

The Best of Both Worlds

Think globally, hybridize locally

This city doesn't exist. The sky is too spacious, the water too tranquil, the mosque too much the epitome of all mosques to be true-to-life. The high-rise on the left is actually located elsewhere, the Galata Tower has been pumped up to the status of dominating presence, and the proportions have gotten a bit skewed in a few other ways as well. Istanbul, as depicted by the imagineers at Doublemoon Records, is a bold skyline conceptualized by designers and pixeled together at the computer. Tradition and Modernism are intermingled in the form of easy-to-grasp emblems with a few units of artistic freedom tossed into the mix. "They're just icons," says the graphic artist who very intentionally situated the bridge over the Bosphorus in the foreground. You have to communicate the message while it's hot.

There's a lot of communicating done at Doublemoon Records—in the conference room, in the hallways, on the monitor screens. Promotion Department ladies are on the phone with London and Berlin, the doors between rooms featuring poster-bedecked walls are always open, and the bosses—two brothers named Mehmet and Ahmet Ulug who, together with a boyhood friend, founded the enterprise 15 years ago—sport casual-wear pullovers that make them hard to tell apart from their staff. Back then, Turkey was still a closed society dominated by powerful elites whose ranks were impossible to penetrate. Nowadays, the Internet provides a means of getting plugged into the whole wide world, which flows in via fiberglass cables and has enormously accelerated the country's corporate culture. "When we got started, everyone was shocked," Mehmet Ulug recalls. "For quite a while, we had absolutely no imitators." In the meantime, there's been quite a bit of talk about the Orient, the Occident and the bridge in between.

Nowhere is connectedness so vehemently conjured up and emphasized than in the Eurasian border outpost of Istanbul, and nowhere is it accorded such a widespread response. The best advertising for foreign tourism is currently being produced by strangers-by-profession: edgewise musicians, DJs and the young artists who exhibit their work in one of the many newly-established galleries or maybe even work for one of the up-and-coming media firms like Doublemoon. The country's old image, with its temples and mausoleums, is out; now, the demand is for crossing borders, creative visions and innovative syntheses. Spending a getaway weekend at one of the resorts on the Bosphorus has long since been a vacation option for Central European tourists; cheap charter flights make it easily affordable. Some stay even longer. Opening in theaters across Germany this spring is Fatih Akin's new film, a documentary about the local music scene entitled *Crossing the Bridge* that was shot aboard an old steam-powered party boat, the veteran of countless pleasure cruises between the continents. Akin spent three months on location. His recap: "Istanbul is on fire." You could almost talk yourself into believing that this city whose image was being crafted by so many designers had indeed come to life—at least in Beyoglu.

The Beyoglu neighborhood, traditionally an embassy-row-cum-business-district that has been transformed into a pedestrian mall, is a sort of ongoing real-life experiment in the field of future viability. At any hour of the day, there are clusters of strollers making their way past the storefronts and display cases on Istiklal Caddesi, the strip catering to the amusement of and consumption by the masses. On weekends when the young bridge-and-tunnel crowd is in town, it's so packed you can hardly move. Pierced and otherwise sensorially accelerated individuals promenade cordially alongside wearers of traditional Islamic headscarves;

every two meters, a different style of music blares out of the shops and cafés; and even the lottery ticket salesmen in their shabby clothes seem somehow to be an integral part of Swinging Istanbul. The overall visual impression is youthful, younger than any European city, and statistics confirm that 50 per cent of the population is under 25. The permanent parade comes across like a demonstration for Tayyip Erdogan's new Turkey, open to the world, though this is certainly not meant to imply that the former mayor, head of state and chairman of the Islamist AKP makes all that many public appearances here.

His conservative worldview seems irreconcilable with clubs like Babylon that opened shortly before the turn of the millennium. Too loose the morals, too profane the ambience, too international the overall look—highly cultivated industrial-ruin aesthetic for an urbane public seeking world-class amusement. Alcoholic drinks are something taken just as completely for granted as the designer drugs that change hands every evening in one of the narrow side streets nearby. Nevertheless, whatever brings it closer to Europe benefits Turkey as well. And the West gets something else to boot. The latest music being played in the clubs has gotten beyond slavish imitation of Western models. Instead of striving to achieve modernity at any price, it is taking up indigenous traditions with modern means. Flute melodies, cries of the Muezzin and Near Eastern melismata woven into electronic beats—no other metropolis in the world has this. It's available only in Istanbul. Local culture is back as local color amidst a diversified sampling.

