

Review: Barnstorming Brooklyn troupe Red Baraat kick off UAE-wide tour at Abu Dhabi's Barzakh Festival

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By Rob Garratt

Red Baraat's oft-touted boast as "the best party band in years" – a quote from America's National Public Radio they are so proud of it is part of their website display name – was under no threat when they kicked off a multi-emirate UAE tour in Abu Dhabi on Friday (February 17).

The eight-piece Brooklyn troupe opened the second day of Barzakh Festival, a two-day celebration of global sound hosted at The Arts Centre at NYU Abu Dhabi. And within seconds of taking to the stage, leader Sunny Jain had the room not just on its feet, but making the "Punjabi fist pump".

Rampant musical omnivores, Red Baraat's free-wheeling, brass n' bhangra frenzy begins at 11, and is set spiralling off mid-song into ever-faster breakneck tempos, crossing sufi devotionals with funky originals.

At the heart of this sonic onslaught is Jain's dhol – the huge Indian drum strapped to his chest – which strikes infectious, relentless rhythms, playfully interwoven with the drummer and second percussionist behind him.

Up front, the daringly dextrous brass section whip up a tornado of sound – an amplified sousaphone spouting strutting lines with all the oomph of a bass guitar, while three soloists spout criss-crossing chords and lead lines. Try to imagine a marching band on steroids, playing over a frenetic bhangra bashment.

This was floor-shaking stuff, literally – the dance-floor occupying the removable, wobbling, wooden roof over the Red Theatre's orchestra pit.

Catch them again in Abu Dhabi's Umm Al Emarat Park tonight (Saturday February 18), Dubai's Global Village on Sunday (February 19) and the American University of Sharjah on Monday (February 20). See www.redbaraat.com.

At Barzakh on Friday (February 17), that tempo couldn't be sustained. Next came compatriots Dengue Fever, whose brand of swampy, sixties, psych-rock is dealt a beguiling wild card in Cambodian lead singer Chhom Nimol, whose haunting "ghost voice" crawls over twanging, reverb-soaked guitar, bluesy sax croons and moody bass-lines – in her native khemer language. Trippy, grungey, groovy, and with

perhaps a hint of irony, the vibe is that of a vintage movie soundtrack – twisted, trashy, quixotic and exotic.

A rendition of Ros Sereysothea’s Shave Your Beard is more than an in-joke about guitarist Zac Holtzman’s epic facial hair – but a head nod to how the band began, 15 years ago, covering forgotten khemer pop. However Dengue Fever moved on long ago – two kooky English language tunes Tiger Phone Card and Sober Driver go down best. Before, that is, Red Baraat join Dengue Fever for their encore – effectively blowing themselves off the stage.

There was a distinctly political mood in the air when Ukraine’s Dakhabrakha took to the stage for Friday’s [Feb 17] closing slot.

“We are Dakhabrakha from free Ukraine,” announced accordionist Marko Galanevych, taking to stage in front of dozens of compatriots, some dressed patriotically in yellow and blue, others in traditional Ukranian embroidered outfits, while a huge national flag waved from the front row. “Peace and love – no war, stop Putin”, he declared an hour later, leaving the stage.

In the middle, this four-piece, acoustic troupe served up a set which was at turns sombre and ecstatic, ironic and intense.

Taking Ukrainian folksongs as their starting point – and performing largely on accordion, cello and percussion – Dakhabrakha spin off into both gleeful, kooky hoe-downs and harrowing, forlorn, rural laments, peppered along the way with everything from raps to bird noises. Garbed in bright traditional dress – Cossack hats balanced atop their heads – the troupe’s background in theatre and cabaret is clear.

Picking a favourite from this swathe of divergent talents is both foolhardy and arrogant – and would be missing the point of Barzakh entirely. It seems impossible anyone who attended either day did not leave without their eyes opened, and their mind broadened.

“Hopefully this will become an annual event,” announced The Arts Centre’s executive artistic director, Bill Bragin, at the outset of day two. These hopes should be shared with music lovers across the emirates.

Find out more about The Arts Centre’s season of free events at nyuad-artscenter.org.

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