

fROOTS / UK

JONY ILIEV

Red wine... cheap skiing... poisoned umbrellas... plots to kill the Pope: welcome to Bulgaria. And music: the intoxicating voices of Le Mystere de Voix Bulgares and Ivo Papazov's Thracian jazz clarinet noodling were briefly 1980s world music phenomena. Since then? Largely silence. While Romania has exported Gypsy brass and string bands to international stages Bulgaria, for decades the Soviet's pet pit bull, appears cowed, forgotten.

Then Jony Iliev's album *Ma Maren Ma* (Asphalt Tango) arrived. Rich in Balkan flavour, Jony's throaty vocal rides languid rhythms and hypnotic melodies to great effect. Jony's band play with relaxed fervour and the production is perfect, effortlessly suggesting the music's live in your living room. Where many East European Gypsy recordings tend to be too busy *Ma Maren Ma* emphasises warmth and soulfulness.

Which is why I'm in a dodgy Sofia restaurant on a Saturday night as guest of Henry Ernst, the Berlin-based music magnate behind Jony Iliev. Jony's the evening's entertainment yet things aren't sounding good. The band are way too loud and their sound is not the soulful Gypsy music of *Ma Maren Ma* but *chalga*, the Bulgarian term for what's best known as turbo-folk.

Turbo-folk spread like sonic Sars across the post-communist Balkans and as Yugoslavia crumbled it provided a nationalistic soundtrack, its pick 'n' mix blend of synthesised sounds being grafted on to traditional lyrics/melodies. The 1995 marriage of turbo-folk queen Svetlana 'Ceca' Raznatovic to the monstrous Arkan only served to increase the music's gruesome popularity (Milosevic's state controlled media ensured their wedding was an Event). This hellish Posh & Becks may have got their just deserts – he murdered, she jailed for involvement in the assassination of Serbian PM Zoran Djindjic – yet turbo-folk thrives.

Under communism traditional music in Bulgaria was forced into the uncomfortable role of 'official' music for the regime so creating much kitsch folk music. Bulgaria shares a land border and strong cultural affinity with Serbia so Bulgarian musicians quickly adopted turbo-folk and began making their own variant on it, *chalga*. *Chalga* blasts out of Bulgaria's cafes, bars, restaurants, radios, cars and houses, the apposite soundtrack for an insecure nation shaken by the leap from communism to capitalism. There's even a TV channel devoted to *chalga* which features endless videos of leggy babes crooning, the scary sight of Aziz (a Gypsy *chalga* singer who bleaches his hair, eyebrows and beard), concerts of Bulgarian folk kitsch and ad's for sex phone lines, motor bike rallies, tabloids... yup, white trash paradise.

Back in the restaurant Jony's set is slick with synthesisers while the obligatory belly dancer stubs out her cigarette to gyrate across the floor. "This is shit," mutters Henry. True, but Jony's multi-octave voice still rings out, a beautifully expressive instrument. Joining us I ask why he's playing *chalga*, not the songs of *Ma Maren Ma*.

"I like this music because in restaurants people pay to hear this music," he replies. "This music is my job, my everyday work."

Fair enough. Anyway, the last thing Jony needs is the world music police on his back. I mention the *chalga* he sings appears to have a strong Turkish flavour. Jony nods and states he loves Turkish music - unsurprising for a nation with a large Turkish minority. He also confesses to admiring Khaled and in contemporary Balkan music one can find many similarities with *rai*: sonic scavenging, epic boasting and wailing sentimentality all given a hi-tech buff. Jony admits the restaurant isn't an inspiring place to sing but it's a

Mafia joint so he can expect big tips. And considering the surroundings – waitresses in fishnet stockings hovering over hard men who drink heavily and publicly grope their dates – sure, this is pure Balkan Sopranos.

Across the restaurant's clamour Henry explains Jony's history: a child prodigy on the Gypsy wedding circuit, he gained national fame by cutting chalga tunes and currently earns a good living working Sofia's restaurant circuit. Occasionally Jony would return to singing more traditional material. A Gypsy ballad he recorded appeared on a tape purchased by a German journalist who was writing a feature on Bulgaria's Gypsies. She passed the tape to Henry, aware he discovered – and now managed and produced – Romanian Gypsy brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia. Henry and Helmut Neumann had set up Asphalt Tango, a label dedicated to discovering the best Gypsy talent, and Jony's voice leapt out at him. "I thought 'such a great voice... so raw... pure Gypsy soul. I must find this voice'." In a Sofia bar Henry found Jony on stage. A deal was cut and Ma Maren Ma was recorded at a Sofia studio with, Henry recalls, "two great local engineers who were a bit nervous at first because they had never worked with Gypsies before and thought they would steal everything from the studio!"

