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Living Like Gypsies

All over the world, people are embracing the culture of the Roma people through music, films, festivals and plays.

By **Ginanne Brownell and Amber Haq**
Newsweek International

July 30, 2007 issue - Summertime and the living is frenzied in Paris's trendy nightclub neighborhood of Pigalle. Where absinthe-swigging artists, musicians and cabaret singers once swarmed to watch the can-can girls raise their skirts at the Moulin Rouge, today hip Parisians groove to the beats of "Nuits Tziganes"—Gypsy Nights—at the Divan du Monde nightclub. It's close to midnight on a Thursday and Franco-Italian DJ Tagada, the brains behind the evening's hot "Balkan Beats" ticket, is spinning the tunes as a rollicking, largely barefoot crowd swing their hips and clap to the rhythm.

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1/5



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It's not just the Parisians who are going crazy for Gypsy-inspired music. Across the Atlantic, in New York, similar scenes are taking place at the Mehanata Bulgarian Bar on the Lower East Side. The club's "Gypsy Mania" parties make for some of the most raucous nights in town. From London to Berlin, and Zagreb to the deserts of New Mexico, Gypsy music is this summer's hottest sound. Even the highbrow and almighty Opéra de Paris decided to get in on the action last month when it presented Bosnian director Emir Kusturica's punk opera based on his film "Time of the Gypsies." "This music urges you to move," says Tagada. "It sits restlessly between melancholy and joy [awakening] a sensibility in us that is otherwise asleep."

The buzz goes way beyond music. Interest in all aspects of Gypsy culture has exploded, with scores of concerts, festivals, films and plays raising awareness of the people who first migrated from northern India to Europe more than 1,000 years ago. In June, London's Barbican Centre hosted a three-week-long festival of Gypsy music and culture, "The 1,000 Year Journey," with Johnny Depp's favorite band—Romania's Taraf de Haidouks—headlining one night. Films like Dusan Milic's "Distant Trumpet," a modern-day "Romeo and Juliet" set in Serbia, and Tony Gatlif's "Transylvania," in which a young woman travels to Transylvania to track down her Gypsy-musician lover, are being released across Europe to

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- Education
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much hype this summer. Audiences have also embraced documentaries like "Gypsy Caravan" and "Guca," a film about the ferocious five-day Gypsy brass-music competition that draws 500,000 fans to Serbia every August. "We are not far away from [recognizing] the role that [Roma] culture has played in European culture," says musician Goran Bregovic, who wrote the scores for several of Kusturica's films.

The history of the Romani people— "Gypsy" is now widely taken as a term to describe their culture—was never written down. But it is believed that they were originally north Indian mercenaries enslaved during the Muslim conquests of circa A.D. 1000 and later marched across the Caucasus, ending up scattered across Central and Eastern Europe. Eventually they became renowned for their talents in music and dance, entertaining the royal courts of such monarchs as Catherine the Great. "Given the facts of social history, performance has provided one of the few areas where Romanies have been able to make a living in the non-Romani world," says Ian Hancock, the director of Romani Studies at the University of Texas. "So it made sense to develop and encourage those skills." But they remained at the bottom of the class ladder; many were held as slaves. It was only in 1864—a year before African-American slaves were freed—that Roma slavery was abolished in Romania.

Because of this parallel history, many see similarities between Gypsy music and jazz. "Romanies bring an inventiveness and a radical way of thinking about making music to Europe in the same way that African-Americans, like Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, have done in America," says Garth Cartwright, author of "Princes Amongst Men: Journey With Gypsy Musicians." Documentary filmmaker Jasmine Dellal sought to explore history's role in shaping culture in "Gypsy Caravan," which narrates the musical journey of five Gypsy bands from Macedonia, India, Spain and Romania, as they tour the United States. It artfully interweaves scenes from their lives on the road with poignant snapshots of their personal lives, painting a vivid portrait of the Romani people. "Be it a Slavic brass oompah band, weeping Romanian violins or Spanish flamenco, there are common roots [and] a strong sense of the very real and rich musical space they share," Dellal says. "There is an emotional thread which goes back a long way in time and geography."

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1 | **2** | [Next >](#)

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