

17 Hippies – EL DORADO (Hipster Records HIP. 013)



17 Hippies are Berlin's very own "Orchester Spezial", a unique, now-13-piece ensemble whose weird-and-wonderful, whirling, crashing, ducking-and-diving mixture of music from around the world is nothing if not seriously overwhelming.

It's hard to get a handle on their brand of music beyond the fact that it's mutant, freewheeling, wildly eclectic, and sung in at least three different languages (German, French and English, not to mention hardcore impenetrable Hessian dialect on the opening salvo).

It never rests anywhere much for more than a song's span either. The problem – even after a hefty number of plays – is that it can sometimes seem like a badly-judged joke gone wrong or told at the wrong moment or repeated ad-infinity à-la-Python, and any novelty value of some of it wears thin after a short while (and then you find yourself asking "what's the point?"). At various points during *El Dorado I* was reminded of Chumbawamba, the Bonzos, 20s cabaret and Marlene Dietrich, 3 Mustaphas, Urban Folk, and even – bizarrely – Brian Peters doing a Beatles cover (*Welcome To My World*).

The band's instrumental complement is as imaginative and wild as the world musics they espouse: accordion, trombone, trumpet, harmonium, violin, cello, double-bass and plenty of mando, banjo, uke and bouzouki.

Best tracks here are those where the spontaneous crusading spirit doesn't get too knowingly "ironic" and/or the fun element is not too consciously staged. That notoriously frumpy babble-arse opener *Uz*, the altogether calmer instrumental *La Zona Drom*, the madcap gypsy *Arcanul* that somehow tips over into ukulele-skank, and not least Kiki Sauer's enchantingly sexy singing (especially on *Adieu* and the sultry *Franglais*-ridden title track) – all of these embrace the elements that made earlier albums like *Heimlich* work their way into my affections that much easier (and there's no *Shadows* cover this time round either, more's the pity!).

But the jury here is still out to some extent – and you've the chance to sample their presence at some UK festivals (eg. WOMAD and Trowbridge) this summer.

www.17hippies.com

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