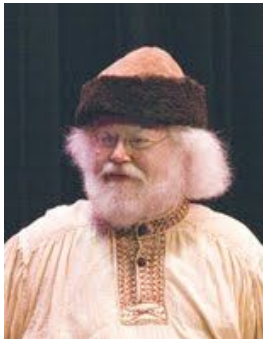


## Biography of the Musical Life of Paul Phillips for Nomination into the BDAA Hall of Fame



We, members of the Houston Balalaika Society, proudly place the name of Paul Phillips in nomination for induction into the BDAA Hall of Fame. Paul's love of Russian folk music has for much of his life inspired him to discover, perform, and teach an ever increasing community of people, both in Houston and throughout the BDAA membership, and has inspired them to pursue their own musical aspirations within the cultural heritage of the Russian folk arts.

Paul is a charter member of the BDAA and has attended many conventions where he led jamming workshops and creatively contributed to the nightly jam sessions. His book, *Music From Old Russia and Elsewhere* (the Yellow Book), meticulously compiled and expanded over the years, has introduced and helped untold numbers learn the melodies, chords and harmonies of traditional Russian and Eastern European folk songs. Jamming is one of Paul's favorite activities and through his efforts he has helped others become more confident musicians. Thus, his influence is strongly felt at BDAA conventions even when he is not present.

First entranced with Russian folk music after seeing the film *The Brothers Karamazov*, Paul spent years listening to the records of Sasha Polinoff. While attending graduate school at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston he played his mandolin at Cairo's Coffee House and one night began playing a tune from a Polinoff record. A customer approached Paul and said he knew that song. Thus began an association with a long line of musicians who, like himself, loved to collect and play Russian and Eastern European music. For Paul, the creation of the Houston Balalaika Society was the fulfillment of a long-time dream. Founded by Charley Rappaport and Steve Wolownik in 1976, the HBS is the longest continually performing Russian folk orchestra in the U.S. Paul has been a leading voice in the Houston Balalaika Society since its inception and has nurtured it through the years with exceptional dedication, expertise and a uniquely creative vision.

We believe that Paul's many years of devotion to the preservation of Russian folk music and culture through his wide ranging interests and great passion for performing, teaching and exploration qualifies him for induction into the BDAA Hall of Fame. This application includes the following chronicle of Paul's life work in Russian folk music and culture. We add a collection of HBS annual concert programs which displays the diversity of Paul's creative vision and breadth of accomplishment over a period of 34 years. A collection of photos of Paul and many of the friends/fellow musicians with whom he has worked during these years completes the application.

In January, 1977, the fledgling HBS hosted a very successful reception for the Osipov Orchestra following its performance at Jones Hall in Houston. In June of that year the

group held its first Vecherinka – a concert followed by a full sit-down dinner. Those early successes set a high bar for which Paul as President and Artistic Director continued to strive, especially after Charley Rappaport and Steve Wolownik moved to Atlanta. His efforts were enhanced by a great many very talented individuals who contributed abundantly to the growth and development of the orchestra during these formative years. We were fortunate to have had the Ukrainian Dancers of Houston perform at many of the early concerts. Paul, a naturally gifted musician, learned to play many instruments of the Russian folk orchestra, including a variety of wind and percussion. He conducted group and individual classes, loaned instruments from his own extensive collection and repaired and maintained instruments for group members.

The Caravan, a professional ensemble created by Paul and Pona Martin, his musical partner of over thirty years, has performed for memorable events throughout the Houston area for several decades. This versatile group which has included other musicians over the years as well, has provided pre-concert entertainment for touring companies including Moiseyev Dance Ensemble, Red Star Ensemble, Kirov Ballet and for the gala opening of the Catherine the Great Exhibit in Dallas. It was a natural evolution for Paul to create the Gypsy Camp at the Texas Renaissance Festival and become King of the Gypsies! This had been a longtime dream of his and his creative visions flowered. The Gypsy Camp became a community of kindred spirits for six weeks every October and November where 5-6 shows per day were performed which included ethnic music and dance. Many HBS members participated in the Gypsy Camp and this experience of having to memorize the music and give spontaneous performances on stage, as well as participate in small ensembles such as the Tartars, broadened everyone's musical horizons. Paul's creativity at the Texas Renaissance Festival often found its way back to the HBS through staging of innovative, off-beat and usually humorous performances which included lavish costumes, witty dialogue often based on tales found from devouring sources of Russian history, a variety of dancers, choral ensembles and an ever increasing number of authentic folk instruments. (Glancing through the annual concert programs gives an idea of such creations!)

