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Greek Popular Music in an American Cafe

by Nancy Sultan

In my last contribution to *Laografia* (May/June 1994), I wrote about *xenitiá* and the poetics of pain associated with emigration in Greece. I examined some modern Greek songs along with some ancient Greek poetry to illustrate the long tradition of negativity associated with the idea of *xenitiá*. In this issue I will approach this same topic from a different angle; I present some results of field research that I conducted in 1987-88 with a group of Greek musicians who performed weekly at the Middle East Café in Cambridge, MA.

The project began as an attempt to define “popular” music for a course I took at Harvard with ethnomusicologist Rulan Pian. Since I was working on the idea of exile at the time, I decided to combine my interest in popular music with the question of *xenitiá*. I focused on a specific image of the popular: that of the relationship between Greeks and their music in a specific time and place, in a setting removed from their place of origin and native environment. An interdisciplinary study of a culture's popular music is in essence a study of that culture at its most fundamental and basic level.* Scholars who have worked with Greek popular music (Holst-Warhaft and Ole Smith for instance) understand the effect of music and musicality on individuals and, by extension, society. A generation ago, popular music was classified as inferior to classical or high art music and deemed unworthy of serious attention. As the connection between popular music and society has become more clearly defined, new critical and scholarly journals in this area have appeared.

I studied all too briefly the intricate relationship between Greek popular music and the Greek performers and audiences who are *xenitemenoi*—living abroad—and who are therefore disconnected from their community in Greece. I learned that the theme of *xenitiá* is strong even for third generation Greek-Americans who have never been to Greece. Greek emigrants, unlike many groups who resign themselves to their new environment and effectively give up their roots, generally seem less willing (or able) to compromise their language or cultural identity by assimilation. Students especially make it a point to find a new community of Greek *xenitemenoi*. In the Boston area this involved picking up a copy of *The Hellenic Chronicle* and going to dances and social gatherings at the Orthodox church or local restaurants that featured Greek music.

The Middle East Café a small restaurant in Cambridge, was named by its Lebanese owner, but on Fridays in 1987, Greek music was the attraction and the audience was Greek. Tables were packed close together; noise and thick smoke from cigarettes clogged the air, giving it a nightclub atmosphere reminiscent of the juke-box joints of the Plaka. There was a small stage at one end of the room and no real dance floor—people danced in the aisles or on the stage. The band that I recorded and interviewed was called “The Contemporary Greek Ensemble;” its members included band leader Nikolas Souvadjis, Kosmas Vrouvlianis, Sotirios Klotsonis, John Bogis, and one non-Greek, Alan del Castillo. Their repertoire consisted of a large variety of Greek music, including *rembetika* and *laika*, *nisiotika* and some *dimotika*, learned for the most part by listening to LPs. The ensemble used two *bouzoukia*, along with *baglama*, *toumbeleki* (small single-headed clay drum), guitar, flute and electric bass. Although the group wanted to project a more or less “traditional” sound, they amplified the acoustic instruments. Sotos, the bass player, liked his state-of-the-art Steinberger because he could program it to sound like an

acoustic double-bass. Electrification has, for better or worse, become part and parcel of the popular music sound in Greece and in Greek music abroad; instrumentality and song arrangement were topics often discussed by the audience. Purists who expected or desired an authentic rembetiko sound, for example, would sit in the back and criticize. One would argue, “bass was not even included in the earliest rembetiko bands!” and another would retort, “Theodorakis used electric instruments in 1975!” This kind of critique served an important function: to enhance the sense of ownership these people felt about “their” music.

The members of the Contemporary Greek Ensemble lived in the Boston area. Nikolas, Sotos, and Kosmas were born in Greece but lived in the US for many years, making only occasional trips back to visit relatives. John Bogis is a second-generation Greek-American born in Massachusetts, who considers himself “more American than Greek” and speaks no Greek. Although married to a Greek-American, the couple never spoke Greek at home and expressed no interest in even visiting the country. Despite all this, John affirmed that he felt a strong attraction to Greek music and never played anything else. In my conversations with the band and audience members, I discovered that Greeks in general tend to listen much more to Greek music when they are abroad than when they are in Greece. Why? Because popular music provides a sense of identity for those who are cut off from the familiar. The band members confessed that although they listened to western music on the radio, they played Greek music exclusively. The sonic stimulation was as important to their connection to community as language, food, and religion.

The band members were very aware that they were playing before a mixed audience—young, old, students, professionals, Greeks and non-Greeks. The rhythms of the *tsifteteli*, the *karsilamas*, the *syrtos/ hassapiko*, or the *zeibekiko*, as Kostas said, “could drive Greeks wild.” It was those rhythms, along with their familiar melodies—so recognizable, so culturally marked—that brought Greeks from all walks of life together on a Friday night.

The audience and band members often confided that they had no small amount of guilt about leaving their “struggling country” to “make it” in a wealthy nation. Very few of them were ready to return home because the economic rewards in the States were just too “enticing.” As the *mána* says in Papatakis's 1986 film about emigration *I Photografia*, “It's better to be in a den of a well-fed lion than a hungry one.” Understandably, songs about xenitiá were popular with the band and the audience. Marinella's *Ena Piató Adeío* (An Empty Plate) and to *Psomi Tis Xenitiás* (The Bread of Exile) recorded by Lydia and Dalaras, for example, were often requested. The popular folk song *Poulaki Xeno* (Strange Bird) and the rembetik *O Naftis* (The Sailor) were also standard. So was the popular Tzavara song *En Belgio* (In Belgium), which deals with the fear among emigrants and their families that some fatal accident will cause a temporary separation to become permanent.

