

A Way of Life



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Rebetiko is rebel music by definition (challenging power, war and conformism), part of the cultural baggage of those displaced from Asia Minor. In recent years it has been reborn and is once again releasing its revolutionary potential.

I was initiated into rebetiko by a Russian. His name is Yanni, a skinny guy with a glassy look in his eyes softened by a glint of non-conformity. He carries himself with respect and delicacy, and sooner or later you will come across him if you have fallen in love with this unique music and start frequenting the right places in Athens, the old-time venues that cannot be named because they have to stay on the margins of the law. You will see him bent over his *tsipouro*, the Greek version of grappa, and his cigarettes rolled from the best tobacco. A blond dandy, a peaceful rebel. Yanni Litovchenko smokes like a *rebetis*, a rebetiko musician, but he does not play and does not sing. He sits on the margins of these rooms full of music and ashtrays. And he listens. He dreams. Sometimes he will let out a yell or sing a verse under his breath. He has a passion for this music, and if you fall under its spell, succumb to the tales that he tells and his amazing night-time pilgrimages, perhaps you might have the same experience as me. At the beginning I thought he was just an unusual character. I had found out that he was born in Moscow but had been taken to America by his parents after just a few days, in one of those Cold War escapes that made the news but had condemned him to be forever stateless. His life before Athens was like something in a film. He had travelled the world for the whole of his teenage years, constantly on the move. Visiting Greece, he had felt the spirit of certain ancestors on his mother's side still flowing through his veins and had decided to come back as soon as possible. Perhaps he had realised all this listening to rebetiko. Perhaps. Yanni says he is not sure, and it is true that when rebetiko is getting under your skin, you never notice it. Only later do you realise you have caught the fever and you will never shake it off. I caught the rebetiko fever with him but have no idea how long it has been in Yanni's blood.

It all began for me in earnest in around 2013. I always met Yanni in the same bar. We used to chat a little, and, by some happy turn of events, he quickly realised what I needed. So one night he told me he would take me to hear Thymios play his bouzouki. Well, I already knew quite a lot about rebetiko. I could tell you those same things now. But I had not yet been enlightened. My enlightenment came that evening, when I felt something, a visceral sensation. As the old man Thymios Stouraitis played, with everyone around him quietly dreaming or crying or shouting, I felt the transfigurative spirit welling up inside me, the Dionysian spirit that Nietzsche described when enthusing about Wagner and primordial music, a musical spirit that cannot truly be defined because it is a way of life, a way of seeing the world. These are things that have to blossom inside before being put into words. Up to that point, it had been a fleeting feeling that I had never been able to understand fully. I had done some research and was quite familiar with what you can find in any of the books on rebetiko that have now become classics. I knew it was a modal form of music with its roots lost in the oral traditions of the late 19th century. Even then

it was difficult to say what united these musicians of the most disparate origins beyond their subject matter – laments from the slums – a tendency to consume copious quantities of hashish (which was legal at the time) and certain Oriental-style instruments that were in any case due to die out when rebetiko became increasingly well-defined in the early years of the 20th century. The key event was the Catastrophe of Smyrna, when over 1.5 million Greeks from Asia Minor were forced into an immense migration, an event I have discussed in relation to the routes taken by displaced people in ancient and modern times (see ‘Migrant Lands’ on page xx of this issue). The port city of Piraeus, which was already home to many *rebetes*, was flooded with men and women who had lost millennia of history. Life was hard on the streets, so hashish and the music of nostalgia and pride provided an escape route. A mixture of traditions representing the refined music of Smyrna marked the beginning of the golden age of rebetiko.