Jony's nightly schedule involves a ninety minute set in two restaurants. Chalgaed up we leave Jony working. He's a humble man with a warm manner and a smile as enchanting as his voice. "Don't worry," he says as we exit, "tomorrow we'll be in my mahala in Kyustendil. There you'll hear some music!"

A road trip through Bulgaria is never dull – the landscape is gorgeous if scarred by dilapidated concrete crap – and after two hours we hit Kyustendil, the last city before the Macedonian border. Famous since Thracian times for its thermal springs, on a blazing Balkan afternoon Kyustendil's wide, tree-lined avenues and café dominated squares look mighty appealing. But this is not the Kyustendil Jony hails from. Instead, passing crumbling apartment blocks and crusty factories, we're squeezed into the arse-end of the city - the mahala.

Mahala is the Bulgarian word for "poor place" and the term used to describe where Bulgaria's Gypsy communities live. And Kyustendil's mahala bears no resemblance to the city's pretty centre. Here the roads are potholed, few trees stand and houses are jammed alongside one another. Gypsies – Roma in their language, Tsigani in Bulgarian – make up between 3 and 8 percent of Bulgaria's population (census figures are unreliable). 10,000 Gypsies live in this mahala with up to 95% unemployed. Jony's family are more fortunate, as musicians they find work amongst both the Roma and Bulgarian communities. And as we empty from our vehicles Chico, Jony's older brother and musical mentor, welcomes us into his café.

Chico's a huggy bear, overflowing with goodwill and affection. He's the second oldest of the eight boys and one girl that make up the Iliev clan and when their father died aged 47 Chico took on the family's responsibilities. During his army service he learned music theory and on return he drummed it into his brothers. Chico also taught the family Bulgarian – their mother only spoke Rom. Chico's a devout Seventh Day Adventist. He doesn't smoke or drink - rare amongst musicians anywhere, especially Gypsy musicians. Jony admits to being a lapsed Adventist and will recites tales of Nicky Cruz, the 1950s New York street gang leader whose conversion to Christianity formed the basis of bestseller *The Cross & The Switchblade*.

That evening Stefan Lazarof, a schoolteacher and head of the local Roma organisation, drops in. He tells us the history of the mahala – in 1890 the Gypsies of Kyustendil were forced from the centre of the city to its outskirts. Lazarof proudly notes the local school teaches in both Rom and Bulgarian and has seen two hundred people graduate over the last few years – it is thought as few as 50% of Gypsy children in Bulgaria attend school – while there are five university graduates in the mahala and four students currently at university. There's also an internet café Rom@net which teaches the local kids computer

skills and Anti-Pun, a comic theatre troupe who mine a very black vein of Gypsy humour. The mahala is impressively organised – in Romanian Gypsy communities it's rare to find any real investment in education and activism. Freedom came after the fall of communism states Lazarof and the Roma began organising for themselves. Financing comes from an American development organisation, the Soros Foundation, Dutch and UN human rights organisations and the Seventh Day Adventist church which, in the last decade, has gathered a considerable following amongst Bulgaria's Gypsies. Kyustendil is the best-organised mahala in Bulgaria, he adds, "because no one steals the money."

Still, discrimination is widespread and although the Bulgarian government introduced a specific programme of 8 directives to help Gypsies (health, education, women, development) in 1999 it was, notes Lazarof "a programme that was written but remains only written. It stayed on the books, you understand me? It was never implemented within the mahalas. The programme was important for Bulgaria's candidacy for the EU. After it was put on the list for EU entry in 2007 the programme was conveniently forgotten."

Mahala life is lived on the streets: these are social people, quick to smile and welcoming us gadje (non-Gypsy). Drifting across the mahala's central square we end up in what Jony and Chico refer to as "the ghetto". Here the houses become shacks constructed out of concrete, brick, wood and canvas. Windows lack glass – not a concern in today's heat but the snow capped Rila mountains are ominously close: in winter these people surely freeze. Rubbish is dumped on the river bank, there's no sewerage or running water for the poorest dwellings, horses are tethered in front of houses, mangy dogs snap at heels, electricity is illegally tapped off the power lines, the streets are dirt (which lends resonance to Jony's statement "if it rains in Kyustendil it is the saddest place on earth") and, as with other Gypsy communities I've visited, it appears the darker your skin the poorer you're destined to remain. The poverty here is extreme, closer to the shanty towns which encircle Kathmandu and Delhi than the council estates looming across Western Europe's cities. Vehicles are few yet police cars cruise the narrow alleys, a constant reminder of who's boss.

