

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Eddie Cooney explores some of the fine music being made outside the UK. Passport, please ...

Anyone travelling through France last summer cannot fail to have been touched in some way by the music of new darling of the French music industry, **ZAZ** (www.myspace.com/zazofficiel). The single 'Je Veux' has been the ubiquitous hit of the summer and the debut eponymous album ***** (PLAY ON/SONY) is a sensational and astonishingly poised release. The album mixes



twin French traditions of *manouche* jazz and *chanson* with enormous doses of youthful exuberance and energy. Think Django Reinhardt playing guitar for Edith Piaf and you won't be far from the sound of Zaz. The singer's vocals have an intense impact on the listener like those of Piaf but this is no copyist repetition of what has gone before. The songs may have a traditional setting but this is a modern, vibrant album of its time.

I'm sometimes suspicious of hype in the French music scene, especially when it is attached to new artists who seemingly appear from nowhere. My suspicions led to me being lazy in checking out Zaz but a little research has revealed the opposite of an overnight sensation. Zaz is the musical pseudonym for thirty-year-old Isabelle Geffroy who spent ten years paying her dues including gigging in Japan and Egypt, singing with a Basque festival orchestra, solo tours of Russia singing Piaf and a stint in rap group, 4P. The latter includes a hilarious song, 'Rugby Amateur', forever to remain a skeleton in Zaz's cupboard and fast becoming a favourite on YouTube. Such history is foundations for great music and has led to an essential purchase for lovers of European music.

Zaz is not to be confused with **ZAZIE** (www.zazieonline.artistes.universalmusic.fr) whose seventh studio album *Za7ie* ***** (MERCURY) is an absolutely bonkers collection of seven mini-albums, each of seven tracks. Successive discs are named after days of the week and subtitled indicating a distinctive theme. Adult music, music for children, serious music, music for a party, music to chill-out to are all present. A lavish house-shaped boxed set of all the albums is available for a probable bargain of forty Euros but there is also a single-disc version featuring highlights.

Life being short, I plumped for a special edition of the highlights disc, which came packed in a rather lovely hard-backed book with a bonus DVD but, to be perfectly honest, I want the house. If this project has a fault it is in its breadth and depth but I can't fault the music on the single disc. Zazie is an inventive and adventurous alternative pop star with a

tendency to eccentricity but she adds deep vibrant colour to the music scene and is a precious French treasure.

WIR SIND HELDEN (www.wirsindhelden.com) release their fourth studio album *Bring Mich Nach Haus* ***** (REKLAMATION RECORDS) after a near three-year break since the preceding *Soundso* *****. The band reckons the time has been spent in quality parenthood, going to gigs, learning new instruments and generally cultivating anew their love of music. The resulting album, with its idiosyncratic mix of quirky songs, melancholic themes and beautiful if somewhat understated melodies, has been called a career suicide by some who can only be thought of as cloth-eared and superficial in their assessments.

The album opens deceptively enough with the wonderfully uplifting, alternative pop of

'Alles', which could have appeared on either of the previous two albums. What follows is a collection of songs played live in the studio mostly on acoustic instruments, featuring sounds never before heard on Wir Sind Helden recordings courtesy of instruments such as accordion, banjo, glockenspiel and Arabic lute.

The lyrical themes here are more intimate and personal than the band's previous work with the meaning of life, love and home being examined from an individual perspective. At times the music has a wistful beauty as on the title track or the gorgeous 'Die Ballade Von Wolfgang Und Brigitte'. Beauty is no stranger to the music of Wir Sind Helden but here its intensity is enhanced.

Do not, however, get the impression that everything is gentle and quiet. The breadth of variety on offer is admirable and ranges from the gentle reggae of 'Dramatiker' to the full-on alternative rock of 'Im Auge Des Sturms'. The entire album is available to listen to on the band's MySpace page (www.myspace.com/wirsindhelden) so go there and decide for yourself whether this album is the sound of a 'career suicide' or a band at the height of its creativity. I know what I think!

Another German band doing the unexpected is **FOTOS** (www.fotosmusik.de) who with their third album *Porzellan* ***** (INITIATIVE MUSIK/SNOWWHITE) have transformed themselves from a decent, if average, alternative rock/pop band into one to be reckoned with. In recent interviews Fotos have bemoaned the way their previous label, EMI, marketed them as a kind of alternative rock Monkees, giving them an image they were never entirely comfortable with.

Now freed of the controlling pressures of The



Man and given creative freedom, they have produced a peach of an album and, ironically, their most commercially viable product. The opening 'Alles Schreit' begins with an ethereal vocal passage that is suddenly interrupted by Jesus And Mary Chain-like guitars and it is so obvious that everything has changed forever. Fotos have also written their best songs to date, with the insanely catchy 'Mauer' and the melodically similar but almost threatening 'Feuer' having the potential to be massive hits.

