

Critiquing the Crisis through Music – Three Songs about Life in Cyprus Before and After the ‘Haircut’ of March 2013

MIKE HAJIMICHAEL

Abstract

This essay reflects on three songs from Cyprus written, released and performed on/or about/around the bailout crisis of March 2013. While the songs come from three different musical genres and artists they articulate a number of themes which are pertinent to understanding the economic crisis as a possible succession of a number of political crises and unresolved wounds that go back to the 1970s. One of the essay’s main objectives is to contribute to an emerging field in contemporary Cypriot scholarship, namely that of popular music studies through a contextual analysis of songs and the art of listening (Back, 2008). The essay also aims to develop an understanding of songs as commentary, as a form of media narrative on everyday lived experiences as reflected by musicians living through economic and political crises in Cyprus.

Keywords: popular music, protest, songs, ethnomusicology, Cyprus, crisis, ethnography

Introduction

Music has always been a barometer of society’s problems, often reflecting on social, economic and political conditions. Musicians act as commentators on the present, reflecting on society’s anxieties, injustices and problems. We listen to songs by modern day ‘troubadours’ who express ideas through the looking glass of music on the world around them, as they see it.

Every generation and moment in history has its own epoch-defining music. Bob Dylan’s ‘Blowin in the Wind’, John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’, The Sex Pistols ‘God Save The Queen’ and Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’. Songs are contextually bound time and again, defining shared experiences or exploring narratives that are often unspoken. For instance, Linton Kwesi Johnson’s ‘Sonny’s Lettah’ on the unjust British Police Force’s ‘Sus’ laws or Gil Scot-Heron’s moving ambient declaration ‘Poem for Jose Campos Torres’ reflecting on the ‘dogs’ and ‘police’ in every street around the world. In this paper my aim is to reflect on the issue of how artists critique a crisis by exploring specific songs and the context leading to the economic and political watershed in Cyprus, more commonly

known as ‘*to kourema*’ – ‘the haircut’ – which took place in March 2013. What interests me is how music presents a critique by relating and reflecting on the situation from which it emerges.

Generally speaking this method of contextualising songs invests effort in understanding possible meaning(s) as a process of unpacking, deconstructing and reflecting on how songs acquire a life form of their own within particular contexts, and how these songs in turn become a form of alternative critique to the contexts from which they came. Authors who have adopted similar approaches include Goldman’s ‘The Book of Exodus: The Making and Meaning of Bob Marley and the Wailers’ Album of the Century’ and Maconie’s ‘The People’s Songs: The Story of Modern Britain in 50 Records’. In terms of ethnography and data, these texts provide a great deal of insight in relation to a wide range of detail on circumstances of creation and interpretation. I have found them to be valuable in the teaching of courses on popular music studies with regard to how songs are and can be interpreted by different audiences, and how important context is to the development of particular artists and the music they make. In addition, I would like, by way of introduction to stress the value of auto-ethnography in the processes and practices of making and sharing music which I am bound to do as part of the process/subject matter of this paper. Occupying this kind of position within musical culture as a creative person and critiquing author has at times been problematic – particularly given the canonical requirements of academics being peer reviewed. However, this position of subjectivity also has a key advantage of living through and in creative musical processes and being witness to significant cultural manifestations which can sometimes be lacking in critical works on popular music in specific and media studies in general. As Attfield states on the value of auto-ethnographic contributions on Punk music they are ‘potentially more useful to readers interested in understanding the music, the specific circumstances of its creation and how it has inspired and endured’.¹ That being the case, all songs have an experiential quality; we hear them, view video clips that feature them, and relate to music in all kinds of different settings and environments. As a person involved with the creation and sharing of music, as an artist and DJ, I sense that some data comes from within these experiences and this reflects something ingrained in me from Cultural Studies and Sociology. It is that ‘capacity to hear’ and to ‘listen more’ which is so important in the process of conducting ethnographic research. Les Back applies this capability meticulously in understanding everyday culture:

1 S. Attfield (2011) ‘Punk Rock and the Value of Auto-ethnographic Writing about Music’, *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 2.

