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Now Playing Mainstream: Pop Music's New Balkan Beat

 By **DAVID CRONIN**

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The band has left the stage but nobody is going home. Palms bash together, feet stomp and raised voices demand to hear more. The crowd's persistence pays off as the musicians return for an encore of "Siki, Siki Baba," a boisterous tune driven by cheeky brass and heavy drums.

In Macedonia, this song is guaranteed to induce euphoria on wedding-reception dance floors. Tonight's venue, though, is not a Balkan party tent. It's a rock club in Brussels called Le Botanique. "Siki, Siki Baba" was introduced to Western ears by the Macedonian Gypsy band Kocani Orkestar, but this group, which calls itself Beirut, comes from New Mexico.

The eight-piece band's founder, 21-year-old Zach Condon, looks every bit the indie-rock frontman with his somber-hued cardigan and just-out-of-bed hairstyle. But rather than being obsessed with guitar pedals, he has immersed himself in the music of the former Yugoslavia ever since he traveled to Europe after dropping out of college a few years ago.

Mr. Condon is one of several performers in a new generation of pop musicians who are championing a culture that has long been on the margins of European society: the Roma gypsy community.



Shaune Janes


New York-based Balkan Beat Box updates the Roma sound with modern instruments to create a style it calls "Mediterranean dance hall."

Now, Gypsy music has been expanding beyond the world-beat sections of music stores and reaching a more mainstream audience. Roma music, especially the kind with its origins in the Balkan countries, has been popping up everywhere from major movie soundtracks to indie-rock albums made by American and Western European artists to trendy discos in London, Paris and Frankfurt.

The music has recently been featured on the soundtrack of the hit movie "Borat," in a major production at the Paris Opera called "Time of the Gypsies" and on albums by indie-rock groups like Beirut and New York-based Balkan Beat Box. It is also the subject of three recent documentary films, including one

still playing in cinemas across Europe, Jasmine Dellal's "When The Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan." The movie follows five Gypsy groups touring Europe, India and the U.S., and may do for Gypsy music what Wim Wenders' 1999 film "Buena Vista Social Club" did for Cuban music: help give

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it more mainstream exposure.

The Roma people, commonly referred to as Gypsies (a term that has been used derogatorily but is nevertheless embraced by the community), have long been known for the importance their culture places on music -- and for the frenzy their raucous, brass-dominated bands have been known to whip up in live concerts. The music's lively style and upbeat tempo are distinctive.

But while references to Gypsy music have occasionally popped up in other genres -- the jazz recordings of Django Reinhardt in the 1930s and '40s, for example -- it has largely been known to listeners outside Eastern Europe only as a niche product.

While it has been featured in movies before -- especially those of acclaimed Bosnian Serb director Emir Kusturica, including two that won him awards at Cannes, 1988's "Time of the Gypsies" and 1995's "Underground" -- it has only recently started popping up in films not specifically about Gypsy culture or history.

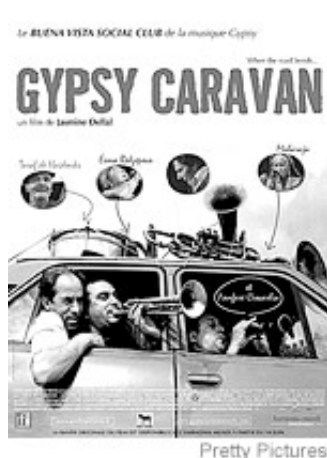


Sipa Press

A scene from "Time of the Gypsies" at Paris's Bastille Opera

But even more surprising than the exposure the music is getting on movie screens or opera stages is its trendiness with a younger generation of Western musicians, especially in the indie-rock world.

Mr. Condon and Beirut earned glowing reviews and respectable sales for their 2006 album, "Gulag Orkestar," which borrowed heavily from Balkan music. Hailed by Rolling Stone magazine as a "delightfully downtrodden debut," it spliced melancholy left-field rock with somewhat sprightlier accordions and brass.



