



CHORNOBYL SONGS PROJECT

LIVING CULTURE FROM A LOST WORLD

ENSEMBLE HILKA



Under the musical direction of Yevhen Yefremov, an ethnomusicologist and singer whose field expeditions into Kyivan Polissia (“the Chernobyl Zone”) began in the 1970s and have continued to the present day, Ensemble Hilka presents the sketch of a ritual year as a song cycle that may have been performed in a typical Polissian village for centuries leading up to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986.

42 minutes, 18-page notes with photos.



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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TRACK LIST

1. **Oi pan khaziain, chy ie ty vdoma? / Winter song for the master of the house** 3:04
2. **Oi na richtsi, na lordani / Church carol** 1:43
3. **Oi dai Bozhe vesnu pochat' / Spring calling song** 0:47
4. **Strila / Spring ritual song** 2:58
5. **Vasyl', Vasyl' / Spring song** 3:04
6. **Kalyna-malya nad iarom stoiala / Lyrical song** 4:34
7. **Oi po horke, po krutoi / Soldier's song** 2:48
8. **Provedu ia rusalochky / Early summer song** 1:15
9. **Nasha khata na pomosti / Lyrical song** 3:12
10. **Ne kuï, ne kuï, da zezul'ko rebaia / Solo song** 2:22
11. **Kalyna-malya luhovaia / Solo song** 2:25
12. **D'oi ty bereza tonkaia, kudravaia / Summer field song** 2:29
13. **Av chuzhoho sokola / Harvest song** 0:52
14. **Oi z-za dnoï horki... / Lyrical song** 3:18
15. **Da kosyv kosar / Salt trader's song** 4:30
16. **Rozpletala mene diadina / Wedding song** 0:45
17. **Oi shcho my skhotily / Wedding song** 0:44
18. **Kotu, kotu, kotochku / Lullaby** 1:00
19. **Oi pan khaziain... / Winter song (reprise)** 0:48

Cover page, photo by Jim Krantz

Above, left to right: photo from the archives of The Ivan Honchar Museum of Folk Arts in Kyiv; photo by Jim Krantz; photo by Virlana Tkacz



*So that's how we spent that terrifying spring / With its burning sun and radiant leaves
In the wasteland of abundance created / By our own artificially fertile world
Whose flower hides the initial nudge towards a new mutation.*

from Nataalka Bilotserkivets's poem *May*

INTRODUCTION

Seaon yields to season, and such unceasing cycles of life, death and rebirth have shaped logics of human spirituality and expression since time immemorial. Thus, an event as modern and technological as the April 1986 nuclear disaster at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant in then Soviet Ukraine, uprooted and extinguished centuries of village life—including the ritual, musical, and devotional—in the remote region known as Kyivan Polissia that surrounded the reactor.

In the wake of the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl, the massive injury to the natural environment and the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people created an irreversible rupture from the traditional way of life that had developed in this secluded region of the world. Twenty-five years after this nuclear disaster, in 2011, the Chornobyl Songs Project was initiated to reinterpret and pay homage to a year in the traditional life of those vanished villages, as expressed through their ritual and lyrical song repertoires. This project was performed by singers in New York City, most of whom had little personal connection to Chornobyl or its environs. Yet, following the March 2011 nuclear tragedy in Fukushima, we were reminded again of how local disasters can have worldwide resonance. This recording is a re-imagination of a year in song from a lost world whose unique sonorous legacy should not be forgotten.



Left to right: The Chornobyl nuclear reactor; apples in a local villager's orchard. Photos by Jim Krantz