Songs and melodies do not have to deal directly with the theme of xenitiá to evoke shared memories of home. The lyrics of many rembetik songs, which speak of living in the street, being penniless, alone, desperate and broken-hearted drew Greeks to the Middle East Café. Melodies that contain elements of folk and Byzantine church music were collectively understood and identifiable to the Greek ear. A fisherman who once worked the seas of Greece and now fishes for Boston restaurants always requested the rembetik song *O Psaras* (The Fisherman). For him, that song carried a personal message and at the same time affirmed his national identity; the image of boats carrying young people away from home to make a living is strong throughout Greece.

From the time the Ensemble began playing at 9 PM until about 11:30, the audience at the Middle East was always close to half Greek/Greek-American and half non-Greek. Both Greek

and English were spoken. After 11:30, however, any non-Greeks who were in the audience, having long ago finished their meal, had gone, and by midnight the room was close to 100% Greek/Greek-American. English began to disappear. By 1 o'clock AM, even most of Greek-Americans had left, and by closing time, the remaining audience consisted of Greeks who needed a dose of what can be called "music therapy." It was this group who requested rembetika and zeïbekika; they crowded close to the band to dance and sing, and experience melancholic nostalgia triggered by the rhythms and melodies of familiar tunes.

Nick arranged the group's play-list to accommodate his changing audience. Always concerned with propriety, he remarked that the musicians were careful NOT to play rembetika until late at night, when they could be sure that those left in the audience were Greek! The band believes, for example, that non-Greeks relate better the "lighter lyrics and simpler tunes" of the laïko, songs by artists such as Hadjidakis and Theodorakis, so they play laïka in their first set. Rembetika and *varilaika* are reserved for later for, as Nick remarked,

"rembetika is heavy—too heavy for a lot of people. It seems depressing, but to me it's the expression of the utmost despair these emigrants experienced...the people [listening] aren't in Greece, they...need an occasion to be with their own people, to share pain." *

Nick goes on to say that Greek-Americans, "if they are too 'Americanized', they don't respond to Greek music the same. They might not even know Greek dance." As Jane Cowan has eloquently shown in *Dance and the Body Politic*, dance is not only tied to culture, but to politics as well. Through a highly personal art form, dancers display their social and political identity. Some Greeks ridicule Greek-Americans who "don't do it right." Tension is created between the two groups of people, many of whom would not be mingling in the first place if they were back in Greece. Different people would go to different clubs; but when the population outnumbers the places to socialize, all types of personalities and social classes must mingle. This forced mingling is an important aspect of the immigrant culture that reveals how xenitiá, while it breaks down some of the social barriers, creates others.

Xenitemenoi seek out each other and will socialize with people they would not normally socialize with back in the homeland, but then a new discomfort can arise between Greeks and Greek-Americans. John Bogis, the Greek-American bassist who does not speak Greek said that occasionally, Greeks disdained him:

"They called me 'American-Greek'. But I am here, playing Greek music. And they are listening. How can they not accept me as one of them? It's absurd. We are here together and Greece is over there. We should and do share, whether we are Greek-American or Greek. The music brings us together."

There appears to be a connection between the Greek national and cultural identity and their popular music that intensifies when Greeks are on foreign soil. Older people in the band's audience may have been in Greece at a time when rembetika, for example, was being banned, or when Theodorakis was at the height of his popularity, while others may be too young, and still others may have never been to Greece to experience any Greek music in its native environment

but nonetheless want to connect. Regardless, there is among the band's audience a true sense of “ownership” about the music. It can be understood by each member on one level or another. Any given night at the Middle East Café the Contemporary Greek Ensemble’s repertoire might include:

1. songs about *xenitiá*
2. songs about Greek professions
3. songs of Greek wars
4. songs based in part on church melodies & rhythms
5. songs that mention specific places
6. urban songs (*rembetika*) or regional folk songs (*dimotika*)
7. songs by well-known artists (Theodorakis, Hadjidakis, Kazantzidis, Savvopoulos, etc.)

The melodies, the poetry, and the musical instruments combine to create a sensory experience that evokes nostalgia. And what is nostalgia, this complex Greek word? It is the *algea*, the “pain” we feel when we think about a *nastos*, a “homecoming.” The concept of “nostalgia” is beautifully illustrated by Homer’s Penelope, who, separated from her husband for twenty years, felt renewed anguish every time the bard sang of Troy:

"Cease this bitter song,
which always wears away my dear heart in
my breast
since always unceasing pain touches me most
of all."

(*Odyssey*, 1.337ff)

For Greeks, it is possible to have a kind of spiritual *nostos* through the act of sitting with friends in a club listening to the melodies, the rhythms, and the poetry of music native to their land. If what they hear pains them, it is the *algea* they feel, thinking about home; that process is a curative for *xenitemenoi*.

Postscript

Despite the relatively large Greek population in the Boston area (roughly 300,000) the Greek music scene has mysteriously collapsed in recent years. In the past, big name acts such as Marinella, Hadzis, Sakelariou, and Dalaras performed live concerts, but not in recent years. The contemporary Greek Ensemble disbanded shortly after my fieldwork was completed, when Nickolas decided, after months of deliberation, to quit his lucrative job in Boston and return to Greece. The Middle East Cafe has not featured a Greek band since. Still, the young and hip Greeks in the Boston area manage to keep well informed, through the grapevine and through friends who have recently been browsing the record stores in Athens, about the latest recordings and trends in music, for example the difference between the *lalko* of Dionyssiou and Vissi. I have been gone from Cambridge for a long time now; on behalf of all the Greeks in the Boston area, I hope the scene revives soon.

All information was gathered on tape during interviews conducted the Middle East Cafe, March 6, 7, 14, 1988. Phone interviews were conducted with John Bogis on April 22, and Sotos Klotsonis on April 25. All quotations are taken from these interviews.

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