Those who are unable to explain this music call it the ‘Greek blues’. In any case, there is no definition. What happens in every book on this music of life and death is truly symptomatic. Generally, after listing a series of possible definitions, the authors give up and move on to something else. They try to get to the heart of the matter through tangential descriptions then conclude with a final section in which a selection of songs is reproduced, with commentaries and translations. Because the soul of rebetiko and the soul of the *rebetis* (plural *rebetes*) cannot be pinned down. And the same is true of the soul of the *mangas* (plural *manghes*). Ask a few Greeks, and each time you will receive a different definition of these key terms. Ilias Petropoulos, the first writer to publish a really extensive study on rebetiko (1968), does come to some conclusions. He was a writer, anthropologist and student of Greek language and customs, but above all a philosopher of the underground who was sent to prison several times because of his libertarian critiques. He found it hard to believe that the word *rebetis*, of Turkish origin, was unconnected to the term used by the Venetians to define a spirit of rebellion (*rebelos*). The *rebetes* came from the slums; they were marginalised outcasts, opponents of the bourgeois spirit in a metahistorical sense, an embodiment of those who show defiance in the face of established power but also in the face of death, the highest power of all. The *manghes*, on the other hand, were the dominant, dandy-like figures in a neighbourhood, handing out money with disdain (for the money) and cultivating an inward-looking, aloof attitude. Men (and women, too, because women are not relegated to supporting roles in this story) who dominated the streets with pride, stoic resistance to the torments suffered by the soul and dignity that they would defend with any weapon. The *rebetes*’ only weapon was the pear-shaped mandolin known as the bouzouki and the *baglamas*, the miniature version that came into fashion when the instrument was banned by the authorities. *Manghes* were often armed with knives as well. All true *rebetes* were *manghes*, but not all *manghes* were *rebetes* – you could put it like that, but nothing is certain. Perhaps there is only one way to separate the two, as Gail Host put it in that other classic volume on rebetiko, *Road to Rebetika*. ‘Rebetes and manghes are the same, but different.’ There you have it. In any case, to those observing from a distance, the most important thing is the common element, which lay to a large extent in a quality of the soul, in their bravado, their romantic attachment to a lost homeland and the waking dream of recreating this homeland within themselves. A homeland built on candour, simplicity and a desire to live each day to the full, without making plans and free from the dominion of time as a rectilinear process. *Rebetes* only lived from day to day, walking the streets in search of friends and love, or a place to play and sing of their pain and their dreams. In the beginning these places were bare-walled rooms called *tekedes* (singular *tekes*), anonymous venues that opened up in the largest of the single-storey shacks that had sprung up on the shores of the Saronic Gulf, off the coast of Athens and Piraeus, and around the port of Thessaloniki. Very simple dictionaries will tell you that the *tekedes* were hash dens. This is partly true. Protected from the dazzling sun of summer and the cold of winter, patrons of the

tekedes would smoke hookahs packed with hashish to lose the sense of their own individuality in the sublime state of *mastoura*. But, as well as smoking water pipes, people played and sung to delicate, unending rhythms until night fell and the notion of time disappeared. Men and women would come and go, then some would start their hypnotic, solitary dances, and finally every man and woman was simply part of a single animal existence, uniting everyone with no distinctions.

When Yanni and I entered the magnificent neoclassical house that a fisherman had decked out as a release for his rebetiko passions, I had the sensation that this was finally the *tekes* I had always been looking for. Of course, we can only dream of the rough-and-ready atmosphere that must have dominated in those first glorious years, during the so-called Piraeus era of the 1920s, although it can be seen in the marvellous reconstructions made for Kostas Ferris' film *Rembetiko*, which won the Golden Bear in Berlin in 1984. But in the large room in the neoclassical building where Yanni took me that sweltering June night there was still a certain harshness in the air, that rough surface that is the skin of rebetiko. The unadorned walls, the lighting low but not cloying, the smoke-filled air, the unmistakable smell of hashish and marijuana, a thick and tremulous silence in the air vibrating to Thymios Stouraitis's bouzouki playing and his husky voice. His partner Maria sang along, standing erect, a severe look in her eyes, as Thymios became one with his instrument, holding a cigarette in the *rebetis* style, between the little finger and the ring finger of his right hand as it danced over the metal strings. We had entered a different world and been welcomed into a different space–time configuration a few metres away from the noise of the hipster bars. The established laws did not apply. They came in droves, young and old, girls and boys. It was four in the morning, and the place was packed to the rafters, the windows open on to the dark surrounding streets, as Thymios carried on playing. At around 5 a.m. he began to let loose completely, launching into covers that made your insides tremble. We left as day was breaking, and Thymios was still playing, even though the room was almost empty by then.

On the street, Yanni explained to me in a sentence why this musician approaching his eighties, whom he called 'the old man', was the last true *rebetis*, in his opinion, the last true *mangas*. 'When you ask the other musicians if they have the same lifestyle as in the olden days, they all say yes, they're *rebetes*, they're *manghes*. Then you talk to him and he says, 'Me a *mangas*? What are you talking about?' This humble attitude already counts in his favour. Then, if you follow him, you realise he's the only one who still lives that lifestyle to the full.' Because Thymios Stouraitis leads a timeless existence. He has no bank account. He lives on the little he earns from his performances. His house is very simple, a little cement cube outside of Athens, in a suburb called Keratea, practically the epicentre of the side of Attica dominated by rocks, dust and olive trees. There, having settled down with Maria for twenty-five years after a youth spent wandering, Thymios spends his life in a constant search for inner peace divorced from the rhetoric that sees evil in war. Polemos is the father of all, said Heraclitus. The *rebetes* know there is no music without crisis, no peace without war. So alongside the countless songs about hashish (known as *basiklidika*), there are compositions about prison and the underworld, tavernas and love, work and family, nostalgia and death. At the centre of everything is an attitude: the sense of pride and dignity, steadfastness in finding your own way outside the idiocies that govern the world of appearances, the unquenchable thirst for justice.