THE DISASTER

On April 26, 1986, a power surge resulted in a series of fires and explosions in Reactor #4 of the Chornobyl Atomic Energy Station, releasing radioactive contaminants into the local atmosphere and water sources in one of the worst nuclear disasters in history. Prypiat, the site of

the disaster, was the USSR's 9th "Atomic City" (Атомоград), founded in 1970 to house workers at the nuclear power plant. Today, it is a famous ghost town. Prypiat (population approximately 50,000 in 1986) was evacuated starting on April 27, 24 hours after the disaster. In the first week after the meltdown, the government moved more than 200,000 people from a 30 kilometer "zone of exclusion" radiating from the reactor. However, Soviet leadership did not publicly acknowledge the disaster until April 28, when a Swedish nuclear power plant more than one thousand kilometers away registered elevated radiation levels. It took 18 days for Mikhail Gorbachev to appear on Soviet television and alert the public to the nuclear catastrophe that had occurred on the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In Kyiv, the capital city of the Ukrainian SSR located about 70 kilometers downstream from Chernobyl, May Day celebrations had gone forward as planned—though rumors of the contamination had spread throughout the city, and those citizens who could afford it, fled the area. Today, more than 3.5 million Ukrainian citizens have official *Chornobylets* status—legally defined as *poterpili* (sufferers). The post-Soviet Ukrainian state, which inherited the burden of dealing with most of the fallout from the catastrophe, has provided protections such as free medical care, cash subsidies, and other social services for the *poterpili*. However, due to the volatility of the independent Ukrainian economic and political establishment, support for victims has been inadequate.

The disaster at Chernobyl was a momentous event that catalyzed public outrage against the environmental and human abuses of the Soviet Union and, as Adriana Petryna wrote, contributed to "a politics of national autonomy...[by] devaluing Soviet responses to the disaster as irresponsible." As a rallying point against Soviet mismanagement, the event was crucial to the cohesion of the anti-Soviet movement for Ukrainian independence (2002: 5). In the tumultuous years following the catastrophe, an environmental movement centered on anti-nuclear activism took root in Ukraine; later, the organization cohered under the name "Zelenyj Svit" (Green World) and was the "first independent organization to officially register its existence in Ukraine" (Dawson 1996: 74). Though the organization was banned from holding a memorial service two years after the disaster in Kyiv, it became a significant political presence in the early post-Soviet era, fueling the "eco-nationalist" impulse of the last Soviet years into the early post-Soviet period (Dawson 1996). In tandem with this new environmentalist ethic, and with the restoration of religious freedoms that accompanied the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the Ukrainian neo-pagan—*ridnovira*, or "Native Faith"—movement also grew in size and momentum. The Native Faith movement sought to return to much earlier models of religious belief, ritual, and social organization rooted in territorialized and "natural" notions of ethnicity and local identity, rather than national borders and large bureaucratic governments.

Following the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986, the waning years of the USSR were characterized in part by a revival of social movements that revolved around conceptions of nature and the natural. The relationship between the traditional village songs of Kyivan Polissia, the urban "authentic" folk song revival movement, and the growth of Native Faith and environmentalist social movements,





Ukraine and surrounding countries; inset shows the area around the “Chornobyl Zone,” also known as the ethnographic region Kyivan Polissia.

constituted a web of interconnected and overlapping milieus. These milieus circled around renewed interest in political, spiritual, musical, and ritual discourses giving renewed strength to individuals and organizations outside of official power structures that opposed the abuses of Soviet rule and, ultimately, contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.

VILLAGES IN THE CHORNOBYL ZONE

The 12th century settlement of Chornobyl, located 16 kilometers from Pripjat’, is in a region known as “Kyivan Polissia,” a remote, marshy and densely forested belt that, today, runs along the border of Belarus. According to Jewish legend,

The Chornobyl nuclear power station was built on the place of a ruined Hasidic cemetery. In Ukrainian, the word ‘Chornobyl’ means ‘wormwood’; many have made the connection between the meltdown of this reactor and a New Testament prophecy about the Apocalypse: ‘And the name of the star is called Wormwood and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter’ (Revelations 8:11) (Fialkova 2001).

In her history of Polissia, the borderland region between historic Poland and Russia once referred to as the *kresy*, Kate Brown provides some detail of what Hasidic Jewish life looked like before World War II. Her book, which documents the multi-ethnic and religiously diverse culture of the *kresy* (which also included Poles, Germans, Lutherans, Baptists, Sectarians, and Catholics, many of whom were moved during Stalinist population transfers of the 1940s and 50s) from the early 20th century

to the Soviet 1950s, asks the question of how the “particular worlds of the *kresy* disappear[ed] with hardly a trace?” (2003). This project, which focuses on the village culture of the region in the 1970s and beyond, deals with a population that had been, in many regards, ethnically and discursively cleansed by the atrocities of World War II and Soviet nation-building projects.

