

40 ART SCENE By Melissa Hekkers

Monsieur Doumani



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# Monsieur Doumani busking in Ferrara

Cypriot trio take their music straight to the people

There's a fine line when tampering with tradition. It needs both a proper understanding of the basics as well as highly developed skills, especially when attempting to intertwine it with a contemporary identity.

Local trio, Monsieur Doumani seem to be achieving this through their two year journey into reviving traditional Cypriot folk music, with one album under their wing, selective performances on the island and a recent jump into the international alternative music scene with their participation at the Ferrara Buskers Festival in Ferrara this week and the Festival del Mediterraneo in Genoa in September.

Their album-cover reminisces a far gone era, when folk music was transmitted orally to, for the most part, illiterate people who acquired particular songs by memorising them, and a setting which depicts the chequered shirts of its peoples and dim lit, minimally designed locos.

Having been characterised as a Cypriot folk band with a twist, the trio, Antonis Antoniou (tzouras, vocals), Evangelos Iona (guitar, vocals) and Demetris Yiasemides (wind) have been actively researching Cypriot folk tradition to discover the musical culture in order to recognise its distinct elements as well as the whole vibe of each song.

As for the twist, it's "a very exciting and fresh paint that gives a glint and a new life to an old forgotten song," says Antoniou.

"We are not just playing the music as it has been established through some relatively recent recordings by some local singers. We are trying to go back to the root, and deconstruct the whole thing, keeping elements that are in our aesthetic opinion interesting and vital, and bring in new elements taken from other forms of music.

"The instrumentation here is totally different from the original. We replaced the violin, the lute and the percussion with a guitar, a tzouras (a smaller-scale bouzouki) and several wind instruments such as the trombone, the flute and ney (an end blow flute), and this has changed the sound of the songs radically."

As a means of expression, lyrics are also a vital element to which the trio attaches equal importance and also tampers with to a certain extent, though Antoniou says that in the case of Cy-

Monsieur Doumani  
Album cover

Monsieur  
*Doumani*  
CYFOLK



priot folk music its lyrics and music are not specific, especially since the trio only based themselves on recordings from the 60s onwards.

"It's quite definite that each song was sung with a varied melody as well as lyrics in different areas of Cyprus and that many of these songs are not even rooted in Cyprus but in Minor Asia and many other places...we sometimes tamper with the lyrics too, at different levels; sometimes changing a word for another, sometimes omitting a whole verse and so on."

Since its formation in 2011, the band has been trying to establish and meet a balance between innovation and tradition, "We have been carefully rearranging some of these songs and rehearsing many hours in order to meet the balance between innovation and tradition", says Antoniou.

Does the local audience approve of this balance?

"So far this work has attracted mainly younger people who know all or some of these songs in their more traditional version.

"But this project is still very young, so

we haven't gathered substantial feedback yet. We believe that there will be people that will get excited about our work and of course others who might find it too interventional or not interesting. We accept all opinions and we welcome any criticism."

Perhaps maintaining folk tradition's word of mouth custom, their first album entitled CYfolk, was released in 2012 and can only be purchased by contacting a member of the group or at a gig. Although the album features rearrangements of traditional Cypriot songs, this seems to be merely the beginning.

"Monsieur Doumani kicked off with this project, but this is not going to be a permanent condition.

"For the future we have other plans such as writing our own music and exploring other musical styles such as the "laika" (a popular genre of the Greek music)."

Keeping a low profile however hasn't stopped Monsieur Doumani from being invited to perform at two festivals in Italy, one of them being particularly in tune with the band's aspirations.

Called the Ferrara Buskers Festival

and founded in 1988, it hosts 800,000 spectators and dedicates its annual presence to enhancing street musicians.

The festival seeks familiar and exotic sounds; hunts to discover the most original instruments, the most inspired performances and the most fanciful costumes.

The "buskers", hence its title, are the protagonists, travelling artists who in their daily activities try to offer some good humour and poetry to passers-by.

The extent of their being appreciated lies in their ability to win the attention of a yet-to-be audience, to get them to drop a token in the "hat" (in euros, dollars or pounds).

"The generosity of the audience, in getting involved and in giving, is what reimburses the musicians."

Not sure whether Monsieur Doumani's identity was the driving force behind their invitation Antoniou says as to their invitation, "we are very much interested in this form of performance, since we believe that it is a great vehicle for one to communicate his/her art, in this case our music.

You take the music straight to the people, transforming the dynamics of the public space by adding new parameters and this is a very interesting process in itself.

"Your art becomes functional since you intervene with the atmosphere, colouring the urban soundscape and consequently the mood of the people."

As I try to imagine the trio on a quaint piazza in northern Italy, approaching the public with notions I have heard about either through conversations or moments shared with my elders, I ask myself, why the name Monsieur Doumani?

And although I assume that this has to do with a particular figure, a man, or a reference to a person, Antoniou surprises me and tells me that, the band's name simply derives from its echo. "We just liked the way it sounds...Doumani in Greek also means full of smoke, so because we smoke a lot we thought it was appropriate." A true folk's tale at its best...

The Ferrara Buskers Festival begins today and continues until August 26 ([www.ferrarabuskers.com](http://www.ferrarabuskers.com))

You can find more information about Monsieur Doumani on their Facebook page.