

FOLK ON THE EDGE

As Gogol Bordello returns to Australia, singer Eugene Hutz warns a musical storm is coming, writes **Jane Cornwell**

After three decades in the rock business, Eugene Hutz knows how to make an entrance. I'm waiting in the mezzanine lounge of a west London hotel popular with musicians, nodding along to an 1980s chart hit soundtrack, when the lanky, long-haired frontman suddenly appears at the top of the stairs, strumming a beat-up Cordoba acoustic and looking, as they say in Britain, the dog's bollocks.

He's wearing a bomber jacket, a looped patterned scarf, a single gold hoop earring and a clutch of long gold necklaces; his tight black trousers have large white termites printed on them. His cheekbones are sharp, his eyes cobalt blue. His handlebar moustache curls at the corners.

A man without a moustache is like a woman with one, goes an old Ukrainian saying that Hutz, who is Ukrainian, has confessed to making up.

"Hollo," he says in his thick Slavic-American accent, percussively slapping the body of his guitar, which is plastered in oval-shaped car stickers from Spain, Mexico, Britain, all over. "So it is you who will tell them we are coming."

Gogol Bordello was last in Australia in 2010 but the memories of the band's frenzied, mosh-pit-tastic shows linger on in the minds of those who were there, and in the bank balances of the chiropractors who treated them.

Now, armed with the band's seventh album, *Seekers and Finders*, and an arsenal of instruments including violins, accordions, trumpets, a marimba xylophone and a giant marching drum, the gypsy punk juggernaut that Hutz founded in Lower Manhattan in 1999 is returning to Australia, bent on blowing back the hair of crowds at WOMADelaide before going on to take Sydney and Melbourne.

"Be you Mongolian or Hungarian or Japanese, I have observed that people react quite instantly to what we have to offer," says Hutz, 45, sitting down and ordering a pot of Earl Grey. "Which is a really big dance around the fire, a mass walk on hot coals, with an emphasis on



storytelling. With all the illegitimate hierarchical things going on in society all the time, this feeling of all-inclusiveness is very healing for the soul."

The nine members of Gogol Bordello are on the British leg of a world tour to promote *Seekers and Finders*, which Hutz — after working with big-name producers Steve Albini, Rick Rubin and New York-based Australian Victor Van Vugt — has produced himself. Gigs, as usual, have sold out, thrilling an army of long-time fans and converting new recruits to their wild energy and Hutz's subversive, upbeat story-songs about outsiders, no borders, lives lived transcontinentally.

It surprises him when they make the news, hit the front pages. "We have been out of the underground for a long time but there are always people who think they have discovered us and have to tell the world — even after we've played the David Letterman show three times," he says.

Even after Hutz has starred in films including Madonna's 2008 directorial debut, *Filth and Wisdom*, and been the subject of a 2006 documentary, *The Pied Piper of Hutzovina*.

Even after he inspired a 2008 Gucci menswear range (the fashionistas love him; in 2013 he made the cover of Ukrainian *Vogue*).

Even with all the other stuff he does, such as DJing, usually when he's home in New York — he has recently returned to the city after hanging out in Brazil and Argentina for almost a decade.

Playing live, however, is what he loves doing most. Tonight Gogol Bordello will dazzle a sweaty Brixton Academy with the same chaotic elan the band members bring to every show they do. Multi-ethnic musicians with bandanas and sleeve tattoos will mix power chords with dub, punk and reggae, along with Mexican mariachi, American coun-

try blues, Brazilian carnival music and keening folk melodies from eastern Europe. Two female backing vocalists will whoop and high-kick.

Hutz will belt out new songs and long-time favourites *Start Wearing Purple* and *Think Locally, F.k Globally* in his strangled tenor; cavort about the stage as if there were ants (or termites) in his pants; and surf bare-chested on the top of the marching drum as it is passed over a sea of hands in the moshpit.

Asked if, after 20 years in the game, he has to work to keep his edge, to stay relevant, one side of that impressive moustache rises in a sneer.

"This is like when Salvador Dali was asked if he took drugs to do his art, and he said: 'No, I am the drugs.'"

Hutz's blue-eyed gaze is steady. "I am the edge. I am a continuous shape-shifting hybrid with a fireball instinct. I will always mutate."

Performing live is Hutz's gasoline. Thrill-seeking is part of it: "There is a certain Ukrainian fearlessness that is in the zone, or over-the-border, ha-ha. Most Ukrainians know about their ancient Cossack fighting traditions, of the runaway slaves and martial arts pursuers who then became a nation. It is in our blood."

Ukraine, Europe's second largest country, gained independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and continues to be pulled between Russia and western Europe. While at pains to stress he's no nationalist ("Russian propaganda belittled Ukrainians, considered them a bunch of peasants, which is very wrong"), Hutz's urge to give his birthplace its dues is palpable.

"These (Ukrainian) Cossack fighters had all sorts of rituals which involved destroying fear, destroying a part of you, which is found in other spiritual traditions like Sufism and Hinduism. The power came from the fact that you go through battle like it's fine to die." He flashes a grin. "If you survive, then that's like a bonus track; you go home and party."

Gogol Bordello is well known for blowing out sound equipment during performances. Hutz was once knocked out when a Russian

Eugene Hutz channels his inner Cossack on stage with Gogol Bordello, above centre and below left