Sufism light at the techno-club—à la carte mysticism at breakneck speed

Burhan Öcal, now here's a man who knows what the audience expects of him. "You simply can't do without at least a little bit of electronics," he sighs out from behind his jet-set sunglasses and shrugs his shoulders as if he had only unwillingly conformed to the prevailing trend. No question about it—everything's gotten faster; flexibility is the watchword of the times. Without the slightest hesitation, he lists his diverse activities: collaborative efforts with stars like Paco de Lucia, appearances in Montreux, Cairo, Moscow, Berlin. He recently revamped the lineup of his Istanbul Oriental Ensemble, brought in some younger blood, as he puts it. And then there are the commercials and, most recently, shooting for a feature-length film. Burhan Öcal is a real all-rounder with a finger in a lot of different pies, a guy who makes things happen, as well as a celebrated lady-killer who turns up frequently in the gossip columns of the tabloid press. Nevertheless—or perhaps for that very reason—he stands with one leg still firmly rooted in the Turkey of yore. In the movies, he's been cast as a gangster, "a Turkish Al Pacino." It's a role he plays in real life too.

His most ambitious project took him back to his hometown Kirklareli, a provincial city in Thracia, the northernmost part of the country where Turkey does a gradual segue into the Balkans. He started out as a percussionist; he sought out Gypsy musicians, jammed with them, and put together an ensemble named Trakya All-Stars that played the music of the region. In Istanbul, this didn't make much of a splash at first. Hey, Burhan, they said, looks like you've turned into some kind of Gypsy yourself! But somebody like Burhan Öcal doesn't care about what other people say. He grew up with this sound and knows what it's all about. You have to have respect and understanding for the unique expressions of a culture; and after all, "the Gypsies are the niggers of Turkey." The collaboration called for the gentleness and meticulous care of a restorer of precious antiques, he said, self-accompanied by brushstrokes drawn in the air. The fact that the final step was having his in-house DJ, a guy named Smadj, apply a delicate coat of electronic icing to the entire cake—well, you know, that's just a sign of the times.

Others have gone about the task of adapting local musical stylings to modern sound formats in somewhat more supple fashion. Orient Expressions is a quartet whose very name is a manifestation of the blending of East and West: traditional folksongs encounter elegant, flowing tonal surfaces punctuated by chugging machine beats. İlhan Ersahin takes turns at the turntable, at the keyboard and on the sax in his Love Trio; the result is a sort of Turkish-inspired World Jazz. The band named Baba Zula, a project put together just for fun by one of the best-known off-the-wall characters-about-town, describes its brand of folk-rock that fluctuates between experimental slapstick and high-concept Turk-Trash as “Beyoglu Beat.” And sometimes as “psychebelly dance music.” But what’s in a name when new projects are taking shape on a daily basis? The whole scene is pervaded by a feeling that things are really taking off, whereby attention is focused on the future and the past in equal measure. Creatives feel free to draw inspiration from the traditions of Istanbul’s cultural melting pot and then to cross it all with everything else. Even rapper Ceza feels only half flattered when he’s compared with Eminem; he sees himself first and foremost as a boy from Üzküdar, the quarter on the Asiatic side, whose watering holes have always been settings for loose talk and unencumbered speech.

But the consummate practitioner of the art of fusion is Mercan Dede. The term “dede” actually refers to a grandfather and thus, by extension, to a person of advanced age to whom great respect is due. None of this applies to the multimedia performing artist Arkin İlçali, who adopted the stage name Mercan Dede from a character in a novel. On stage, his hair twisted into little spikes, he looks like a punk with a bent for spirituality. Audiences at his shows experience him behind a gigantic DJ console that resembles an alter aglow in four-color illumination, at which he plays around with the buttons and knobs a bit and occasionally blows a few notes on the traditional Turkish ney-flute. “All the others are far better musicians than me,” he assures the listener with a smile, but somebody has to be there to hold the whole thing together, so he plays master of ceremonies. Here too, the music features a lot of Eastern sounds done to a digital beat—from artistically entwined chants of lamentation and woe all the way to folksongs from the Balkans delivered by a 15-year-old Gypsy *Wunderkind*. And just as the atmosphere is approaching its peak of intensity, the Dervish maiden takes the stage and the crowd goes absolutely nuts.

The whirling dervishes of the Sufi tradition are Mercan Dede’s trump card in the game of East-West synthesis. Spiritual Islam and Techno-nobody before him was able to bring together this kind of blend. The idea had already occurred to him when he was a kid at an indoor basketball court in his hometown of Bursa, where he watched dancers spinning in circles in accordance with the ancient custom. In those days, Sufism was suppressed in a Turkish state committed to rigorous laicism; no wonder, then, that the essence of this idea seemed to him like a mixture of angels and aliens. As he began to familiarize himself with the writings of the poet Rumi, it was as if he had opened up a letter that had been mailed seven centuries before. The message: It is not a person’s descent that matters, nor his education, but rather what he bears within his heart. “The idea of radical inclusion is what filled me with enthusiasm for Sufism,” says the man who lives alternately in Montreal and Istanbul and spends the rest of the year on tour. Actually, this tradition, strictly construed, calls for a novitiate during which the candidate spends 40 days in a room in silence and then undergoes 1001 days of probation before being admitted into the Circle of the Enlightened. But who has time for all this nowadays? At one of Mercan Dede’s shows, anyone can get that dose of transcendence he needs and he can get right away.

