

Lucid Culture, Concert Review >>

Kal means black in Romanes, the language of the Roma (the nomadic people of Europe formerly known as gypsies). For the band, the word has several shades of meaning, not the least the sense that the Roma experience the same struggle that American blacks face. For example, the father of frontman/guitarist Dragan Ristic was the first openly ethnic Roma to graduate from teachers college in his native Serbia. Last night at Joe's Pub, the band put on a fiery, pummeling show worthy of Gogol Bordello, somewhat incongruous considering the sedate confines of the club: while they had no trouble energizing the crowd, there was nowhere to dance, and what they played was most definitely dance music. They would have had an easier time connecting at Drom or Mehanata. Behind Ristic and sensational violinist Djordje Belkic were a hot rhythm section, percussion as well as drums, along with button accordion and key accordion. Like their Ukrainian-American counterparts (one of whom they invited onstage to deliver a boisterous rap in the middle of a frenetic dance number), most of what they play is lickety-split 2/4 minor-key dance-rock with Balkan melodies. On vocals, Ristic alternated between Romanes and Serbian (except for one tongue-in-cheek number about a young immigrant willing to marry a 45-year-old woman for a green card).

About 60% of the set was brief, barely three-minute instrumentals sprinting along on what was almost a ska beat (Kal would be HUGE on the Warped tour), sparks flying from the fingers of the accordionists and Belkic, whose searing violin runs seemed almost effortless. Watching them fan the flames, it made perfect sense that this band would have the #1 world music cd of the year in Europe a couple of years ago. After starting on the boisterous note that would dominate the night, Ristic brought things down with a beautifully contemplative, slow instrumental replete with innumerable false endings that bedeviled the crowd (and his bandmates), very evocative of the pensive, thoughtful side of Jimi Hendrix (think Little Wing or Castles Made of Sand). Then he brought the temperature back up again. "There are eight intervals. And four halftones." He paused for a second. "That's all. So what is the difference? Soul. Feeling. Blues." He paused again. "We play for you halftones." And they didn't exactly (the song was another frenetic dance tune with some chromatics on the chorus), but in the vernacular of his fractured English, it was halftone.

Along with an uncompromising political awareness, there's a lot of humor in Kal's music, and the band did well to translate this for those who didn't speak their language. The funniest song of the night, at least as far as a non-Serbian could understand, was a somewhat stogy number about a Serbian kid scheming to go to Vienna, where his rich uncle resides. The problem is that he doesn't have a visa. So he makes one himself, manages to get to Vienna and then bangs on his uncle's door. The uncle watches through the peephole...and doesn't answer.

The crowd, a motley mix of thrill-seekers, didn't overturn any tables, but they did scream ferociously for an encore, which the band began without any violin until Belkic came stumbling out from backstage and in an instant had plugged in and was wailing away as if nothing had happened. Hard to imagine anything more exciting than this happening at this particular club all year long – and a pleasant distraction from watching the weary, battlescarred Red Sox collapse in the playoffs.

by Alan Young

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