



Dec. 2007

Reviews

ERSATZMUSIKA *Voice Letter*

Asphalt Tango Records CD-ATR 1407

“Post-Soviet Urban Folk From Berlin” reads the press release to this extraordinary debut album and I’m thinking ‘yes, that pretty much sums it up’. Ersatzmusika appear to be a Berlin-based outfit made up of musicians from Russia, Ukraine and Estonia. They are focused around Irina Dubrovskaja who writes/ sings/ plays keyboards and produces. She is also apparently a visual artist of some note. And on *Voice Letter* – apparently the theme of the album is a series of musical communications to friends now scattered across the globe – they create a lovely Slavic sound both new yet nostalgic.

I’m unfamiliar with most contemporary Russian music (they sing in Russian) – Leningrad were too prog rock for me on CD, much of the Gypsy music is overheated in the manner necessary for cabarets – so have no idea if Ersatzmusika represent a popular sound. What they do create is a lovely, very poetic (several songs are based on poems) folk rock (psych-folk is a fashionable term that could apply to them) sound. Songs are slow and weary yet infused with a droll humour and lovely shades: fairground organ, wheezing accordeon, scraps of guitar, melancholy xylophone – really, this is the perfect record for autumn, it being both grey in tone and full of warm textures.

Opening track *Beside Myself To You I Came* (titles in English, lyrics Russian!) has a quiet mystery like little else I have heard recently, weaving a seductive melody over an odd rhythm while Irina sings in a matter-of-fact manner that recalls the great tunes Françoise Hardy cut in the mid-1960s. *Cranes*, based on a poem written by a Gulag prisoner, is sad and beautiful and rides a chippy guitar figure. *The Mushroom Hunter* is a treatise on the village economy of collecting fungi, narrated by guitarist Sergej Voranzov. *Went And Drank* is based on a Julia Belomlinskaya poem and apparently includes the memorable refrain “You can call me a bad Jew, but I’ll drink until I drop”.

Voice Letter feels like a collage of melodies, impressions, colours. All kinds of influences are cited by the band – Russian folk and underground Soviet-era songwriters, Ukrainian Gypsies and Central Asia melodies, even Pere Ubu’s David Thomas! – yet Ersatzmusika sound like no one else I can place. It’s rare that I think a ‘world’ album could appeal not only to the diverse tastes of fRoots readers but also to a wider public: *Voice Letter* enchants like few others.

Distributed by [Harmonia Mundi](#)

Garth Cartwright