'If a writer's experience and subjectivity is useful we need to think why? Here I am suggesting that these experiences are of little use if they are not put to work in service of reaching out to others.'²

In a bid to comprehend criticism towards authority and the status quo in Cyprus during the period leading up to the financial crisis of March 2013 three songs by radically different groups in terms of genre, sound, production ethics and performance are considered including: 'Zitame' ('We Demand') by hip-hop Reggae fusion group Fort Bravo (2011); 'Paiakin Miroaton' ('Young upwardly-mobile professional') by acoustic world music trio Monsieur Doumani featuring Maroulla Constantinou (2013); and 'It Does My Head In' a dub poetry song by Haji Mike & Dub Caravan (2013). By conducting this kind of qualitative and at times auto-ethnographic analysis of these songs an important aspect of responses to the crisis is explored through a medium, popular music, which is often underestimated or ignored. Indeed it will be argued that music forms an alternative style of media which offers a somewhat different resonance and perception of understanding society which is important due to the lack of work in this area and context. While there is a relatively rich bibliography on Cyprus and Cypriots in areas such as Anthropology, Sociology, and Politics (for example, Loizos, Anthias, Trimikliniotis, Argyrou, Officer and Hadjipavlou, to name but a few) very little research has been undertaken in the field of popular music studies and ethnomusicology which this article makes a direct contribution to.³

Before moving on to discuss the songs themselves, the method and process used for the sample should be explained briefly.

First, a sample was selected of three songs containing a number of messages relating to Cyprus before and after the 'haircut' of 2013. These songs were chosen for their narrative content which represent alternative ways of seeing things. I next listened to the songs carefully with the intention of interpreting their deeper meanings and offering translations into English. I then decided to share some of my interpretations with their creators. This process was largely undertaken online through text exchanges in Facebook. It was important for me to do this as I wanted to understand the songs fully. I also wanted to share my initial ideas with the people who had created the music and lyrics. Generally my approach needed to be grounded in the texts and what they would uncover, each

2 L. Back (2007) *The Art of Listening*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, p. 160.

3 With the exception of a forthcoming book (to be released in fall 2015) by J. Samson and N. Demetriou, *Music in Cyprus* (Farnham: Ashgate), and M. Hajimichael (2013) 'Hip Hop and Cyprus – Language, Motivation, Unity and Division', in S.A. Nitzsche and W. Grünzweig (eds) *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*, Münster: LIT Verlag, pp. 37–55.

doing so in different ways. I am not in favour of a systematic analysis of songs as this, in my opinion, might lead to misinterpretation and a misperception of intricate details. Lastly, in understanding the songs, which was more relevant to ‘Zitame’ and ‘Paiakin Miroaton’ I explored issues of metaphor, use of language, double entendre, emotion of performance and contextualisation.

Fort Bravo – We Demand ... A New System⁴

Fort Bravo is a hybrid Hip-Hop/Reggae group from Paralimni in the Famagusta District of Cyprus. Formed in 2010 by Andreas ‘ICY’ Michael and George ‘2J’ Ioannou the group set up an existence/fan base in Cyprus and Greece releasing their own independently made songs and video clips. Many of their songs reflect on their existence in Cyprus. Andreas was inspired to write the lyrics of ‘Zitame’ by a number of events he had witnessed, experienced and grown up around:

‘The song was written around 2009 and was recorded and released in 2010. It was written with Cyprus in mind because my house is near the occupied area of Famagusta and specifically near the ghost town. It talks about the corrupted system and how media manipulate people’s mind.’⁵

Generally, in terms of textual structure ‘Zitame’ is a tale of four parts. The first verse by Andreas describes the way things are and how people are fed false information by the media. We live in a world where even the Ghost Town referred to above has become worn out, and people are ruled by the ‘Tsunami’ of money and we forget what we are struggling for. The chorus line, repeated three times, follows like a chant on a protest march, ‘*We Demand! A New System*’. The phrase ‘*We Demand*’ is broken down into its three syllables, ‘*Zi-ta-me*’, to emphasise the urgency of the issue while the rest of the line, ‘*Kainourgio Systema*’ – ‘*A New System*’ – rolls off the tongue in a melodic yet fast manner. After the three-line repeat the last line stresses the need for change as a kind of craving and something which is fought for yet starved of the process of being able to forget – devoid of amnesia. The chorus is repeated twice as well, which again delivers a more chant worthy and memorable refrain.

