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Danubius
Bistro E Europe, Nov. 22

Whenever I hear someone say "world music" with a straight face, I get suspicious, because despite its connotations of open-mindedness and sophistication, the term — much like "alternative rock" — has no real meaning. Unless, of course, you consider its use as a marketing term, in which case it has a lot of meaning, usually as a synonym for overproduced cheese that's created largely to help aging rockers feel good about their musical tastes. "Look at this! This CD's got Ti-bet-an monks on it. Throat singin'. Crazy, isn't it?" The difficulty for folks who actually care about music, then, is trying to find out about the "real stuff" as opposed to the tacky "world music" crapola that usually gets the big marketing push.

Danubius, a Bay Area quintet (give or take a few guests) specializing in traditional music from eastern Europe, does the real stuff. They have been playing regularly in the city for a decade. I admit I didn't know about them until about eight months ago, and it was through the person who was releasing their self-titled full-length record, Mimicry Records head and Secret Chiefs 3/Mr. Bungle guitarist Trey Spruance.

But hey, you've got to find these things out somehow, and I'm glad I did, because Danubius are great. Especially live. They play every Friday at Bistro E Europe in the Outer Mission, and on these nights — at least when there's a good crowd, which there was at this show — the place transforms into a whole hidden realm of good-time, old-world party vibes: people eating, drinking, talking, and at points, getting up and dancing in the aisles, often prompted by the joyful Hungarian couple who are in charge of the restaurant. There's a refreshing lack of hip scenesterism in the air here and an even more welcome absence of world music-consuming yuppies in search of a little more exotic lifestyle accessorizing. No, the people here seem genuinely interested in the music, and for good reason.

The folks in Danubius — apart from accordionist, MVP multi-instrumentalist, and resident "real live Hungarian!" Jutka Mándoki — were not born into this music, but they're not dabbling weekend warriors, either. Far from it. At this show four of the five members ably took turns on the woolly upright bass — including Mándoki, who also played cimbalom, viola, and a few other stringed instruments I couldn't identify, in addition to singing and even dancing.

My favorite thing about Danubius is that, despite their extensive classical backgrounds and technical expertise, they don't approach this music with museum gloves on. They're not afraid to get their hands dirty, and beyond that, you can tell they're having fun with it. The exception may be perpetually scowling cimbalom specialist Jay Steebly, but considering his choice of such a notoriously difficult instrument — a rickety, percussive-sounding monstrosity that predates the piano and appears to play like a sadistic, primitive version of the vibraphone — perhaps he just enjoys torturing himself.

Together for a decade, Danubius have built up a huge repertoire, encompassing both folk and popular styles from Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, as their CD liner notes explain. So despite playing for more than two hours on this night, they only pulled out a few tunes off their recent album. One of those, a tricky Bulgarian number called "Blateshnikhka kopanitsa," came near the end, and its propulsive, odd-metered rhythms brought out one of the group's best performances. Also toward the end came the climactic Romanian medley "Turceasca," a frenzied roller coaster of a piece that may be familiar to fans of the great Taraf de Haidouks.

So show up early if you want a seat, or else make a reservation, because people tend not to leave once they get there, and turning over tables isn't a big priority with the Bistro E Europe staff. They're as into partying and enjoying the music as the customers are, and while that means you might have to wait a bit for your stuffed cabbage and sour cherry soup, it's part of the vibe that makes this place what it is. Danubius perform Fridays and third Saturdays, 7:30-10 p.m., Bistro E Europe, 4901 Mission, S.F. (415) 469-3637. (Also, first Saturdays, 8-10 p.m. Anna's Bistro, 1801 University, Berk. 510-849-ANNA. Dec. 21, 8 p.m., Music Store, 66 West Portal, S.F. 415-664-2044.) (Will York)

Bowing for dollars:
Danubius lead violinist David Skuse plays traditional music from eastern Europe — gloves off.



live

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