



I WANTED TO BE A STORYTELLER LIKE JOHNNY CASH BUT TELL STORIES LIKE IGGY POP

EUGENE HUTZ

"I always did my own thing at school, which gave away my heritage," says Hutz, who was 15 when he found out about his Roma background. "When I was meant to be reading Gogol, I was reading Dostoevsky. When I was meant to be reading Dostoevsky, I was reading Gogol."

That's Nikolai Gogol, Ukraine's most famous writer, who smuggled Ukrainian culture into Russia (just as Gogol Bordello would sneak eastern European music into the English-speaking world) and after whom Hutz would rename a band he had originally called Hutz & the Bela Bartoks — only to discover that nobody he met in America was familiar with the great Hungarian composer.

"When I arrived in the States the only English phrases I knew were Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Birthday Party," he says. "With these words I made my way around the music scene, learning English by listening to Johnny Cash and these other master storytellers whose material was so dense and focused; they squeezed all the water out, as [Charles] Bukowski once said. But I was already the leader of a band when I left the Ukraine. I was on my path."

The young Eugene had wanted to be a painter like his uncle. Then along came punk, whose DIY aesthetic dovetailed with the music he made on his homemade gear, and offered a sort of giant playing field on which one could do whatever the hell one liked.

He had founded a band called Vinegar Tap when, in 1986, his family was forced to flee Kiev in the wake of the catastrophic nuclear reactor meltdown at Chernobyl, 150km away. It was while staying with his mother's family in the Carpathian Mountains in western Ukraine that he was told about his Roma roots. Later, he would make his way back to them.

"Some people in my family hate that lineage and still criticise me for popularising the idea," says Hutz, who has campaigned for and remains an ardent supporter of Romani rights. But as far as further "edutainment" on the matter goes, he has been there, done that, had his fill of morons.

"We played all the benefits. I attended all the seminars. I dated anthropologists who were studying Roma camps. But I still had people coming up to me with the most idiotic ideas. I mean, the Roma saw the value in getting Madonna to learn a folk song in the Romani language, to sing with us at Wembley [at Live Earth] in 2007. But all the f.cking white people just thought we'd played on Madonna's song [*La Isla Bonita*] when it was our song mashed with hers — and she had really gone out on a limb for a specific cultural purpose."

A sigh. "I have learned that my capacity for edutainment is quite limited after all the dumb motherf.ckery I've experienced out there."

Hutz's family left Ukraine in 1989, only to spend a further three years being handballed through Poland, Hungary, Austria and Italy as they waited for permission to enter the US as political refugees. He has said this period of limbo gave him the courage of his convictions and a fierce sense of self. Today Hutz is multilingual, widely read and business-savvy, and his poetic, sometimes surreal proclamations carry weight.

Resettled in Burlington, Vermont, Hutz formed the Fags, a punk rockabilly trio with a set-list of tracks called things like *Jung and Crazy* and *Blues for Albert Camus*. It's little wonder, really, that Hutz found a kindred spirit in the French-Algerian author of 1942 classic *The Outsider*; Camus's famous maxim, "The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion", seems to be one he tries to live by.

His other heroes are similarly trailblazing. There's 19th-century Ukrainian Russian explorer Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, who har-

nessed his Cossack fearlessness and lived with headhunters in Papua New Guinea before pitching up in Sydney, marrying the daughter of NSW premier John Robertson and becoming an advocate for the rights of colonised people: "He was the first voice to speak out against these completely racist ideas. He ran into conflict when he raised the issue of Aboriginal rights; there were Australian farmers with rifles ready to ambush him wherever he went because they were OK with genocide.

"Australians should write songs about him. Australian storytelling, the little I know, is very impressive. *I Was Only 19* by Redgum," he offers.

Then there's the aforementioned Bartok, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, a man for whom Hungarian peasant music was as influential as the works of Debussy, Strauss, Stravinsky.

"In the mid-90s I wrote this novel in verse called *Whisper of My Blood — A Tale of Ethnomusicological Madness*," offers Hutz, who ranks "folkloric exploration" among his greatest passions. "The story ended up being about a character like Bartok who was obsessed with Balkan music. He created a symphonic orchestra lifted up from the peasants in the village but they found the music frighteningly sophisticated and refused to work with him, whereas before it just felt natural."

The novel was too pornographic to be published, he says, barking a laugh ("I was just having a crazy ball by myself").

But in New York City in 1999, it helped birth the idea for a new band.

"I think nostalgia is a form of mental and spiritual laziness but after seven years in the States there was a subconscious longing for my eastern European vitamins.

