

Two Albums Offer Gems of Gypsy Melodies

By Alexander Gelfand

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Before the advent of the European Union and its open borders, long before Germany had been invaded by the Turks and France by the North Africans, two groups vied for the distinction of being the most despised people in Europe: Gypsies and Jews.

More often than not, the Gypsies — or Roma, as they prefer to be known — were the unfortunate winners of this grim competition. Indeed, the Roma were once so reviled that wealthy Hungarians hired Jewish klezmer musicians to play Romani music rather than have the Roma do it themselves, believing, it seems, that Jewish riff-raff were preferable to Romani riff-raff.

That Jewish musicians were able to fill in rather competently for their even-more-oppressed brethren testifies to the rich musical history that the two groups shared. In the 17th century, Jewish musicians fleeing the wars and pogroms of Central and Eastern Europe joined forces with itinerant Romani performers to tour the southern reaches of the old Ottoman Empire, sharing melodies and musical techniques along the way. Ultimately the Greco-Turkish and Romani dance music these klezmerim encountered helped shape the klezmer style in Eastern Romania (today's Moldova), just as traditional Russian and Slovakian music influenced Ukrainian and Polish klezmer. Romani musicians, meanwhile, became valued members of many klezmer ensembles.

The Brooklyn-based band Romashka capitalizes on those various interconnections to produce music that is deliciously distinctive yet strangely familiar. The name Romashka, which means "daisy" in Russian, is derived from both "Roma" and "mashke," the latter being Yiddish for "liquor." And in matters of repertoire, instrumentation and playing style, the group draws equally on Romani and klezmer traditions. Fans of Balkan wedding music will appreciate the wildly kinetic rhythms of "Mariana," while "Moldovan Batuta" could have sprung from the book of any Bessarabian klezmer outfit. The Russian tango "Tanya" drips with the kind of bittersweet, sepia-toned nostalgia for which both traditional klezmer and Romani music have become aural tropes. And "Shimdiggy" — a freewheeling original that merges New Orleans rhythms with Central European melodies — sounds like what you might get if you mated the Dirty Dozen Brass Band with Ivo Papasov's Bulgarian Wedding Band.

Romashka owes its irresistible rhythmic drive to drummer Timothy Quigley and tubist Ron Caswell, who slyly funkify even the most traditional of the group's arrangements. But much of the band's visceral punch comes from Lithuanian-born singer Inna Barmash. With her wide, throaty vibrato and ringing delivery, Barmash has an uncommon gift for communicating the emotional valence of a song, even when its lyrics are in a foreign tongue. On the Russian Gypsy tunes "Loli Phaboy" and "Zoznobila," the impact of her voice is almost tactile. She's the kind of singer with whom you could fall in love.

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