

MUSIC

BY ZACH DUNDAS

zdundas@week.com

A decade after the Iron Curtain's meltdown, Eastern Europe is still a mystery to most Americans. Two grassroots shows, by Irena Jarocka and the folk ensemble Bulgari, lift the veil.



EAST MEETS EAST

MUSIC STORY

Do you know Irena Jarocka? Probably not—unless you're Polish.

In New York state, where she currently resides, Jarocka can probably walk down the street without a second glance from a soul. In Warsaw, though, it's another story. Jarocka has been one of Polish pop's most inescapable faces since the 1960s. Between the Oder River and the Belorussian frontier, her graceful, emotional singing puts her in the first rank of stars. If she were a he, it'd be tempting to call her the Polish Sinatra, since her steady march of hits stretches back 30 years, practically without pause.

Under communism, she was a member of the elite star team of national artists. In the rough-and-tumble of the new democracy, her iconic status has survived even the Old Testament flood of Western pop, rock, hip-hop and techno that has engulfed Eastern Europe, not to mention the homegrown uprisings in punk, electronica and death metal. Her popularity in Poland even outlasted her 1991 relocation to the United States.

That move, of course, left her an ocean away from stardom, but Jarocka, who makes a Portland stop on a brief Northwest tour this week, says that's just fine with her.

"I started in America nine years ago, but the thing was that I had made a big career in Poland," she says from New York. "To make such a big career here in America—I decided I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to lose all of my time, you know?"

"So I decided that here what is important is to introduce Americans

Notes from the Underground: Irena Jarocka (above right) croons Polish pop; Bulgari (right) rips Balkan rhythm.

to international music, to songs from around the world. I can do this—I'm a good professional, and I can sing in casinos, in churches, whatever I need to do. And in America, you have a little bit of everything, so when I sing in any language, there are usually people in the audience singing the songs with me."

Most Americans could certainly use the kind of education Jarocka hopes to offer, particularly when it comes to the countries that played on the other team during the Cold War. It's a funny thing about Eastern Europe—for nearly half a century, we feared its ability to nuke us back to the Pleistocene, for five minutes we cheered its liberation from the Red yoke. Now, however, we treat its millennia-old cultures with something alarmingly like condescension, when we bother with them at all.

That's a shame, because the artists, writers and musicians of Eastern Europe have always driven deep into the richest veins of life, even as their politicos and generals wallowed around in a figurative dung heap. Fortunately, this week offers Portlanders two very different chances to sample the best of what the old Warsaw Pact has to offer.

While Jarocka favors a romantic brand of traditional pop, Bulgari devotes its conservatory-honed abilities to Bulgaria's rampaging traditional folk music. Singer Radostina Kaneva is a soloist for the Bulgarian



National Radio and Television Ensemble, and fiddler Georgi Andreev is the Bulgarian National Ensemble's director. But Bulgari's current grassroots U.S. tour looks more like a punk band's DIY cross-country trek. Its Vancouver venue, a gymnastics studio converted into a concert hall for one night, fits right into that underground aesthetic.

The difference is, Bulgari plays at blinding speeds far beyond the imaginations of the most hell-for-leather punk bands. And while most of the players' instruments have a familiar echo—the *gajda* is like the bagpipe, the *kaval* is a simple flute—their music's theoretical underpinnings seem custom-built for blowing Western minds.

Bulgari comes armed with an arsenal of stuttering, stopping, surging time signatures that make 4/4 seem

fit for chimps. Every ornate melody changes with every rendition of a given song. Given Bulgaria's ancient love for back-breaking rhythms and rampant improvs, it's small wonder that its modern citizens flock to avant-garde jazz.

While Jarocka's music is considerably less frenetic and owes more to Western influences and sheen, she also looks to stamp a very visceral impression on audiences of all cultures.

"I have learned that when you sing with your heart, they will feel your emotions, and they will feel your soul," she says. "American people have told me after they hear me sing in Polish, 'I had a tingle in my skin when you sang. With my skin I felt your songs.' This is what I love to hear."

Bulgari
Naydenov
Gymnastics Studio
5313 NE 94th Ave.,
Vancouver, Wash.,
(360) 944-4444
9 pm Thursday,
June 3
\$12, \$8 children

Irena Jarocka
The Polish Library
3832 N Interstate
Ave., 748-6776
1 pm Sunday, June 6
\$13 in advance, \$15
at the door

The Polish Library is across the street from St. Stanislaus Church, a Catholic parish that conducts services in Polish and Croatian. Polish food will be sold at St. Stanislaus during Jarocka's performance.