The HBS has actively performed in annual music and folk festivals around Houston including the Texas Folk Life Festival, the Houston International Festival, the Mediterranean Festival at St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church and in more recent years, The Harvest Days Festival in Woodville in the Piney Woods of East Texas and the Día de los Muertos Festival at MECA. The orchestra has performed many times at pre-concert venues for visiting groups from Russia as well as at the Wortham for the Houston Grand Opera's *Boris Godunov*.

During the 1980's the newly created BDAA developed a relationship with the Ukraina Society. In 1985 Charley Rappaport and Steve Wolownik led a 25 member group of BDAA members in a musical study tour of Byelorussia and Russia, where for the first time American musicians studied and performed Russian music as guests in the Soviet Union. Paul enthusiastically participated in that first trip and afterwards spent 3

months in Kiev at the Kiev Institute of Culture where he studied both playing and teaching techniques for domra and balalaika under the sponsorship of the Ukraina Society of the Ukrainian SSR. These remarkable experiences formed very meaningful long term relationships for him and greatly enhanced his musical skills and fascination with Russian music and culture. He began a more intensive teaching program in the HBS.

The HBS embraced the opportunities to travel to Russia to learn from visiting artists and to welcome émigré musicians to perform with the orchestra. These opportunities arose in the early 90's due to the transition from the very restricted Soviet Union to the more open present day Russia. Paul had always wanted a Russian folk dance ensemble to join the orchestra and when he met Yelena Kochourova, a dancer and choreographer originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, he encouraged her to organize such a group. First as the Skomorokhi Russian Dance Ensemble led by Yelena and Mary Eichnor, the dance troupe evolved into the Uzori Russian Folk Dance Ensemble in the late 1990's. Almost all members of the ensemble are of Russian descent and include many recent émigrés. The group has grown into a dazzling ensemble of children and young adults and continues to thrive, largely due to Yelena's enthusiasm and the teaching program for young children directed by herself and Alla Shariy, a young Ukrainian émigré, who herself performed in the troupe. The Uzori Dance Ensemble has performed in the HBS annual concerts for over 20 years.

Sergey Vashchenko, originally from Ukraine, has become a remarkable asset to the HBS. Paul met Sergey at the BDAA Convention in San Pedro when he arrived for a single day to hopefully purchase a balalaika, after his own irreplaceable instrument was stolen from his apartment in Dallas. Mel Lewis of the HBS sold Sergey his balalaika and soon afterward Paul invited Sergey to be guest conductor in the 1997 annual concert. Thus began a wonderful relationship with this superb artist, who has continued in the role of conductor at the annual concerts as well as serving as guest artist and friend.

A major portion of the orchestra year is focused on the planning for the upcoming annual concert. The consistently high quality of the concerts has been due to Paul's vision of a concert with momentum, with a variety of orchestral and dance numbers interspersed and with a superb narrative. Paul often says "Let the audience leave wanting more!" Paul, as Artistic Director of the HBS, has often ingeniously re-arranged the instrumentation of pieces to suit the current availability of instruments and personnel. The scope of his contributions to the annual concerts covers a wide range from selection of concert music, organizing ensembles, working with the dancers, writing the narrative, and handling the technical aspects of the concert. He has recently spent much time teaching the Wagner family to play instruments of the Russian folk orchestra. They performed as a family in the annual concert two years ago and with the full orchestra this year. The entire family will attend the BDAA Convention this year in Minneapolis!

The HBS has been fortunate to have had several excellent conductors over the years: Steve Wolownik, Michael Skupin, Richard Pickar, Lech Borowicz, Pamela Bingham and most recently, John Helton and Sergey Vashchenko. Rosita Kirkman has been indispensable in the planning, publicity, preparation of concert programs and coordination of the concerts. Before leaving Houston for Washington D.C. where he founded the WBS, Max McCullough was a uniquely creative and versatile musician, generous host, as well innovative leader in his role as President of the HBS for many years.

