

Songlines 1/2003

Jony Iliev & Band *Ma Maren Ma*

Asphalt Tango Records CD-ATR 0102

Full Price (47 mins)

A Bulgarian singer that deserves nothing less than stardom

Bulgarian singer Jony Iliev has an exceptional voice: rough, harsh and powerful, slightly slurred but utterly direct, and supremely assured. In fact, as a singer he perhaps deserves slightly better material than he gets here – some of which, like much self-consciously ‘Romani’ music, is not very original and too close to the sentimental side of cabaret – but *Ma Maren Ma* is still a highly enjoyable album.

The strongest influence is probably Serbian, of a slightly old-fashioned tinge – and in fact the great Gypsy vocalist Saban Bajramovic immediately springs to mind – but there are also echoes of Macedonian and Turkish music, and flamenco too, as well as the occasional touch of cheese, mostly supplied by saxophonist Boril (sic) Iliev. But the latter does come very good indeed on ‘Gaida Cocek’, one of several very decent instrumentals, and his clarinet playing is more tasteful.

The most original of the musicians is guitarist Stojan Stojanov, who I should like to have to heard more of, but accordionist Martin Lubenov is no slouch either. The arrangements are keenly performed, and the swing is tremendous, brooking no argument and taking no prisoners. Still, the best thing about it is Iliev himself, who really sounds as though could become be a major star. I very much hope that this recording will be the first of many.

Kim Burton

