



*At the intersection of
Eastern Europe's ethnic
music and postmodern
club music, the
BALKAN BEAT is
a sonic
powderkeg.*

SOUNDKLATCH!!!

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rankfurt's Schauspiel Opera House overlooks a bustling plaza that is also home to the German National Bank; people leaving the opera are greeted by a huge concrete sculpture in the shape of the symbol for the Euro. A cigarette flick away from the sculpture, there is a line of about sixty people taking a stab at getting into what appears to be the place to be on a Thursday night in Frankfurt: an 800 person dance party of Romanian, Russian and Mediterranean songs mixed with electronica called Bucovina Club.

Tonight's Bucovina Club features a live band from Israel called Boom Pam followed by a six-hour DJ set from the party's founder, a short, dandyish German named Stefan Hantel who is better known as Shantel. With glass windows that reveal all goings on to onlookers in the street, the Schauspiel seems a bit sterile for the rumored debauchery of Shantel's parties—ask him what he hopes for each event and he'll sum it up neatly: “That my guests arrive proper and with good manners and leave blind drunk on vodka

with someone else's husband or wife.” Stranger still that he would do this playing Romanian wedding songs laced with violins and Russian folk songs that bounce with flutes and gypsy tunes that explode with chaotic horns. This is one place the Balkan beat is found in 2005. My interest in music from Eastern Europe and the Balkans began after I came across an album by a guy called OMFO (Our Man From Odessa) that was released on the German label Essay Recordings. *Trans Balkan Express* was a far-out compilation of klesmer-influenced electronica and dubby takes on traditional folk tunes that melded the icy futurist pragmatism of Kraftwerk and the wandering sound bubbles of King Tubby's dubs with traditional acoustic instruments like the kaval, drimba and gaida (a type of flute, a mouth harp and a bagpipe). Some of it sounded way out—some of it bordered on unlistenable technocheeze—and I couldn't help but get into it. I suppose I also got caught up in the way the music evoked a snowy village in Ukraine where I could descend rickety wooden steps leading to a tiny subterranean room that sixty years ago provided refuge for Jews and gypsies on the run from the Nazis. After chasing the Balkan Beat, I wanted to come back and tell my family that people were dancing where they had once wept.

When Boom Pam takes the Schauspiel stage after one AM, the windows are moist with sweat and beer. The band plays weddings back in Tel

Aviv, and since they've spent the week recording with Shantel, they're especially well-rehearsed. When they slide in and out of Middle Eastern scales and into waltzes that ride the tuba's bellowing *um-pa-pa, um-pa-pa* rhythm, the dancefloor goes nuts galloping along to the beat and jumping up and down like drunken pogo sticks. After two encores Boom Pam leaves the stage with a *L'Chiam*.

The Bucovina crowd is trashed and Shantel is taking the night in a different direction. After a selection of obscure tracks, he detonates his crowd pleaser: the Israeli folk tune “Hava Nagila”. But this isn't a 40-second sample. Shantel plays the full seven rapturous minutes of the song, and during the chorus, he picks up the mic and shouts *Hava Nagila, Hava Nagila, Hava Nagila, Ve'nismacha* at maximum volume. People start dancing the hora, a traditional Jewish dance in which large groups hold hands and slowly circle around to the beat, which gradually increases in speed as it churns along with ecstatic intensity; “Hava Nagila” translates as “let us rejoice.” Holy shit: I was hearing bar mitzvah music—spun by a gentile—in Frankfurt—at an opera house packed with drunk Germans dancing the hora.

Through his Essay releases and the Bucovina parties in Frankfurt, Cologne and Berlin, Shantel has become a cultural and commercial ambassador of the Balkan beat scene. It's a curious turn to those who know the German native as a downtempo electronica DJ/producer of successful singles and albums on the dance label !K7. But after the moneyed jetsetting of the DJ life, Shantel says he felt “a deeply spiritual need” to go to the home of his grandparents in the Ukrainian port city Chernowitz.