Much of the album is delivered in a cold, dense wall of sound with gloomy synths, booming drums and heavy bass joining multi-tracked guitars but the acoustic guitar ballad 'Ritt' and the closing, tender 'Wellen' are examples of the wide-ranging variety on offer. I've always quite liked Fotos but this album is something entirely different. It sees a blooming of previously unexpected potential.

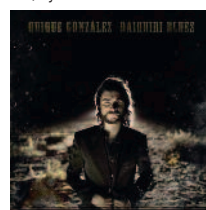
It's been five years since purveyors of intelligent German pop, **ERDMÖBEL** (www.erdmobel.de) released an album of original material and I have missed them. Their last release, 2007's *No.1 Hits* *** was an album of covers and, while it was a fun listen, it never reached the precious heights of previous classics such as 2005's *Für Die Nicht Wissen Wie* ***** and 2003's *Altes Gasthaus Love* *****. Latest release *Krokus* ***** (EDEL) is a joyful return to the scene full of thought provoking, poetic songs and beautifully subtle melodies.

The opening '77ste Liebe' is an uplifting beauty with an irresistible melody like Bacharach joined by a drunken Prefab Sprout. New single for the festive season 'Erster Erster' is a similarly wonderful gem and the sound of a jaded heart suddenly bursting with hope and anticipation for a new year. Erdmöbel have always offered a bittersweet edge and 'Fremdes' is an uncompromising, surprisingly angry comment on modern Cologne, my favourite German city, set to an aggressive reggae/ska arrangement.

Listening to Erdmöbel has always involved catharsis for me. They are equally capable of lifting my heart or of bringing a tear to my eye and have long been a personal favourite of mine. I actually don't trust anyone who says they don't like Erdmöbel. Only a heart of stone would attempt to resist such precious creativity.

Madrid's **QUIQUE GONZÁLEZ** (www.quiquegonzalez.com) is the writer of one of my all-time favourite songs. 'Aunque Tú No Lo Sepas' was most famously recorded by the late great Enrique Urquijo Y Los Problemas on the 1998 album *Desde Que No Nos Vemos* ***** and is a simple, bittersweet, melancholic ballad with a beautiful tension that so suited Urquijo's sad vocal. González released his first solo album, *Personal* ***** in the same year and has since built a career making him one of Spain's quality singer-songwriter/rock artists.

In 2003 he was cast aside by Universal and looked all washed up only to form his own record label, tour extensively throughout Spain and release his best album to date, the intimate and sparse classic *Kamikazes Enamorados* *****. His three albums since include a wonderful live set, *Ajuste De Cuentas* ***** and 2007's *Avería*



Y Redención N° 7 *****, which topped *Rolling Stone*'s end of year poll as Spain's best country album. For his latest release *Daiquiri Blues* *****, González relocated to Nashville and recorded with American musicians and producer Brad Jones. Curiously, the resulting album is not another country classic but a warm, self-assured, relaxing singer-songwriter album of quality. Moving to America does not appear to have influenced González's muse in any specific way but has produced a strong and consistently melodic album. As to be expected Nashville's musicians have added some great guitar work but all of the songs are bereft of obvious Nashville references and feature lovely, gentle brass and gorgeous string arrangements. *Daiquiri Blues* is an exquisite, intimate late night/Sunday morning album.

My love of Slovakian band **LONGITAL** (www.longital.com) has been well recorded in Continental Drift. Daniel Salontay and Shina Lo are two equally talented musicians who perfectly complement each other's muse. New album *Teraz* ***** (SLNKO RECORDS) is a strange and beautiful thing. Strange in its originality and beautiful in its profundity, this is music like you have never heard before: sounds and melodies from out of the air like gifts from the gods; rhythms from the depths of a soul like the varying heartbeats of lovers; lyrics of honest, naive expression like the truth means everything.

Longital have made an album that is the sound of true creative freedom. They have found the point where the spirit of childhood invention is compromised by and lost to adult consideration. *Teraz* looks nowhere for inspiration other than inwardly to the very moment of creation, and then it tries to maintain that precious moment for as long as possible. This is the music of life with the hot red blood of passion for living pumping through its heart. I've listened to *Teraz* over and over again but I recognise not a single note or idea I have heard before. This music is not of the past and neither is it of the future. This is music of the moment. *Teraz* is the Slovakian word for 'now'.

And that's it for this issue. Next issue will feature new releases from Croatia's Brlag Records. Until then it's au revoir, tschüß, adios amigos, zbohom and zbogom.