It was an apparition that pushed Thymios towards rebetiko. As a child he went from village to village playing a mandolin with his violinist father. Then he heard Markos Vamvakaris play during a triumphant appearance in one of these shabby little places, and everything changed. These days, without even needing to mention his surname, Markos is regarded as pretty much the true soul of rebetiko during its golden age. And what happened to Thymios was the exact same thing that had happened to him. Markos was born on Syros, the Catholic island in the Cyclades, and arrived in Piraeus before the Catastrophe of

Smyrna. In Piraeus, while working at the slaughterhouse, he heard the bouzouki playing of Nikos Avliotis. Nikos, who had spent ten years in prison, played Eastern-inflected melodies like a god. Markos listened to his songs of prison and hashish, and six months later it was his turn to impress the old man. He had already learned everything. He was ready to play in the *tekedes* to the dreaming *manghes* sitting with their backs against the walls, their borsalino hats down over their eyes and their hookah pipes in their mouths, feeding the hashish into their brains. Vamvakaris, with his rough, stark voice, was responsible for the first recordings that enabled rebetiko to go beyond its oral traditions in the 1920s with the help of the record labels. Markos, the writer of future classics, was also the musician who found himself at the crossroads between the traditions of Piraeus and those of the people who arrived in Piraeus from Smyrna after the Catastrophe. Ilias Petropoulos believes there were three key periods in the history of rebetiko: the first (1922–32) was dominated by the Smyrna style grafting onto the Piraeus tradition; the second (1932–40) was marked by growing public success that led to the ‘bourgeois’ reaction, the bans imposed by the Metaxas dictatorship (which held power from 1936) and musicians being sent to prison; the third (1940–52) was the era of war, hunger, terror and the re-emergence from those tragedies with the smoother, more popular songs of Vassilis Tsitsanis. Later, rebetiko exhausted its vital drive, and the repertoire became restricted to what had already been written. These songs became the classics, and any musician arriving on the scene has to engage with them, playing them and reinterpreting them rather than writing original music.

So is it dead music? Music without a future? This was playing insistently on my mind one evening as I walked through the streets of Metaxourgeio, when I found myself following the music into another sort of clandestine *tekes*, without Yanni or Thymios but surrounded by a throng of teenagers, their eyes clouded by hashish, fervently singing songs written almost a century before they were born. The answer was obviously no. I think anyone who loves this music and follows its strange vitality could confirm this. Many things have happened in recent years, in any case. Not just in terms of the form of rebetiko and a few young rebels who have started writing their own songs. Because it is still difficult to imagine a future for songs that no one can strike up in a café and that have not been in babies’ blood since they were born. But that is not the point. It is the spirit of rebetiko that has burst back on to the scene. The soul of the *rebetes*. Their way of life. With the financial crisis, upheaval in traditions and customs, poverty, repossessions, rapacious banks, lethal debts, clashes with the forces of law and order, the revolution always around the corner, the idea of Europe to fight over, closed-down businesses, unemployment, the lack of health cover, taxes like guillotines and a pervasive sense of a genuine crisis, rebetiko has once again become a strong, clear response. A certainty full of doubt to rally around. An island of authenticity and pride. A refuge of tranquillity in the imposed search for new ways. Back to the land, back to the homeland, to what we love, to what they want to take from us. But how? What weapons are they going to use to take it from us? Today the answer is clearer than ever. With the numbing of tastes, globalisation, homogenisation, the imposition of typically protestant consumerism and hyper-productivity. But we must resist. Rebel. Puff out our chests and ignore the insults. Bear the pain and defy death. We must get back to simplicity, to liberation from the unnecessary and superfluous desires. Seek out only what can help us to live well. Become *meraklis*, wedded to our own passions, enjoying time and the things that we truly love, doing what we do with all of our love.

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Rebetiko is a way of living. Not a way of thinking or simply a way of making music. This is what Ilias Petropoulos wrote. This is what Yanni continues to say. Courage and generosity, shunning the rules of economic profit in a spiritual as well as material sense. I follow behind him as he walks down the street pursuing an idea. ‘Perhaps it’s too late, Yanni,’ I tell him, and he replies, ‘Oh Matteo, it’s always too late for people like us.’ And so I follow him. I know he will find a place where we can sit and immerse ourselves in the music. A place to lose our own sense of individuality, as Nietzsche said. To feel like humans, all belonging to the same animal kingdom. The Dionysian. The orgiastic intoxication of song that unites us all outside of the trappings that conventional lives have tried to impose on us. And, as I follow him through the dark alleys of Athens and the underground walkways where you find famous tavernas and the tumbled-down buildings with treasures concealed inside, I am reminded of one of the most extreme *rebetes* of the 20th century, a minor, almost forgotten figure: Vangelis Papazoglou. In 1937 Metaxas’s censors asked him to correct one of his lyrics: ‘I am desperately searching for my fate to ask her if I have the right to live in freedom.’ Replace ‘freedom’ with ‘happiness’, they told him, or be censored. But Papazoglou refused. ‘Only those who can be free are happy,’ he replied. From that day on he stopped writing songs. And when the Germans occupied Athens he stopped singing as well. ‘The birds don’t sing when it gets dark,’ he kept saying. He was right. But only partly. Dawn is breaking on the streets of Athens. You can already hear the spring arriving.