THEODORE BIKEL
SONGS OF A RUSSIAN GYPSY
THEODORE BIKEI
SONGS OF A RUSSIAN GYPSY

THERE IS ONE QUESTION I AM OFTEN ASKED WHEN I SING THE
folk songs of various nations, in concert or at informal occassions: "Which kind
do you like singing best?" It is a question I find quite impossible to answer, for
my preference in folk music shifts with the mood and tempo of the particular
evening. The heat of the day, the assembled company, the conversation that
precedes the singing and, naturally, the presence of certain preferred people—often
to which my thoughts turn—determine my buoyancy of spirit and therefore
the choice of songs and the regions they stem from. However, if someone un-
known to me were to conduct a survey determining the frequency with which
I sing certain songs, at the top of the list would be Russian and Russian Gypsy
music. For they seem to reflect so many of my own moods, ebullient or lyrical,
phlegmatic or effervescent. Over the years I have come to regard Russian Gypsy
songs as an expression of myself, although I am neither Russian nor Gypsy—
by birth, that is.

Why this affinity with Russian Gypsies? I could put forward many explana-
tions, facetious or serious, trivial or deeply psychological. Thus: I travel—I am
a Gypsy; my temperament changes from fiery to lyrical—I am a Russian.
Or: Feeling basically secure in my environment I have the need to project myself
into songs of yearning and wandering... All this is nonsense, of course, and there
is no rational explanation. Sufficient to say that I like this music and feel
terribly happy singing it.

Also—in case you wonder about the authenticity of my rendition—I know
quite a bit about it.

My association with Russians and their language goes back quite a while.
The first theatre I appeared in as a professional actor was the Habimah in Israel.
Anybody who is familiar with this famous theatre group knows that, although
Hebrew is the language the plays are performed in, Russian was and remains
their workday tongue. So much so that in watching them perform a play in
Hebrew it would seem—if you weren't listening too carefully—that they were
speaking in Russian; the lift was that pronounced. I was nineteen when I joined
the Habimah as a student-actor. There were unforgettable evenings on tour when
we used to sit on the grass beneath the eucalyptus trees in some far-out settlement,
and the awe one felt toward the veteran actor of Habimah (who had worked with
Yuri Sleznov himself) slowly mellowed and melted as we all sang together. Many
of the songs were Russian ones, of course.

The very first girl I was serious about had just fled with her parents after
four years hardship in the Asian part of the Soviet Union. We both studied for a
University exam in English. Meanwhile, I taught her Hebrew and she in turn
began to teach me Russian. That was some 15 years ago. I was terribly fond of
her. Her name was Tamar.

I seem to be relating much of my private life here. I find it hard to apologize
for this. For me this whole business of folk-music is a very personal matter and
if I am to talk about it at all I can only do so in terms of immediate—sometimes
intimate—personal experience.

Wherever my travels have taken me since those early days it has been the
same: I became one of the few accepted non-Russians in Russian circles. Be it
Paris or London, New York or Barcelona—if there are Russians living there I
got to them somehow. And if they are Gypsies to boot, all the more so. Why I feel
close to them is obvious: I like their language, I like their music. Why they in
turn should have taken me under their wing can be attributed to several reasons.
Many of them have been exiled from their homeland for a long, long time; their
feeling of nostalgia is magnified tenfold. And anyone who is capable of evoking
such a profound feeling is instantly welcome. Then, my being a non-Russian seems to enhance
that effect. Like all exiles these people have had to adapt themselves constantly
to other peoples' cultures and languages; so much so that when an outsider takes
the trouble to adapt to theirs they are sincerely moved. Thus I have become an
"honorary Russian."

Long is the list of those who sang to me and with me in Gypsy Russian. There
were George Ivanov, Dina Ousseff, Lida Goulouco and Sonja Dmitrievich in
Paris; Ade Tal in Tel-Aviv, Liubov Hanshine in New York and virtually countless others. Foremost on my list however are the Prince George and Emanuel
Galitze in London. Recognizing my love for this music they helped to lend me
to its only accessible source, the Russians and Gypsies in Western Europe.

Collecting texts for this album was not an easy task; I needed helping hands.
My thanks to Theo Bennahum (who, as usual, became my mentor and my con-
science in matters Russian); special thanks also to Yuri Tutanov and Victor
Prokofiev.

The language of some of the songs is not Russian but Gypsy dialect. In the
enclosed booklet of texts we have tried to record them phonetically as accurately
as possible. Gypsies are guilty of slurring words and syllables often in an
arbitrary manner that varies each time they sing the song. I am beholden to quite
a few of my Gypsy friends from whom I learned; most notably Sonja Dmitrievich
in Paris.

The songs I sing in this album are old ones. Ballads of nostalgia or
"romanzas" and happy-sad fiery gypsy tunes. In today's Russian much of this
music is frowned upon and decdred as decadent. Since I need share none of
Shostakovich's apprehensions at being labelled "decadent" I have no hesitation in
singing these songs. Censure from the Soviet People's Republic I fear not; at
best I fear Brooks Atkinson.

THEODORE BIKEI

The featured instrumentalists in this album are Sasha Polinoff, balalaika; Lonya
Kalbouz, accordion; George Greenberg, violin, and Yuri Tutanov, bass balalaika.
Guitar accompaniments are by Theodore Bikel and Fred Hellerstein.

Other Elektra albums featuring Theodore Bikel include: An Actor's Holiday (EKL-105); A Young Man and A MAID, with Cynthia Gooding (EKL-109); Folk
Songs of Israel (EKL-132); Jewish Folk Songs (EKL-141); Folk Songs from
Just About Everywhere, with Geula Gill (EKL-161); More Jewish Folk Songs
(EKL-165); and Bravo Bikel, an on-the-spot recording of his SRO Town Hall
concerts (EKL-175).

THE ELEKTRA CORPORATION • New York City, New York • Production Supervisor: Jac
Heinemann • Engineer: Leonard Ripley • Front cover design, Wm. & Harvey • Photo, J. Livne,
George Pickow.