

YOUR LENSQUETTE



Fame hasn't changed the Taraf's wardrobe but it has won them a few celebrity followers, like Johnny Depp (pictured below left)

Macedonian brass band also managed by Karo and Winter. In 2000 the band appeared in Sally Potter's film *The Man Who Cried* with Johnny Depp and Cate Blanchett, which is how Depp became a fan. Sadly the veteran fiddler Nicolae Neaşcu (pictured below), who'd become the eccentric figurehead of the band with his mischievous gap-toothed grin, died in September 2002, aged 78. "I'm the one they want to come and see after the show," Neaşcu chuckled when I was lucky enough to visit him in his tiny house on Strada Musicantilor (musicians' street) in Clejani. It was a privilege to meet this wonderful old-time musician who'd enjoyed an extra decade of performing thanks to the success of the Taraf.

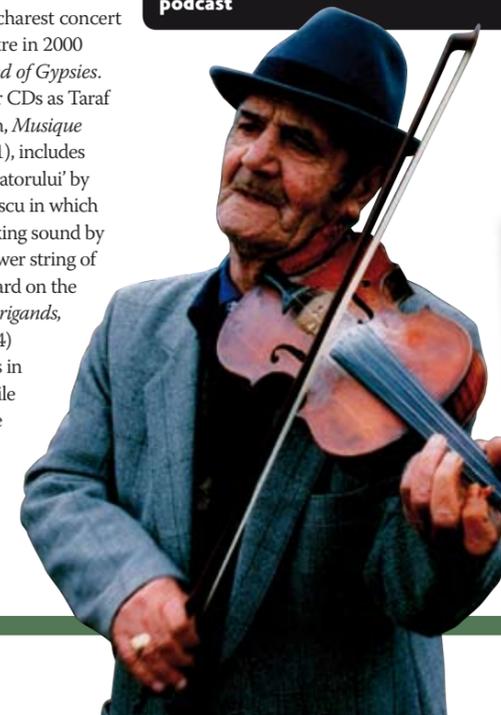
Their music has evolved over the years but despite the commercial pressures of recording and touring the heart of the music still seems true to Clejani's Strada Musicantilor. Now there's a new CD on its way making a connection to Béla Bartók's fascination with Romanian music and there are Bucharest spin-off groups like Mahala Raï Banda and Clejani Express (reviewed in this issue). Sadly, with the passing of the old timers something is lost, but with the musicians of Clejani the music will continue. ●

Taraf de Haidouks and Mahala Raï Banda play at the Barbican – see On The Road for details
The new album, *Maskarada*, will be released in June and reviewed in the next issue

You can hear music from two of Taraf's albums, plus an exclusive excerpt from *Maskarada* on this issue's podcast

down into smaller units so there was plenty of variety in the concerts and recordings. The three veteran musicians of the Ocora recordings, Ion Manole, Nicolae Neaşcu and Dimitru Baicu (Cacurica), specialised in lengthy ballads which were slimmed down and presented alongside flashy playing from younger instrumentalists like the grinning fiddler Caliu and Ionitsa on accordion. Still today the Romanian cultural authorities, who prefer more 'folkloric' groups, seem to resent their success and their first Bucharest concert only took place in a small theatre in 2000 when they were recording *Band of Gypsies*.

To date they've recorded four CDs as Taraf de Haidouks – the first of which, *Musique des Tziganes de Roumanie* (1991), includes the memorable 'Balada Conducatorului' by Neaşcu about the fall of Ceauşescu in which he makes an otherworldly cracking sound by pulling a bow hair tied to the lower string of the violin – a technique also heard on the Ocora recording. *Honourable Brigands, Magic Horses and Evil Eye* (1994) introduces newer arrangements in Serbian and Bulgarian style, while *Dumbala Dumba* (1998), is one of the rootsiest recordings with the female voice of Viorica and vocal percussion of Napoleon. *Band of Gypsies* (2001) is a spectacular meeting of the Taraf with Kočani Orkestar, the