“Before World War II and the Nazis, Chernowitz was a magical city—a place that musicians and intellectuals from all religious and ethnic backgrounds flocked to,” says Shantel. “I wanted to go there because ever since I was a child I felt like I didn't quite belong where I was.” He pauses. “I wanted to go to the place where my relatives had once lived in peace, surrounded by the arts.”

Prior to my Bucovina Club experience, the first time I heard Balkan music in a club was a couple years ago at an NYC fashion week party thrown for designer Rachel Comey. The DJ was Eugene Hutz, a mustachioed enigma from the East Village by way of Ukraine who leads a sex-fueled gypsy punk band with a cultish following called Gogol Bordello and had modeled in a fashion spread of Comey's clothes called “Dance of the Gypsies.” I overheard some people bitching about the music (“What is this? Some fucking fashionista bar mitzvah?”), but seeing waify models and random fashion thugs lose their shit on the dancefloor was proof enough for me—dude knew how to rock a party.

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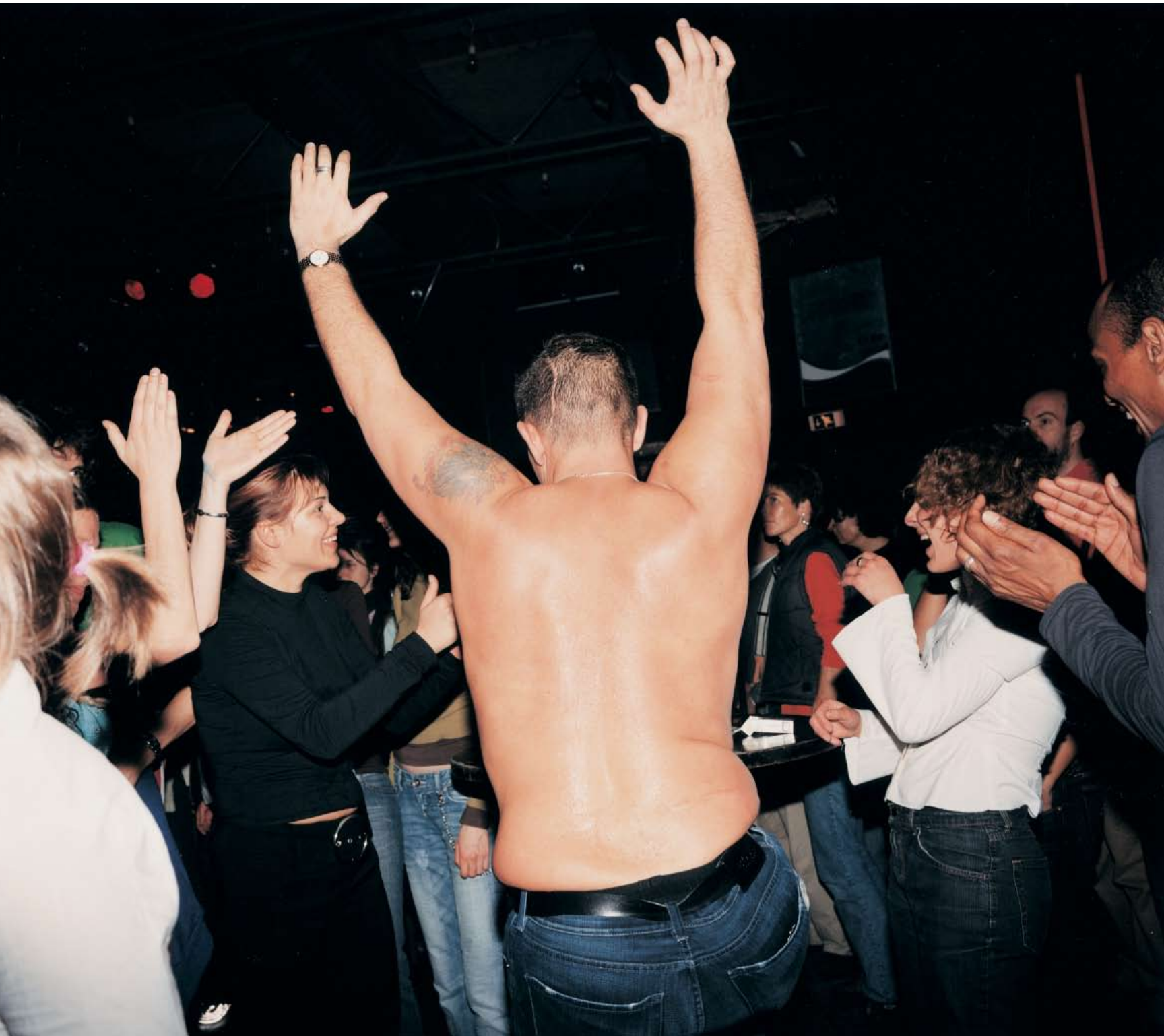
At home Hutz is dressed in a tattered red dress shirt with a GG Allin patch safety-pinned to his chest and a pair of crisp Adidas sneakers. Taking a bottle of Ketel One from the fridge, he rattles off the names of a few of his musical idols: Hungarian composer Bela Bartok (about whom Hutz has written 100 pages of an unfinished play called *Scream Of My Blood*), Serbian bandleader

