



The Ukrainians

Garth Cartwright raises a glass to the British collective who have championed Ukrainian music in their unique way for the last 25 years

This year finds The Ukrainians celebrating a quarter century of music making, blending East European folk with indie rock music. It certainly has been a remarkable ride. That lesser American bands have copied their sound and enjoyed much greater success is, surely, annoying but the band likely shrug and admit such events are nothing new in showbiz. Let us then raise a glass to this English collective of largely unsung pioneers of what has been called everything from 'Gypsy punk' to 'East Bloc rock'.

The Ukrainians grew out of The Wedding Present, an indie band who, with their 1987 debut album *George Best*, won widespread support from the likes of *NME*, *Melody Maker*

and John Peel on his Radio 1 show. Being feted on the then booming British rock circuit saw The Wedding Present sign a lucrative recording contract with RCA and gather a broad audience both in the UK and abroad. So far, so ordinary. Then, one day at a 1988 rehearsal, guitarist Peter Solowka began playing the Ukrainian folk song 'Hopak' – Solowka is of Ukrainian and Yugoslav descent and had learned Ukrainian music from his father – and his fellow Wedding Present members were intrigued. They decided to incorporate the song into the band's set and found it worked so well that, when invited to record a Peel session, they ended up recording four Ukrainian songs. Peel loved this diverse blend of East European

folk and British indie rock and gave the songs plenty of airtime. He then invited them to return and record another session; again it was well received, so they decided to issue the recordings via RCA and the subsequent 1989 Wedding Present mini-album titled *Ukrainian John Peel Sessions* – title in English and Ukrainian (Українські Виступи в Івана Піла in Cyrillic lettering) – proved a surprise success, selling some 70,000 copies and reaching No 22 in the UK charts. Opening track 'Those Were the Days' is based on an old Russian folk melody – it had been a UK No 1 for Mary Hopkin in 1968 – and RCA begged the band to release it as a single but they refused, perhaps wary of being pigeonholed as Slav balladeers.

As communism crumbled, they helped provide the soundtrack

Peel Sessions, it did establish the band as witty purveyors of East European folk rock and won them an international audience.

As communism crumbled across East Europe, The Ukrainians helped provide the soundtrack to the party. Solowka notes "the performance at London's Town and Country of 'Vesilini Podarunok'... That was such a special gig – to see Ukrainian dancers in national dress dancing to our supercharged versions of Ukrainian folk. When you come from a background where you're told 'you're from Ukraine, a wonderful country of hills and music but under a repressive regime,' when you have learned how to play music and speak the language but only a few hundred people in the UK really know what you're talking about... then to see those thousands of people accepting your heritage is a wonderful feeling." He continues, "it was really the start of quite a musical movement in Ukraine. Cassettes were passed around and duplicated. The sound was revolutionary, mixing tradition and Western in a way that had not been allowed. Many groups do that now – Ruslana won the European Song Contest doing a pop-folk mix. I like to think that she has got a 'Vesilini Podarunok' poster on her wall!"

Since then they have released several studio and live-in-concert albums as well as two acclaimed EPs – the first found them recording four Smiths songs in Ukrainian; the second doing the same for The Sex Pistols – that were received very enthusiastically across the former Soviet Bloc. How influential were The Ukrainians across this region? It's hard to judge from this distance but their ability to blend traditional folk songs and contemporary rock music, their wit and deft touch, their willingness to sing lyrics written by Morrissey and Johnny Rotten in Russian and Ukrainian, certainly inspired many Eastern Bloc youths who were tentatively embracing Western rock music. I can only speculate but I'm pretty certain that Gogol Bordello's Eugene Hütz studied The Ukrainians when he was growing up in Ukraine. These days The Ukrainians continue to record and perform, albeit after over 1,000 gigs they now operate at a much more part-time level: Solowka holds down a secondary school teaching position in Yorkshire, only strapping on his guitar when specific festival or cultural gigs are on offer. ♦

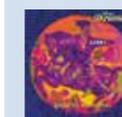
BEST ALBUMS

 **The Wedding Present Ukrainian John Peel Sessions** (Fresh Ear Records, 2000)

Now reissued with several extra tracks, this compilation of Peel sessions and demos from the late 1980s was recorded before anyone realised that the Soviet Union would crumble and music from the Eastern Bloc would soon be embraced internationally. As far as lo-fi Eastern folk punk goes, it all starts here.

 **The Ukrainians** (Cooking Vinyl, 1991)

Here ten folk songs are reinterpreted by a bunch of hard-rocking Northerners who had grown up with their parents singing these songs at family gatherings.

 **Drink to My Horse! Live** (Zirka, 2001)

Always a dynamic live band, this 20-track in-concert album from 1999 captures all the wild joy and hard drinking blend of Slavs and Yorkshiremen as they rock through their repertoire.

 **Diaspora** (Zirka, 2009)

This album finds The Ukrainians in a more mature, reflective mood as they consider the huge changes that have taken place across East Europe over the past two decades. Reviewed in #60.

 **Evolutsiya! 40 Best and Rarest 1991-2016** (Zirka, 2016)

Released in August 2016 to celebrate the band's 25th anniversary, this double-CD compilation gathers both many of The Ukrainians' best-loved tracks alongside a slew of rare and odd tracks that will engage long-time fans. Reviewed in #122.

IF YOU LIKE THE UKRAINIANS, THEN TRY...

Kal

 **Kal** (Asphalt Tango, 2006)

The Belgrade-based Gypsy band mix traditional folk songs with rock dynamics on this, their debut album. Bandleader Dragan Ristić writes exciting songs that mesh contemporary sounds with Balkan Gypsy music. No other East European folk-rock album has yet bettered this wild, mercurial fusion. Reviewed in #37.