

FANFARE  
CIOCARLIA IN  
FULL SWING WITH  
DANCER AURELIA

# gypsy kings

Despite its traditional roots, Romanian Gypsy music is experiencing a resurgence in popularity. Words by Ed Stocker



**O**n stage, it's a sweaty, debauched mess. And the crowd loves it. A bare-topped singer wearing skin-tight trousers and a cabaret moustache is hailing the "Gypsy Punk Revolution!"

Meet Gogol Bordello and its frontman Eugene Hütz, whose music is an aural assault of thrash guitar, drums and violin. Their sound leans heavily towards Western rock, but there's no doubt the group also looks another direction for inspiration: East.

New York-based Gogol Bordello have also been influenced by Eastern Europe's Gypsy music along with other American bands like Balkan Beat Box and Beirut. But it's not only in the US that Balkan and Gypsy-themed nights are packing in the punters. Frankfurt's DJ Shantel, whose Bucovina Club is named after a historic region of Romania and Ukraine, is topping the charts in Germany. In Paris, Le Divan du Monde club hosts a much-celebrated Gypsy night. And DJs from Brazil to Turkey have queued up to remix Roma musicians on recent CD projects like *Electric Gypsyland*, *Nuit*





*Tsigane* and *Gypsy Beats* and *Balkan Bangers* – mixed by Felix B, one half of Basement Jaxx.

Gypsy chic isn't just limited to music: on the big screen, Algiers-born filmmaker Tony Gatlif released *Transylvania* – about music and Gypsies in Romania – to critical acclaim last year. The fashion world caught on for a while too with 'boho' flowing dresses and hoop earrings. Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* film even featured Romanian Gypsy music – which was bizarre given the Kazakh setting. Hütz, meanwhile, is enjoying newfound celebrity status having duetted with Madonna at last year's London Live Earth concert.

It's a far cry from the original, acoustic form of the music that still thrives on the arable plains of Eastern Europe. Roma musicians have been playing in this part of the world since coming from northern India and settling in Europe around the 11th century. And Romania, straddling Central and Eastern Europe, is "the proverbial treasure chest for Balkan Gypsy music" according to Garth Cartwright, author of *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians*. It's here that Roma *lautari* (musicians) play until sunrise at weddings and funerals while guests get sozzled on homebrewed plum brandy. For Simon Broughton, co-editor of *The Rough Guide to World Music*: "The energy and emotion of hearing these bands in

action at a traditional wedding is hard to beat."

Across the country, Romanian music is marked by the dominance of the violin, mostly played by Gypsies. Other instruments include the accordion, double bass and *tambal*, a rectangular-shaped and hammered zither that produces a rippling oriental sound. In a small pocket of Moldavia, brass is king, a legacy of the Ottoman Empire and their marching bands, which also influenced the music of neighbouring Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia.

By the early 20th century Gypsy singers were making decent livings in Bucharest's cafés and restaurants. Violinist Gore Ionescu serenaded a bookish clientele in the capital's upmarket eateries until his death in the 1950s. Grigoras Dinicu was another popular fiddler, credited with popularising the tune "Ciocarlia", who played Bucharest venues and toured Western Europe before he died in 1949.

Under communism, Roma musicians were encouraged to play folkloric, as opposed to village, styles but many went on to record with Bucharest's Electrecord, Romania's only music label at the time. Performers included the doyen of female song, Romica Puceanu, who aged 14 was singing in the Floreasca and Herestrau *mahalas* (slums) of Bucharest and performing with Aurel and Victor Gore, sons of Ionescu.

#### PLUM SPIRITS EXPLAINED

*Tuica* is a traditional Romanian spirit made from plums and particularly popular in rural village areas. The strength goes from about 30 per cent by volume up, depending on how many times it is distilled. Often it's moonshine brewed and bottled at home and brought out at meal times and celebrations.

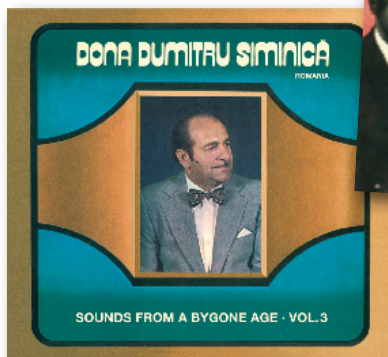
PHOTO: LUDWIG OLAH



LEFT: THE "FASTEST BLOWERS ON EARTH" FANFARE CIOCARLIA BLOW THE CROWD AWAY  
ABOVE: ROMICA PUCEANU AND THE GORE BROTHERS

Another was male vocalist Dona Dumitru Siminica who dressed like a university professor and had a high falsetto voice quite unlike anything anyone had heard before. The strangest story of them all was that of Ion Petre Stoican. In the early 1960s he was a struggling Gypsy violinist who noticed a man acting suspiciously in the capital. He took him to the local police station where, after questioning, it transpired he was a foreign spy. Asked what he'd like in reward, Stoican demanded a record deal.