By the mid-20th century, the villages of Kyivan Polissia were overwhelmingly made up of self-identified “Polishchuks,” (or *tut-eshni*, “locals”), who had inhabited the region for centuries leading up to the disaster. Lydia Grigorevna Orel, the curator of the Ukrainian Ethnographic Museum and a well-known ethnographer of the region, described the remote rural region:

Polissia changed only slowly with time. People lived there far from the urban centers and trade routes, in the midst of a forest and on land not well-suited for agriculture. Large collective farms never took root there because there were only small patches of arable farm land. Instead, the villagers adapted to the forest and swamps by fishing, collecting berries and mushrooms, digging peat for fuel. Stores sold little that people needed to buy—bread, a little salt. And then [in the early 1970s], only 90 kilometers away they built [the Chernobyl] nuclear reactors. In the midst of this agricultural preserve, they put the most advanced industrial technology. To see it, the contrast, didn’t make sense.... But the region remained isolated even after they built Chernobyl. That is the paradox: 90 kilometers away from a modern, industrial city with an atomic substation, people still wove their own clothes, lived on their own natural means, and even confessed to their own pre-Christian gods... During Easter, instead of carrying the specially baked bread to church, they offered it to the setting sun, confessed and prayed before a sacred tree for prosperity and a good harvest. All the old ways were preserved there like nowhere else (in Brown 2003: 227).

After the disaster in Chornobyl, over 160 villages were relocated in their entirety (though a much greater range, constituting approximately 9% of Ukraine’s territory, and 23% of Belarus’, is thought to be contaminated). Some elderly villagers, unable to adapt to life away from their ancestral homes and lands, eventually returned to the Zone of Exclusion, where they carried on with their daily lives tending their livestock and gardens and picking berries and mushrooms from the forests.

Today, it is estimated that approximately 300 villagers are still living in the Zone of Exclusion. Fialkova notes that:

Many who now live in the ‘Chornobyl zone’ dismiss the radiation threats as immaterial, since radiation cannot be seen or felt immediately. Others treat radiation like a house spirit, trying to charm or cajole it; they maintain that radiation affects those who prefer city comfort but has no harmful influence on people who appreciate nature (Fialkova 2001: 198).

This faith in the inability of radioactivity to work on those “who appreciate nature” is consistent with how villagers historically conceptualized their relationship to land and the territory of their ancestors in Kyivan Polissia. To natives, the earth is life-sustaining, just as it always has been. Any other truth is too difficult to imagine, too cataclysmic in its effects, and is therefore dismissed.

Due in part to their isolation, these villages had also preserved a unique style of strident





Photographs from the areas surrounding Chernobyl. From the archives of The Ivan Honchar Museum of Folk Arts in Kyiv

heterophonic and polyphonic singing for an expansive repertoire of ritual songs, many of which blended Christian motifs with pre-Christian themes. In these villages, ritual songs were closely tied with the change of seasons and the calendar of church feasts: songs sung for *koliada* (the winter song cycle); songs that implored the gods to bring spring to the village; harvest and work songs; funeral songs; and elaborate cycles of wedding songs. With the exception of the *koliada* songs, most of the ritual repertoire was sung by women, the traditional time-keepers in the village; whereas lyrical songs could be sung by mixed groups of men and women.

Following the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl, villagers were resettled in various regions of Ukraine and had to adjust to environments with different geographical features. As community networks, family bonds, and ties to the land were severed, some villagers fought to protect aspects of their traditional way of life. One such strategy was through the staging of key ritual events, such as the summertime tradition of chasing *Rusalki* out of the village and back to the cemetery. *Rusalki*, the resurrected spirits of the village dead, always took the form of beautiful young women and were believed to be responsible for fecundity of the soil, but were also feared for their powers to drive the living to madness and suicide. After the fields started to grow, village women and girls would process together from the far end of the village to the cemetery, singing the repertoire of traditional *Rusalka* songs. Upon arriving at their ancestral cemeteries, the villagers would build fires and celebrate the return of the *Rusalki* to their resting places. For resettled villagers after Chernobyl, such rituals began to die out, as locals unfamiliar with the traditions undermined or mocked aspects of the ritual.