Word quickly spreads that Jony's in the ghetto and everyone steps out to see him. Those who know him personally offer greetings, exchange kisses and handshakes. "You have forgotten us Jony but we haven't forgotten you," shouts one observer. As we walk Jony becomes a literal pied piper, dozens of children excitedly trail his every step. "I feel good to meet my own people in the place where I grew up," he says. "At the same time I feel bad because I see they live a very hard life, very poor, and I can't really help them except with my music. They say they want me to be mayor because they trust me but I'm not a political man."

Having trawled the streets he grew up on sets Jony in a reflective mood.

"Making music is a tradition in the family of many generations. My father had me learning the tambora aged two. He died when I was nine years old and Chico raised me and made such a discipline for me and my brothers. I hated him! Now I realise this has really helped us. Boril is Bulgaria's leading saxophone player. He can walk into a session and read the music. This really surprises some music people here, that Gypsies can read music."

Jony initially rose to fame amongst Bulgaria's Gypsies as a wedding singer. Being a wedding singer may appear incomparably naff in the UK but Balkan weddings aren't comparable with our humble affairs - instead they can last up to a week and involve continuous partying – and to be a wedding singer is amongst the Romas' highest calling. From the age of 12 Jony was rocking mahalas across the south west.

"I began singing professionally in 1981/'82 with another small guy. We started to play weddings and we were a big hit. We'd go to Sofia to play in the mahala and Gypsies from

all around would come to listen to us! We'd sing all day and all night, sing for eight to twelve hours. We sang songs we'd learnt in the mahala and our own original songs – right from the start this was special to us. We'd have an idea for a song and my brothers would do the arrangement. But then my friend did his army service and he went crazy. He's living here in the mahala but he's not mentally well. At fifteen I became guitarist in the band and backing vocalist. It was a very dangerous time in Bulgaria. There were a lot of criminals who wanted to take the money and the music and my brothers were scared I would be attacked so they moved me to backing vocalist to protect me from these aggressive people. Some times these mafia would demand I sing so I was recognised as a good singer even then. Some of the bosses of the mafia created problems for my colleagues but somehow I managed to know how to deal with them so I became their favourite."

While Jony's career has gone relatively smoothly, contemporary Bulgarian history has often been unsettled. In the 1980s dictator Todor Zhivkov tried to mask communism's failings by embarking on such extreme nationalist policies as forcing Turkish and Gypsy citizens to Bulgarianise their names. This wasn't a problem for the Iliev family as their surname is Bulgarian but Jony's wife Natalie comes from a family who were coerced into changing. The fall of communism has led only to corrupt/inept governments and a powerful Mafia. Anti-Gypsy sentiment is now highly visible: crime, inefficiency, even Bulgaria's poor international reputation is blamed on these marginalized people. Appropriately, Ma Maren Ma translates as Don't Beat Me and Jony describes it as "a hymn for Bulgarian Gypsies". On May 21 the European Roma Rights Group filed a lawsuit against the Bulgarian Ministry of Education for discriminating against Gypsy children in schools – the feeling amongst mahala activists being it's time to kick against the pricks.

"The discrimination against ordinary Gypsies is terrible," says Jony after Natalie expresses her anger at how Bulgarian society treats its Roma. "A lot of the children have talent but what is killing me is that the talent will never get the opportunity to come out."

Which means it's down to the Gypsies themselves. The following day New Morning, a mahala organisation dedicated to keeping Roma culture alive with children, presents awards for poems, essays, dancing – all are won by girls under 15. A poem is read saying Gypsies pray for better health/houses/work and until they get this they must keep singing the praises of God. Jony is asked to sing and agrees as long as everyone sings with him. It's the Gypsy anthem Ederlezi (popularised by Goran Bregovic; "he steals our music" says Jony) and across the square there's a roar of pride as hundreds of voices rise. It's the day before St George's Day, a major holiday across Bulgaria and the major celebration on the Gypsy calendar, and everyone is excited. To European Bulgarians this day is connected with the beginning of the summer fieldwork (Bulgaria having always been an agricultural country). To Gypsies it's more a case of George being their patron saint: legend has it that centuries ago the Bulgarian Tsar decided to kill all the Gypsies and so set his dragon on them. God sent St George to slay the dragon and Gypsies are still thanking God for St George. Sweet, eh?