But it's the bands that cut their musical teeth in the last days of Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship and the early years of democracy that have really made their mark internationally. The most famous is Taraf de Haidouks, the "band of brigands", a string band from the village of Clejani in Wallachia, just south of Bucharest. There is a story of Buena Vista-style discovery late in their careers. Although Western enthusiasts travelled to the village in the 1980s, things only changed with the collapse of Communism in 1989, when Belgian promoters Stéphane Karo and Michel Winter signed Taraf to Crammed Discs and started touring them around the world. With their extraordinary virtuosity and speed of playing, they continue to win over audiences. Their most famous fan is Johnny Depp, who befriended the Haidouks, still proudly wearing their



shabby suits and trilby hats, after he appeared alongside them in Sally Potter's

2000 film *The Man Who Cried*.

The star of the band was undoubtedly violinist Nicolae Neacsu. A born showman, he had a permanent twinkle in his eye and was chasing the ladies until the very end, at the age of 78 in 2002. Performing since the age of five, he had invented a bizarre method of tugging a bow string attached to the lowest string of the violin, creating a scratchy sound that's been much



● Na scenie pełne rozpasanie. Ale ludzie to uwielbiają. Obnażeni do pasa, ubrani w obcisłe spodnie faceci z wielkimi wąsami wykrzykują 'Gypsy Punk Revolution!' Wszystko drży od grzmiących dźwięków gitary, perkusji i skrzypiec. To występ nowojorskiej grupy Gogol Bordello, czerpiącej inspirację ze wschodnioeuropejskiej muzyki cygańskiej.

Ale muzyka cygańska popularna jest nie tylko w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Frankfurcki DJ Shantel z klubu Bukovina, nawiązującego nazwą do historycznego regionu Rumunii i Ukrainy, jest teraz na topie niemieckich list przebojów. W paryskim klubie Le Divan du Monde noce cygańskie cieszą się ogromnym powodzeniem.

Temu wszystkiemu daleko jeszcze jednak do oryginalnej muzyki cygańskiej, ciągle obecnej w Europie Wschodniej. W tej części świata romscy muzycy grają od XI wieku, kiedy przybyli tu z północnych Indii. Według Simona Broughtona, współredaktora Przewodnika po świecie Muzyki, energia i emocje towarzyszące słuchaniu romskich zespołów, grających na tradycyjnych weselach, są nie do pobicia.

W muzyce romskiej dominują skrzypce, wśród innych instrumentów jest akordeon, kontrabas i tambal, wydający orientalne dźwięki. W Moldawii przeważają instrumenty dęte — to spadek po czasach imperium osmańskiego i jego marszowych orkiestr dętych, które miały wpływ również na muzykę Bułgarii, Macedonii i Serbii.

Do połowy XX w. w bukaresztańskich kawiarniach i restauracjach królowali cygańscy muzycy. Jednak prawdziwą międzynarodową sławę w ostatnich latach dyktatury Ceausescu i w pierwszych latach demokracji zdobyły cygańskie kapele.

Najbardziej znana grupa to Taraf de Haidouks (Banda Rozbójników) z niewielkiej wioski Clejani na południe od Bukaresztu. Jednym z jej fanów i przyjaciół jest Johnny Depp, z dumą noszący ich marynarki i filcowe kapelusze. Pojawił się też z nimi na planie filmu Sally Pottera *The Man Who Cried*.

Choć Rumuni nie podzielają tak wielkiego entuzjazmu zagranicą do muzyki cygańskiej, to jednak powoli coraz bardziej zaczynają doceniać jej walory.



imitated since. In the film, *Gypsy Caravan: When the Road Bends*, documenting a 2002 Taraf tour of the US, he said: "Fate made it my destiny to feel good in my old age." Yet this tour of America was to be his last and he died shortly after returning to Clejani.

hailed as "the fastest blowers on earth" by their record label. Musical influences include Turkish and Balkan flavours, Bollywood and the West — they even have their own take on "Born to be Wild". So their music is an earful of oompah-oompah marching songs

## *The energy and emotion of hearing these bands in action at a wedding is hard to beat*

His funeral, captured on film, contains scenes of Taraf playing all night outside Neacsu's window where his body lies in an open-casket. As his protégé, violinist Caliu plays, a relative shouts: "Wake up and tell him you're a better violinist than he is!"

