebration included Mark Levy, Carol Silverman, Jaap Leegwater, Erik Butterworth, and Mary Sherhart. Vassil and Nellie Popov were also special guests, in honor of Vassil's hall decorations, which were used at every Festival." —*Email from Lynda to me, 2/06/2026.*

Looking at the schedule for that day, the Wedding Rituals included Braiding of the Bride's Hair, Dances for a Bulgarian Wedding, Procession from the groom's house to the bride's house, Bulgarian Wedding banquet, Procession to the groom's village from the bride's village, and Bulgarian Wedding Party. What an incredible festival that one was!



Carol, Mark, & Jaap in the "plant corner." Photo by Ric Spratley.

Lynda reminisces, "Yves was the moving force behind all the BBBs, and the group of enthusiasts in Vancouver was totally attuned to his vision. Jaap joined in with wholehearted support to get the ball rolling and remained an avid festival supporter throughout the years. Responsibility for different aspects of the event was passed around to alternating members of the original committee, and new recruits had experienced mentors and growing local expertise to ease their work. Over the years we had different

teachers along with Yves, different musical ensembles, and different regional highlights, thus providing a continuing font of new and expanding material. The first year's participation of the Canadian Bulgarian Consul and the local Bulgarian community gave the festival a sense of authenticity that remained a part of its aura despite changes in focus and participants."

Lynda continued, "My own turn as festival co-chairman was riddled with the uncertainty of whether Bulgari—the five-member Bulgarian ensemble we had invited—would actually be able to get into Canada to play at the festival. Mark Levy and Carol Silverman had already arranged a US tour for Bulgari on dates later than the festival. They prompted our invitation. It would be our first festival with an overseas Bulgarian ensemble and we were elated. But the Canadian authorities were obsessed with the possibility that Bulgari members would defect during their Canadian venture and create a political crisis between Canada and Bulgaria. My ace-in-the-hole was that Bulgari's Canadian performances came before their organized tour in the US, where they had more dates and would earn more money. I insisted that if they planned to defect it would not be in Canada, but in the US. To our great relief, this argument eventually prevailed and Bulgari was given the necessary visas. Their 1992 Canadian debut at our BBB was a resounding success."

Ric Spratley contributes, "When Yves suggested that he'd like to be involved in a Bulgarian festival in Vancouver, I was president of the Vancouver IFD (VIFD). It was already a decade since the last Maple Leaf Folk Dance Festival had been presented by VIFD, and that predated my own involvement with the club. My experience was with festivals and workshops in the Pacific Northwest, notably in Seattle, Bellingham, Victoria, Corvallis, and Enumclaw. However, it was Dennis Boxell's Northwest Balkan Camps (starting in 1980 on Whidby Island, WA) that gave me the model for what Yves and I discussed: a broad cultural experience supplementing the teaching of dance with live music, singing, food (pig roasting) and drink, and good cheer."

Ric further explains, "A committee was formed, lacking experience, but full of enthusiasm, and gradually the BBB came to life. Yves asked Jaap to join, Carol and Mark recruited Erik Butterworth, and the music was set. We recruited a local Serbian woman to cook Balkan food for the banquet and Bulgarian artist, Vassil Popov, to help with decorations.

As planning moved forward, we talked a lot about how to make visitors feel welcome, so we tasked committee members with greeting out-of-towners personally as they arrived for the Friday night party. As reservations poured in, we realized that the smaller room we had reserved for that party was going to be seriously packed and so the first BBB button was invented, featuring the logo and the immortal words, "It's not Crowded, it's Ethnic." It helped to break the ice, raised the energy, became a collector's item, and established a button tradition for all following festivals."

Ric adds, "Lynda mentioned in her comments about the contributions of the Bulgarian Consul, who joined us at the Saturday night banquet and dance party, where he sat stiffly at the head table in his dark suit, clearly not fully understanding what was happening. For me the highlight of

the evening was the moment he suddenly stood up, tossed off his jacket, and joined in a pravo.”

He elaborates, “Lynda also spoke of Vassil Popov, the sole Bulgarian we could find in Vancouver, who provided paintings, pottery artifacts, banners, and a monumental wooden chest over 10 feet long with four leather embossed doors and a top made from a single natural hunk of very heavy wood. It was a stunning centerpiece but, curiously, he never came to pick it up. Today, 41 years later, it still resides in our basement rec room, where it is a constant reminder of a great event.” Ric concludes, “Many more BBBs followed when the breakup of the Soviet Union paved the way for the



Stara Zagora Male and Stara Zagora Female. By Vassil Popov.

inclusion of many more Bulgarians, both local and visitors, but we’re all very proud of that first amazing event.”