The third part of the song, again by Andreas, indicates the kind of difference its message demands; an image of a Utopia where ‘*women and children*’ dressed in ‘*blankets and throws*’ (evoking a kind of caped female super hero) fly across ‘*lakes and valleys*’ to a place where everything is ‘*fantastic*’. Here ‘*trees mature into big hearted men, who don’t get*

4 Listen to Fort Bravo, ‘Zitame’, at: [<https://soundcloud.com/fort-bravo/fort-bravo-zitame>].

5 Andreas (ICY) Fort Bravo, interview via Skype 15 November 2014.

conned for the sake of two bit second homes.⁶ The reference to second homes is a critique of a fashion in Cypriot society of owning more than one home but never really able to pay for it and being conned in the process. The thrust of this is reflective of a common theme (with Monsieur Doumani) of people borrowing more than they can afford to pay back. This line is followed by a reference to slavery and starvation becoming extinct, being wiped off the map of the world by government. It is not clear which government is actually being referred to but the implication is that a fairer world can only come about if these inequalities are eradicated once and for all. When all of these changes happen the *'tanks will be like trucks giving out ice creams to five year old[s]'* and the idea of *war* will shift from being a memory based on protest to one that has been turned into a coffee shop anecdote.⁷ The chorus is again repeated twice before being followed by a lacklustre kind of saxophone solo, which does not actually feel like a solo, but suggests a more tortuous meandering walk which leads into the fourth part of the song. This verse is radically different because it is written by 2J and is entirely in English. This is largely delivered as a first person commentary with reference to an uncle who died in 1974 and a statue in Ayia Napa Park. The verse similarly echoes the sentiments of the first two parts of the song by criticising the falseness of things. A *'beautiful picture'* is painted of the way things are but the *Artist* (the person who created it) is a *'Farcist'*.⁸ The theme of money re-emerges again but recall in the first verse it was referenced as a kind of *addictive Tsunami*. Here, this idea is extended through the line *'Money and power has made all the powerful heartless'*. As an alternative, *'we ask for something new'* (echoing the chorus, but in English) for something *'with no boundary'* (meaning the 'Green Line' that divides Cyprus). The song then ends with the repeated chorus.

Overall, Fort Bravo reflects on the past as a daunting memory, as something that cannot be shaken off, but at the same juncture its essence posits a longing, a craving, for a future, an alternative with no boundary. The imagery of the past as something worn out is heavily anchored to the Ghost Town of Famagusta which is suggestive of a shattered semiotic cliché of the past. The town has been empty since 1974 following the invasion by Turkish armed forces. Technically under United Nations control the 'Ghost Town' feels like one of the '7 human blunders of the earth' with bomb-shelled buildings, broken glass and a promenade of once busy hotels frozen in time by a wind of intransigence and obstinacy. The chorus in 'Zitame' simply says *'we demand a new system'*, stating that the one in place is corrupt and rotten to the core. Fort Bravo not only present an alternative perspective but they express a young generation's view of being let down for 41

6 'Zitame', Fort Bravo.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

consecutive years by their political leaders, all of whom make promises about many things, including Famagusta, but nothing essentially changes. While the song has a certain specificity it could, from my own supposition, relate to the financial crisis of 2013 which many people viewed as another let down in a long succession of political let downs. For many decades a whole stream of events has passed by, unresolved with no one accepting responsibility. These actions epitomise a serious crisis of trust in governance, which is after all an essential element of any democratic process. Events such as the military coup of 1974 and subsequent invasion and colonisation of northern Cyprus by Turkish armed forces;⁹ the mysterious S-300 Missiles that never actually came to Cyprus (1997);¹⁰ the stock market swindle and the falsehood surrounding it (1999–2000);¹¹ the Helios Airways Flight 522 crash when 121 people died (2005);¹² and the Mari Disaster with 13 innocent people losing their lives over and beyond frequent electricity cuts (2011).¹³ More recently, we have experienced the financial crisis of 2013 and its fallout. Taking everything into account it is no wonder that Andreas ICY and 2J from Fort Bravo are clamouring for a ‘*change of system*’. All of the aforementioned crises remain unresolved, without anyone accepting responsibility (let alone punishment) which typifies in all respects contemporary Cyprus as a state in constant crisis.