A poster for the film "Gypsy Caravan"

Another New Mexico band, A Hawk and a Hacksaw, partly recorded its 2006 album, "The Way the Wind Blows," in a remote Romanian village with the Gypsy band Fanfare Ciocarlia. On its new album, released this summer, A Hawk and a Hacksaw joins forces with a Hungarian folk group, the Hun Hangár Ensemble.

Other Western groups have incorporated the sound of Roma music. Balkan Beat Box, founded by Israeli-born Ori Kaplan, uses studio technology to create a brass and beat-heavy concoction that Mr. Kaplan calls "Mediterranean dance hall." The British folk big band Bellowhead is steeped in English and Celtic traditions, but its fiddles flirt with Balkan-inflected brass. New York's Gogol Bordello bills itself as "Gypsy punk."

The Balkan appeal is even more apparent in hip concert venues and nightclubs, including Le Divan du Monde in Paris, the Jazz Café in London and La Palma in Rome. DJs have found that, with a little tweaking, turbo-charged Gypsy tracks are surefire floor-fillers. "This is the perfect music to party to," says Belgium's pre-eminent spinner, Buscemi (real name: Dirk Swartenbroekx), who has appeared at Club Meirei in Vienna, La Paloma nightclub in Barcelona and Club Babylon in Istanbul. The music's fast, thumping one-two beat fits easily into today's dance-club mix.

Frankfurt-based DJ Stefan Hantel, better known as Shantel, pioneered the idea of mixing digital beats with Balkan horns and strings in the 1990s. He is founder of the popular Bucovina club nights, named for the region straddling the Romanian-Ukrainian border to which he has strong family ties. "I don't see these sounds as world music," Mr. Hantel says. "They are part of our daily pop culture. If you look at the club scene in Frankfurt, Berlin or Vienna, you'll find that there is nothing alternative or left-field about this music. I'm sure that it is going to have more and more crossover appeal, just like reggae and funk have had."



Divano Production

Macedonia's Kocani Orkestar

Record companies are hoping to take advantage of that crossover appeal. Brussels label Crammed Discs, home to Taraf de Haïdouks, the first Balkan Gypsy band to enjoy significant commercial success in the West, has released two "Electric Gypsyland" compilations, in which Gypsy tunes are remixed or reinterpreted by DJs or musicians from outside the tradition. This format has been emulated in Britain, where Felix Burton, from the techno-pop group Basement Jaxx, and DJ Russ Jones put together the "Gypsy Beats and Balkan Bangers" CDs, the latest of which was released in July.

Music fans looking for the genuine Gypsy sound might start with the soundtrack to "Borat," one of last year's top box-office successes. Though the film's main character purported to come from Kazakhstan, the scenes depicting his home village were filmed in Romania, and the soundtrack featured such prominent Roma acts as Fanfare Ciocarlia and Stefan de la Barbulesti. Liev Schreiber's 2005 film "Everything Is Illuminated," about a Jewish-American man searching for the woman who saved his grandfather during World War II, included music from Romania's Taraf de Haïdouks and Kocani Orkestar.

Balkan Gypsy music has also crossed over to the operatic stage, featuring in a well-received production at the Bastille Opera in Paris this past summer. "Time of the Gypsies" was directed by Mr. Kusturica, in a musical restaging of his film with a score that careened between eardrum-assaulting rock and frolicsome Balkan folk.



Newscom

The 'Gypsy punk' band Gogol Bordello

The music's sudden popularity across several genres means increased exposure for the people who play it all the time, performers like Boban Markovic. Mr. Markovic is one of the best-known musicians in the genre, and is the perennial winner of the "best trumpet" award at the Guca Festival, the main brass-band contest in his native Serbia. His concerts are notable for their energy, as the band he fronts with his son, the Boban I Marko Markovic Orkestar, whips up a storm with trumpets, tenor horns and tubas.

Music and family life are intertwined in Roma communities. Children start playing plastic Chinese-made trumpets as early as the age of 3; once they have graduated to proper instruments, their elders will help them learn the often complex rhythms of their tradition.

Mr. Markovic says Westerners have a tough time grasping the intricacies of his work but are nevertheless captivated by the passion and quality of Gypsy musicianship. "This is live music, played from the heart and soul and often with virtuosity," he says.