

# National Public Radio: Elina Duni: Love, Lust And Albanian Folk Songs

by [Tom Moon](#)

On *Matane Malit*, the Elina Duni Quartet lays expansive instrumentation over traditional Albanian folk melodies.

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The spread of formal jazz education has created a new breed of global musician: one who uses improvisation, and other devices associated with jazz, to transform folk and traditional music. The Albanian singer Elina Duni is part of this rising class. Her latest release, *Matane Malit* ("Beyond the Mountain"), offers a transfixing balance of old and new.

When Duni was growing up, the singer and composer says she didn't pay much attention to the folk music loved by her grandparents. She went to music school in Switzerland, and there, a pianist friend asked if she knew any traditional Albanian songs. She did not. That sent her on a search to discover the music of her homeland.

"Kjani Trima" is a folk song that has rattled around the Balkans for a long time. It's safe to say that Duni's version, with its stately and majestic vocal ad-libs and coloristic backing, isn't the most traditional. But it reveals the alchemy behind this transfixing collection: Though trained as improvisers, Duni and her group handle these plaintive melodies with great respect and reverence.

When Duni sings, she's poised but fierce as she stretches the themes, pushing until they're about ready to snap. Her musicians enhance the effect, surrounding her with expansive, beautifully nuanced chords that carry traces of [Maurice Ravel](#) and [Bill Evans](#).

Duni has been working with Albanian folk songs since 2004. She considers them central to her art, and says she's moved by their poetry every time she sings. The lyrics tell of love, lust and honor, hardship and perseverance, man's relationship to the land, and (in the grand tradition of folk songs) death. And you don't have to understand Albanian to appreciate what's happening here: Starting with somber and often heavy music, Duni and her group wind up in a soaring, graceful realm all their own.