I would also like to share some reflections on the song in a club setting. Clearly from video clips available online ‘*Zitame*’ was a popular hit among youth in Cyprus and Greece. Sometime in 2011, shortly after the Mari incident, on a night when there were no power cuts, I was DJ’ing at Scarabeo *STATE of Reggae* in Nicosia, one of the longest running Reggae nights in Cyprus. About 300 people had gathered into the small venue, which resembled an old house turned into a club/bar. In reality it felt as though someone was throwing a birthday party due to the intimacy of the atmosphere and interior décor. At around 2.30 a.m. Mr Pakman the DJ played ‘*Zitame*’. I had heard the song before, mainly on Andreas MegaHz Sunday Hip-Hop radio show on Zenith Radio. This was probably the first time I had heard it in a club and watching 300 people bouncing and skanking to the song in a kind of disorderly unison was moving. Thinking about the lyrics, the

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- 9 F. Mirbagheri (2010) *Historical Dictionary of Cyprus*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, p. 38.
 - 10 S. O’Connor (2008) *The Cypriot Missile Crisis*, 1 May 2008, available [on-line] at: [<http://geimint.blogspot.com/2008/05/cypriot-missile-crisis.html>], accessed on 10 April 2015.
 - 11 B. Taylor (2013) *The Worst Bear Market in History* available [on-line] at: [<https://www.globalfinancialdata.com/gfdblog/?p=2254>], accessed on 10 April 2015.
 - 12 A. Weir (2006) ‘Behind Closed Doors’ *The Guardian*, Tuesday 19 December 2006, available [on-line] at: [<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2006/dec/19/theairlineindustry.travel>], accessed on 10 April 2015.
 - 13 BBC News Europe (2011) ‘Cyprus Protest over Deadly Blast at Navy Base’, 12 July 2011, available [on-line] at: [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14132130>], accessed on 10 April 2015.

militancy and urgency one sensed a revolution was about to happen. Revolutions however, in my opinion do not simply happen through songs, but songs can locate themselves historically by playing a significant role in particular struggles. El General's 'Rayes Le Bled', a scathing anti-establishment rap comes to mind here. It became an overnight *YouTube* viral hit resulting in the rapper's arrest at the height of the Tunisian uprising against the 30-year rule of former ruler Ben Ali.¹⁴

'Zitame' is subsequently a landmark by an independent group who made a thought-provoking song that was equally very danceable. The metaphors, particularly in the first two parts of the song by Andreas ICY offer a critique packed with imagination and realism, full of a unique sense of idealism and clever reference points. All of this acts as a kind of omen. How much longer would people be asking the same question(s), demanding a change? The fact is that at least someone was still asking the question

Monsieur Doumani – Paiakin Miroaton – The Yuppie in Cyprus¹⁵

My second example is a song by Monsieur Doumani, a group totally immersed in struggles on the economic crisis in Cyprus. As their official band web site states in their blog section:

'Next Thursday 20 Nov, Monsieur Doumani will participate in the protest against the privatization of the public wealth in Cyprus. We strongly urge our friends and everyone living in Cyprus to be there.'¹⁶

The song I would like to reflect on by Monsieur Doumani is taken from their CDLP release entitled 'Grippy Grappa' (2013) and it is called 'Paiakin Miroaton' which the group metaphorically translate to mean *Young upwardly-mobile professional* or to put it in another vernacular way, 'Yuppie'. The literal meaning of the term differs as it can mean a '*nice smelling/or a nice young man*'. The group's translation is an allegorical and witty take on the term. Monsieur Doumani stands out in the contemporary music scene of Cyprus for a number of reasons. First of all the group is one of the few to express songs in the vernacular Cypriot dialect. This is accomplished by exploring traditional folk melodies and tunes to which the group adds its own rendition besides composing their own

14 V. Walt (2011) 'El Général and the Rap Anthem of the Mideast Revolution' *Time Magazine*, Tuesday 5 February 2011, available [on-line] at: [<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2049456,00.html>], accessed on 10 April 2015.

