

# Music Review: Fanfare Ciocarlia - *Fanfare Ciocarlia Live & Best Of Gypsy Brass*

Author: [Richard Marcus](#) — Published: [Sep 20, 2009 at 1:46 am](#)

Somewhere near the Hungarian border in Romania lies a town so small that it doesn't even show up on the country's roadmaps. The trains don't stop at Zece Prajini; you have to tell the conductor which piece of farmland, indistinguishable from all the rest, is the one you want to be let off at, if you plan on travelling there. According to those who live there, 100 years ago their families asked permission of the area's landowner if they could move their village from a desolate hilltop where they had been forced to travel miles each day for water and fire wood, to this valley where life would be somewhat easier. Easy is a relative term when you're Romany living in Eastern Europe, and they were grateful for any kindness.

The one way the inhabitants had of supplementing their incomes was the fact the village was famous for its brass band. They would be booked to play weddings and other events requiring music by neighbouring communities for miles around and over the years their reputation continued to spread and grow throughout the region. It was their reputation that drew a young German music enthusiast, Henry Ernst, to come and seek out this tiny village and its brass bands. He had been travelling through Eastern Europe searching out, and recording if possible, Romany musicians where ever he went, and he eventually heard of these amazing brass musicians who lived somewhere in Moldavia at the eastern edge of Romania.

The miracle is that he ever found the musicians the world has come to know as [Fanfare Ciocarlia](#), let alone launched them on an international career. Yet now instead of playing weddings for Romanian farmers who were just as likely to stiff them as pay them because they were gypsies, and who was going to believe their complaints of being ripped off? they now play concerts on stages the world over and are fast becoming international stars.

If you've seen the movie *Borat* than you know their music as they were the brass band who tore through "Born To Be Wild" for its soundtrack. Realizing that there are plenty out there who might not have had the opportunity of experiencing Fanfare Ciocarlia, their German record label, [Asphalt-Tango](#), is releasing [Fanfare Ciocarlia Live](#), a two disc CD/DVD package, and [Best Of Gypsy Brass](#), a greatest hits package on a high quality 180 gram vinyl LP.



The title *Fanfare Ciocarlia Live* is slightly deceptive, because aside from containing a recording (the CD) and a film of a 2004 concert they gave in Berlin, the DVD includes; the hour-long documentary on the band, *Iag Bari (Brass On Fire)*, an interview with the late elder statesman of the band Ioan Ivancea relating a history of the village and the music that has grown to define it, super 8 film the band members shot of themselves, and a variety of video clips of the band. The concert, both the film and the CD, are wonderful as they give listeners a chance to hear and see what happens when the band's intoxicating music meets a live audience. It's a wonder the roof doesn't blow off the concert

hall with the amount of energy being generated by the combination of the band performing and the fervour with which the audience throws themselves into dancing to the music.

Yet, what's equally amazing about Fanfare Ciocarlia are the nuances and subtleties that you hear in their music. I don't know about anybody else, but normally when I think of a 12-piece brass band made up of tubas, trumpets, saxophones, percussion, drum, and a clarinet, noise is the first thing that comes to mind and music second. However, these guys do things with brass instruments that I've never heard from anyone. Even when they're playing at breakneck speed, so the music is pouring out fast and furious, every note is distinct and the music speaks to something inside of you on an emotional level that conventional bands can't hope to match. It's hard to describe the experience, except to say the music manages to capture the full range of the human emotional experience while blowing the doors out.

In *Iag Bari* we travel back to the early days of the band when Henry Ernst was still skidding his car through unpaved roads, where the mud and icy slush came halfway up his hub caps, in order to rehearse the band for their third CD. We attend the wedding of a band member's daughter, meet the people in the village, and are taken inside their homes. Most are still heated by stoves, electricity is rudimentary at best, and pony carts are the predominant form of transportation. It's only when flash to shots of them on tour, with Henry steering their bus across Europe, that we remember it's 2004 when this movie was shot. This isn't the world of I-pods, cell phones, and personal computers that you and I take for granted.



One of the most telling scenes in the movie for me was the band members meeting with a Eastern Orthodox priest, and going over their plans for restoring the church in the village. They have pooled their earnings from touring and record sales so the village can have the first officially recognized "gypsy" church in Romania. The smiles that crease their faces when the priest tells them the project has been approved, and it will be consecrated are wonderful to behold. They may be on the verge of international success and becoming the darlings of the World Music scene, but that doesn't change who they are and what's important to them. Perhaps it's that sense of community that they carry with them onto stage when they perform that makes their music so special, They aren't just Fanfare Ciocarlia when they climb on stage, they carry with them the history of their village and the stories of all the people who live there.



While the CD/DVD package takes us only up to 2005 in telling the story of Fanfare Ciocarlia, the LP *Best Of Gypsy Brass* takes you right back to the earliest recordings the band made and then carries you to their most recent triumphs including their infamous recording of "Born To Be Wild". I'm not sure what motivated Asphalt Tango to release this on LP instead of CD, but the music is still the music no matter how you present it, and this greatest hit's package is a perfect

introduction to their music for someone who hasn't heard them before. Not only do the songs cover the entirety of their career but they also give you a good idea of just how diverse their sound is.

In the interview with Ioan Ivancea on the DVD where he talks about the history of Zece Prajini and the music they play, he makes a very telling remark. The people of this village he says have always had to toil in the fields, do hard physical labour, and work with their hands. As a result they've developed great lung capacity and have calloused and misshapen fingers. You couldn't imagine any of them even trying to play a violin or other instrument which requires delicate fingering, so it was only natural they gravitated to brass instruments. He also recounts how in the days when the Ottoman Empire ruled over this part of the world, the Turkish armies were always accompanied by brass bands, which would either lead them into battle in an effort to frighten their enemies or blow the fanfares that marked the coming of dignitaries. So not only were they suited to the instruments because of the nature of their existence, these were also the instruments the people of the area were most familiar with.

Fanfare Ciocarlia have gained the reputation as one of the supergroups among Romany musicians and are justifiably respected and appreciated where ever they play. With roots that are not only rooted firmly in the soil of their home village, but the history of Eastern Europe, their music resonates with the sound of the human experience in a way few other bands can ever hope to emulate.