

Romanian gypsy music offers zing and swing

Kathy Petite

Contributor/Singapore

A spontaneous blast of excitement emanated from the audience at a performance by Taraf de Haidouks at Jubilee Hall, Singapore, on June 22.

Originating from the small Romanian village of Clejani near Bucharest, this group, whose name means "band of honorable brigands", provided a rich feast of music, dance and theater at the 30th Singapore Arts Festival, which ran from May 25 through June 24 this year.

Festival director Goh Ching Lee said they were the "true blue" of Romanian Gypsy bands that still have purity and originality. "I've been trying to contact them for four years but since they travel a lot, it's been a challenge to get them here."

The effort was truly worth it. The show lasted for 110 minutes with an intermission — but never could one sense any decrease in energy that radiated from the eight colorful, warm, eccentric characters who created invigorating tunes from violins, accordions, *cimbalom* (a stringed instrument struck by two light hammers), bass and vocals.

The audience was transported by and immersed in intense medieval ballads — Turkish-flavored tunes from the Balkans.

It was not easy to comprehend the complexity of the tunes as they darted and zigzagged with trills and precisely articulated repeated notes. But there were quieter parts, too, that created a more sentimental mood.

In the second part, the audience was treated to music with a stronger Turkish and Arabic flavor that was both exotic and fascinating.

Apart from the sole female, *cimbalom* player Dulitru Stela, father and son Gheorge Anghel and Robert Gheorghe seemed to steal much of the audience's attention with their magical violin playing.

They also offered two surprises, one in which Gheorge Anghel played the loose strings of his violin, but



Courtesy Your Language

still produced a pleasant melody. The other was when Robert Gheorghe held the violin between his thighs and played it.

After the end of the scheduled show, the group gave an impromptu performance outside the auditorium. The space was suddenly turned into a fun, vibrant carefree crowd of clapping, cheering and dancing people.

Some of the performers even took off their hats and upturned them on the floor near the band, and they were then filled with coins and notes.

Nearby, a bunch of 20-something fans got carried away as they swung and swayed away, intoxicated by the music.

For a moment, you could have been part of a fiesta in a Romanian village. The party went on for a while; even the traffic noise around Raffles hotel seemed to fade away.

Albert, a young Romanian who had come to see the performance got carried away with the sheer energy of it all: "It's wonderful. They're a real, authentic Gypsy band and seeing them makes me feel like I'm at home."

"But you should meet them in weddings — it's 10 times more beautiful."

Taraf de Haidouks have produced three albums and are preparing their fourth, recently performed successfully at the Folles Jours de Nantes, one of the largest classical music

festivals in France, and in Japan.

"After Singapore, we'll return home then it's off to Portugal for the next performance," explained band manager Vande Wyer

Romanian Gypsy band Taraf de Haidouks ("band of honorable brigands") captivated audiences at the recently concluded Singapore Arts Festival with their rambunctious performances.

Stephane.

Now I know why Johnny Depp fell so madly in love with this band that not only did he fly all the way to present them a trophy when they won the 2002 BBC Radio 3 Award for World Music (Europe/Middle East category); he also flew them to Los Angeles to play at his club to mark the release of his film *Sleepy Hollow*.

It's not every day you'll find a band that engages its audience so effectively with its grace, easy camaraderie and sense of mischief.

Oh well, I'm now craving to see them perform at a wedding someday. Did I mention Johnny Depp?

On the Record

Still Shocking

Artist: **Jane's Addiction**

Album: *Up From the Catacombs*:

The Best Of Jane's Addiction

Label: Rhino/Warner

Rating: **** out of *****

Standout Tracks: *Pigs In Zen*,

Been Caught Stealing, *Superhero*, *Three Days*

Forget his doomed stint with the Red Hot Chili Peppers or his ill-advised decision to join the cast of the show *Rockstar:INXS*.

Long before the debacles, guitarist Dave Navarro was a force of nature with metal-funk outfit Jane's Addiction. At about the same time, when INXS' Michael Hutchence still had his sanity intact, Navarro graced the rock scene with some of the best guitar playing ever.

His guitar solo in *Three Days*, off the album *Ritual de lo Habitual*, was voted by critics at



Guitar World magazine as the 100th-greatest guitar solo of all time (of 1,500), while many other considered it as among the best.

That, and other guitar pyrotechnics, as well as lead singer Perry Farrell's perverse worldview, are the treats offered by *Up From the Catacombs: The Best of Jane's Addiction*.

And for those who have been led to believe that Jane's Addiction is a Led Zep derivative, *Up From the Catacombs* will convince them otherwise.

In *Pigs In Zen*, Farrell channels his best impersonation of Aerosmith's Steven Tyrell, while Navarro churns out some of Joe Perry's most incendiary riffs.

Other songs in this compendium, predictably, are hits culled from Jane's Addiction four long-players: the live debut *Jane's Addiction*, *Ritual*, *Nothing's Shocking* and the 2003 reunion album *Strays*.

The downside is that we get a live version only of the band's best track, *Jane Says* — one that will remind us of how good things were only 20 years ago.

— M. Taufiqurrahman