# Roma Rule

By ANDREW PURVIS Sunday, Jun. 09, 2002

Roma bands like Taraf de Haĭdouks, left, have fans across Europe dancing in the aisles

JULIE DENESHA



Union chapel, a stately congregational church in the upscale London borough of Islington, is often rented out for summer events. So the crowd of concertgoers who gathered there on a breezy evening last month was nothing unusual. Except, that is, for the guy with the accordion. A portly man with long, thinning hair pulled into a ponytail, undaunted by the smart set in their $100 jeans and retro shirts, he stood in the main entranceway trying to hawk his damaged instrument. Politely ignored at first, he finally hooked a young woman and carefully played a tune that somehow avoided the twisted stops and smashed keys. She was impressed.

What she didn't realize — apart from the dubious quality of the merchandise — was that the peddler was in fact Viorel, the bass player of Taraf de Haïdouks, the gypsy band she had paid good money to see, and that his ditty was in effect the first tune of the evening's performance. Downstairs other band members, a sort of extended musical family spanning three generations, were swigging wine and fiddling away on battered violins. By the time the concert got under way they had already been warming up for an hour and soon had the crowd of Londoners (Londoners!) dancing in the pews. A corner of Tony Blair's old borough was transformed, momentarily, into a raucous outpost of Eastern Europe.

And so it goes with Taraf de Haïdouks, or "band of brigands," a Romanian gypsy group that has won praise from the late Yehudi Menuhin, modeled clothes for Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto and played Johnny Depp's Viper Club in L.A. Taraf's CD sales may still be modest, but their performances have won a cult following. And they are not alone.

Gypsy music is stirring audiences around the world. Top bands from Central Europe are playing upwards of 100 foreign gigs a year. Filmmakers are hungry for their scores. Critics have likened

the outpouring to the birth of jazz in the U.S. in the 1920s. Says Simon Broughton, co-editor of The Rough Guide to World Music: "The music does what music should do. It tears at your heartstrings and gets your blood racing."

This summer Taraf de Haïdouks is moving on to the International Istanbul Jazz Festival (July 6). Fanfare Ciocarlia, a Romanian brass ensemble, will play France's Jazz à Vienne Festival (July 13). A few weeks before that, a film about the band entitled Brass on Fire will open at Berlin's Museumsinsel. These won't be staid affairs. "They are phenomenal live entertainment," says Garth Cartwright, a London music journalist and author.

Critics point to the virtuosity of bands like Fanfare Ciocarlia, whose musicians can tap 180 beats a minute, to explain their appeal. Others cite the use of traditional instruments in a time of digitized sound machines. "It's music untouched by the 20th century," says Cartwright. Fans are less analytical. "It's beautiful. It's raw. It's out of this world," enthused Miroslav Luczka, resting after a hectic bout of dancing to the Yugoslav brass band Roma Zorale at a Prague club last month.

Serbia's Goran Bregovic is considered a pioneer of the gypsy music revival. Though not Roma himself, he scored Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica's 1989 film Time of the Gypsies, which critics consider a seminal work that did for gypsy music what the cult classic The Harder They Come did for reggae. Bregovic is still touring with his Wedding and Funeral Band. Interviewed by Time in Belgrade, he said he thought gypsy music's growing popularity in the West had as much to do with image — and imagination — as music. The Roma, he says, are "Europe's cowboys." In a rule-bound world, they have come to symbolize "a special sense of freedom" and "this special talent of dying for friendship and love. Everyone wants to be a gypsy for a day."

At a time when music and concertgoing can seem over-orchestrated and oversold, gypsy bands offer a glimpse of life on the edge. "It's not just what they do on stage, but what they do afterward," says The Rough Guide's Broughton. Michel Winter, Taraf's manager and translator, agrees: "They are not backstage musicians. Music is their life."

All 13 members of Taraf de Haïdouks grew up in the same small Romanian village, and all come from musician families where grandfather, father and son were raised to play. Saban Bajramovic, 66, a gypsy music legend in Serbia who once played for Josip Broz Tito and India's Jawaharlal Nehru, was imprisoned for desertion from the military and made that experience the inspiration for his life's work. A press statement introducing his latest album observes, in all seriousness: "He can't say himself how many times he has been married since his return from prison, and God alone knows how many children he has fathered throughout the Balkans." The gypsy diva of the Czech Republic, Vera Bila, meanwhile, has performed at the Hollywood Bowl and London's Barbican. But until a few years ago she was working odd jobs cooking and cleaning.

Whatever the roots of their popularity, these musicians may be helping preserve the cultural traditions of an entire region. Bands like Taraf learned their craft while Eastern Europe was still shut behind the Iron Curtain and so avoided the market forces that have weakened other folk traditions. Now, says Simon Broughton, were it not for Roma, the popular music of Romania, Bulgaria, former Yugoslavia and many parts of Greece would be in a dire state: "The way to preserve this music is to use it, and that is what the Roma are doing. As for Roma themselves, hearing the music is more than entertainment."

The irony is that while gypsy music is being welcomed in the West, its following at home — among non-Roma — has been tepid at best. Indeed, it has been a difficult time for the Roma across Eastern and Central Europe. The end of generous state subsidies for this music eliminated a key source of support, and discrimination is still depressingly common from Romania to Slovakia, where Roma children are routinely sent to schools for the mentally handicapped. During the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, Roma were targeted by both sides. As a people they have suffered discrimination for centuries, and that suffering forms an important part of their music.

More than a decade after the end of communism, things are changing. Responding to Taraf's burgeoning acclaim, a record company organized the group's first major concert in their native Romania. Pressure from Brussels on countries that want to join the European Union is improving Roma rights, slowly. Now, in fact, there is another worry. The aging of bands like Taraf and stars like Saban Bajramovic, some argue, heralds the end of an era. "We are seeing the last of the greats now," says Cartwright. Goran Bregovic, however, is more hopeful. He says some younger Roma in Serbia are using electronic instruments to forge a "new gypsy music" that could help the genre survive. "It's only in the ghetto now but soon it will be popular."

Not that the members of Taraf, say, seem to be worried that their time is up. Back in Islington the performers soon had the crowd of well-heeled locals limp with appreciation. The performers never seemed to get tired. There is, after all, always another accordion to sell.

With reporting by Reported by BLAINE GRETEMAN/London, JOSHUA KUCERA/Belgrade and JAN STOJASPAL/Prague



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