15 Listen to Monsieur Doumani, 'Paiakin Miroaton', at: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRWZ5kXzmwY>].

16 Monsieur Doumani website, available [on-line] at: [<http://www.monsieurdoumani.com/index.php?page=806>], accessed on 10 April 2015.

songs/lyrics that reflect on Cyprus today. Secondly, they are a working group too, in that they try to survive through their music, performing concerts, touring in Cyprus and abroad, which is not an easy concept given the smallness of the island in terms of building audiences for live gigs and the limited support offered to local musicians. A third dimension relates to their success outside of Cyprus and their acceptance in world music and 'roots' music circles worldwide. This is a big achievement given that Cypriot musicians often rely on a local or diaspora demographic. Of course all of this has been said by introduction and the group's names have not been mentioned yet. Monsieur Doumani is actually three musicians who formed the band in 2011. Antonis Antoniou (tzouras), Angelos Ionas (guitar) and Demetris Yiasemides (wind instruments) make up one of the most refreshing groups to ever come out of Cyprus. While the song itself does not say anything directly about the financial crisis it certainly touches a lot of raw nerves on the themes of overhyped consumerism and the way people became dependent on a debt-to-banks type of lifestyle – which by implication led to the crisis. What carries this along in a perfect fashion is the use of the Cypriot vernacular, articulated in a unique tone of voice by guest vocalist Maroulla Constantinou whose likeable repetitive call and response element to most lines in the song from the rest of the group, make it very catchy. It is worth considering some possible interpretations of the original language, issues of double entendre and some key themes/lines in the song.

Structurally the song has four verses of which the ending phrases/words are repeated in call and response style. This makes the words almost like a chorus that is repeated line by line, which is a common trait of many traditional Cypriot folk songs which reflect an oral participatory audience/creator style. It is an irresistible song, and one that finds listeners singing along to. Each verse also begins with the phrase 'Eeeeeeh' which is a characteristic trademark of many traditional Cypriot folk songs (for example 'I Vraka' and many 'Chiattista' exchanges).¹⁷

Central to understanding the song is the title 'Paiakin Miroaton'. Metaphorically the phrase can be translated to mean a 'winnable' rich kid who desires fast cars, hence the 'BMW' reference and the implication of building an enormous house: All of which is undeniably achieved with that illusive capital, borrowed cash. 'Now', the song says, in its opening two lines '*you've run out of money*' and '*you bow your head down in shame, you look down*' (implying for the first time) or as the translation online says '*you hit hard earth with a bump*'.¹⁸ What is more the 'Yuppie' character is compared to a 'bithikos' and an 'ape'. This is a popular vernacular term which can vary from a mild form of insult, as in 'could you have done better you ape' to a more aggressive epithet used in a heated argument. The

17 'Chiattista' (also spelt 'Tsiattista') is a form of traditional rhyming poetry.

18 'Paiakin Miroaton/Young upwardly-mobile professional, Monsieur Doumani.

implication is the 'ape', ruled by all kinds of financial fetishes and consumerism, actually thought, by having all these materialistic possessions, he would 'become a man'. But he remained, an 'ape', a capitalist primate. If this line is the icing on the cake of the song, the cherry on the top is the last stanza. '*You can't run fast enough, it's the end of the road now no more easy pickings*'. This phrase harks back to the recent past, when there were easy pickings, meaning by implication, bank loans, and making fast money speculatively. But today, the '*perfumed boy*' – the Cyprus version of the Yuppie – is too busy running, and running so much that he runs out of time itself because he is too '*busy kissing ass*', and trying desperately to hold on to all the luxuries he has acquired in life – the materialistic commodities that he used to have and grew accustomed to having, for instance, the big car, the big house, that '*abracadabra*' style of magic, the capitalist dream. As the description says on *YouTube*, this is '*A satirical song by Monsieur Doumani inspired by the financial crisis in Cyprus*'.¹⁹ Part of the satire is also produced from clever use of double entendre. From the second verse of the song words such as '*Danistikes*' which means that you borrowed (the money), are slightly altered in the call and response part of the stanza to '*Distikes*' which means you got tied down. Many loans have this quality in our lives when we take them out and have to pay them off for years or decades. This is used in the third verse as well with the phrase '*tin gravatou tin liftikes*' which translates to: 'you're missing that little tie' (as in, you do not have that any more, that symbol of your formality/success/consumerism) to the call and response part '*tyliktikes*' which insinuates that you wrapped the tie around you, even forcibly. The tie metaphor has a kind of self-strangulation connotation here too.

