

SOUNDING OUT...

BUDAPEST

Hungary's capital city is one of the best places to get a taste of the rootsy and passionate sounds of Eastern Europe.

Annabel Barber reports



Hungarian National Tourist Office

With a population no larger than greater London, Hungary has a powerful musical profile. In

Budapest, a handsome city divided by the river Danube, into hilly, residential Buda on the west bank and flat, commercial Pest on the east, your chances of hearing the authentic sounds of the various peoples who inhabit the Carpathian Basin – Magyars, Roma Gypsies, Slavs, Romanians and Jews – are better than anywhere else in the former Eastern Bloc.

Hungary started promoting its distinctive musical character in the mid 19th century, with the romantic image of the Gypsy fiddler. Their music inspired composers like Brahms and Liszt, and spawned moustachioed stereotypes in the Austro-Hungarian operettas of Kálmán and Lehár. To this day

Gypsy bands – good and bad – still accompany the *gulyás* (goulash) soup and paprika chicken in Budapest's old-style restaurants – see below for recommendations.

As one of the more liberal – or pragmatic – of the Soviet Bloc countries, Hungary saw a grassroots folk revival unequalled anywhere else in the region. As a reaction to sanitised state ensembles, the *táncház* (dance house) movement began in the mid-70s when young urban enthusiasts travelled out to the rural communities to learn music and dances which were fast disappearing. These were then played, danced and taught in Budapest clubs to a whole generation of city-dwellers. Bound up with this were elements of counter culture, national pride and a concern for the Hungarian minority in Transylvania (in neighbouring Romania) where the best

music was to be found. Most of the music played in the dance houses comes from Transylvania, and these days there are frequent visits from authentic village bands from over the border. The *táncház* scene isn't what it was, but Budapest still boasts several dance houses, and there is the opportunity to experience live Hungarian and Balkan music and dance almost every evening of the week. Sitting with a thimbleful of plum *pálinka* as the musicians fiddle away inexhaustibly and girls with braids and boys with beards dance flawless *csárdás-es*, is as close to a Transylvanian village as you'll ever get in a capital city.

Stealing a march on the *táncház* is the ethnic club scene, with bands like Anima Sound System and Besh o droM, as well as DJs, pioneering an exciting new fusion of

Hungarian, Balkan and Gypsy folk with dancebeats. Try to hear Mitsou or Kálmán Balogh when you're in town. Quite extraordinary are DJ Laki's epic Cinetrip parties – a truly Roman style club blow-out in one of the beautiful 19th century Turkish baths, with steam room projections, bars around the diving board and live bands on the mosaic lobby floor. See www.cinetrip.hu for more details. On the airways check out the new Roma station Radio C (88.8 FM), with its very hip mix of traditional, pop and club Gypsy sounds.

The only really comprehensive listings guide in the Hungarian-language is Pesti Est, a weekly magazine and website (www.est.hu). All dance house, world music and club events are listed under 'Könnyű' at the top of the menu page. For an alphabetical list of performers, click on 'Fellépők'; for an alphabetical list of venues, click on 'Helyek'.

RESTAURANTS WITH MUSIC

For an experience of Budapest as it might have been in its heyday, go to **Rézkakas** (District V, Pest, Veres Pálné utca 3), where Róbert Kuti and his band bring tears of nostalgia to the eyes of returnee exiles. Lajos Sárközi plays in **Kárpátia** (District V, Pest, Ferenciek tere), an old-style Magyar restaurant decorated to look like a neo-Gothic cathedral. For Gypsy music, **Vörös Kapu** on Csengery utca, a tiny bar known for its raw, impromptu jam sessions, is one place to avoid the tourist schmalz.

DANCE HOUSES

Budapest has many dance houses. The best are given below. www.tanchaz.hu is a handy guide to all dance house activities.

Fonó

Traditional dance house offering a varied concert programme, with a live act or dance-teaching session at least two evenings a week. A bar area with tables and chairs, space to dance, a larger hall for concerts and an excellent CD shop complete the offering. (Fonó, Budai Zeneház. District XI, Buda, Sztregova utca 3. www.fono.hu).

