

CD REVIEWS



MAHSA & MARJAN VAHDAT
Songs From A Persian Garden
 KKV

There have been some sad side effects to the Bush administration's grudge against the Middle East, especially when it comes to showing any cultural appreciation for the wide range of artistic and musical talent from the region. With Iran in particular, there's a dismissive Western taboo attached to the art and music—not to mention the religious and political views—of Tehran. For Iranian sisters Mahsa and Marjar Vahdat, the taboo is double-edged: not only do they get lumped in with the "axis of evil" by right-wing ideologues in the West, but they're criticized by fundamentalists in their homeland for singing in public. Fortunately for us, the human need for self-expression is stronger than any political or religious dogma, so we get to hear the Vahdat sisters sing beautifully on *Songs From A Persian Garden*—a rare live recording captured by their Norwegian label. Though the oppressive atmosphere of Iran creates challenges for such young artists, the spirit of the tradition lives on in their voices, which flow with unrivaled grace and sorrow, blending into one intimate harmony.

—JILL ETTINGER

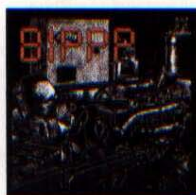


CHUCHO VALDÉS
Featuring Cachaito
 Yemayá

Originally compiled and released in 2002 and now officially available for the first time in the U.S., this stellar 20-song set bookends 16 years of the legendary Cuban jazz pianist's

career, beginning in 1970 with the exceedingly fruitful period he was enjoying with drummer Enrique Pla and bassist Orlando "Cachaito" Lopez (later of Buena Vista Social Club fame). There's little in Havana's jazz-pop canon of the time that can match the upbeat, funky exuberance of "Preludio No. 1" or the frenetic Afro-samba blues of "Invento No. 4"—the latter offering a glimpse of the spaces Valdés would explore with his fusion juggernaut Irakere—while solo pieces like "Evocación A Manuel Saumell," recorded in 1986, display a master's emotional range, evoking such classical giants as Debussy and Shostakovich. Valdés continues to this day to add to his dauntingly hefty catalog, but if ever there was a good spot to sample the waters before diving in, this is a strong contender.

—MALACHAI PHELPS



VARIOUS ARTISTS
B.I.P.P.: French Synth Wave 1979/85
 Everloving

Don't let the synths scare you—this isn't the vapid day-glo pop that came to dominate the mid-1980s. The aesthetic here is decidedly pre-MTV, suggesting a jittery mashup of Gaulloises, amphetamines and cheap technology that still sounds fresh today. Culled from obscure 7-inch singles and limited pressings, all 13 tracks skitter and spike with a bleak, detached worldview. The featured bands—Deux, Ruth, TGV, Act, and others—are close contemporaries of such seminal U.K. acts as Ultravox, Soft Cell, Gary Numan and New Order, and like their Brit counterparts, these Parisians had a penchant for spare, guitar-free soundscapes, crafted mostly on old Roland CR-78 rhythm composers and other pre-MIDI keyboards. The

bleeping, mechanized anomie of the era is best captured on Vox Dei's "Terroriste," Deux's "Game And Performance" and TGV's "Partie 1," while the Gallic obsession with the perverse is on full display on À Trois Dans Les WC's "Contagion" and Comix's "Touche Pas Mon Sexe." There are plenty more gems here—along with some great anecdotal stories in the liner notes—but you'll have to forgo the MP3 rips and actually buy the CD to get the full picture. And what could be more '80s than that?

—TOM PRYOR

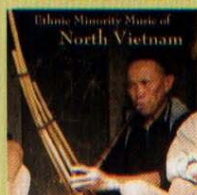


VARIOUS ARTISTS
Putumayo Presents Euro Groove
 Putumayo

It speaks volumes about the vast universe of world music that after 15 years and countless collections, Putumayo continues to find more



VARIOUS ARTISTS
Ethnic Minority Music Of Southern Laos



Ethnic Minority Music Of North Vietnam
 Sublime Frequencies

Most releases from the Sublime Frequencies label in Seattle have consisted of snippets of music recorded on the streets, pirated off the radio, and taken from cassettes bought at markets in various parts

of the world. These sounds are then edited into pastiches and released without documentation, with the idea that the absence of context compels the listener to deal with the music strictly on its own terms.

These two albums are something of an anomaly, then, because in a sense they conform to the conventions of traditional ethnomusicology. Recorded in the field by Laurent Jenneau, they follow the label's release last year of a similar album of Cambodian ethnic minority music. All these discs seek to capture the music of ethnic groups still relatively untouched by encroaching majority cultures, and these two are brimming with wonderful sounds.

The North Vietnam set features recordings of the Gay, Lu, Red Zao and Black Hmong peoples. Bamboo seems to be the operative material in the music: several songs center around the shifting tones of the bamboo mouth organ, while

another song documents a man who dances while striking himself with a bamboo stick that has coins attached to it. Many other tracks feature Baozoo singing—a style in which the primary vocalist is echoed after a slight delay by several others, forming a slightly unsettling yet mesmerizing wall of sound.

The haunting music on the Laos collection, which consists of songs from the Harak and Brao ethnic groups, has a deeply thoughtful and pensive quality. Some songs feature male vocals accompanied by mouth organ, while several more are recordings of gong ensembles that sound like something out of the Deep Forest catalogue. Still others, which feature a 10-stringed instrument with a kora-like timbre, have the plaintive sound of the blues—a style that still seems to be the great equalizer, no matter what part of the world you visit.

—DOUG MERLINO