The key themes of the song are subsequently interlinked: The self-destructiveness of the capitalist dream – how people borrow in excess for more material possessions. It follows then that the real power of the borrowers, the banks over people is incredible. The word bank is never used, although the word '*danistikes*' hints at a relationship with a lender. So now all that remains is grovelling and a desperate longing for all those material possessions, to the same people who destroyed society in the first place, the borrowers.

In addition, some reference must be made to both the sound and acoustic chemistry of the song. Although Monsieur Doumani is usually a three-piece band, on this particular tune they feature Maroulla Constantinou on lead vocals and Dimitris Aristidou, Symis Sioukouroglou, and Efthymia Alphas on backing vocals. Over and above this Symis Sioukouroglou plays clarinet on the song. This gives a much fuller sound which also maintains acoustic roots character. The actual mix is quite intricate, particularly with the stereo panning of the trombone, sometimes note for note from left to right, giving a wide feel and space for the satirical take on a heavy situation by the group. The tone of

19 *Ibid.*

Maroulla's lead vocal voice is equally relevant as it has a unique vernacular quality. She even sounds like a coffee-shop philosopher who is reasoning on the crisis from a corner somewhere proclaiming 'what did you think you ape, you was going to now become a man'. To conclude, as in the previous song by Fort Bravo, reference should be made to a live rendition of the song I experienced at the University of Nicosia's *Diversity Festival* in 2013. Monsieur Doumani took to a rather large stage, backed by the University Amphitheatre and the group filled up the space with its unique sound. It was actually on this particular night that something 'clicked' for me with the group. I had heard their music before, and followed their news on various social media websites and in magazines such as *Songlines*. Something however on this evening, post-haircut, in Nicosia, Cyprus was different. Watching a few hundred people dancing to this particular song, 'Paiakin Miroaton' had a special resonance, reasoning on the times. And what made it better was that people were dancing, quite joyfully to the song. 'Thinking folk music' that can be danced to with a strong potent political bite is not an easy achievement for a group anywhere. Again, comparable with the previous example, this song represents an alternative Cyprus, a voice of people often unheard.

Haji Mike & Dub Caravan – It Does My Head In²⁰

A good place to start is how the song began. On the night of 15 March 2013 like many people in Cyprus I was eager to find out what was actually going on behind those closed doors in Brussels between President Nicos Anastasiades and the Euro-Group in Brussels. At about 1 a.m., CyBC TV, the state broadcaster's main anchor-man, Yiannis Kareklas, had given up waiting and began to wind up the show. '*All we can say then as far as tonight is concerned, is there is no agreement, that is all we know*'²¹ Of course everyone awoke to a different kind of Cyprus on 16 March. One thing that was noticeable in the media was how many economists seemed to come to light like mushrooms. It was also apparent that many of these experts were stating completely different viewpoints, which likewise was reflected by numerous politicians. The timing of the first bailout was significant too. The following day was Carnival with street parades in Limassol and other towns on Sunday 17 March. With many people having had their savings cut overnight, this festival appeared somewhat bizarre. Crowds were later dancing in the streets. A day after Carnival it was 'Kathari Deftera', 'Green Monday', which again had a subdued feeling to it.

The President of the Republic of Cyprus in his publicly televised address regarding

20 Listen to Haji Mike & Dub Caravan, 'It Does My Head In', at: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnEfhTtkfvU>].

