

# Performing Artists for Peace plan USSR trip

by Kathleen Grummett

for the Tundra Times

In the Yup'ik village of Uelan, Siberia, sits a traditional building called a dance house.

Its large picture window faces toward Alaska. Inside, an elder raises a hand to quiet a celebration, gazes upon the horizon beyond the window and speaks.

"How can we dance when our brothers and sisters across the water are living in such abject poverty and under such repression?" he asks.

Meanwhile, in Alaska, dancers, singers, actors and musicians — the repressed — prepare for a trip to Siberia. They combine a love of music, a curiosity about the Soviet Union and an interest in bringing some understanding between the two most powerful countries on earth.

These 70 Alaska Performing Artists for Peace hope to dispel misconceptions like that of the Yup'ik elder's, as well as some of their own.

The performers have spent more than a year studying Russian music, culture, history and language. They've prepared families and employers for a month's absence that will take them on a trek across 11 time zones and 7,800 miles, part of it via the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Their unique performances, which mix portions of the Yup'ik bladder festival with American folk dance and song, will be seen in seven Soviet cities between Khabarovsk in the East and Leningrad in the West. They are led by Dixie Belcher, APAP's founder and artistic director.

No stranger to the rigors of touring, Belcher spent 10 years directing the

St. Paul singers, a Juneau-based folk group that toured Alaska and parts of Canada throughout the 70s. During that time, the president of Rumania invited the singers to his country.

Belcher also blended her spirited "up with people" musical style to form the Juneau friends and neighbors, a group that convassed Anchorage and Fairbanks with song, hoping to sway public opinion in those towns prior to the heated capital move vote.

Belcher's interest in promoting the Alaska-Siberia Eskimo reunion stems from a life-long interest in Alaska Native culture and the Arts.

"This tour will bring Siberian and Alaskan Yup'ik relatives together for the first time in 40 years," she says.

APAP's musical language springs from a patchwork of statewide arts groups including the Tanqik Theatre in Chevak, the Juneau Folksingers and Dancers, the Nunamta Dancers from the Bethel area, the Savoonga Comedy Players, the Anchorage Gospel Choir and the Yukon Fiddle Band of Fairbanks complete the statewide cast.

Within this diverse group, members comprise varying levels of artistry. They range from the professionalism of Homer's Eddie Wood, a percussionist who accompanys for Windham Hill recording artists and tours with Alex DeGrassi and the Scott Cossu Trio, to singers who have never performed publicly.

Of the group, Dave Hunsaker, screenwriter for a planned documentary about the trip says, "They are not a slick professional performance group but are a bunch of citizens from a variety of cultures, from all walks of life, who are first and foremost

Alaskans."

With the assistance of Toksook Bay elders, Hunsaker created "Yup'ik Antigone," an adaptation from the greek play by Sophocles. He says the performance to be offered is on a folk level.

"It's not an exportation of polished art, such as the Soviet's Bolshoi, or a headline American rock and roll band designed to impress."

In many cases, a cross-cultural theme runs through the backgrounds and interests of APAP members, such as Bill Stevens of the Yukon Fiddle Band. His Athabascan ancestors learned how to fiddle reels and jigs from Scottish Hudson Bay employees at Fort Yukon where he was born.

Percussionist Wood was born in Spain and schooled in Panama and Georgetown University, and the cast's translator and general manager Alex Mafewski, was born of Russian parents in Germany on the way to America.

Another quality tying this diverse group together is their desire to understand people of another culture. Singer Shirley Staton of the Anchorage Production Company Desh Mae, is "intrigued with people and their way of living."

She organized 27 Alaska representatives to attend the 1985 United Nations International Women's Conference in Nairobi.

While in Russia, Staton and four other Anchorage gospel singers from Anchorage churches, have been invited to visit the home of black author and anthropologist Lily Golden. Golden's parents immigrated to Russia from the United States before she was

born.

Of course, as the name implies, the performers are interested in the issue of peace. Theresa and John Pingayak of Chevak's Tanqik Players, who accompanied Belcher on a January advance trip to Russia. They are one of three Eskimo performing groups represented on the tour. Like others, when they board the jet leaving Chevak, they also leave children behind.

Theresa says, "We decided if this was going to be for the good of the world, our people and children, we knew it was important that both of us go together."

John is mayor of Chevak, director of the Chevak Cultural Heritage Center and master of ceremonies for the cast. Theresa is Chevak's Headstart Program director.

Juneau folksinger monsignor James Miller, who usually confines his singing to mass at St. Paul's Church, is committed to the message of peace.

"The means by which we have been striving for peace haven't been successful," he said. "Peace is something very positive rather than just an absence of war. Generally, the more we know people, the more barriers are lowered and peace can be possible."

This month, the statewide cast meets for the first time when they rehearse together in Anchorage prior to departure. They will be accompanied by 20 others including staff, press and film crews, three Eskimo elders and former Gov. Jay Hammond and his wife Bella, who is part Yup'ik.

No matter how politicians interpret it, the tour's mission is strictly one of goodwill.