"First I had to look into the music I grew up on, which led me back to the Russian Five [Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov] — these composers took folklore and arranged and refined it endlessly, leading to all these masterpieces that are now so f.cking overplayed.

"A lot of famous so-called Russian tunes are actually from Ukrainian folklore," he continues, mentioning several of them. "So Bartok was central to my question of: how do you bring melodies and harmonies from back home into your music? Do you just quote them? Do you write new lyrics to old melodies — which I wasn't interested in? Then I looked and found that Bartok had moved into a completely new place where he'd internalised this music and made his own music out of it.

"This was the point where I thought, 'OK, I am ready to move to the big city and get a big f.cking job', which was Gogol Bordello. On top of that I wanted to be a storyteller like Johnny Cash but tell stories like Iggy Pop, which was really ambitious." Another pause. "And maybe quite annoying for other people."

He agrees that it's all turned out rather well. "People always give their best in response to our music, their best idea of what they think dancing around the fire can be.

"I think Australians are ready for another dance, another set of stories."

He glances over at the guitar that rests against a nearby pillar, its patchwork of stickers comfortably worn, a couple of them curling at the edges.

"There was a tradition in the early days when people would jump onstage and put their country's sticker on my guitar. It still needs a sticker from Australia."

Careful, I say. There might be a stampede. "A stampede would be outstanding," says Hutz. "Bring it on."

Gogol Bordello performs at WOMADelaide on March 9-12, then travels to Sydney and Melbourne.

HERE COMES THE WORLD

WOMADelaide has a knack for pulling the corners of the world close together.

The annual four-day cacophony of music, culture and dance returns to Adelaide's Botanic Park from March 9.

More than 300 groups from 80 countries have appeared on the festival's roster since its 1992 inception, and this year's line-up carries on the eclectic tradition. It features a healthy roster of local talent, including electronic sample kings the Avalanches, indigenous Australian rocker Dan Sultan and Arnhem Land's up-and-coming trilingual rapper Baker Boy.

From the US there will be genre-melding bassist Thundercat and saxophonist Kamasi Washington, both of whom contributed to Kendrick Lamar's Grammy award-winning album *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

British-Indian sitar virtuoso and composer Anoushka Shankar fills the void between Indian classical music and contemporary jazz and electronica, while Mexican classical guitar duo Rodrigo y Gabriela strum out their southern Spain-influenced lamentations.

The Manganiyar Seduction, a 43-strong troupe of musicians from India, perform from a 36-windowed, multi-level "jewel box" stage.

Planet Talks share the bill, alongside yoga classes and Taste the World, a smorgasbord of exotic flavours, where artists and local chefs introduce food and culture from their respective homelands.

And as a veil of darkness descends on the festival each night, look to the treetops, where *Place des Anges*, a high-altitude ballet, is performed by French circus company Gratte Ciel.

Sofia Gronbech Wright

gangster whacked him with his microphone stand mid-song. How often does he hurt himself?

"Only twice so far on this tour," he twinkles. "I might be crawling on all fours with illness off-stage, but when I am up there no one can tell a thing. You know, if it wasn't for Jim Osterberg, aka the magnificent Iggy Pop, I don't think any kind of existential rage or raw spirituality would take place onstage. And being a modest disciple of that school of rock 'n' roll, I like to throw myself around.

"Some people think I'm more insane than ever," he shrugs, sipping his tea.

You don't seem very insane, I say.

"You didn't know me 20 years ago. No difference," he says, a bit confusingly.

Still, there's an uncommon tenderness to be found in *Seekers and Finders*, whose understated title track entwines Hutz's voice with the sparkling guest vocals of Russian-born American singer-songwriter Regina Spektor, and reflects on a life given over to adventure and discovery. "Seekers, finders, which one are you, which one am I ..." soars the catchy chorus. "Some crack right through, some only try."

"As people we are meant to be adventurous and curious," says Hutz. "We owe it to ourselves to stop rushing to the bus stop, to peel off our desensitised layers and look further. We need newness to help us stay optimistic. New faces. New music. New lovers. New food. New weather. New shapes and forms."

New interview questions. Hutz is over regurgitating his backstory: how he was born in Kiev when it was still part of the Soviet Union, the only child of a Russian butcher and a Ukrainian mother who was half Servitka Roma (a subgroup of the nomadic Romani people, who have endured persecution and forced assimilation for centuries). How he grew up playing a guitar made from plywood and a set of drums crafted from metal fish cans, and as an adult learned to speak English by listening to music's dark poet laureates: Nick Cave, Johnny Cash, Leonard Cohen.