The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Regions Impress Gypsy Punk Band Gogol Bordello

By Nosheen Shakil

July 31, 2011



Eugene Hütz, center right, is the lead singer of Gogol Bordello, which went on a mini tour of Russia this year.

"You got seven minutes," warns a stressed-out promoter as we walk into a Soviet-style dressing room to meet the king of gypsy punk: Eugene Hütz.

Hütz is the frontman of Gogol Bordello, a group as famous for the raucous, energetic concerts that have given it a reputation as one of the best live bands in the world as the eight albums it has released since 1999.

The band's music is a difficult-to-pin-down mix of gypsy folk music and punk that comes along with a mix of diverse influences ranging from Jimi Hendrix to Manu Chao.

With his Ukrainian stylized mustache, Hütz, 38, who sits wrapping his feet in pieces of cloth as he prepares for the concert, is a charismatic figure with music in his blood.

Born Yevheniy Alexandrovich Nikolayev-Simonov in Boyarka, Ukraine, Hütz has a Russian father and a mother of Roma ancestry.

“Music is the family business — my father played in the Ukrainian group Meridian, one of the first rock bands of the country. I still play with the same guitar my father used to conquer my mother’s heart,” says Hütz, who speaks with a thick Russian accent. “I grew up with rock, gradually discovering punk rock. The music scene in the ’80s evolved into ethno-rock, which only exists in peripheral areas such as Ukraine or Ireland.”

In 1986, when Hütz was 14 years old, his family left Ukraine after the nuclear disaster in nearby Chernobyl.

“When we heard of Chernobyl, we fled to the gypsy village of my mother, eventually leaving the country and roaming for years through Europe till we finally arrived in Vermont, U.S.A., in 1992,” says Hütz, whose immigrant experience and Romani heritage permeate his songs. “I am very grateful to the gypsy culture — to me it is as much inspirational as The Doors or The Stooges.”

Hütz eventually moved to New York City, took his mother’s maiden name and formed Gogol Bordello, once called “the world’s most visionary band” by influential American music critic Robert Christgau.

“NYC gave us everything. They understood us as a band,” Hütz says.

In Moscow the band plays a well-orchestrated chaos of gypsy punk, abundant sweat, theater and explosive dance for more than two hours.

They play the favorites such as “Wonderlust King,” “Start Wearing Purple” and “Alcohol,” and, after a third encore, finish off the concert with a Dynamo Kyiv song. Sensing a hint of discomfort in the air — Hütz laughs it away by saying, “Don’t be angry, it is only football!”

Hütz also plays in the Kolpakov Trio gypsy band and acts, most famously with Ethan Hawke in “Everything Is Illuminated,” Hütz’s 2005 film debut, and infamously in Madonna’s universally derided “Filth and Wisdom.”

“Madonna is a good friend, but my favorite movie directors are [Emir] Kusturica and [Jim] Jarmusch,” Hütz says.

At Moscow’s show, he climbs off the stage to give out autographs to die-hard fans. When a female fan begs to touch his moustache, he plays a sensual game of cat and mouse, getting closer, backing away, getting closer before allowing her to lay a finger on his facial hair. She is thrilled.

“I am a Roma wunderkind,” as he sings in his latest album.

Before playing in Moscow, Gogol Bordello played in Kazan and Yekaterinburg.

“Touring for the first time in Russia’s provinces completely changed our image of the country. It was a dark hole before — now we understand the place better,” he says. “We definitely want to continue doing so. It is interesting to see how provinces have their own

reality which is very different from the one in big towns. The core of the band is Eastern European, and we keep this aspect very fertile. People in the provinces can relate to this, and we find the audience super inspiring."

Hütz says the group has plans to release a record specially for its Russian audience.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/07/31/regions-impress-gypsy-punk-band-gogol-bordello-a8610