



### **KAL (CD [Asphalt Tango](#) ATR 0906)**

Gypsy music has evolved rapidly in the last 30 years. It was shoved aside by Balkan pop and then all music was buried by the civil war, though we might have sensed impending martial doom in Laibach. In the Tito era I hitch-hiked through Yugoslavia. People were curious about me, a Western kid with shoulder-length hair. They wanted to buy my jeans, which I did sell when I was broke. They would invariably ask me if I liked Tito and Johnson. I told them Tito was good, LBJ bad. That always got me a shot of slivovitz. Tito held all these disparate cultures together with his iron gloves, even finding a place for the Roma. Yugoslavia was a lot less grim than Bulgaria where everyone was dying to escape. But then it all fell apart along good old ethnic lines. "Marx wasn't a German, he was a Jew!" says the Orson Welles character in the Stranger, and from this the detective (Edward G. Robinson) knows he's a Nazi. KAL takes the opposite approach and includes everyone and every style in their music which is what makes it so engaging. They are from the suburbs of Belgrade and play gypsy music that casts a wide net, gathering in Turkish, Arabic and Western (rock) influences. Kal is the Romany word for "Black" as the band's founders, Dushan and Dragan Ristic, chose it to confront the prejudice that gypsies constantly face. They also felt gypsy music faced a musical blight with electric gypsies turning up at weddings with a synthesizer to replace the band. Post-Tito music was swamped by what Dragan calls "turbo trash" where the lowest common denominator was allowed to rule (like in American pop). Though this album was produced on a tiny budget, it's a fine production with great studio engineering by Mike Nielsen. There are touches of bhangra and rap (a funny drawling take from satirist Rambo Amadeus, but without translation). There's even Hawaiian slide guitar on the amusing "Gurbetski Tango" which features tuba laying down the bass. Using traditional instruments KAL has found a place for gypsy music in the 21st century.