

REVIEW

Music Review: Ersatzmusika - *Songs Unrecantable*Written by [Richard Marcus](#)

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I suppose if most people in North America think of Russian music at all, they will either think of the Red Army Chorus extolling the virtues of the "Workers Paradise" by singing "The International", or groups of Cossack dancers doing improbable steps to the sound of balalaikas. Well the "Worker's Paradise" hasn't existed, if it ever really did, since the late 1980s, and Cossacks haven't had much to dance about in years, so you need to throw all those old expectations away when you listen to what contemporary Russian musicians are creating.

Germany and Russia haven't had a history of amicable relationships through the years. The twentieth century was a particularly bad time, as each took turns in occupying the other for extended periods. However, this hasn't stopped Russian musicians being welcomed when they've gone searching for greener pastures in the West as they look to make a living from their craft. Which explains how the Russian group [Ersatzmusika](#) comes to be based out of Berlin Germany and is about to release their second CD, [Songs Unrecatable](#), on the German label [Asphalt-Tango](#). (While April 10, 2009 is the release date for the physical disc, you can download and preview the CD at the Asphalt-Tango site above as well as a [songbook](#) illustrated by the band's lead singer, Irina Doubrovskaja.)

If you download the songbook one of the first things you'll notice is the lyrics are in English, and that's not because they've been translated, it's because almost all the songs on *Songs Unrecantable* are sung in that language. Although to be honest lead singer Doubrovskaja's accent is so thick that if you're only listening casually chances are you're going to assume she's singing in Russian. To be fair, it's not just her accent, the music the band plays is so different from what most of us are used to hearing when it comes to Eastern European folk, the combination of the two makes for a sound so alien to our ears you can be easily forgiven for not noticing she is singing in English. It's a little different when native English speaker Thomas Cooper (he also translated all the songs into English) sings on tracks eleven and thirteen, but by then the disc is almost over and the atmosphere been long set.



Before anyone starts jumping to any conclusions about brooding Russians or anything equally stupid, by mood I'm referring to the fact that Doubrovskaja sounds like a Russian accented Marlene Dietrich. Yet while both she and Dietrich evoke smoke filled cabarets with dim lights, musically, lyrically the two women are miles apart. For while the former's stock in trade was sultry love songs, the latter's lyrics drip irony onto music that tastes of a little bit of everything from Balkan beat box to traditional folk sounds. There's actually something eerily familiar about Ersatzmusika's overall sound that escaped me for the longest time, until it struck me how much they reminded me of The Doors in their slower and more pensive moments.

While they might share certain characteristics with other performers and have drawn upon various styles, it's doubtful you've ever heard anything quite like Ersatzmusika before. While the instruments in play sound like the normal array for an Eastern

European folk ensemble/pop group: guitar (Leonid Soybelman, Sergej Voronzov, Fuslan Kalugin, and Phil Freeborn); bass (Konstantin Orlov, and the late Igor Vdovchenko on two tracks); drums and percussion (Michail Zukov and Roman Buschuev); keyboard, piano, and accordian (Irina Doubrovskaja); cello (Sergej Chanukaev); synthesizer (Werner Zein); and harmonica (Roman Buschuev), the results are anything but standard.

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Richard Marcus is a long-haired Canadian iconoclast who writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees it at [Leap In The Dark](#) and [Epic India Magazine](#).

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Where one has come to expect a lively sound inspired by polka's, the heady influence of gypsy violins, or other rural traditions, you find moody, atmospheric sounds which are a far more accurate reflection of life today. The lyrics in turn are a match for this sound as they offer commentary on humanity's checkered history and uncertain future. The opening lines of "Gypsy Air", the first track on the CD, give you a good idea of the band's appraisal of our past: "Woe filled times we must abide / woe betide him who knows not this...Let us compile a list/Of the wrongs that man commits / Never shying ignominy / Clipped the wings, ducked the tail/Little boy, Nagasaki."

However it's not only the past they are concerned with as they capture the true price of the greed and materialism that plagues today a little later in the same song with the following lines, "That tenderness' needs must contrast / With tender, its negation." I don't think I've heard a condemnation of a system that puts selling above caring phrased so succinctly and directly before. Now, lest you think they're only a one note band, they also show themselves capable of being darkly humorous. "Oh Pterodactyl", track seven, is a darkly delightful examination of our genealogy. "There has of late been much debate / Bout what is round and what is straight / And why no politician / Could have a forebear simian / But oh pterodactyl / To you we owe a / Oh pterodactyl / A debt of honour / Oh pterodactyl / Although that Noah / Oh pterodactyl / Wants to disown ya."



It's hard to describe the experience of listening to *Songs Unrecantable* by Ersatzmusika simply because there's not much else like them around to offer up as a comparison. Their accents mark them as Eastern European, and there are elements of their music that reflect that heritage, but not in the way we've grown accustomed to hearing them as presented by world music labels. This is an edgier, more contemporary, and urban sound which, while it doesn't discount its heritage, uses it as its springboard to something new instead of just recreating what's been done before. It's only fitting though considering their song's lyrics, which are not only predominately in English to allow for more universal comprehension, are also far more relevant to today's world than what we're used to.

Recently we've seen how young musicians from backgrounds as diverse as Balkan and Roma have begun to make their sound more contemporary while maintaining a connection to their traditional music. Ersatzmuzika is on the leading edge of the movement intent on proving anything old can be new again and in the process are creating some great music.

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