Late afternoon Jony and his band set up on a makeshift stage built in the square. The crowd is large and respectful, letting the smallest children gather at the front. Beneath a bright Bulgarian sun all eyes are on Jony as he grabs the mic', grins at his assembled neighbours and leads the band into Ma Maren Ma. The kids have a great time, clapping to the rhythm and dancing. Most everyone else is simply happy to hear the mahala hero. Jony's sound is a chilled balm under a blazing Balkan sun, his voice curling and unleashing Rom phrases that are answered by Boril's exquisite clarinet and saxophone work. The band – double bass, drums, percussion, accordion, lead and rhythm guitar – play with relaxed feel, never forcing the rhythm or issuing too many notes. There's none of the frantic 7/8 rhythms that make so much Bulgarian traditional music difficult for Western listeners. Instead, their sound is comparable to that of Serb Gypsy legend Saban Bajramovic (see feature fRoots No 228) – he lives less than 200 kms away - in its unhurried, soulful manner. Indeed, Jony's friendly with Saban and they've sung together

many times.

Jony takes a break and Anti-Pun take the stage. They have the crowd in stitches with a performance that finds Rambo (a popular name in Balkan Gypsy communities) sniffing glue while his dad is on the run for theft and his mum bargains with a bill collector so to not to get the illegally hooked up electricity cut off. Another skit pokes fun at Gypsy leaders who grow fat from playing at politics. Even with the language barrier this is good stuff and the audience roar. Jony returns and the performance is now one of collective joy – local men join him on stage and fire off sky rockets, female singer Cherina duets and belly dances, people form circles and dance through the crowd, babies are held aloft, girls shake it – impoverished Kyustendil's mahala dwellers may be but their faces beam and bodies move with a sensuality rarely found in Northern Europe.

The concert finishes and immediately the wail of a clarinet in the distance announces the engagement party of Chico's son Alex is on its way to the square. We're swept up in its twisting horo – dance patterns where everyone holds hands and spins across the street, snaking around the musicians (clarinet, accordion, bass drum) and forming circles which swing in a wild, ragged anti-clockwise motion. The trio join Jony's band on stage so creating a full wedding band. Trays of biscuits and cakes are distributed by women amongst the watching crowd and lev notes are pinned on Alex's fiancée's blouse. As the sun sets over the mahala its citizens keep dancing in a large, ragged circle, whooping and swaying, intoxicated on love, life, music and rakia.

After two hours the engagement party retires to Chico's café where salad, sausage and cheese is served to a soundtrack of chalga. Infants are put on tables and encouraged to move – these kids can dance before they can walk. Chico may be an Adventist but this doesn't mean he's going to enforce his beliefs on guests and the bottles pile high. A screen is set up on a rooftop to show Anti-Pun's feature length video and thus St George's Day begins at midnight with a very merry mahala. Merry and volatile – car and tractor tyres are doused in petrol and set alight (Gypsies don't party without fire) so creating clouds of toxic smoke: wood is hard to find, old tires are everywhere and burn for hours. Parties erupt out of houses and the streets fill with people of all ages dancing. I thought Emir Kusturika's portrait of Balkan Gypsy life was fanciful but Kyustendil's concept of celebration has a dizzy, narcotic feel to it, pure magic realism, very Emir.

By 5 am the dancing is over and the temperature chilly. In the ghetto stereos are set up outside, blasting chalga as toxic as the now smouldering tyres. It's zombie time with swollen eyed youths sniffing solvents from plastic bags - the lumpen proletariat's cheapest high, a hunger killing, brain buzzing, anaesthetic for those who literally have nothing. A dawn chorus of roosters, horses, dogs and birdsong welcomes St George's Day. Ritual has members of each family heading to a marshy spot where a weeping willow grows. Here you strip off a branch and make a crown of it thus guaranteeing good luck across the year. Yet Chico doesn't like the atmosphere in the ghetto and notes a drunken member of one of the mahala's feuding families has been shouting threats in the square. Time to retire, soaked in rakia and nicotine, for a few hours.

St George's Day is quiet – everyone's too exhausted from the night's festivities to engage with the heat – so we sit around Jony's mum's house on the border of the ghetto. At 67 she's weathered, ancient, yet her black eyes sparkle and there's always a chuckle on her lips. That evening she serves the traditional feast of roast lamb stuffed with rice, liver, mushrooms and flavouring. The following day is for giving alms - widows and the mahala's most impoverished residents arrive at a ghetto bar to be gifted with loaves of sweet bread and clothes from the Red Cross. Bulgarian TV and radio is here to record the event and a giant bottle blonde transvestite demands an interview: what is London doing in the mahala? There are many answers I could give but I'm weary so stick with the simplest, I'm here because Jony Iliev is the future of Balkan Gypsy music. Nuff said.

Thanks to Henry Ernst, Rumiana Kotseva and the Iliev family.

Garth Cartwright