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The Gypsies pitch up

By Nina Roberts

Wild Balkan music is electrifying the New York club scene

THE Bulgarian Bar, on the corner of Broadway at Canal Street, looks like an Eastern Bloc rec room gone mad. Every Thursday night, under dim coloured lights and a disco ball, people loose themselves on the packed dance floor to New York City's most unusual dance rhythms.

Romanian Balkan brass is cut into Mano Negra, streamed into flamenco dub, slapped into raggeaton, Fanfare Ciocarlia, mixed with the Bad Brains, eased into Turkish guitars, with some Fugazi stabs. The music is so loud that inner organs vibrate, and ears will ring for the next 18 hours. Surging this way and that, the dancing throng is a tangle of diversity: twentysomething groovers, retro Eighties gear, Italian bankers in suits, faux-hawks, students in sneakers and greying artists.

Igniting the scene from behind the DJ counter is Eugene Hütz, a surprisingly sexy fiend with porcelain skin, big-lidded eyes and a gold tooth barely visible under his bushy winged moustache. He thrusts his body around to the pounding rhythms he's spinning while swigging from a bottle of brandy. His unbuttoned shirt flaps about and it's only a matter of time before it comes off and he's standing on the counter with a mike in hand. Hütz, 32, a refugee from the Ukraine, has been a pioneer in New York City's gypsy-punk scene through DJ gigs at the Bulgarian Bar and his formidable band Gogol Bordello.

"I always wanted to be a conductor, actor, musician, instrumentalist, singer, composer, poet, all at the same time," he says. "That is why Gogol Boredello is the way it is; it's kind of an avalanche of all these things."

Formed in 2000, the eight-member band is a ragtag group of immigrants from Russia, Israel, Ukraine, plus one American drummer. Their performances involve an accordion, costumes, crowd surfing, violins, booze, guitars and a hardcore sound, mixing gypsy, Russian/Ukrainian folk and punk.

Gypsy-inspired bands have been emerging for the first time in New York City. "We all came from separate places and found one another," says Sxip Shirey, 37, the producer of the King Gypsy Rocker Massives and guitarist of the gypsy-punk group Luminescent Orchestrii.

At the sold-out Knitting Factory gig for Gypsy Massive, Shirey announces from the stage, "This is the music for drinking, dancing and f*****!" Later he explains: "We're pursuing the need to have fun. This society has an extreme lack of joy."

Romashka and Slavic Soul Party! are two bands that play traditional gypsy and Balkan dance party music with various combinations of sax, percussion, clarinet, violin, accordion, trumpet and tuba. During a break at a recent Romashka show, Inna Barmash, 26, a singer from Lithuania

says: “There is something about gypsy music that people just respond to, whether it’s flamenco, Hungarian gypsy or Russian gypsy — it catches people’s souls in a very immediate way. People seem to know how to dance to it intuitively.”

Indeed they do. With a few stomps of Inna’s high-heeled boot, the band furiously launches into Mariana. Diners at the East Village Turkish restaurant abandon their tables, and dance in the tiny space in front of the band, oblivious to the grumpy waiters who get jostled by the crowd.

Matt Moran, 32, always leads his raucous band, Slavic Soul Party!, out of the performance area to snake around the bar and tables of drinkers, imposing his huge strapped-on drum. Moran believes the opening up of the Eastern bloc and recent immigration patterns have contributed to the growing popularity in Balkan-Roma music. “As things state-side become more square and bland, it’s so exciting to find music and cultures that really lay their s*** on the line. Balkan brass-band music is extreme. There is just a real balls-to-the-wall-ness that is cool. We grew up with punk, and maybe we left incredibly loud guitars behind for a while, but a lot of us still want to live at the edge of something. Balkan music is really intense and a beautiful way to grab on to some fire and some life.”

Guignol, a four-person band, serves up a combination of punk, jazz, folk, tango, klezmer, cheap red wine, woolly pinstriped suits, newsboy caps and one waxed moustache, worn by Franz Nicolay. As he pumps his accordion, teenagers in full-on punk regalia thrash and dance. “We’re doing folk music from a country that never existed,” Nicolay says. “It’s the kind of music we’d like to hear, rather than the kind of music people were making 100 years ago.”

On a recent night at the Galapagos in Brooklyn, the Hungry March Band (22 plus musicians) weaves its way through the crowd on to the stage. Mardi gras beads swing, saxes buck, trombones extend. There’s a cabaret feel, with wigs, goggles, pigtails, spinning bass drum mallets, fedoras; spoons rattle a washboard; there are epaulettes, a hula hoop, marching hats and a frilly red crinoline. The playing is tight and immaculate.

Greg Squared, 33, one of the six sax players, says: “The people that play this stuff are amazing musicians, and it’s so foreign to your ear that it automatically grabs you. To be able to play in a weird meter is difficult; to be able to groove and jam in a weird meter is even more difficult.”

Hütz, of Gogol Bordello, is a quarter Roma, and is slightly proprietary about gypsy music and culture. He wants musicians to understand and respect the culture, not just to use the sound superficially. “There are pioneers driven by passion, but then there are also copycats, — people who start throwing gypsy and Balkan all over their things without even knowing what it means,” he says.

Gogol Bordello has been collecting rave reviews on all five of their CDs, including the latest, East Infection, and have played at Tate Modern and the Whitney, as well as local dives across America, Europe and Ukraine. Hütz is also co-starring in Everything is Illuminated, a movie based on the book by Jonathan Safran Foer, due out in America in August.

“I really love New York, and what has happened here,” says Hütz. “I brought a thing that nobody ever thought about here, and I was able to communicate it to people and originate a whole following.”