

FILM REVIEW

The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago. By Jill Godmilow in collaboration with Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig of the Balkan Arts Center. 60 minutes. 16mm. Color. Produced and distributed by the Balkan Arts Center, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey 07417. (201) 891-8240.

Reviewed by Richard March

The film "The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago" by Jill Godmilow is an excellent documentary about a musically talented Serbian family whose contribution to the Serbian American community of Chicago and the Midwest is nothing short of immense. The film does a good job of explaining the motivations behind and revealing the emotional feelings for ethnic group bonds among the Serbs of the highly industrialized Calumet Region.

In several insightful interviews with the Popovich family and other Chicago area Serbs, their intense feelings of devotion to their ethnic background is expressed, especially as it is manifested in traditional music, church activities and family ties. The film is quite strong in its sociological aspects, but folkloristically it leaves something to be desired at times.

The filmmakers had to work around a number of disadvantages. First of all, they are based on the East Coast, geographically quite far from the film's location, Chicago, which probably contributed to a tendency to schedule shooting around big events, like the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Popovich Brothers Tamburitza Orchestra. There is some wonderful footage of the big fêtes, concerts and celebrations, but day to day life, in the course of which so much of ethnic culture unfolds, is somewhat slighted. It might have been more natural to include footage of everyday meals, comings and goings to work, school or church, had the filmmakers been based nearer by.

The other major difficulty which the filmmakers encountered was the fact that they chanced to pick a particularly tumultuous period in the lives of the Popoviches. The youngest brother and prima player Marko Popovich, died suddenly, and the death of his father Nikola Popovich, followed. Teddy Popovich, the band's lead singer, suffered a heart attack which put him out of action for several months.

This difficulty carried both advantages and disadvantages. It provided a good opportunity to demonstrate how the extended family and the ethnic community can provide support in difficult moments. Footage of the funerals and the family gatherings is very moving and handled with good taste and restraint. The stable role, however, which the Popovich brothers played for decades as a cultural and musical institution, is somewhat obscured by all the tumult. It is to the filmmaker's credit that they were able to overcome such difficulties and respond to the opportunities to produce a high quality documentary.

The film is well suited for screening at civic and ethnic group events, but its length, 60 minutes, makes it difficult to use as a classroom tool. Sometimes the editing seems too loose-- often the interviews become repetitive or seem to drift, and more time than seems necessary is devoted to such shots as Adam Popovich adjusting the position of the folding chairs for the Sloboda choir rehearsal, or the choir slowly struggling to exit from a crowded stage after their performance of "**Albanska Golgota**".

The aspect of the film which is perhaps most disappointing to folklorists is the sparcity of musical material, especially since the film is about one of the finest groups of Serbian-American musicians. In an hour-long film about musicians there certainly ought to be time for at least one uninterrupted performance of a song. Most of the musical sequences seem to run only about twenty seconds before a visual or audio cut. The film plunges too quickly to examining the deeper questions of why the music is perpetuated that just what the music is and how it is played are almost ignored.

Narration is provided by appropriate selections from interviews with the informants and is usually quite effective, but at times some explanatory narration by an

"outside" narrator might have made clearer what was being shown. For example the *krsna slava* (family's saints's day) of the Popovich family is on St. Nicholas' Day, December 19, by the Julian calendar. They are shown holding the event in their church hall which had already been decorated with Christmas decor. Though the narrator, Adam Popovich I believe, says, "*Slava* is like your own personal holiday...", the first word, *slava*, unfamiliar to most viewers, may be missed or not understood, and in the absence of further explanation, the impression is that the *slava* ceremony has something to do with Christmas. Similarly, a narrator might have explained why a Serbian New Year's party would fall on January 15 or might have imparted the simple but relevant fact that Eli Popovich, who is shown attending the celebrations and funerals, is no longer a resident of Chicago but flew in from his home in Washington, D.C., to attend.

A narrator also might have been able to offer some folkloristic commentary on the music. The musical styles and activities shown are quite diverse. For example, the brothers perform a version of the ancient *licki ojkan*, a form of male unaccompanied singing from Lika, their ancestral region in western Croatia. Without a pause or explanation there is a sudden cut to a newer addition to folk tradition, the unaccompanied singing of an old-time popular song from the turn-of-the-century in which men and women sing together.

Had there been announcements concerning the nature of the particular music shown, there might have also been more care shown in selecting a representative cross-section of the brothers' musical repertoire. Recently composed Yugoslav pop tunes adapted to *tamburitza* comprise a larger share of the numbers shown in the film than would be proportional in their repertoire.

All of these criticisms certainly do not negate the many strengths of the film and indeed it may be the finest extant documentary about contemporary ethnicity in America. Perhaps it would be a worthwhile endeavor to make a second, ethnomusicologically-oriented film from the filmmakers' outtakes. Such a film could be shorter-- 20 to 30 minutes, (and therefore more useful in the classroom) and it could provide more information about the musical traditions depicted.