

## Romany madness

(Friday 09 March 2007)

### Kal

Wiltshire Music Centre, Bradford-on-Avon

#### **DAN GLAZEBROOK catches the Balkan-style beats and Romany rhythms of a Serb Gypsy band that likes to bend the rules.**

Back in the West Country after a three-year absence and with a sterling new album under their belt, Serb Gypsy band Kal have a packed and excited hall waiting for them tonight.

With groups such as Gogol Bordello bringing eastern European folk to a whole new generation of punks and indie kids and even dance anthem kings Basement Jaxx playing live gigs with Gypsy musicians these days, Kal's brand of stomping two-step Balkan beats have become all the rage over here since they've been away - and about time.

Taking to the stage in black trilbies and shiny pointed shoes - picture Madness in some kind of Gypsy gangster alternate reality - Kal bring us gently into their world, beginning with a trio of down-tempo love songs.

Even during these traditional numbers, however, the hints of breakbeats from the two drummers suggest that this is a band which likes to bend the rules.

Komedija, by Serb nu-jazz eccentric Rambo Amadeus, is where they really start letting loose, its bass-heavy groove providing the perfect backdrop to violinist Dusal Ristic's exquisite flights of fancy.

This raw and experimental side of the Balkans is developed throughout the first set, playing with time signatures yet staying true to the two-step which characterises Romany rhythm.

This is where they are at their best, the rhythm section combining their own funk-ed-up take on the genre while accordions and violin joke, tussle and battle majestically in a way that is both relaxed and accomplished.

Also featured in the opening half, however, is Djelem Djelem, the official Romany national anthem, declared as such by the first world Romany conference held in London in 1971, lead singer Dragan Ristic explains.

The song has an amazingly intimate, warm, feel, tinged with sadness but nevertheless full of hope.

The band clearly consider it part of their mission not just to entertain but to educate their Western audiences about the plight of the Romani worldwide and, especially, in Kosovo.

"Do people in Britain realise now that the NATO campaign allowed for the Albanians to act even worse than the Serb army?" Dragan asked a recent interviewer. It is estimated that 75 per cent of Roma have fled Kosovo since the NATO "triumph," such is the violence that they face there now.

Their second set is straightforward - fast and furious Gypsy dance music. All the musicians get to show us what they're made of, with beatboxing and frantic drum-tarabuka duelling that gets the audience whipped up into a frenzy.

We even get a quick lesson in Serbo-Croat - the numbers one to four - thrown in.

The high points of the evening, though, are definitely the violin and accordion players, both spectacularly gifted. Strongly recommended.

