

Clue: A major city



World CD

Ersatzmusika, Voice Letter

4 stars (Asphalt Tango)

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Based in Berlin but made up of musicians from the Ukraine, Russia and Estonia, Ersatzmusika are a quirky, intriguing band who set out to revive and transform the forgotten music of the Soviet Union. "Voice letters" were cassettes that were recorded anonymously by songwriters and passed around secretly, in defiance of the authorities. Now they have become part of what singer and lyricist Irina Doubrovskaja calls an urban folk style. Here, her deadpan vocals are matched against guitars, accordion, fairground organ or xylophone in songs that mix slinky balladry and echoes of Gypsy music with a dash of Kurt Weill or the blues.

The results sound, at times, like a disjointed east-European answer to Tom Waits, and I'm sure the lyrics will prove fascinating to those who speak Russian. One track was apparently written by an unknown Gulag prisoner as he watched cranes flying over his cell, while another deals with Leningrad during the second world war. Sadly, such information is not included in the inadequate English sleeve notes.

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