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Roma royalty Gipsy Kings return to their roots

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It might be easy for cynics in the U.S. to dismiss the Gipsy Kings. Flamenco's volcanic passion, which the group sets amid a slick pop sound, is a world away from American popular culture, so it might seem on the verge of parody. But these cousins are serious musicians and were raised in some no-joke circumstances.

On their 2004 release, «Roots» (Nonesuch), the Kings -- who will be heard Thursday at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center -- eschewed the high-gloss production machine they assembled in Paris for their previous five studio releases. They gathered in a renovated storehouse at a farm in southern France, about an hour from their homes, which are not too far from the caravans in which they grew up.

«'Roots' is like before 'Bamboleo,' but with a much better recording technique,» lead singer Nicholas Reyes says, referring to the group's 1992 breakout hit. «It was time for us to take our real sound back.»

«Roots» disappointed some younger Roma (as most Gypsies prefer to be called) back home. They called it less danceable and «music for old people,» according to Pascal Imbert, the group's long-time manager. Because the album did not have the added fuel of drum kits and electronics, it is a step closer to the smoldering, darkly lit aesthetic of traditional flamenco.

For casual fans the difference on first listen might be negligible, since the Kings' basic elements remain. There are still many rhythmically propulsive tunes, but it's not too hard to imagine them being played around a campfire, albeit one with some well-synchronized guitarists.

The group took the criticism to heart, Imbert said. The album the group is currently finishing is a mix of the «Roots» sound as well as the souped-up dance floor-targeted numbers.

Americans might be forgiven for thinking the Kings are from Andalucia in southern Spain, flamenco's home province, but the Kings' grandparents were from Catalonia in northern Spain. Fleeing persecution of the Roma under Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, the families -- who had produced notable musicians -- relocated to southern France. The cousins who first came together as Los Reyes began their career at local Roma parties and as street buskers.

Though they didn't invent the idea of fusing flamenco's throat-ripping passion with Latin-influenced dance floor rhythms, they popularized the Catalan rumba sound like no one else. Though their first two independent albums went nowhere, they enjoyed some success, alternating low- and no-pay gigs with the occasional one-off to private jet-set parties.

Then, it all changed. The cousins teamed up with producer Claude Martinez to release their eponymous major-label debut, which has sold 14 million copies.

For a while, it seemed that municipalities were giving out copies of the album along with every restaurant liquor license. Any eatery that dimmed its lights seemed to have the Kings in its CD carousel. The multi-guitar rhythmic attack, fronted by the hairy-chested voice of Nicholas Reyes, was irresistible; particularly as it was juxtaposed with the strikingly lovely instrumental tunes fronted by lead guitarist Tonino Baliardo.

The group has since toured the world, as well as appearing in films, soundtracks and television specials. Still, Imbert said, when the members are home, they are still often with their extended families in the caravans in which they grew up.

Imbert said the Kings, as the most public face the Roma have ever had, have helped the outside world reconsider this nomadic minority, still the object of widespread prejudice. Imbert said when the group tours, particularly in Eastern Europe, they are often approached by local Roma who tell them, «your success is our success.»