

The Ukrainians

The idea for The Ukrainians grew out of a side project of British 1980s Indie band The Wedding Present. The 'Weddoes' had decided to make one of their BBC Radio 1 John Peel sessions a Ukrainian one. Peter's friend 'The Legendary Len' Liggins was brought in as an extra member because he sang, knew a couple of Slavic languages and played an authentic eastern European village sounding violin. The huge popularity of the session took the lads, the public and Peel by surprise, and two more Ukrainian sessions were recorded for the show.

After this, Peter and Len went on to form The Ukrainians. They had written their first songs in Ukrainian, including 'Oi Divchino', which was to be their first single. They flew out to Ukraine to make a video for it. Shot in Kyiv's (Kiev's) outdoor 'Museum of National Folk Architecture and Way of Life', it was the first pop video to be produced entirely in the east for a western band. 'Oi Divchino' was an NME Single of the Week and The Ukrainians attracted huge coverage in the music and mainstream press - including a page in The Guardian, two pages in Folk Roots (now fRoots) and a huge feature in the Soviet Weekly.

The first album, 'The Ukrainians', firmly established the group as the world's major exponent of a new hybrid of traditional Ukrainian folk and Western rock music. The group was immediately embraced by rock, punk, folk/roots and world music fans, generating a cross-genre appeal that has never deserted them. The album received such good reviews in the UK and beyond that the group was subsequently booked to play festivals and tours throughout much of Europe.

Word began to spread across the Atlantic, prompting sportswear company NIKE to approach The Ukrainians to record the soundtrack for a TV ad. The music accompanied footage of Ukrainian world champion pole-vaulter, Sergey Bubka and was screened globally.

The group then released their 'Pisni Iz The Smiths' EP, which included the group's Ukrainian language versions of four classic Smiths songs. Voted No.1 'Single of the Year' in Berlin it set the template for the band's occasional foray into covering classic Western pop songs in Ukrainian style. So far, other bands to have been 'Ukrainianised' include The Sex Pistols, The Velvet Underground, Prince and Kraftwerk.

The 'Vorony' album extended the Ukrainians' popularity to almost every country in Europe. The group played over a hundred concerts as part of a magnificent tour that took The Ukrainians from Western Spain to Eastern Ukraine, covering most of the countries in between. Included were prestigious festivals such as Glastonbury and Womad in Britain and many dozens of World Music, Folk, Indie, Dance and Rock events throughout Western, Central and Eastern Europe. A part of this frenzy was The Ukrainians' tour of Ukraine as guests of Ukraine's Ministry Of Culture. The tour culminated in a performance in Kyiv's Independence Square before a crowd of 75,000 people, a politically charged and internationally-televised event organised to celebrate the anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union.

The subject matter of the next album, 'Kultura' was influenced heavily by the group's experiences on the latter tour. Kultura turned out to be responsible for extending the group's popularity to Poland and, via extremely enthusiastic responses from college radio stations and Ukrainian emigre communities, across the Atlantic to the USA and Canada.

The Ukrainians developed a legendary reputation for their live performances. However, after playing over 300 gigs it dawned on them that none had been professionally recorded. To try and make amends, the band searched around in drawers and boxes for any desk recordings and the result was the surprisingly good 'Drink to my Horse!' album, which is amongst the band's most popular recordings.

This was soon followed up by The Ukrainians' fourth studio album, Respublika: quickly recorded, urgent and punky. It seemed as though the band had turned full circle as Respublika attracted five star reviews and a good deal of airplay across Europe and North America.