

## **Nicolas Simion Group**

### **TRANSYLVANIAN JAZZ**

After more than 25 years of playing and writing music focused in a particular direction—mixing folk music and modern jazz with the other styles of music—I am still in the middle of the process. With each experience I get closer to what I feel is an ideal way of melting those sounds together, doing a crossover and coming to a point where one can say: “it sounds fresh and original, it sounds like—good music!” Finding the right people and experimenting with different musicians and instruments is always a challenge. This particular project could be labeled “ethno jazz,” “folk jazz” or “Balkan jazz”. I call it simply “music.” Looking back at my early CDs like *Transylvanian Dance*, *Back to the Roots*, *Balkan Jazz*, *Romanian Dance* or *Transylvanian Grooves*, to name a few, I thought that *Transylvanian Jazz* would be a good title for the next project.

I was born and I grew up in a small Transylvanian village with very pleasant and natural people who would speak to you from the heart. Music was always present in their lives, playing a part in almost every occasion, whether a birth (baptism), a wedding, a party, a solstice, a religious holiday, passing into another world, etc. I grew up there and my Transylvanian roots go back through my community, my school, my family, back to my very first moment of life.

By the time I emigrated to the West in October 1988 I was almost 30 years old, so I more or less knew what I wanted. But I didn’t know how to get it. Now after 20 years of learning from and playing with a lot of great musicians—Americans, Europeans, Japanese—names like Mal Waldron, Lee Konitz, Jancsy Körössi, Archie Shepp, Gunther Schuller, Jamey Haddad, Ed Schuller, Bill Dobbins, Tomasz Stanko, Dusko Gojkovich, Ino Nobuyoshi, Isao Miyoshi, Martin Gjakonovski, Norbert Scholly, Alan Jones, Piotr Wojtasik, Zoltan Lantos, Kruno Levacich, Florian Weber, Martin Lubenov, and many others, I learned how to get the best out of most situations.

This is the first project where I invited more musicians playing folk instruments than musicians playing conventional instruments. Everyone is a great player and a great personality on his own, so it was easy for me to line up the best grouping for each tune, to create a colorful group sound with a repertoire that is stylisti-

cally cohesive. I wanted to get the feeling and the mood of Transylvanian and Romanian folk music, to write or arrange a few songs like Hora Staccato, Lullaby or Colind in a very simple way and have fun playing them. They have something in common: scales, rhythms, chord changes, melodies, atmosphere. And they sound organic. It's like a picture, like a landscape with lots of details and contrasts.

Hora Staccato is a violin standard that nearly every violinist has heard and played. Grigoras Dinicu, a great Romanian violin player, wrote and performed it many times. Jascha Heifetz, another great classical violin player, arranged it for violin and piano and brought it into the classical repertoire. I kept the marvelous melody very close to the original but changed the comping and chords, alternating the original harmony with some poly chords and incorporating alternating time signatures. The melody is a fast 4/4 and the comping is an alternating slow 3/4 (half time) and fast 4/4.

On Lullaby, based on the "Chanson pour Berceur" from the George Enescu masterpiece, Impressions d'Enfance, I took the lullaby-like melody and repeated it over and over again, producing a dreamlike mood. The character of the piece then transforms into something else. It is like a fairytale. It speaks to us about other places, other times, about being lost in the depths of space somewhere, some-time....

Colind is a very old traditional Christmas song from Transylvania, from the village of Leud in Hunedoara. This masterpiece was transcribed and recorded by Bela Bartok almost 100 years ago and arranged for the solo piano album, Rumänische Weihnachtslieder. The original lyrics are:

*"Pa cel plai de munte, Doamne, Merg oile-n frunte,  
ioi Domnului Doamne, Merg oile-n frunte."*

It's a simple and short way of describing pastoral life: being immersed in nature, herding sheep, walking up and down wooded hills. It could be a version of the famous ballad called Mioritza. I like the simplicity and the strong character of that song, nine measures long. I added a tiny bridge, a contrast to the beauti-

ful melody. I also incorporated a flute called the Caval, a different instrument than the Bulgarian flute of the same name. It can only play a pentatonic scale, compared to the chromatic scale and the wider range of the Bulgarian Kaval. I like the sound of the Caval when combined with violin on the G and D strings and clarinet. It makes the sound quite unique and is perfect for this particular melody. It is also a favorite instrument of the Transylvanian shepherds, who sometimes make their own instruments and play all day long.

As you can see, the two great composers George Enescu and Bela Bartok—who knew each other and even played together—are present here in spirit. I like, respect and relate to both composers very much, especially in the sense that they are inspired by the folk music of Transylvania and other parts of Romania and composed some of their masterpieces based on those beautiful folk songs. The other tunes on our recording session are either old or more recent compositions of mine. Transylvanian Wood, Bear Dance and Dance from Maramuresh were previously played and recorded. But Children's Song, Hora Funk, The Village is Getting Drunk and Wedding at the Black Sea (with an oriental touch), are played and recorded here for the first time.

The picture of the whole project is pretty colorful with sounds and musical elements from all parts of Eastern Europe—Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Turkey—combined with folk, pop, modern jazz and Gypsy music sounds. My inspiration also came from life experiences—children, people, anniversaries, weddings, parties at the village pub, even bear dancing! (As a child I was fascinated to watch a few people walk into the village square with a bear in tow and make the bear dance for us by playing a tiny drum and singing to him.) The landscapes, the forest, the sea—everything— is part of the small universe or microcosmos, call it village, town, city, country or planet.

By keeping the music easier and simpler and by following the mood of each song, the spirit and the soul of it can come alive. This was always my idea, to make a timeless music. Now how good we did it—it's up to you to say.

I am very glad that the Romanian Culture Institute (ICR) from Bucharest trusted

me and my musician friends and supported this project. It is great music inspired by the great old tradition of the Romanian folk music. It may be more Romanian or Transylvanian jazz but it's still sounding like universal music, a little American, Eastern European, African, Oriental, pop, Indian and so on. It is the music of our time. It has a strong rhythmic element, some gorgeous melodies, it swings, it grooves, you can dance if you want; you can just listen and dream if you like, it is yours now. We really enjoyed playing it. Just hear it and sing with us.

Last, but not least, I would like to say thank you to my musician friends and colleagues for their passion and support, for making the music sound so natural and beautiful and for putting their soul into the music. Gjako, Martin Lubenov, Zoltan, Giani, Sorin and Boris: I compliment you guys for your creativity and thank you for your friendship. Also thanks to all the others who helped us to realize this project--Ana-Maria (Mariuka), Hans-Jürgen, Reinhard, Christoph, Radu, the team from the Cantemir Program from ICR Bucharest—for their passion and support. And many thanks to all the other people who were involved with us.

Peace and love

Yours, Nicolas Simion,  
Transylvania, July 2009