Aranytíz

The Kalamajka táncház takes over this renovated 19th century office block every Saturday evening. Béla Halmos and his band – Halmos was the founder of the dance house movement in the early 70s – produce a superb sound. The pálinka flows freely from the makeshift bar; soak it up with *zsíros kenyér* (bread and dripping sprinkled with paprika). (Aranytíz Ifjúsági Centrum. District V, Pest, Arany János utca 10).



Ókrös Csaba (left) with the Palatka band from Transylvania (Sándor László)

Fővárosi Művelődési Ház (FMH) and Marczibányi Téri Művelődési Központ

Both are grim concrete blocks with regular dance houses. The FMH has Hungarian, Balkan and Moldavian troupes, usually several nights a week. Marczibányi tér has a weekly dance house every Wednesday evening. (District XI, Buda, Fehérvári út 47 and District II, Buda, Marczibányi tér 5/a).

MUSIC VENUES

A38

A boat moored on the Danube in southern Buda, fitted out as a music venue and restaurant. The permanent concert hall is below deck. In summertime the music emerges above the hatches as well. The programme is mainly world music, jazz and blues: Erik Marchand, Anima Sound System and the Holmes Brothers have all played here recently. (A38, Állóhajó. District XI, Buda. Close to Petőfi Bridge. www.a38.hu).

Millenáris

A 19th century factory building right in the heart of Buda, converted into a stunning concert venue for world music and folk. There are two main concert halls. The smaller podium is an intimate, informal space next to the bar so you can get up and replenish your drink between songs. The Teátrum is housed in a vast brick hangar, with a high ceiling into which music can swell and soar. (Millenáris Park. District II, Buda, Fény utca 20-22. www.millenas.hu).

Darshan Udvar

Come here to explore the Magyars' mysterious origins from the East. A cavernous interior is decorated to look like an exotic caravanserai. Local musicians make mystic sounds: this is Hungary's take on its own 'world music', haunting cadences from beyond the Karim Basin or Takla Makam. (Darshan Udvar. District VIII, Pest, Krúdy Gyula utca 7).

Roma Parlament

This dilapidated apartment block in the heart of Pest's traditional Gypsy neighbourhood is home to the Roma Assembly, and has an atmosphere all its own. The main room is fitted out as a concert hall, with tables and chairs, sagging sofas, Roma art all over the walls, moody lighting, swirling cigarette

smoke and a raised stage at one end. Ando Drom play here pretty frequently. (Roma Parlament Sarasate Koncertterme. District VIII, Pest, Tavaszmező utca 6).

FESTIVALS

Táncszínház

Dance troupes and folk bands from all over Hungary congregate in the Budapest Körcsarnok in late March. (www.tanchaz.hu).

Sziget Fesztivál

At the end of July, beginning of August, this is primarily a pop festival that takes over an entire island in the Danube. But there's a world music stage to rival most other festivals in Europe – last year performers included Ibrahim Ferrer, Nitin Sawhney, Los de Abajo, Madreus, Lo'Jo, Amadou & Mariam, Värttinä and Goran Bregovic. Plus a Folk Stage and Roma Tent with the likes of Ando Drom, Kalyi Jag, Roby Lakatos and Besh o droM. Woodstock eat your heart out. (www.sziget.hu).

Budapesti Búcsú

What began as two classical and contemporary music festivals have now begun to include more world music. Held over two weeks in late March-early April and late October-early November, it's well worth checking out the line-up. (www.festivalcity.hu).

Jewish Music

Budapest – the third largest Jewish community in Europe – has an annual Jewish music festival that is second only to Kraków's in Poland. The Klezmer és Irodalom (Klezmer and Literature) event is a major celebration of Jewish culture that takes place every December during Hanukah in Petőfi Csarnok.

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Sziget Festival 2003 (Csaba Aknay)