Fanfare Ciocarlia, who formed around 1996, are perhaps the only band to come close to the fame of Taraf. From the village of Zece Prajini in the Moldavian region of eastern Romania, their sound is brash brass played at a thumping speed. They have been

on trumpet, saxophone and horns.

"Some of us," band member Nicolae Ionita says, "were obliged to play by our parents and grandparents while some of us had to fight for our own instruments. But we all learned the music by listening to it."

Romania has thousands of talented Gypsy groups. Bucharest-based Mahala Rai Banda represent a fusion of the fanfare and taraf traditions. Their members include ex-army brass players and two grandsons of late Taraf violinist



ROMICA PUCEANU  
PERFORMING WITH  
AUREL AND VICTOR  
GORE

Neacsu. There have also been Clejani offshoots, bands such as Taraf din Clejani and Clejani Express that have tried to cash in on the success of Taraf de Haïdouks. Similarly, Fanfara Shavale come from the same village as Ciocarlia.

Some angst-ridden teenagers today don't want to listen to traditional string and brass bands. Some want thumping basslines and a bit of aggro. Enter *manele*, Romania's answer to R&B, now called "electronic Gypsy pop", with repetitive beats and lyrics about love and sex. Some see it as flooding Romanian record shops with mundane music that relies on keyboards and synthesisers more than technical prowess. Electro band Shukar Collective try to strike a balance between the two musical extremes by combining Roma vocalists with electronica. Their producer Dan Handrabur says the project is as an alternative to "the Gypsy hits that every brass band is playing these days."

While international interest continues to focus on traditional Gypsy music, within Romania the situation is slightly different. Fanfare Ciocarlia only played their first Bucharest concert in December 2006. Nicolae Ionita describes the night as "emotional" but doesn't read too much into the significance of a sit-down concert. Music is an integral part of life in Romania: "Everybody knows our music from their daily lives." But the gig does show that Romanians are starting to see Roma music as more than just an everyday sound. Now they appreciate it as an asset." Ionita adds: "Young people are starting to be interested in Gypsy music. They don't want to dance to the folk dances – they just want to feel the real music." **W**



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## LIVE ON STAGE

The best places to see Gypsy music in the capital are in restaurants that host live music. Or, if you're feeling really bold, try to sneak into a wedding or local party – they're often held in reception rooms at big restaurants in Bucharest.

## RESTAURANTS

### TAVERNA SARBULUI

*Strada Tipografilor 31, +40 (0)21 490 6050*  
[www.tavernasarbului.ro](http://www.tavernasarbului.ro)

Music daily, except Sunday. Mainly piano and violin performances with some Balkan-influenced shows. Music from 8pm to 11pm.

### RESTAURANT JARISTEA

*Strada Georgescu 50-52, +40 (0)21 335 3338*  
[www.jaristea.ro](http://www.jaristea.ro)

Shows every evening, from traditional Romanian music to Russian romances and Gypsy music. Roma singer Valentina performs around once a week, normally at clients' request, with a four-man band. Music from 7pm to around 12.30-1am.

### CARU+CU BERE

*Strada Stavropoleos 5, +40 (0)21 313 7560*  
[www.carucubere.ro](http://www.carucubere.ro)

Traditional Romanian music played – worth visiting for the historic interior. The performance cellar seats 150 people. Music from 7pm to 10pm.

### HANUL DRUMETULUI

*28, 1 Mai (nr Strada Sibiu), +40 (0)21 413 3430*  
[www.hanuldrumetului.ro](http://www.hanuldrumetului.ro)

Gypsy music every night except Monday. Expect the partying to go on all night while the male band play. Music from around 10pm till late.

### CASA GORJANA

*Strada Brezoianu 7, +40 (0)21 315 6429*  
[www.casagorjana.ro](http://www.casagorjana.ro)

Restaurant serving local dishes and hosting lautari and "muzica live".

## OTHER VENUES

### CLUB TARANULUI

*Soseaua Kiseleff 3, +40 (0)21 317 9660*  
[www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro](http://www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro)

Opened in summer 2007 and housed in Bucharest's Peasant Museum (Muzeul Taranului Roman) – official opening, January 2008. Hosts concerts, theatre and cinema with Gypsy music, folk and traditional song.

### SALA PALATULUI

*Plata Revolutiei, +40 (0)21 315 9710*  
[www.salapalatului.ro](http://www.salapalatului.ro)

Centrally located concert hall and exhibition space. Site of the 2006 Fanfare Ciocarlia concert where they performed with Macedonia's Esma Redzepova and French titans Kalomné. Roma concerts programmed several times a year.