



Global Dance Party

Berlin's 17 Hippies make the world of music a smaller place

MUSIC | A band named 17 Hippies suggests a group of flower-bedecked folkies in pastel saris and bell-bottoms singing — shudder — “Kumbaya.”

But let 17 Hippies singer Christopher Blenkinsop set the record straight: “There are not 17 of us, and we’re not hippies,” he said.

Actually, there are 13 of them, and 17 Hippies plays a wild mish-mash of music styles from around the globe. From Balkan to Cajun to Indian, whatever the band is exposed to eventually finds its way into a song. Conveniently, the group doesn’t have to travel the world — it does — to uncover these sounds, as many are available right in their native Berlin.

“When I walk from the place I live to the rehearsal room, I hear the Polish accordion player and a lot of Turkish music and a lot of Anglo-American music from MTV blaring — you get all these styles and music mixing just when you’re walking down the street,” he said. “It’s the sound-of Berlin, in a way.”

Touring has only widened the scope of inspiration. The group first developed its Cajun edge during a Texas tour, during which they “stumbled across this music” in Louisiana. Next thing they knew, it was in their songs and all their albums.

The discovery goes both ways:

Fans may find themselves exposed to new material. In one instance, a Texan who caught a show invited the group to play on his farm in front of 20 neighbors and farmhands.

“After the show, a cowboy guy came up to us and was actually crying, saying he’d never heard anything like it and never knew there was other music than the music he listened to, which was country Western,” Blenkinsop said.

The Hippies don’t want people to get the wrong idea about their upcoming Kennedy Center show.

“They sent us this contract that said, ‘You play so long, including educational speeches.’ We were like, ‘What? Like, PowerPoint?’”

said Blenkinsop. “This is ukulele. It is Hawaiian. The name means ‘little flea.’ That’s exactly what we don’t do.”

On the new “Heimlich,” 17 Hippies keep up the wild genre-mixing in a danceable way that will appeal to folkies, world-music aficionados and indie-rock fans. “We have to find our own audience, because there is no category we fit in,” said Blenkinsop.

CHRIS MINCHER

→ Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW; Sun., 6 p.m., free; 202-467-4600. (Foggy Bottom-GWU)



BLESS THIS MESS: It doesn't take 17 Hippies to rock the world — only 13.

