



PRINCES AMONGST MEN [Asphalt Tango CD TR1608)

Garth Cartwright is a Kiwi with a passion for the music of the Balkans. "Bal" is Turkish for blood, and "kan" is Turkish for honey, he explains, describing his fascination for this contradictory and vibrant culture. In 2003 he set off to explore the simultaneously demonised and romanticised world of gypsy music. He wrote a book **PRINCES AMONGST MEN** and then asked Asphalt Tango to come up with a soundtrack album. This is the result, and it's a gem. Cartwright writes, "Rakija, cigarettes, fried meat, pickled vegetables, beautiful girls, absolute chaos and music of unearthly beauty ... these were constants on my Balkan travels." There are a few familiar tracks on this compilation, as is inevitable with any hits anthology, but there's enough good new stuff and surprises to make it worthwhile. "Oh Carolina!" the Mento classic will go down in history as one of the important crossover songs. Not because the Jamaicans got it from Trinidad, but because it made it halfway round the world to Romania where it mutated into "Kan marau la," one of the outstanding tracks on this compilation of nothing but gold. It was also the lead track on Asphalt Tango's 2007 compilation **QUEENS & KINGS**, which deservedly won all the world music awards last year. **QUEENS & KINGS** was a live recording centred around Fanfare Ciocarlia. They energized a fiery set of guest artists and you get the same feeling from this anthology. There are two vintage cuts, selected from the exceptional *Songs from a Bygone Age* series, one each from Toni Iordache and Romica Puceanu, to ground this, but there's the equally solid piece from Esma Redzepova which has not been released previously. Great works from Taraf de Haidouks, KAL and Johny Iliev may be familiar but they are surrounded by wonders from Ferus Mustafov, gypsy legend Saban Bajramovic, Sudahan and a host of others you probably haven't heard of. The Golden trumpet of Boban Markovic is here, of course, doing "Disko Dzumbus," and so is the great Kocani Orkestar, but we also get to hear Rom Bengale doing a previously unreleased cut called "Disko Gitane." In another contradiction the music is both martial and lyrical at the same time. This disc sparkles and crackles with electricity from one end to the other!