Before the disaster at Chernobyl, the Ukrainian ethnomusicologist Yevhen Yefremov, along with his colleagues in graduate school, had been conducting field expeditions in Kyivan Polissia; recording, transcribing, and analyzing the ritual and lyrical songs of that region. After the disaster, Yefremov continued to visit sites among relocated villagers, and traced the ways in which their rituals had adapted to their new environments. Now a senior professor of ethnomusicology at the Kyiv Academy of Music, Yefremov told me about the time he witnessed how the young men of a village doused resettled village girls with water as they sang the *Rusalka* songs and walked towards the

cemetery. As locals in the new communities complained about the “pagan” activities taking place near their home cemeteries and the younger generation of resettled villagers lost interest in their ancestral traditions, Yefremov explained, such rituals have nearly died out among resettled villagers. Subsequently, the songs are also never sung, since they were inseparable from the ritual. The literal distancing from their home environments and ancestral cemeteries sabotaged the relevance of the ritual and silenced the song. However, as villagers from Kyivan Polissia have let go of such traditions, the “authentic” folklore revival movement that reenacts similar ritual repertoires has grown.

AVTENTYKA

Since the late 1970s, interest in “authentic” village songs (*avtentyka*)—meaning folklore thought to be uncontaminated by Soviet cultural policies—has taken on momentum in urban centers of Ukraine such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Rivne. Notable groups include Drevo, Bozhychi, Majsternia Pisni, Hurtpravtsi, Nadobryden’, Huliajhorod, and the Warsaw-based female ensemble Diczka. Drevo, the first Ukrainian *avtentyka* ensemble, was formally founded in 1979 by Yevhen Yefremov with a group of graduate ethnomusicology students in Kyiv. The Kyivan group was inspired by the Dmitri Pokrovsky Ensemble founded several years earlier in Moscow. At the same time, similar ensembles were springing up in other regions of the USSR, including Leningrad and Vilnius.

Across the USSR, the *avtentyka* movement, like many cross-cultural music revivals grew out of an impulse to restore and salvage vestiges of culture believed to be archaic, pre-Soviet, and therefore more authentic. More than just music, these song repertoires were believed to connect to older models of life that symbolized a “true,” ancient brand of identity and belonging. The revival movement also grew as a reaction to the culture of Soviet institutionalized folklore (sometimes called *folkrozym*, or *sharovarshchynna*, in Ukraine), which had standardized and homogenized the timbral, textural, and harmonic qualities of village songs to conform to norms of Soviet professionalism in folk music. One major goal of the revival movement singers, then, was to preserve the dialect, timbre, vocal improvisations, and other stylistic features of these songs. Currently, ethnomusicology students at the Kyiv Academy of Music are required to take classes to learn to sing in the “authentic” village styles from different ethnographic regions of Ukraine. In these classes, attention to the vocal production of timbre, ornamentation, and dialect are primary categories of instruction.

The reaction against Soviet institutionalized folklore that catalyzed the revival movement also carried an ideological component: as the Soviet centralized government relaxed its strict cultural and social policies in various spheres (including musical expression) in the period of *perestroika*, members of the authentic village song revival movement deepened their explorations of sacred and spiritual (both Christian and pre-Christian) themes in village songs. The symbiotic relationship of the natural environments of villagers, their territorialized identities, and the songs that they sang are common themes in the analysis of these repertoires; for urban singers, many of





Left to right: Relocated villagers recreate the “Rusalka” ritual in their new home; Women in Kyivan Polissia gather to sing for a team of ethnographers from Kyiv. Photos by M. Semenoh and S. Marchenko

whom approached their de-Sovietized Ukrainian-ness (or Slavic-ness) vis-à-vis the spirituality and “naturalness” of village songs, such connections were often crucial. This music, with its aura of ancientness, allowed singers and ethnomusicologists to react against the Soviet establishment by embracing something believed to be unique, local, and essential. Today, groups reconstruct entire ritual events based on field recordings, mining these rituals for the link they provide to knowledge from the past. In some ways, the impulse mirrors that of the preservationist folklorists of previous eras; in other ways, their project speaks to historically contingent discourses of place, nature and identity in contemporary Ukraine.