The HBS has welcomed many wonderful guest artists over the years who have brought their wide ranging artistry, winning a special place in the hearts of the orchestra members and inspiring them to new heights. Mischa Sheynkman made his first appearance as guest artist in 1982 in Houston - the HBS being the first Russian folk orchestra affiliated with the BDAA to host him. He returned many times as guest artist, teacher and friend. His quiet charm, wit, empathy and mischievous sense of humor touched the hearts of so many and endeared him to everyone he met. As a tribute to Mischa, one of his pieces is included in every concert. Paul commissioned him to write an arrangement, *The Fiddler on the Roof* with solo violin and it has become a favorite. In 1983, Sasha Polinoff and Gary Nova appeared as guest artists, marking a decided turning point of the orchestra. Several members had first heard Russian folk music and learned to play it from listening to his records.

HBS founder Charley Rappaport was featured as guest artist at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert in 1986 as was co-founder Steve Wolownik, who played contrabass and conducted the finale. It was a great honor to have Charley return as guest artist for the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert with guitarist Sasha Lisnichuk, and for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert in 2006 with guitarist Joe Kovach.

In 1987, a very successful BDAA Convention was held in Houston on the beautiful campus of Rice University. It was an honor to hold the convention concert at the newly opened Wortham Theatre and a second concert at the historic Galveston Opera House. Distinguished guest artists from Ukraine, Irina Orlova, domra, Yevgeny Chornokondratenko, balalaika and Yaroslav Kovalchuk, bayan, were enthusiastically received. HBS member, Pona Martin, designed t-shirts with 'World Peace' written in both English and Russian for the guest artists.

Later that year when President Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev met in Washington D.C., Paul wrote each leader a letter describing how much fun American and Soviet musicians were having here in Houston playing music together and he sent them both his best wishes in their efforts towards world peace. He also sent each one a t-shirt.

In 1988, the Balalaika Centennial Concert honoring the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first performance in St. Petersburg by V.V. Andreyev's eight member balalaika ensemble featured Ukrainian guest artists, Tamara Semyonova, domra, Yuri Aleksis, balalaika

and Bogdan Parumba bayan. In the past decade the HBS has been privileged to have had internationally acclaimed musicians as guest artists with the HBS. They include: Sasha Tsygankov and Inna Schevchenko who have performed several times, usually in conjunction with their appearance as guest artists with the BDAA, Evgueni Tsygankov, who has also performed as guest artist several times, Tamara Volskaya and Anatoly Trofimov, Sergey Vaschenko and Vladimir Kaliazine. All of these superbly talented artists have brought immense pleasure in their performances and friendships. The HBS has supported the efforts of the BDAA to bring guest artists from abroad since this opportunity first came about in the 1980's. Some facets of the HBS concerts have found their way into other orchestras throughout the country and into the BDAA conventions. The very popular Gypsy Night at the BDAA Conventions is one example.

An additional bonus for the HBS has been the development of the thriving émigré Russian community in Houston in which Paul has become very involved. Alex Kogan, co-owner of the Russian store, which houses the rehearsal room for the HBS and the Uzori Dancers, has been a mentor to Paul about all things Russian. He gave lessons to Paul and Pona Martin in the Russian language and etiquette. This has been very important for visits to the Seamen's Center where members of the Caravan often performed for the Russian sailors whose ships docked at the Houston ship channel and for insuring that Russian pronunciation is accurate at concert performances. For several years Paul and Joanne Dodd performed for the Houston World Affairs Council -Russian student luncheon. At one performance Paul met the Consul General of the newly created Russian Consulate in Houston. This led to many performances for the Caravan at consular events. The Uzori Dancers and an HBS ensemble performed at the Houston International Airport for the inaugural flight and celebration of the first non-stop Houston-Moscow-Singapore flight by Singapore Airlines.

Paul Phillips is multifaceted in his musical life. From his beginning in the Houston Balalaika Society as a domra player, he has expanded his expertise and enabled others to participate in a great variety of experiences. Through the many ensembles he has organized, Paul has made significant contributions to promoting the cultural heritage of Russian instrumental folk arts in Houston and beyond. They include organizing the Gypsy Camp at the Texas Renaissance Festival, the Caravan, and being instrumental in organizing the Uzori Dancers. We believe he is worthy of the highest honor bestowed by the BDAA - induction into the BDAA Hall of Fame.

*Affectionately submitted by members of the Houston Balalaika Society,  
Joanne Dodd, author; Rosita Kirkman, Pona Martin, Joan Riley, Marilyn King, contributors.*