TARAF DE HAÏDOUKS

Simon Broughton on Romania's hottest musical export

With scurrying violins, punchy accordions and rattling cimbaloms, Taraf de Haidouks have become the most celebrated raggle-taggle Gypsy band on the planet. They've played in New York, Australia, Japan and their superstar patrons include film star Johnny Depp, eclectic explorers the Kronos Quartet and Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto. The latter seems particularly incongruous as the default dress of the Taraf is shabby nylon suits and, for the older members, a trilby hat. But see the Taraf on stage with their furious fiddling and performing panache, or hear their heart-felt ballads and finely-produced discs and you can understand why their music has entranced thousands – celebrity endorsements notwithstanding. Then, after the show you'd find them busking or trying to sell musical instruments.

The Taraf de Haidouks come from the Romanian village of Clejani about 30km south of Bucharest on the Wallachian plain.

They have become one of the most recorded bands in the Balkans and their discs tell their incredible story as preservers and popularisers of traditional music, eventually becoming Romania's best-known musical export. They are a rare example of genuinely traditional musicians becoming international stars.

It was Romanian ethnomusicologist Speranta Radulescu who started things moving. She first went to Clejani in 1983 having read about the *lautari* (Gypsy musicians) in a book by Gheorghe Ciobanu and having heard recordings in the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest. In December 1986 Laurent Aubert visited Bucharest to gather archival recording for Geneva's AIMP (Archive Internationale de Musique Populaire) label and Radulescu organised some live performances, including musicians from Clejani. "I will always remember the night we spent with them," says Aubert. "They came late because the hotel where Speranta had reserved rooms refused to host them – they really looked like dirty old Gypsies! – so they reached the studio with all their luggage. They took their instruments out of old cardboard boxes and started tuning while

we were placing our microphones. When the music began, around midnight, I started shivering. It was magical, like the first time I heard Bessie Smith!" The recordings were released by Ocora in 1988 and the same year Aubert and Radulescu got the Lautari of Clejani out for concerts in Geneva and at Chérif Khaznadar's Maison des Cultures du Monde in Paris – quite a feat during the Ceauşescu regime.

The Ocora CD made a particular impact on two Belgian promoters – Stéphane Karo and Michel Winter – who, the moment Ceauşescu was overthrown in December 1989, made their way to Clejani to find the band. They christened the band Taraf de Haidouks – *taraf* is the Romanian word for a village ensemble and Haidouks are the honourable brigands that feature in many of their songs – a trademarkable name rather than the generic Taraf de Clejani (which any musicians from the village could claim). What Karo and Winter did brilliantly was maintain the everyday look of the musicians – they were not dressed up in folkloric costumes – and keep the loose group of about a dozen musicians breaking

BEST...

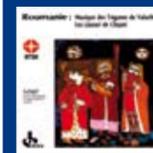
...ALBUMS



Band of Gypsies (Crammed Discs, 2001)
 All the Taraf's discs are worth having. This is perhaps the best introductory disc with the old timers, flashy fiddles and cimbalom, plus Macedonian brass, Bulgarian clarinet and Turkish percussion.



Honourable Brigands, Magic Horses and Evil Eye (Crammed Discs, 1994)
 A compelling mixture of old Haidouk songs and laments, with catchy Geamparale and Turceasca dances from the younger generation.



Les Lautari de Clejani (Ocora, 1988)
 Once you've acquired a taste for the old time ballads and soulful instrumental playing, discover where it all began.

...DVD



The Continuing Adventures of Taraf de Haidouks (Crammed Discs, 2005)
 The DVD of the London concert is disappointing, but the documentary on the Taraf by Tony Gatliff's daughter Elsa Dahmani is very atmospheric. Also includes a live CD of the London concert.

IF YOU LIKE TARAF, THEN TRY: MAHALA RAÏ BANDA (Crammed Discs, 2004)



A brass section from Moldavia meets young Gypsies from Clejani now based in Bucharest, including the nephew of Neaşcu. Hot, punchy and urban in style with DJ Shantel production.



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