25 YEARS LATER

The environmental and anti-nuclear movements served to reawaken a long-dormant society and remind them of their national heritage. Calls to protect the Ukrainian lands and people from the nuclear threat were important to the resuscitation of a sense of Ukrainian national identity. In Ukraine, environmental and nationalist goals were mutually reinforcing; it might be more accurate to think of the anti-nuclear movement as a catalyst for nationalism rather than a surrogate (Dawson 1996: 79).

In contemporary Ukraine, as in much of the developing world, environmental concerns often take a back seat to the carnivalesque world of post-Soviet politics; for most individuals and families, concerns about the environment are displaced by the economic matters that demand constant and urgent attention. In 2008, the prominent Ukrainian pop star Ruslana attempted to instigate an environmental movement through her project “Wild Energy,” in which she tied environmental activism to her musical depiction of a grim science-fiction future in which humanity faces an energy crisis that only “wild music” can remedy. Her project was met largely with apathy, and a subsequent broadcast on National Public Radio in the United States concluded that, in money-hungry post-Soviet Ukraine, Ruslana’s platform that “[energy] is the most valuable currency”

was too symbolic a rallying cry (2008). But there have been some positive developments as well: eco-tourism efforts in tourist hotspots such as the Carpathian Mountains of Western Ukraine and Crimea; attempts to protect the “organic” foodways of much of the country; the organization of various “eco-clubs” and “eco-journals,” and even the introduction of the first “eco-tote” bag to combat the prevalence of plastic bags.

Since the 1980s, music and national politics have been deeply intertwined in Ukraine. In the late Soviet era, Anglo-American rock music with Ukrainian-language lyrics formed a blaring soundtrack of nationalist protest against Soviet power; the *avtentyka* revival movement operated as a less visible, but also important form of resistance to Soviet authority. Bolstered by the rise of the environmentalist and Native Faith movements and spurred on by the trauma of the Chornobyl nuclear disaster, the song culture of Kyivan Polissia offers a rich example of how this kind of traditional ritual music, with its embedded discourses of nature and place, can work to consolidate groups around agendas of environmental protection for humans and our natural world.

ABOUT THE SOURCE RECORDINGS AND PEDAGOGY

By Yevhen Yefremov, translated by Maria Sonevytsky

The Chornobyl disaster left a black mark in the history of mankind. The consequences of the disaster are varied, but the cultural losses that the catastrophe wrought are the least likely to be mentioned. However, the territory of the present “Chornobyl Zone,” which is a part of the historical region of Polissia, was, even in the late 20th century, a kind of sanctuary for the archaic cultural traditions of its inhabitants. Here, people lived from time immemorial—cultivating the land, bearing children, burying the dead, singing their old songs, calling spring to the village through song, celebrating the new harvest, honoring God.

In 1986, this world suddenly changed. As a result of mass resettlements and the dispersal of communities following the nuclear disaster, people became alienated from their native environments and distanced from their family homes and from the graves of their ancestors. All of this led to the profound undermining and loss of local village traditions. For the resettled—the *pereselentsi*—these losses were most acute, as they found themselves in close contact with entirely different local cultures. It became impossible for the resettled Polissians to continue the ancient rituals in these new environments, and the unique sounds of quintessential Polissian tunes steadily faded, as did the typical dialects of resettled Polissians.

