

European sensation Kal puts a fresh spin on Gypsy music at Don Quixote's this week.

Gypsy culture is under siege across Eastern Europe and the Balkans, assailed by discrimination and the pressure to assimilate. Music is one of the most powerful forces in the fight for cultural survival, and no ensemble has seized the reins of Romani self-determination with more energy and panache than Kal, a seven-piece band from Belgrade that plays Don Quixote's International Music Hall on Wednesday, Sept. 24. Founded by brothers Dragan and Dushan Ristic, Kal is steeped in Gypsy (or as they prefer, Romany) musical traditions from across the southern Balkans. But the band's attitude and approach is utterly contemporary. Raised on rock, the musicians seamlessly blend everything from flamenco guitar arpeggios and Middle Eastern rhythms to surf rock licks and keening Turkish clarinet lines.

The band first made a splash in 2006 when its self-titled album on the German label Asphalt Tango shot to the top of the European world music charts, an unprecedented accomplishment for a Balkan Roma ensemble. Performing at festivals around the world, Kal honed a hard-charging sound combining passionate musicianship, dance-inducing grooves and sharp political consciousness. The band recently finished recording its second album, which is due out on Asphalt Tango later in the fall.

"On the first album you bring out all your emotion, everything you've been keeping inside," says Dragan Ristic from his home in Belgrade. "You don't think too much about what you're doing, and you throw it outside. The second is much more defined. Kal is going in the direction of rock and Roma. It's more like an article in which you have an introduction, and then make the points. It's closer to what we're doing on the stage."

More than musicians, Kal is a band of cultural activists dedicated to fighting for Romany rights. The band's North American tour, which includes several dates opening for Gogol Bordello, is produced by the Petaluma-based human rights organization Voice of Roma, which was founded by Sani Rifati (a Romany man from Pristina, the capital of Kosovo) and his American wife, Carol Bloom.

Few peoples have been more in need of human rights intervention. Over the past 1,000 years, the Romany people spread from the Indian state of Rajasthan to Persia and Europe, settling most densely on the Iberian Peninsula and the Balkans. Along the way, they acquired the misnomer Gypsy, a reference to their supposed Egyptian origins, and lost all memory of their homeland. Often forced to wander, the Roma have experienced the entire catalog of inhumanity. Enslaved for centuries in Romania, targeted for extermination by the Nazis and subject to pervasive discrimination across post-communist Eastern Europe, they have doggedly maintained their own language, culture and traditional vocations.

While not all Romany communities include professional musicians, it is through music (and language) that one can trace their journey. In some lands, like Hungary, Russia and Spain, certain forms of Romany music became an integral part of the national identity. In other places, Romany musicians became cross-cultural repositories of various melodies, rhythms and songs. In many ways, Kal is simply the latest expression of a complex process of cultural amalgamation. Like young people around the world, the new generation of Roma seek out a contemporary identity listening to Western rock, hip-hop and heavy metal; Eastern Europe's turbo-folk models itself after Western pop and hip-hop. Kal's international success points to an alternative path, one that embraces new styles while refusing to relinquish a deep-rooted Romany identity.

"With this album, Kal aims to set an example to the young Roma musicians across the Balkans that you can be both modern and roots at the same time," Ristic says. "So many young Roma are just making pop crap because Balkan society, especially Serbian society, has, after the collapse of communism, allowed the lowest common denominator to rule. Many good young musicians compromise their music because they can't imagine that anyone wants to hear anything but turbo trash. I hope we set an example of young Roma musicians using beats but staying true to Romany culture and music."

KAL performs Wednesday, Sept. 24, at 7:30pm at Don Quixote's International Music Hall, 6275 Hwy. 9, Felton. Tickets are \$15 adv/\$18 door; 831.603.2294 or [www.donquixotesmusic.info](http://www.donquixotesmusic.info).

*By Andrew Gilbert*