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The car doors are locked.

"Better safe than sorry," laughs the driver.

A mile on and someone rolls down a window to smoke. My face is flecked with hot tropical rain.

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wet brick as the slope gets steeper. Towards its summit we reach an iron gate, closed-circuit cameras whirring to greet us. Portuguese greetings are exchanged. Some laughter. The smell of cigar smoke. The sound of a party. Then the guard welcomes us in with a handshake; in his opposing hand his fingers tap against the stump of a submachine gun.

"Come!" says Eugene Hütz. "I'd like you to meet one of my friends."

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Madonna, in town on holiday, will make an appearance at some point in the evening. I'm thinking two things: this isn't a house, it's a mansion, and it's like being dropped into the set of *Scarface*. Now to meet Tony Montana/Blair...

"Welcome to my home," says the host, grasping the shoulders of Eugene as we climb the concrete steps to the door. "Actually, it's my mother's house. Mine is over there." He points at the silhouette of a castle at the very summit of the hill. Inside the courtyard of the mansion there's a small chapel the size of every room in my house glued together. "I built that myself," smiles the host.

"Come inside! Have some duck!" I have 15 slices of duck. Well, when in Rio...

Call it Romani spirit, or call it 'having a girl here', but Eugene Hütz, 37 years of age, now calls Rio de Janeiro home. In truth it was his friend Manu Chao who called him here, the French-born Latin folk singer, who promised Eugene would "fall in love with Rio" if he packed his bags (and presumably the battered acoustic guitar he takes everywhere with him) and left New York City. He applied for a three-month Brazilian visa. They stamped it for five years. He called

it a "mystical sign", and he did. Fall in love that is. "I love Brazil," he says banging his fist against his chest.

Outside the mansion there is some commotion. Down by the swimming pool, a girl on one knee is looking up at Jonathan Shaw. She asks him to marry her. Jonathan says yes. There is much cheering. Champagne glasses are kicked into the pool. Jonathan Shaw is Eugene Hütz's best friend in Rio.

A former associate of Jim Morrison, Charles Bukowski, Iggy Pop and The Manson Family, Jonathan Shaw is also the best friend of Johnny Depp. The story goes that Jonathan once sent his actor friend some mummified fingers as a gift. Mistaking the flakes of skin for hashish, Depp was only prevented from skinning up and smoking the remains when Jonathan called and said, "Did you like your fingers?" Jonathan made his name as an internationally renowned tattoo artist, the author of gonzo novel *Narcisa: Our Lady Of Ashes* (described by Depp as "a greasy, shameful, evil whorehouse orgy") and

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"The thing with Rio," Eugene tells us, his deep Ukrainian accent undeniably arresting, "is it's a dangerous place." Eugene will repeatedly remind me, and indeed the rest of Gogol Bordello, of this throughout our stay.

"I only made the mistake of forgetting that once... by sitting on the back of the bus." At poolside, a local gypsy family – Eugene's "south American family" – are playing accordions and acoustic guitars.

"This kid gets on the bus," Eugene continues, swaying to the music, "he makes his way to the back and sits next to me. You can see anger in his eyes. You can smell the glue on his breath. I can tell he's got a gun in his pocket. He's looking at my bag and I'm thinking, 'He thinks I've got a laptop.' So I open my

The multinational troupe and their amazing levitating guitar



bag and take out my lyric sheets and you can see how disappointed he is. But he shrugs and gets off at the next stop."

He follows this by telling us that someone was shot and killed outside his apartment a few days prior. Then that he met the footballer Ronaldo when appearing on a São Paulo TV show. Later, he will share his belief that the police helicopter that was shot down by drug gangs in the Morro dos Macacos area a few days before our arrival in town – killing 10 people and two police officers – was actually the work of the Brazilian government, "to provide a motive to clear the favelas before the 2016 Olympic Games".

dancer, an Israeli, a Mexican, a dual-pronged Italian and Irish tour manager team, as well as an Ethiopian, whose passport is literally a sheet of paper with some Biro on it. Live they'll give microphones to their American monitor and English lighting guys to join in on backing vocals. The band might only now rehearse "during soundcheck", but you sense they've been reinvigorated by Eugene's love affair with Rio's sweet and sour culture.

"He's been writing some of the best songs he's ever written," one of the band tells us, "it's given the band a new lease of life. We just wish he'd stop telling us how dangerous it is all the time." These are songs we will hear incessantly; as Eugene strums his guitar pacing up and down the beach; as he waits for his restaurant to serve dinner; as he rides around the city in the back of a dirty yellow taxi. They're lilting folk songs, new compositions with an old soul; the kind of tunes that can only be written if you've actually gone out and met folk. The band's fourth album is due this autumn. Presuming Eugene stays off the back of the bus, and they actually get in a room to record them.

Of course another motivation for Eugene relocating to South America is to link arms with his "extended family", of whom many are spread across the continent. Despite claiming that "our popularity is diminished because of it – sometimes we just want to be Arctic Monkeys!", the singer's long-term support of Romani rights has clearly been solidified by moving to new climes.

"The first thing I do, wherever we play, I find some gypsies, we make music and they tell me their story," he says within the grounds of the sprawling mansion. "In the States what we do is cool. If we go somewhere like Turkey or Romania what we do is not fucking cool. We've been booted offstage in Turkey. In Russia I've been hit in the mouth with a mic stand by someone shouting, 'Sing a song for me, Freddie Mercury!' There's still so much stigma against gypsies. They get blamed for everything. They're 'dirty', they 'steal'. We still exist to change people's perceptions about that."

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Take note, Borrell: this is how to look cool on a Harley



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# Welcome to my NEIGHBOURHOOD

Pictures Darryn North



"Mmm, maybe one day someone will make a massive statue in a pose like this..."

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And it's a setting that certainly suits Gogol Bordello, that most multinational of bands. Eugene's Ukrainian roots aside, their ranks now sport two Russians, two Americans, a Scottish

dancer, an Israeli, a Mexican, a dual-pronged Italian and Irish tour manager team, as well as an Ethiopian, whose passport is literally a sheet of paper with some Biro on it. Live they'll give microphones to their American monitor and English lighting guys to join in on backing vocals. The band might only now rehearse "during soundcheck", but you sense they've been reinvigorated by Eugene's love affair with Rio's sweet and sour culture.

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