As it happened, in 1978 I started ethnomusicological surveys of these territories: a few times a year I visited Polissian villages, talked to people, witnessed ritual ceremonies, and recorded their songs on tape. Later, after the accident, I continued this work as a member of a historical-cultural team of researchers in association with the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Ukraine. We worked both in the resettled villages and also in the “zone,” where a small percentage of people remained





Left to right: A snowy landscape in Kyivan Polissia, 1986; Yevhen Yefremov sits with a group of villagers in the Chernobyl Zone. Photos by M. Semenoh and S. Marchenko

after 1986. This is how an ethnographic collection of information, including songs, came to exist, and to provide insights on the traditional life of Polissian villagers up until 1986.

The creation of this album was made possible thanks to a happy confluence of factors. The first of these was the availability of ethnographic musical recordings, which became the primary source for the songs provided on the disc. The second was the origin of the idea, which began with Maria Sonevsky, a young scholar of ethnomusicology and an American of Ukrainian heritage, who invested great energy to bring the project to fruition. The result of her initiative was the formation of a remarkable team of creative individuals, representatives of an entirely different contemporary American culture, who took on the task of studying and interpreting some of the lost musical treasures of Ukrainian Polissian song. At Maria's initiative, I was invited from Ukraine to work on the project, since I already had considerable experience in the sounds and songs of Polissian folk music and a pedagogical methodology developed expressly for this style. In America, with the members of the newly formed group "Hilka" (which means "branch," an homage to my Kyivan vocal ensemble "Drevo," which means tree), we endeavored to prepare for a concert presentation of these songs, and also worked to overcome the inevitable technical and creative complexities of this style. At the beginning, our efforts were aimed at cultivating a characteristic Polissian timbral quality—one that is powerful (since most ceremonial songs were traditionally sung outdoors and were meant to be heard at great distances) and saturated with high overtones, especially for women. The second task was to learn the lyrics in the distinct dialect of the region, with particular attention to the phonetic reproduction of those sounds. Together with the words, we studied the melodies of songs. And this was also not easy because traditional singers perceive and reproduce songs orally and aurally, not utilizing any means of fixation besides memory. Therefore, a critical dimension of true folkloric singing is the element of variation, or adaptability. It is through the pliability of melodic variance that the song becomes a musical phenomenon that lives, one that can vary depending on the conditions of performance, as well as with the abilities and creative imaginations of the singers. In our training, we learned the principles of variation in these styles, enjoying new discoveries and building on the complexities of these songs as we made them our own. Variation, moreover, brought

out the individual personalities of the Hilka ensemble members, who trained in this style with great enthusiasm and openness, and to whom I express my sincere gratitude and admiration.

Special thanks are also due to Virlana Tkacz, whose unconventional, vivid and multifocal theatrical direction added an invaluable dimension to the live performances of Hilka. Unfortunately, listeners of this recording will have to be content with their visual imaginations as they listen.

I will conclude by adding that the creative act of the “Chornobyl Songs Project” took place on the 25th anniversary of the Chornobyl nuclear tragedy. Unfortunately, most of the village singers from whom these source recordings were made—and reinterpreted in this project—are no longer on this earth. May this release serve as a significant brick in the spiritual memorial to all the Polissian victims of this tragedy.



Images of Ensemble Hilka, live in concert in 2011. Photos by Virlana Tkacz

ABOUT THIS RECORDING

PERFORMED BY **ENSEMBLE HILKA**: SUZANNA DENISON, BRIAN DOLPHIN, CHERRYMAE GOLSTON, J.R.HANKINS, JULIAN KYTASTY, EVA SALINA PRIMACK, ETHEL RAIM, WILLA ROBERTS, CAITLIN ROMTVEDT, MARIA SONEVYTSKY, NADIA TARNAWSKY, SHELLEY THOMAS, DIRECTED BY YEVHEN YEFREMOV

Following performances in New York, Princeton, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., the ensemble created this recording to be a document of the collaboration between these 12 singers and Dr. Yefremov. On December 5 and 6, 2011, the ensemble spent two intensive days recording with engineer James Frazee at Water Music studios in Hoboken, N.J. Dr. Yefremov flew back to Ukraine on December 7. This recording seeks to maintain the integrity of the conceptual “year in song” that was staged in performance. Therefore, the album begins and concludes with the same track, an archaic winter song.