and trumpet legend Boban Marcovic and Nick Cave. After a few drinks, he takes out his laptop and starts playing one of the hundred MP3 mixes made from the music he's picked up as a consequence of basic NYC culture klatch. “I get lot of this stuff from cab drivers and restaurant owners, people who just play whatever is hot back in their home countries,” he says popping

in a mix labeled “Balkano Jamaican Crossover”. “When I was really broke, I sold one of these to young kid for fifty bucks. He offered me ten and I told him to fuck off. This was my hardcore ethno-research, you know? At the time, ten seemed sell out, but 50 could go to rent.” The “Balkano Jamaican Crossover” mix begins with a flourish of swirling brass grounded by a



In Cologne, Shantel explains that the essence of Balkan music is “anarchy and romance.”



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The Schauspiel is fully alive at two AM on a Thursday night.

dizzying tuba beat that is surprisingly hard as fuck before it segues into the skank of the Cutty Ranks dancehall classic “Limb by Limb”, a spastic punk song with a ripping horn section and the moans and grunts of women from Brazilian funk tracks and keeps pounding from there—a global ghetto fusion of Hutz’s hardcore ethno-research.

I was surprised that the dude’s musical references points were so expansive, perhaps because the public DJ Hutz plays the gypsy punk so well (so well that he’s landed the role as Elijah Wood’s loopy Ukrainian tour guide Alex in the forthcoming film adaptation of *Everything Is Illuminated*). Gogol Bordello’s two full length records, *Voi-La Intruder* and *Multi Kontra Culti Vs Irony* (a third is being worked on by Nirvana producer Steve Albini) combine distressed punk and frantic gypsy music to great plate-smashing, vodka-chugging effect, but they don’t capture the multicultural mindfucking chaos of the weekly party that Hutz has been DJing for several years at a Bulgarian bar in Chinatown. A Hutz party is loud as hell and notorious for excess (a poster on the wall at the Bulgarian Bar reads “a shot for getting naked, a bottle for getting fucked”) and the music he spins there—a spazzy, keyed up mix of gypsy, Romanian, Israeli, Turkish and Ukrainian tunes spliced and diced with Jamaican dancehall, reggaeton, 200 BPM techno and a rush of other loud musics—is a perfect soundtrack for such behavior. “I want my DJ gigs to sound like the most ghetto street party you’ve ever been to,” he says. “I spin Jamaican style—totally reckless—I drop the best 30 seconds of a track and then cut to the next one without any real mixing.”

Perhaps it’s no surprise a chat with Hutz can turn into a marathon conversation about nationalism, the perils of seeking authenticity from pop culture and the similarity between Pushkin’s poetry and Jamaican dancehall chat. His music selections are similarly without borders: the *Ragga Jungle Anthems* compilation, the crash of Hungarian folk and digital mindfuck on Szeki Kurva’s *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, a grip of late ’90s reggaeton tracks (“This beat is so heavy economical,” says Hutz appreciatively. “I can understand why it hasn’t changed in five fucking years.”) and one of Hutz’s favorites, the classic recording of Balkan folk music by the Taraf of Clejani. “Take this CD,” he told me. “It will change everything for you.”

