

DONA DUMITRU SIMINICA

Sounds From A Bygone Age Vol 3 Asphalt
Tango CD-ATR 1106

TONI IORDACHE

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I first came across recordings from these two remarkable artists in Bucharest in 2003. This wasn't through fortuitous crate diggings (although the wonders of old Romanian recordings will certainly lead to many collectors wanting to sift through car boot sales in that part of Europe) but due to Electrecord, the Romanian state label, making some of its archive of Gypsy recordings from the golden age (early '60s – early '80s) available on CD. To say hearing Dona Dumitru Siminica and Toni Iordache for the first time was a shock is an understatement, the latter is the most magnificent cymbalom player of the post-war era while the former... I don't think since my teenage self first heard Robert Johnson has a recording both so impressed and unnerved me.

Siminica was a vocalist and violinist who lived and played around Bucharest, dying in obscurity in the early '80s. There is no film/ video recording of him, no interviews and seemingly only two photographs: talk about a Balkan Robert Johnson! What remains is a couple of dozen recordings thirteen of which appear on this essential compilation from Berlin's Asphalt Tango Records. Siminica sang in an unearthly falsetto, one that is extremely unsettling, it being enchanting, beautiful, eerie, while also conveying a darker, older world, a Europe full of superstition and lore and punishment, a Europe I will never know. My skin tingles listening to this music, it's as if I've fallen into a netherworld, a dark yet erotic one, and I can't escape, trapped in a

beautiful nightmare. Siminica's sound achieves this through its sinewy beauty, his voice, the fluid, cat-like prowess of his band (cymbalom, double bass, accordeon, violin), the way no note is wasted, no unnecessary showing off employed. Yeats's term "a terrible beauty" belongs here, not because Siminica represents anything negative but, more, that I find his music so charged and compelling, Romania lore from a time that's passed. Beautifully packaged, superbly mastered, fine sleeve notes; I generally try and avoid hyperbole but if you only buy one CD this year make it Dona Dumitru's.

Much more is known about the late cymbalom master Toni Iordache: so esteemed was he that even Ceausescu's rotten government sent him abroad as a representative of Romania. Iordache died of diabetes in 1988 having played hundreds of sessions; he led one of the great *lautari* bands so was in constant demand and this wonderful CD presents a fourteen-track selection of Iordache's genius. Many of the tunes are instrumental and *what* instrumentals – Iordache plays at high speed with such great finesse it staggers the listener. His ability to fire off solos, to pull the melody way east, to add comic and jazzy touches... it's rare that music as rich as this gets heard let alone recorded. Five of the tracks feature vocals – three from Romica Puceanu, two from Gabi Lunca – and Iordache and band work magnificently behind these throaty divas. Much as I love Taraf De Haïdouks it's fair to admit that they will never match the mastery of Iordache and his *lautari*.

Asphalt Tango Records must be congratulated for its *Sounds From A Bygone Age* series, these CDs opening a window on some of the 20th century's greatest music. And to think this beautifully haunted music was recorded in one of the world's most oppressive states. The very strangeness of Romania is part of its wonder. Traditional Gypsy music-making in Romania today has largely been destroyed by the onslaught of trash culture; *Bygone Age* hints at an artistic beauty few from the West got to experience in person, yet now we all can wonder as this extraordinary sound spills from CDs.

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