TRACK NOTES

1. *Oi pan khaziain, chy ie ty vdoma?* / Winter song for the master of the house

ENSEMBLE, WITH CAITLIN ROMTVEDT ON FIDDLE

Koliada is a winter ritual that now coincides with Christmas, but is much older in origin and symbolism. Some say the winter song singers are the ancestors who descend to earth during the winter solstice and sing magical incantations to each member of the family. Led by a fiddler, the winter singers stand outside the house and sing: “Is the master of this house home? Set the table, for three guests from the heavens are coming to visit.”

2. *Oi na richtsi, na lordani* // Church carol

SUNG BY J.R. HANKINS, JULIAN KYTASTY, BRIAN DOLPHIN, YEVHEN YEFREMOV

A later *koliada* titled “The Waters of the Jordan River,” a Christmas carol about the Blessed Virgin bathing the Baby Jesus.

3. *Oi dai Bozhe vesnu pochat'* // Spring calling song

LEAD VOICES: CAITLIN ROMTVEDT, WILLA ROBERTS

Spring calling songs are sung to literally encourage spring to visit the village. As the winter freeze loosens its grip, young women gather on a hill to call out spring: “Oh Lord, let spring begin! Hey!” The women sing with a high pitch and strident timbre, so that their calls resound from village to village.

4. *Strila* // Spring ritual song

LEAD VOICE: SHELLEY THOMAS

“Strila” literally means arrow, and symbolizes a bolt of lightning in this archaic form of spring song. Spring warmth arrives with lightning storms, rushing waters, and the pale green of new grass. The rites of spring include round dances (*khorovod*), which trace a meandering pattern, and ritual songs about ritual death. “A bolt of lightning flies through the village and strikes down a young man. Oh Lele, the spirit of spring, water rushes around... Only the widow Domna can approach. She lifts the body and carries it to the church. The doors open themselves for her. The candles light themselves for her. The books read themselves for her.”

5. *Vasyl', Vasyl'* // Spring song

LEAD VOICE: SUZANNA DENISON

A song about devotion to the beloved (and lack of interest in others), that would traditionally be performed during a round dance (*khorovod*).

6. *Kalyna-malyna nad iarom stoiala* // Lyrical song

SUNG BY EVA SALINA PRIMACK (SOLO), WILLA ROBERTS, MARIA SONEVYTSKY, YEVHEN YEFREMOV

Lyrical songs in this tradition often begin with an extended naturalistic image that becomes an allegory for the narrative. “The red berry tree was bent by the wind; a daughter changed so much she was not recognized by her mother. ‘I now have three great worries: a young child, a harsh mother-in-law and an impulsive husband.’”



7. *Oi po horke, po krutoi* // Soldier's song

SOLO VOICES: JULIAN KYTASTY AND BRIAN DOLPHIN; TOP VOICE: EVA SALINA PRIMACK

In traditional Ukrainian polyphonic songs that incorporate both male and female voices, the ornamental upper line is always taken by a solo female voice, while the rest of the singers elaborate on the fundamental melody. While recruit songs with male soloists such as this may have originated in a military environment, they quickly became assimilated into the folk song repertoire of the village. "A young major rides on a raven black horse. Oh fiddle, play for me, for I'm in a foreign land."

8. *Provedu ia rusalochky* // Early summer song

LEAD VOICE: MARIA SONEVYTSKY

The *rusalki*, spirits of waking dead girls, were believed to make nature grow, but could also bring calamity to the village. So, once the wheat fields started to sprout, the women would urge the *rusalki* back into the cemetery from the village and the fields. "I will lead the *rusalki* to the river's ford, and then I'll return home alone... Hey, *rusalki*, here is a sprig of herbs, don't come to me in my dreams."

9. *Nasha khata na pomosti* // Lyrical song

LEAD VOICE: NADIA TARNAWSKY; TOP VOICE: SHELLEY THOMAS

A sister visits her brother. He sees her coming and says, "Wife, take the plates off the table, my sister is here to drink." "Brother, don't hide the bread and salt... I've eaten my fill and just want to sit with you."

