

Warsaw Village Band Amazes with New Polish Folk Music, Appearing in Pittsburgh on Monday, November 2.

By Manny Theiner

There's an European movement afoot by a young generation to reclaim and preserve the strains of a rapidly vanishing folk music heritage. From the Irish to the Basques, from Finland to the Balkans, from Jews to Gypsies, new musical groups are resurrecting the authenticity of folk idioms from the most remote villages, and in many cases blending them with the influences of modern popular forms.

Prominent among such efforts in Poland is a sextet called the Warsaw Village Band (Kapela ze wsi Warszawa) who is living proof that Eastern Europe is bringing unique and essential elements into the global village. Forming in 1997 to play in Polish folk venues, they launched onto the international "world music" scene in 2002 when a German label released their second album, "People's Spring."

Since then, not only has the group twice won "Best Folk Album" in the Polish equivalent of the Grammys (named the "Fryderyk" after Frederic Chopin), they've also received continent-wide acclaim especially due to the attention of the British Broadcasting Company, which awarded them "best newcomer" in world music in 2003, and then taped a documentary on the band as part of the four-segment "European Roots" series in 2006.

Just as important, however, is the hypnotic, seductive power of the Warsaw Village Band's live concerts, as their touring schedule has taken them to other continents entirely, landing in Algiers, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Taipei, Moscow, and finally to tours across the United States, where the New York Times cited them as one of the most promising world music acts with the adulatory quote, "This is the sound of globalization!"

But all accolades aside, how does the music sound? That's not entirely simple to describe, since although the Warsaw Village Band interprets mostly traditional Polish folk lyrics, they give their compositions a thoroughly modern twist, heightening the intrinsic drones and percussive sounds in the music to emphasize the heartbeat-like pulse patterns common to pop and techno.

They also incorporate influences from around the world. For example, on their latest and most accomplished work, "Infinity," the track "1.5 h" includes vocalist Tomek Kukurba from the Cracow klezmer band Kroke. "Is Anybody in There" contains allusions to African music, "Polska Fran Polska" capitalizes on certain similarities with Swedish folk, "LittleBaby Blues" incorporates Podhale violist Jan Tutka who evokes Mississippi delta blues, and "Circle No. 1" finds the string players simulating a raga with the help of the "suka," a Polish instrument that ethnomusicologists trace back to the Indian sarangi.

However multi-faceted their influences and approaches, the lineup of the group remains completely acoustic: cellist Maja Kleszcz and violinist Wojtek Krzak, dulcimer player Magdalena Sobczak, baraban drummer Piotr Glinski and frame drummer Maciej Szajkowski. Founding fiddler Sylwia Swiatkowska has taken maternity leave, to be replaced by Ewa Walecka. All three female members are strong vocalists in the high-pitched "white voice" style of ululation which many female-led folk groups share, from Scandinavia to Bulgaria.

The resulting mixture is exquisite and mesmerizing, haunting melodies and driving rhythms with orchestral complexity and glorious drama. As indispensable ambassadors of modern European culture, the Warsaw Village Band borrows a phrase from the legendary African-American jazzers Art Ensemble of Chicago when they proclaim themselves "Polish music...ancient to the future!" Sponsored by the Polish Cultural Council in collaboration with the Garfield Artworks and Calliope Folk Music Society, the Warsaw Village Band will have their much-anticipated Pittsburgh debut on Monday, November 2 at 7:30 pm, at Synod Hall auditorium, located at 125 N. Craig St in Oakland directly behind St. Paul's Cathedral.

Tickets are \$20 at the door and \$15 in advance, and can be purchased at Paul's CDs (Bloomfield), Eide's Entertainment (Downtown), S&D Polish Deli (Strip District), Caliban Books (Oakland), The Exchange, Acoustic Music Works and Margaret's Fine Imports (all in Squirrel Hill), Dave's Music Mine (South Side), and at the Alfred's Deli Plus (Polish Hill). Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime event!

Call the Polish Cultural Council at 412-871-3347 for more information.