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East to West: Essential Gypsy Music Recordings

November 16, 2007

These recordings offer a good introduction to Balkan Gypsy music and to the Western acts that have woven it into their own sound.

The Rough Guide to the Music of Balkan Gypsies (World Music Network)

If you're just beginning a Balkan odyssey, this CD will provide you with an essential overview. The Rough Guide's editors define the Balkans as stretching from the Pindus mountains in Greece to the Carpathians in Romania. The myriad gems on this disc include the herky-jerky electronica-meets-ursari (a traditional style in which practitioners were accompanied by a dancing bear) of the Shukar Collective, leading Bulgarian accordion player Ibro Lolov and Macedonian diva Esma Redzepova.

Taraf de Haïdouks 'Honourable Brigands, Magic Horses and Evil Eye' (Crammed)

Named after the feudal-era brigand Corbea de Haïdouk, this enduringly sprightly combo hail from Clejani, a village near Bucharest. This, their second album, captures the singular talent of the now-deceased violinist Nicolae Neacsu. Wild dances are juxtaposed with an account of being imprisoned with a snake. This record busts guts as often as it breaks hearts.

Boban Markovic Orkestar 'Live in Belgrade' (Piranha)

Sitting still isn't an option once the full-force funk of this 12-strong ensemble kicks in. After being crowned King of Balkan Jazz five times at Serbia's Guca festival, Mr. Markovic seems unstoppable here, especially during the traditional Jewish tune Hava Neguila.

Kocani Orkestar 'Alone At My Wedding' (Crammed)

Macedonia's Kocani Orkestar venture beyond the tacit boundaries of Balkan brass on this 2002 release. Their core sound -- four tubas and a drummer -- gives space to banjo, clarinet and darbuka, as well as some arresting vocal performances that could transform the duller dinner party into a hedonistic hoedown.

Fanfara Ciocarlia 'Queens and Kings' (Asphalt Tango)

Ioan Ivancea, the clarinet-playing leader of Fanfara Ciocarlia, died in October 2006, and his bandmates have just released this poignant...

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October 2006, and his bandmates have just released this poignant tribute. Their trademark oompah-oompah rhythms are augmented by sounds representing the breadth of the gypsies' Diaspora within Europe. French flamenco guitarists Gitans Kalooome and Bosnia's Tito-era exile Ljiljana Butler are among the guests, while the album culminates with Fanfare's quirky take on the 1960s rock anthem "Born to Be Wild."

**Beirut 'Gulag Orkestar'**  
(4AD)

Fresh-faced Zach Condon may hail from New Mexico but this album underscores his fascination with Central and Eastern Europe. Confessing himself bored by electric guitars, he has made a valiant attempt to popularize instruments largely overlooked by his peers. So Balkan-flavored horns vie for your attention alongside mandolins, violins and even a ukulele. Best listened to if you imagine you're confined to an Albuquerque bedroom, where you while away the hours dreaming of the Danube.

**A Hawk and a Hacksaw 'The Way the Wind Blows'**  
(The Leaf Label)

Don't be fooled by how the band's MySpace site claims it is native to Budapest; like Beirut, it's also from New Mexico. Formed by Jeremy Barnes (ex-drummer with the indie rock group Neutral Milk Hotel) and violinist Heather Trost, they partly recorded this album in a remote part of Romania, teaming up with local group Fanfare Ciocarlia.

Their music combines the frolics of Balkan brass bands with similarly playful percussion. Check out the trippy stand-out track, "God Bless the Ottoman Empire."

**Balkan Beat Box 'Balkan Beat Box'**  
(JDub Records)

Israel-born, New York-based Ori Kaplan has the résumé of a true musical polyglot. He has drummed in a punk-rock band and immersed himself (as a saxophonist) in the U.S. jazz scene. Yet his most adventurous work is with this outfit, which even appeared with a Palestinian rapper when playing Jerusalem. As well as their liberal use of electronica, the group opt for an elastic definition of the Balkans. Borrowing from such genres as gnawa, they have decided to redraw the globe so that the Balkans extend into North Africa.

--David Cronin

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