10. *Ne kuî, ne kuî, da zezul'ko rebaia* // Solo song

SOLO VOICE: EVA SALINA PRIMACK

Field songs are surprisingly intimate and private. Alone in the fields, women sang about their personal struggles. Like lyrical songs, these solo songs often begin with a strong naturalistic image that becomes entwined metaphorically with the song's story. "Don't coo, calling bird... I stayed up all night waiting for my beloved. Beloved, don't be angry, don't tear the sheets. Why won't you look at me or our children?"

11. *Kalyna-malyna luhovaia* // Solo song

SOLO VOICE: WILLA ROBERTS

"Don't cry, girl. I'm getting married, but not to you. But I'll invite you to the wedding."

12. *D'oi ty bereza tonkaia, kudravaia* // Summer field song

SOLO VOICES: CAITLIN ROMTVEDT, MARIA SONEVYTSKY, AND SHELLEY THOMAS

"Get up daughter-in-law, or may you never rise. Go milk those miserable cows you brought from your father's house."

13. *A v chuzhoho sokola* // Harvest song

LEAD VOICE: SUZANNA DENISON

A biting, humorous song from the field workers to their master, who is forcing them to work despite the late hour. "Oh Lord, help us make it from this end of the field to the other. May fish and frogs crawl on our overseer's head."



14. *Oi z-za dnoï horki...* // Lyrical song

LEAD VOICE: J.R. HANKINS AND JULIAN KYTASTY;
TOP VOICE: WILLA ROBERTS

A harsh village morality tale. “The sun shines from over the hill right into my garden....The grass rustles as a girl lies with a boy lifting her hand to embrace him... ‘When I don’t see you, I cry 40 times a day.’ What a stupid girl, she gave her love to a boy, then had to be married off to a widower.”

15. *Da kosyv kosar* // Salt trader’s song

SUNG BY YEVHEN YEFREMOV (SOLO), J.R. HANKINS,
BRIAN DOLPHIN, JULIAN KYTASTY

The men who maintained the salt trade from the Black Sea inland formed a society unto themselves. Their songs reflect the harsh conditions that they witnessed during their encounters with local farmers as they travelled through the vast steppe. “The mowers cut the green grass till blood poured down with their sweat, as a salt trader sat in the shade and laughed at their hard work.”

16. *Rozpletala mene diadina* // Wedding song

MAIDENS: EVA SALINA PRIMACK, WILLA ROBERTS,
SHELLEY THOMAS

During the wedding ritual the matrons undo the bride’s braids and roll her hair up under a kerchief, worn by all married women. The maids fight them off in a set of ritual songs and bemoan the loss of a friend. “That snake pulled my hair, sisters shed tears.” “Girls, take up sticks and defend my long braids.”

17. *Oi shcho my skhotily* // Wedding song

MATRONS: SUZANNA DENISON, CHERRYMAE GOLSTEN, ETHEL RAIM, MARIA SONEVYTSKY, NADIA TARNAWSKY; MAIDENS: SHELLEY THOMAS, EVA SALINA PRIMACK, WILLA ROBERTS

Matrons: “We’ve done what we set out to do: we transformed a girl into a young woman.”

Maids: “If we really wanted to, we’d undo her hair and take her dancing.”

18. *Kotu, kotu, kotochku* // Lullaby

SOLO VOICE: ETHEL RAIM

“Kit, kit, kitty sitting in the corner ...”

19. *Oi pan khaziain...* // Winter song (reprise)

ENSEMBLE HILKA

Winter comes again. “Is the master of this house home? Set the table, for three guests from the heavens are coming to visit...”

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The Center for Traditional Music and Dance, one of the nation’s pioneering folk arts organizations, has helped New York City’s immigrant communities maintain the vibrancy of their unique cultural heritage since 1968.
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CREDITS

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Photos of Ensemble Hilka by Virlana Tkacz

Archival images of villagers from the Chernobyl region from the book, *Ukrainian and Ukrainians*, from The Ivan Honchar Museum of Folk Arts in Kyiv. Used with permission.

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