The charge that what Mercan Dede practices is Sufism light doesn’t unsettle him in the least. “So what’s so bad about making things simple?” Dede is one of those modern nomads who

look back upon their homeland while on the road abroad, in order to then return and, at every concert back in the old country, to once again rub their eyes in astonishment at all that's new. And it's not just the music—the schools, everyday life, fashion, the situation connected with human rights issues, everything is going through changes and in most cases for the better. He says that amidst so much change, he sometimes has difficulty making out the Turkey of his youth. Certainly, more has changed over the last five years than during the 30 years before that. The fact that this rapid transformation has taken place under a government headed by a man who doesn't speak English and has a problem with shaking hands with a woman in public is surely bizarre but perhaps historically necessary. Following decades of prescribed modernization, the pendulum is swinging back in the other direction as a generation of secularly oriented young people is going through a return to traditional Eastern values. Assessments like this one are widespread in Istanbul's youthful music and art scene. In the wake of an initial shock, Turkey has been able to re-Islamicize itself under the influence of the AKP. And it's been possible to come to an accommodation with Erdogan on the basis of his pro-European stance; observers have come to dwell less on that which is irreconcilable and focus more on what both sides have in common. And despite his former public utterances, Erdogan seems to stand for a synthesis of Muslim tradition and modern democracy. Erdogan also opposes simply substituting West for East; instead, he is seeking in thoroughly pragmatic fashion a way that takes into account the unsimultaneity of Turkey's development. Furthermore, Erdogan is also a great worker with images who is constantly conjuring up the upward course the country is on. So much commitment on the modernization front does indeed compel an observer's respect. And keep in mind that this is Istanbul and not Anatolia. What the folks out in the boondocks think about all this is of hardly any interest here.

As a matter of fact, since he took office in November 2002, individual liberties have been expanded—at least in the cities. Sufism is once again an officially tolerated part of the country's religious heritage, tourists crowd into the houses of worship in Beyoglu to take snapshots of religious services, and even those who merely want to practice their belief in their own lifestyle can do so without fear of restrictions. Erdogan has reined in the power of the old Kemalist elite whose members had for decades passed the most powerful public offices back and forth among themselves. The upshot is that the new social stratum of young creatives perceives this son of poor parents from the Black Sea region less as an Islamist and more as a champion of the up-and-coming underdogs. The head of government, in turn, is fully aware of what he's got with these artists. They not only provide for a progressive image; they also cost less money, since the state has largely eliminated programs providing funding for the arts. Its place has been taken by corporate sponsors including banks, bottling companies and Big Tobacco. What remains for politicians is the representative gesture.

Where industry dies, art moves into the empty factories—just like in Berlin

Modern-day Istanbul is a giant construction site, in both an ideological and a literal sense. At the end of the Istiklal Caddesi close to Beyoglu's steep precipice down to the Bosphorus, a new subway station is being built. It's completion, scheduled for next year, will make the renowned district with its clubs and bars more easily accessible than ever. For the inhabitants of Kasimpasa, a formerly ill-reputed neighborhood catering to sailors and longshoremen a few kilometers to the north, a brand new football stadium has been plopped down amidst the ancient narrow streets. And down in Galata, where ships headed to the West once took on their freight, what was previously a warehouse that has already served as the venue for the Art Biennale, is about to be reopened as the Istanbul Museum of Modern Arts. Word has it that Erdogan has placed the site at the disposal of the scene and its sponsors with

no ideological strings attached. The sole condition was that the facility be open by December 17, the day of the Big Decision in Brussels. Now, visitors can come and convince themselves that a positive reception has been accorded to all currents of Western modernism among the artists of this country as well.

“What we’re experiencing is the conversion of the city from a center of production to a service sector economy,” says Vasif Kortun. “Development here resembles what’s going on in Berlin.” Kortun, a man who sports an ultra-fashionable buzzcut, knows what he’s talking about. He was in charge of the 1992 Art Biennale in Istanbul, has curated numerous exhibitions abroad, and now heads Platform Gallery, a space in a prime downtown location that is dedicated to contemporary Turkish art. He has absolutely no forbearance for people who are still playing up the specter of Islamic fundamentalism. Development in the direction of a post-religious society has long since passed the point of no return, he maintains in a slightly surly tone, and anybody who says differently is either an idiot or a hopelessly narrow-minded bumpkin.

Constantly being confronted with questions about whether Turkey belongs among the circle of civilized nations-and that right here in Beyoglu-distorts Vasif Kortun’s face into an expression of sickened disgust as if he were in the midst of a severe attack of colic. He takes off his jacket to reveal his T-shirt. Across the front, “Welcome to Europe” is printed over the EU’s gold ring of stars on a blue background. It’s the work of an artist friend of his. After a moment, Kortun, grinning, turns around to show what’s printed in the same letters on the back: “And now go home.”

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald

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