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## REVIEW

# Music Review: Gabi Lunca - *Gabi Lunca: Sounds From A Bygone Era - Vol.5*



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When my mother's grandfather came to Canada in the 19th century from Bucharest, Romania, (according to family legend he knifed a Cossack during a pogrom and had to leave in a hurry) they chose Quebec because they were fluent in French. Bucharest, along with a couple other cities, considered itself the Paris of the Danube. It was common for educated Romanians to be bilingual, and even favour French over their native tongue as a sign of their cultural refinement.

While this influence waned in the twentieth century, especially after Romania was "protected" from the corrupting influences of the West by the Iron Curtain, French cultural influences could still be found in certain areas. At the same time, while Romania's gypsy population had suffered horrible deprivations in World War Two due to being one of the Nazi's targeted inferior races, the influence of that culture on popular music that was performed in clubs in the cities, or community events like weddings in the country, was undeniable.

While the music was undeniably gypsy, with the familiar sounds of the tzimbal, violin, and accordion leading the way, and the language being sung was Romanian, the first time I heard [Gabi Lunca](#) sing I was reminded of Edith Piaf and others of the great French chanteuse tradition. Perhaps it's because I wasn't paying any attention to the lyrics, as I don't speak any Romanian, but only listening to the sound of the singer's voice, that I made the connection. Whatever the reason, there was no denying to my ears the connection between the two singers.



I only heard of Gabi Lunca because of the German record label [Asphalt Tango](#) that specializes in recordings of Russian and Eastern European music with an emphasis on the music of the Roma or gypsies. Not only have they been responsible for bringing some of the best in contemporary gypsy music to Western Europe and beyond, but they have produced a series of CDs featuring the music of performers from the Communist era who were largely unknown in the West.

Like the majority of the series, the music on [Gabi Lunca: Sounds From A Bygone Age - Vol.5](#) has been culled from the archives of the former Romanian State Radio in Bucharest and re-mastered for CD. On this disc they have been able to find music that spans the years that Gabi Lunca was in her prime as a vocalist, 1956 to 1978. Lunca was considered one of the "grande dames" of the Romanian music world and performed with some of the premier musicians of her time so what you're hearing on *Gabi Lunca: Sounds From A Bygone Age - Vol.5* is representative of the best of the popular music of the time.

Gabi was born in 1938, one of twelve children left to violinist Dumitru Lunca to raise by himself when his wife died when Gabi was three. It was music that rescued her from a life of poverty as in the mid-fifties she entered and won a singing competition beating out fifty other entries. With her winner's certificate in hand, she presented herself at the headquarters of Romanian State Radio, and was rewarded for her daring with her first recording the same year. While she had a slight hitch in her career in the shape of an early bad marriage, she soon moved full time to Bucharest and never looked back. She retired from public life in 1990, as the constant demands of performing were getting too much for her husband and herself.

During her heyday she was referred to as "Tziganca de matase", the silken gypsy woman. Listening to her sing, you can guess at least one reason for that title. Her smooth, velvety voice caresses lyrics and she appears almost effortless in her delivery. Even the slight tremor, or strain that one occasionally hears in her voice, is more indicative of being caught up in the passion of the moment rather than an effort to reach a note. According to the extensive liner notes included in the disc, the type of music she sang was meant to lift the weight of sadness from the listener's soul.

They were songs of the quiet yearning that's caused by homesickness, or missing one's mother or sweetheart. In the wrong hands I'm sure this type of material could be deadly. Sickeningly sentimental saccharine, it would make your teeth hurt just to listen to it. Fortunately Gabi's voice has a quality that makes her sound so genuine, one can't help but feel the passion she sings with, even though you don't understand a word she says. It was this passion, and the intensity of her delivery, that made me think of Edith Piaf and the French chanteuse tradition.

Although Gabi Lunca grew up listening to Romanian radio and singers whose music was predominately of gypsy origins, she was also part of a generation of singers who inherited the legacy of a culture that had been heavily influenced by France. Perhaps it's because of the similarities in the cadences of the two languages, Romanian and French, that I was so forcefully reminded of Piaf when I first heard Lunca, but I also think it was something deeper. Both women had an almost instinctual understanding of how to communicate emotion to their audience in such a way that no one listening could doubt their sincerity.

It wasn't as if Lunca was imitating the way the Piaf sang; I doubt it was a conscious decision on her part to imitate anybody. It was more a reflection of how the two cultures had historically merged decades earlier. What's truly amazing about Lunca is her ability to seamlessly merge the chanteuse tradition of France with the gypsy music of her personal heritage. Of course considering that France has its own gypsy population it's always possible that the styles that influenced Piaf could have had their origins in gypsy music.

How ever it came about, what really matters is how Gabi Lunca sounded. If the disc *Gabi Lunca: Sounds From A Bygone Age: Vol. 5* is an accurate representation of her career, she was astounding. The passion in her voice and the energy of the music that accompanies her sound as if they were made for each other. A voice that's as gentle as a caress, but as strong and eternal as the wind that blows through the trees is not going to be easily forgotten once you've heard it, and I won't be forgetting Gabi Lunca in a hurry.