

By Tony Montague, April 19, 2012

Christine Tassan defied gypsy-jazz conventions



Despite the name of her quartet—Les Imposteures—Christine Tassan adds a special authenticity to the April in Paris festival in Vancouver this weekend. She was born and raised in the French capital, where she began her musical journey as a teenager, playing classical guitar and singing her own compositions. Though she was aware of the work of manouche swing guitarist Django Reinhardt, who died in 1953, gypsy jazz was no longer popular in the city where he'd spent most of his career.

Ironically, it wasn't until a few years after Tassan moved to Montreal in 1995 that the music really hit home. "I've always been interested by music that's improvised, and around 10 years ago I heard some manouche gypsies perform," she recalls, reached at home. "That was it—I was completely hooked."

Tassan started playing with three of her female friends, and though they didn't intend it to be an all-girl group, things turned out that way. "Now it's become a selling point for us and something of political significance as well. There are very few women who play gypsy jazz. A Roma guy said it was not well regarded in his culture for a woman to be playing guitar on-stage, which made us all the more determined."

It also suggested Les Imposteures' name. "We're girls and we're not manouche," Tassan explains. "Plus we're not purists in that music. We love the style but come from pretty diverse musical backgrounds and try to bring something of that variety to our music. We're drawing on a

large repertoire, which is not necessarily manouche jazz in origin, though we interpret it in that style.

“Our inspiration comes very much from Django and [his longtime musical partner] Stéphane Grappelli, but you can feel influences from elsewhere,” she adds. “We mix genres a bit—for instance blending Django’s ‘Minor Swing’ with ‘Le Reel Mattawa’, written in a Québécois traditional vein. We compose quite a lot ourselves.”

Tassan et les Imposteures have released two albums of standards and originals. *Le Journal de Montréal* claimed their 2007 debut *De Bon Matin* was “better than Prozac”, citing its *joie de vivre*. Critics nominated 2009’s *Pas Manouche, C’est Louche* for an ADISQ award, the Quebec music industry’s equivalent of a Juno. It features a greater number of Tassan’s compositions, including the Latin-flavoured “La Chic Rumba”, and “Dingo de Django”, a witty paean to Reinhardt. “The stereotype for manouche jazz is songs played at breakneck speed all the time, but we want to show that there are other facets,” the guitarist says. “We like to cover a range of different emotions in the shows, so there are tender songs and ballads and tunes that groove too. The genius of Django for me is the freedom we sense in his music. It flows so easily, it feels so natural, like there’s no effort involved. It’s beautiful and melodic, and whatever it is you listen to, inspiration seems to fall out of the sky.”

Christine Tassan et les Imposteures play St. James Hall on Saturday and Sunday (April 21 and 22), as part of the sixth annual April in Paris festival.