

Whose Is This Song? (De quién es esta canción?) (2003)

Directed by: Adela Peeva

Category: Documentaries

70 Minutes

In Bulgarian, Macedonian, Turkish with English subtitles.

Filmmaker Adela Peeva and her friends from various Balkan countries sat together for dinner. When a familiar song played in the background, they all claim it as having come from their country. They couldn't agree on its origin, so Peeva set out to make a documentary about her journey across the Balkans to discover where the song really came from. It's one of those documentaries where the filmmaker appears onscreen, interviewing. It's a film about her searching for the song's origins, not simply about the song. The results are meandering and occasionally interesting, until the final 15 minutes when it all comes together.

The Balkans are a mystery to most Americans. Most of us probably know that they're in Europe, and that they used to be under the control of the Soviet Union. We might know about "the former Yugoslavia," and we might know about Milosevic. The rest is confusing, something that hits the front page if American soldiers are killed, but that doesn't rate the first section of the paper under normal circumstances. In some ways, this film serves as a useful educational tool about the Balkans and their relationship to each other. It helped me understand a bit about the recent and continuing conflicts between Bosnians and Serbs, Albanians and Serbs, Turks and Bulgarians, and various other opposing parties.

The film starts in Bulgaria, Peeva's country. From there, she travels to Turkey, Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Serbia, before going back to Bulgaria for a celebration of St. George's Day. Along the way, she interviews people, some interesting and some not. She hangs out with some Greek men who spend their days gathered at pubs and talking; in each place she locates someone to perform the definitive version of the song. It's immediately recognizable, despite wearing many different tempos, instruments, and lyrics. In Turkey it's a militant dirge; in Greece it's a snappy song about beautiful girls; in Bosnia it's an Islamist anthem. Each country has a story about how the song came to be. It was about a beautiful gypsy woman who stole the hearts of the town's men; it was sung by the marching armies of Islam as they spread their religion into the region; it was in celebration of a local festival day. There are lengthy tangents while she informs us about a regionally famous film star who popularized the song, interviews an elderly man who chatters at length about all the people he used to know who are dead now, and tries to track down the house that supposedly belonged to the subject of one version of the song. Some of the people she interviews are interesting, like the Macedonian musicologist who informs us that no matter what Macedonians might say, the song did not originate with them. Other interviews make you wonder why they're in the film at all.

It's not until the final 15 minutes that the film gets to its point. Peeva makes the mistake of playing the Bosnian version of the song for a pub filled with Serbians. At first they are silent, but then the place explodes with anger. They accuse her of being a troublemaker; they attempt to smash her camera; they threaten physical violence. The idea of her playing them the enemy's "theft" of their beloved song, which was doubly insulting to them because the Bosnian version was a jihad song, and they were all Orthodox Christians. The song dredged up lingering hatreds from a decade of war with neighboring Bosnia. Shaken by the experience, Peeva goes home to "safety" in Bulgaria, but she learns another hard lesson there. At a St. George's Day festival, she makes the mistake of telling a group of teenage thugs that some people say their beloved song

originated with the Turks—this immediately after they brag that they'd like to slit the throats of any Turks they see. Unsurprisingly, people get pissed off. Word gets out that she's a Turk-lover, and the people turn on her, despite their shared nationality. One old man in a wheelchair threatens to hang her from a nearby oak tree. Again, she has inadvertently dredged up long-held animosity, this time going back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire is the key here: the tune is most likely Turkish, having been carried to the region by the invading Ottoman armies as far back as Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th century. Like most people living under a foreign rule, the people of various Balkan countries took aspects of the ruling culture and made them their own. The film isn't really about who the song originated with, though; it's about how the song as cultural commodity is used in the service of nationalism. In the visually stunning finale, as the Bulgarians attempt to put out a fire started by fireworks (a fire that likely saved Peeve's hide), the filmmaker despairs of there ever being peace in the Balkans. It's not something that Americans will concern themselves with, at least until the next time US troops are involved.