

Hair-raising sound has Polish roots

WARSAW VILLAGE BAND
COMBINES TRADITIONS,
WORLDWIDE INFLUENCES

By Andrew Gilbert

Special to the Mercury News

When some young Polish musicians started casting about for the hippest, most powerful sound they could find, they didn't have to look far.

Like other aspiring players across the former Eastern Bloc, they grew up hearing music from around the world, drawing inspiration from reggae, jazz, rock and Afrobeat. But it was in their own back yard that the musicians in the Warsaw Village Band discovered a fading tradition ripe for rediscovery. Over the past eight years, they have created a startlingly evocative sound, revitalizing a centuries-old musical tradition built upon hair-raising female vocals and Old World string instruments.

Warsaw Village Band

Where: Lake Merritt Church, 1330 Lakeshore Ave., Oakland

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Tickets: \$18-\$20

Call: (510) 444-0323, or see www.kitka.org

Also: 8 p.m. Wednesday, Kuumbwa Jazz Center, 320-2 Cedar St., Santa Cruz, \$17-\$21, (831) 427-5531, www.zookbeat.com

The Warsaw Village Band makes its California debut Tuesday in Oakland and Wednesday in Santa Cruz.

For the young Polish musicians, delving into their own culture was almost an act of defiance. "We knew a lot about cultures from Asia that were very fashionable at that time. We knew a lot about music from Africa, from the Caribbean, but we didn't know anything about Polish roots," says Wojtek Krzak by phone from central Warsaw.

He explains that during the communist era, playing traditional music was discouraged, but in recent years those doors into the past started to open.

"So for young people, it was very important to discover our roots," he says, "and it was the main reason we decided to play this kind of music."

The band's Northern California performances came about when Lily Storm, a singer in the celebrated Oakland women's Balkan vocal ensemble Kitka, got a copy of the Warsaw Village Band's 2003 CD "People Spring" and played it for some of her band mates.

"I listened to the recording non-stop for months," says Shira Cion, a longtime Kitka member who also serves as the ensemble's booking manager. "But then I heard them live in New York City, and my world was rocked. They create this wall of sound coming from acoustic instruments. The fiddling is so gritty and muscular and soulful. The cymbalon, or hammer dulcimer, gives it a magical twinkly quality. The knee fiddle gives it this haunting sound. And the cello gives it depth."

Not surprisingly, Cion was particularly drawn to the group's riveting vocals, known as *bialy glos*, or "white voice" singing, a wild, open-throated style reminiscent of the Balkan practices explored by Kitka and the vocals of groups such as Sweden's Väsen and Finland's Värttinä.



Violinist Wojtek Krzak and cellist Maja Kleszcz of the Warsaw Village Band.

GRZEGORZ NIEWIADOMSKI

"It's so exciting to see a group of hip young people bridging this gap between today and these music traditions that are fading," Cion says. "It's the young people who are transforming and preserving these styles, keeping them alive and interesting, outside of ethnographic studies and museums."

Indeed, while the band's music lacks pop hooks and familiar grooves, it is embedded in popular culture and featured on Jack Wall's award-winning soundtrack for the hugely successful computer game "Myst IV Revelation."

The Village Band first came together in 1997 but has undergone considerable change since then. The only founding member left is Maciej Szajkowski, who plays frame drum and pole cymbals. Vocalist and cellist Maja Kleszcz joined in 1998, followed by Piotr Glinski on various drums and xylophone. In its first incarnation, the ensemble was known as Kapela Ze Wsi Warszawa. By the time the group signed with a German record label in 2000 and became the Warsaw Village Band, the sextet featured the present lineup with Krzak on violin and hurdy gurdy, Sylwia Swiatkowska on vocals and fiddle and Magdalena Sobczak on vocals and dulcimer.

In many ways, Krzak is typical of the musicians in the Village Band. Born in a small rural town in the heart of Mazovia, a region in which folkloric Polish culture is still strong, he grew up surrounded by traditional musicians, though he didn't come to value that until later.

"When I was young, I wasn't listening to traditional music at all; I was listening to music from the U.S. and other cultures," Krzak says. "But at 16, I was really impressed by the music of a Polish traditional

fiddler. For me, it was like discovering Jimi Hendrix. It was like discovering Ali Farka Toure from Mali. Suddenly in Polish roots I could see elements of improvisation, elements of blues scales. For a young man, it was so strong to find in my culture these elements that are universal, and I started studying violin with traditional masters."

On the group's latest album, "Uprooting" (World Village), the band adds contemporary elements, including the live scratching of DJ Feel-X, who sounds right at home in the sonic tumult. The group also incorporates elements from other styles, offering listeners unfamiliar with the often strident folkloric forms an avenue into their music.

For instance, the band adds blues cadences to the track "Grey Horse," a song about a young rider asking his horse to take him to his love as quickly as possible. But when he arrives, he discovers that she isn't coming because she's fearful of being scorned by neighbors. With its message about the menace of busybodies minding other people's business, the song fits neatly into the blues, but it's also a traditional piece that offers a critique of the stifling impact of rigid customs. In other words, its almost a manifesto for the Warsaw Village Band, which celebrates traditional culture while proclaiming its urban identity.

"We are trying to weave the traditional elements and contemporary elements together," Krzak says. "Sometimes our tradition can be a little bit difficult to understand. When the audience hears these contemporary elements, they say, 'All right, I know what's going on at last.' This element of blues, the scales and rhythms, are understood everywhere. We are trying to use this element but not forget where we're coming from."