Around this time I emailed OMFO (the man behind *Trans Balkan Express*, whose real name is Gherman Popov) a few enquires about his mixing of traditional instruments with electronics and one more weighted question—was his music a reaction to Western pop culture? “I am sick and tired of Western mainstream music,” he wrote back tersely. “I am bored with the domination of African, and to some extent, Latin elements in dance music though I realize its strength and appeal to Westerners. This domination creates a lot of ignorance towards other musical genres and ethnic traditions. It can destroy the diversity of various cultures and make everything the same. I am trying to find a comprehensive means to propagate new melodies, instruments and clichés.” In person and in Amsterdam where OMFO lives in a digital bohemian’s apartment surrounded by a collection of obscure instruments used in the ethnic music he loves, I asked him

Boom Pam write great pop music “but not like Robbie Williams,” says Shantel.



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to elaborate. He explained that during the Euro dance boom of the ’90s, he had tried to bring avant garde music to a club setting but had failed miserably. “African music and percussive music like techno conquered the clubs because they are so effective in getting people to move,” he observes. “I wanted to create something exotic and strange that could have opposite effect. I wanted to be called DJ Soporific.” It was after clearing a club in Israel that Popov met Shantel, who was playing drum and bass across the street to a packed crowd: “I thought it was good, what he was playing. I was very stoned, but I liked it.”

Between his travels to Central Asia, the Caucasus and Siberia—and stints performing Russian gangster ballads about “hashish, cash and the romance of the criminal life” with an acoustic guitar at a Russian restaurant in Amsterdam—Popov became increasingly interested in what calls “true exotica.” Then in the fall of 2003, Shantel approached Popov to record an album that would build off a dubby remix he produced under the name OMFO for Essay’s first *Bucovina Club* CD compilation. Despite a tight two-month deadline, Popov jumped at the second chance to make a commercially viable avant garde album and began to look to his native Odessa for inspiration.

Like Shantel, Popov cites the diversity and bustle of a port city as a direct influence on his sound. “Because of its various cultural influences—Jewish, Greek, Russian, Slavic, Armenian—Odessa was a very cosmopolitan town,” he explains. “And like me, it has a strange connection with the Orient.” Popov remains fascinated by the modernist idea of Orientalism. “For me, music starts in Romania and heads East,” he says. “So when I started to record, I began in Ukraine. I started to listen to music from my childhood—that’s where all the space stuff came from. I liked idea of being an exotic cosmonaut.”

“My goal was to present melodic examples of exotic music played on traditional instruments and combine that with synthesizers,” he continues, “I wanted to see if I could make this experiment attractive to Westerners who go to dance clubs and use the Internet. In some sick way, I’m fascinated by globalization and new technology. If my record can show people how the synthesizer is the continuation of the mouth harp, then I can also preserve the bravado of Balkan music—this gypsy notion of romancing your audience with sound and proving you are the best—which is rapidly disappearing. Lately, I’ve been obsessed with throat singing—it’s the most far out stuff to me. But I think I am going to stick with the Balkan thing for a while. People are starting to know me for that record.”

In the liner notes of the *Bucovina Club* compilation (just a few lines before the George Michael quote “listen without prejudice”) Shantel writes about the “Marketplace of the Bucovina” spreading across the globe. Given his concern for preserving “a place which no longer exists,” did he mean Chernovitz before the Nazis or Odessa during the Brezhnev era or a “world music” retailer online?

Or to explain it another way: a few months ago Hutz was shopping for a new pair of kicks in Soho just a few blocks north of Canal Street when he entered a hip boutique only to find the mix he sold a few months back piping through the speakers. “I couldn’t believe I was hearing my ethno-musicological life work at fucking shoe store!” But there it was: the chaos of the Balkan beat and the marketplace of the Bucovina, at last united with the people. **F**