

Pop Talk: Bordello is ready for mainstream success

by *George_Varga*

"Gypsy-punk" and "trans-global rebel rock" sound like contrived marketing slogans, but they perfectly describe the uproarious musical collision that is Gogol Bordello.

GOGOL BORDELLO - Gogol Bordello leader Eugene Hutz adds a new twist to crowd-surfing at his band's concerts. CNS Photo courtesy of Michael Lavine. The members of this two-woman, six-man band hail from Ukraine, Russia, Ethiopia, Israel, Thailand, Scotland and California. The music they make mixes violins, guitars, accordions and heavily accented vocals with drums, electric bass, a rapper and two dancing percussionists. The borders-leaping sonic gumbo that results blends elements of ska, klezmer, heavy metal and rap with flamenco, punk and myriad Balkan and Eastern European music styles.

"Back in the Ukraine, we had our own culture and underground, which we thought was inferior to the Western underground," said Gogol leader Eugene Hutz, who was 19 when his family immigrated to the United States in 1987 from Kiev, by way of Italy.

"But when I came here, I realized we had a lot more spiritual ideas back in our subculture in Eastern Europe and that we were very advanced in some sense. I mean, rock 'n' roll was a real vehicle for truly spiritual energy, you know? Here, it was - at that time - basically a product. And with only very few bands, like Fugazi, did I feel that kind of authentic culture."

But Gogol Bordello's indie underground cult status may be coming to an end after seven years, and the credit (or blame) goes to Madonna. During last month's internationally televised "Live Earth" concert at London's Wembley Stadium, she shared the spotlight with show-stealing violinist-vocalist Sergey Ryabtsev and the even more charismatic Hutz on vocals and acoustic guitar.

Together, they performed an unlikely but electrifying live mash-up of Madonna's 1987 hit, "La Isla Bonita" (recast in a flamenco-tinged arrangement), and "Lela Pala Tute," a traditional Romany folk song Hutz learned from fellow Ukrainian Gypsy musicians as a child.

While Madonna's every move seemed micro-choreographed, Hutz and Ryabtsev performed with such frenzied abandon it appeared as if they might levitate at any second. The result was a highlight of what was otherwise a largely dull day of international concerts to raise awareness about global warming.

"We got the most press out of anyone who participated in the concert," said Hutz, who has a role in the short feature film "Filth and Wisdom," Madonna's upcoming directorial debut. "The reason it looked good is because it was so spontaneous and fresh. That's what our kind of entertainers do."

Hutz grew up listening to such classic-rock bands as The Doors and Rolling Stones, as well as to The Clash and The Stooges. But his biggest musical epiphany came when he was 13 and attended a Gypsy wedding in a remote village.

"Ukrainian music is pretty wild as it is, but I wondered how one person with an accordion made 100 people go nuts," recalled Hutz.

"Basically, what you see in Gogol Bordello is a kind of re-invention of that Eastern European aesthetic on Western territory. I just took all my memories, and what I wanted to be, and made it possible here in a different artistic context. So, that's my roots, my home - the whole idea of very loose, handmade music-making."

"Super Taranta," is Gogol Bordello's latest album on Side One Dummy Records. It does a good job of capturing the energy of the band's galvanizing live shows in a studio, albeit minus Hutz's concert-closing routine of crowd-surfing on top of a marching-band bass drum held aloft by cheering fans.

"Mainstream success? I don't think about it," he said. "What does it mean? That somebody who's never heard Gogol Bordello will come hear us? Well, set me up! I'm there."