Yves’ vision was fully realized in a wealth of ways, and it was such a joy to attend these well-thought-out and executed Festivals.

They were high energy, high quality in every way, and so

fulfilling to the body and soul. Many folks stayed until the very end each night, and didn’t want to go home. The festivals ended with a grand pravo outside on the lawn. Our village experience was thus complete.

At the last Festival, many people did not want it to end, but like Lyrids, it takes a village to pull these events off, and you need enough people willing to participate and put the time in to sustain them. Lynda spent a lot of time pulling many documents out of her own archives and sending me information in order to put this article together, as well as she and Ric contributing special memories. Jana Rickel copied the covers of most of the Festival syllabi, with some secondary pages. I am most grateful for all their valuable contributions.

I did not even mention all those festivals that occurred in Seattle for years and years, which I also attended, or the ones in Enumclaw that I attended as a teenager. Oh, I miss the ending watermelon feed they had! And not to mention all the festivals we Hoolyeh Folkdancers had every year for decades, as did Salem, Portland, and Eugene.

We supported each other’s festivals. Richland, WA had a festival for 65 years, with their last in 2019.

Olympia and other places also had festivals. Camps were held at Fort Casey and Fort Warden on the Washington Peninsula. Raft Island out past Olympia held numerous camps, and still has Hungarian camps.

Now in Oregon, only the Veselo Community Folk Dancers put on an annual festival in Eugene. What a historical wealth we have had...so many teachers. Many places still host workshops, and a lot is done on Zoom these days. Perhaps after a restful break there might be another group of people ready to take up the helm and put on a large recurring festival in the upper Northwest again.



Syllabus Cover & Button

With the advantage of Zoom meetings, you can have committees with members outside of your local range (look at Jana and me in WA and OR on the Canadian Lyrids Folk Dance Festival Committee). Much can be done ahead of time, if you have a ground contingent taking care of local business as needed. Where there’s a will...

Happy dancing, and looking forward to seeing you in person (no Zooming) at the Final Lyrids Folk Dance Festival, April 17–19, 2026, at Pitt Meadows Heritage Hall, Pitt Meadows, BC, <https://lyridsfolkdancefestival.org/>. Tineke and Maurits Van Geel are the featured teachers for Armenian and Roma dances. Please come join us and dance till your socks drop!

Youth Fund Donations

By Diane Vadnais

Thank you! Thank you. Thank you. This is the time of year we need donations for the Youth Fund. This time of year, I look in the Youth Fund wallet and a few moths fly out, like an old comedy. It’s understandable. Last year I asked those who were able to please give more, and you did! No moths this year; however, if you are able, we always need to keep some money in the wallet. This is one piece of the puzzle.

The other is how many kids are planning on attending camp, and will they ask for help. At present maybe twelve, and maybe eight more. (Gasp!) But they won’t all send in applications and many won’t ask for help from NFDI. We’ve awakened them, and camp is coming. Last year we gave those who asked \$150. Normally we give \$175. It was a lean year! The cost of camp is over \$1000, maybe closer to \$1200. On top, you need to add transportation. It’s quite a bit if you have a family. NFDI would never have money to actually pay for a camper. We give “seed” money. The NFO will help with transportation.

Years ago, I approached an NFO friend who is on the Stockton Board and also gives out camp scholarships. I told her NFDI was trying to encourage young people to attend Stockton. Could they help with scholarships? She said, “I would rather give aid to your kids than to people who arrive at camp in Mercedes and bid high at the auction!” The rest is history. The camp gives “work” scholarships and puts the kids to work. It’s an exhausting experience but they do it and dream of next year. They dance their hearts out. They interact with the instructors. They lead the lines. They put on skits in the talent show. It’s win/win, and we have won! The Youth Fund has been an overwhelming success. Mostly small donations over the years.

NFDI had a dream of sharing what we love with a new generation. Heidi Vorst’s troupe members have been the primary recipients, but middle school, high school, and young college-age dancers are eligible. If you know of a young dancer who dances regularly and dreams of Stockton, they should look on the NFDI website for an application. You may use the same website to donate to the Youth Fund, or mail donations to: Northwest Folk Dancers, Inc., P.O. Box 333, Lynnwood, WA 98046-0333. Must be marked: Youth Fund. NFDI is registered under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS tax code. Your contribution may be tax-deductible

Thank you!