21 Yiannis Kareklas, 'Proextasis', CyBC TV, 12 March 2013.

the initial bailout cast a choice between the ‘catastrophic scenario of disorderly bankruptcy and the scenario of a painful but controlled management of the crisis.’²² The House of Representatives convened on Tuesday 19 March to discuss the first bailout. Protesters gathered en masse outside parliament and being there, I felt a need to document the demonstration on a mobile phone. Part of my interest in doing this was the innovation of some of the banners. A woman held up a piece of cardboard cut out roughly like a placard which simply read in bold hand-scrawled capital letters ‘APHRODITE IS ANGRY’. A priest held up high a flag showing a coiled snake with the slogan ‘do not disturb’. Alongside these were the traditional and expected party cadres with their respective banners, political chants and emblems. Inside, the MPs debated as night fell and eventually they rejected the first bailout decision. This demonstration certainly set me thinking that I had to write something on this as an artist, about the entire information overflow, the demonstration, and a whole range of politicians who had led voters to the situation before us. Around that period, Dub Caravan, musician and producer, had sent a piece of music called ‘Timeless Dub’ which the poet decided to develop some lyrics on. Feeling inspired by what I had seen and heard during the lead up and immediate aftermath to the first bailout decision I wrote a set of lyrics around it called ‘It Does My Head In’. It is quite an angry song, performed in a Dub Poetry style, a rhythmic spoken word delivery with an angry chorus that repeats the loud chant of the title. I would like to focus more on the video for this song rather than the song itself. The clip is a treated and edited version of the film taken from the demonstration on the mobile phone. There is no real plot as such or sophistication in the editing. It is a stark document of what happened, the only addition being a colouring effect through the movie maker editing programme. I elected to deliberately change the colours on the party flags. This was decided in response to an atmosphere at the protest which felt intensely sectarian. Supporters of the recent AKEL government exhibited a kind of ‘we told you so’ presence on that evening outside parliament. A chant for example like ‘the left government must come to power again’²³ was a deliberate attempt to erase from memory any kind of responsibility of being in government apropos the negotiation of the ‘bailout’. This position made them in part responsible for the economic catastrophe that had struck Cyprus. So, in the video the red flags turn green, blue and purple. The blue and white Greek flags, turn red, and black and white. It portrays the kind of revolutionary change that is needed in Cyprus; in a place where not only the football teams that people support, but also the coffee-shops they

22 BBC News ‘Cyprus Bailout: Parliament Postpones Debate’, 17 March 2013, available [on-line] at: [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21819990>], accessed on 11 April 2015.

23 Demonstration outside the House of Representatives 19 March 2013.

frequent and even the coffee and beer they drink, are stigmatised along the political divide of left and right.

The colours of politics and their entrenchment are a key theme of the song because the prognosis to this 'laboratory' experiment, the bailout, sets a precedent that so far has not been repeated. However the way things are going, this could, the song implies develop into something much worse. Although the song never mentions anywhere the word Cyprus, it places the experience of being an 'experiment' into a worldlier context as indicated in the chorus line *'the way the world is heading ... it does my head in'*. The way that societies are still presided over, based on various forms of inequality (such as race, gender, class) and division, the people in the context of the world, and *my people* in the context of the reference in the song (to Cyprus), are *'yet to be free'*. The main conclusion is that *'you get the leaders you deserve'*, and by not learning from this lesson things could become even worse, as those in power might take away *'your liberation – your right to persist insist express yourself'*.²⁴ As a consequence, what happened in Cyprus could become a worldwide trend with the 'bailout' effectively being a 'bail-in' financed by imposing a cap on people's savings. Once the model has been tested in Cyprus, a relatively small economy, it could become a template for other states around the world.

Unlike the first two songs the makers of 'It Does My Head In' rarely perform together as they are based in two different contexts, London and Nicosia, and as such are not a group but simply two individuals who from time to time make music together in an online/virtual production sense. Though I have performed the lyrics to the backing track on a number of occasions in Cyprus, performing the lines time and time again feels like reliving the crisis. So the song stands as a kind of universal warning with a resolute message of this happened to us, and you could be next.

Conclusion

The 'art of listening' is, as Les Back says, the art of listening more carefully, more attentively and I have done this by reflecting on three completely different songs about aspects of everyday life in Cyprus in the last two years. It has been a difficult mission to write about the present, which is always an engaging and fluid task as so many things have happened and are happening all the time. From this experience of listening to the songs in my sample the main conclusion I have drawn is that music offers forms of critique which are often lacking in many other more conventional types of media. This may be due to performativity – the ways in which songs are expressed/acted out acoustically as multi-layered texts full of meaning and possible readings. By way of illustration, the creative

24 'It Does My Head In', Haji Mike & Dub Caravan.

fabric of music itself – sound – is like paint on a canvass, which is something that can be crafted to express ideas. We can hear music, read lyrics, watch videos, dance to it in a variety of places and situations, and take it in as a live performance. All of that gives music an unusual kind of informative quality beyond being viewed plainly as entertainment. To quote a phrase from Hip Hop Legend KRS1, the songs in this article are ‘Edutainment’ which offer completely different ways of reading society in Cyprus. The texts can be described as forms of counterculture too – alternative takes on things which go against the grain of constructed ‘game show’ media consumerism (which are so prevalent with music, such as ‘Popstars’ and ‘Pop Idol’) and the vast amount of social media voyeurism and self-promotion which we are bombarded with/engage in every day.

There are, with hindsight, certain dangers with the approach adopted which relate mainly to the generalisation of diverse musical forms and genres, created, made, released and performed by radically different people. It could be argued that this makes my analysis a little disjointed too. But it was never my intention to take these songs as a uniform voice or to claim that they are a reflective sample of contemporary Cypriot music. What I have aimed to do is to explore three songs that have something to say, that have a barometric quality about them which relates to the way society is perceived by the artists who have made them. I think this is significant for a number of reasons that relate to the qualitative characteristics of popular music as a form of counterculture in times of crisis in the specific context of Cyprus. It is important to consider the three songs as completely different musically and thematically as well, yet sharing a similar spirit of independence often found in music produced by people who are not tied down by a recording contract from a label which tells artists what to say, and when and how to say it. That spirit of independence calls for a new system. It rejects overhyped consumerism, and warns of the dangers of being a ‘laboratory experiment’ for neo-liberalist financial dictums. The countercultural quality is also echoed by the reality that these songs are rarely heard or seen through the traditional media in Cyprus. None of the songs are included as regular musical content by Radio or TV outlets. So in a number of ways this music is sought out by people seeking to find something alternative, at live gigs organised by Fort Bravo, Monsieur Doumani or Haji Mike, through online sources like *You Tube*, net based radio and various blogs that may have given some coverage of these artists.

A further conclusion is to try to move things forward through further research which I aim to do in the near future. Are there more songs with messages like these in Cyprus? Is music becoming more about raising awareness on the way our society is? Can this similarly be explored in other countries in crisis such as Ireland, Greece and Spain? Within such a wider contextual framework a set of more generic observations would be worth considering on the relationship between social commentary and popular music. Additionally, it is worth bearing in mind the specificity of vernacular culture in such

processes. Monsieur Doumani's back to the roots approach is an example of this. It is important for future research to explore songs comparatively with regard to vernacular dialects which may for one reason or another be marginalised or even dying out. Moreover it would be interesting to observe how these relate to issues of culture and national identity. Martin Stokes, for instance, in his pioneering work on popular music icons in Turkey reflects that artists such as Zeki Müren, Orhan Gencebay, and Sezen Aksu represent a different and more ambivalent conception of Turkishness.²⁵ Similar themes could be explored with future studies of Cypriot artists and musicians.

Finally, on an individual level, as an artist, performing songs about the crisis has allowed me to reflect on my own role as a creative person. Feeling the need to get out there and do something and not just sit back and take it is a form of artistic calling. As Martin Luther King once said when contemplating the background to the Vietnam War in the 1960s '*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter*'.²⁶ This argument could also be understood as an adaptation and extension of Gauntlett's Web 2.0 transformation in media from a passive to a more active role in creative processes. Not that this is necessarily new. I have always viewed performance in this alternative voice manner. Conversely, making in a creative process is not just for the sake of art itself, it has to provide something beyond the act and process itself. Making a song about the crisis is an act of critique, an alternative offering, an insight relayed through music that is free from the usual control of music companies (who may not endorse such songs being released) and the usual media filtering processes of TV, Radio and newspapers who often marginalise artists for being too outspoken. More than anything, music challenges the increased authoritarianism of neo-liberalist politics which prefers silence and complacency over asking questions and the resonance of critique.

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Interviews

Andreas ICY (Fort Bravo) conducted over a number of exchanges online (Skype, Facebook and E-mail), summer/fall 2014.

Antonis (Monsieur Doumani) conducted over a number of exchanges online (Facebook and E-mail), summer/fall 2014.