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Folk World Music



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ST. VARTAN'S ARMENIAN FALL BAZAAR

Oakland, CA October 1, 2005

JOHN BILEZIKJIAN — SOUHAEL KASPAR

RAQS SHARKI MIDDLE EASTERN DANCERS

Madison Guild Union Hall, Portland, OR
October 15, 2005

Indian summer in the Bay Area is a gloriously sublime time. St. Vartan's Church, perched atop Spruce Hill above Oakland's terraced Lakeshore District near Lake Merritt, offers a breezy view as it plays host to the annual Armenian Fall Bazaar on the first weekend in October. Artists, clothiers, rug makers, and craftspeople come from all over Northern California. First autumn harvests, fresh from the Central Valley's populous Armenian and Assyrian farming communities, can be found either sold at outdoor booths or in home-made Armenian spiced prepared dishes at the "khanoot" (Armenian, Aramaic, and Hebrew word for "store" or "shop") inside St. Vartan's gym. It is inside the church gym that rollaway tables are set up for the traditional Armenian dinner that precedes Saturday night's featured live music. Impressively choreographed performances by an Armenian youth folk dance troupe and truly amazing community-wide traditional folk dancing included line and circle dances indigenous to Armenians, Levantine Arabs, Assyrians, Laz, Greeks, Jews, Turks, and some Balkan communities.

Saturday afternoon in the large tented backyard of St. Vartan's, with breezes and buzzing bees raiding the overflowing baklava (or as the Armenians say, "pahklava") trays, dappled sunlight, and camy barkers luring kids of all ages to try the prize games, the round tables were crammed with parishioners, guests, and culture vultures. Competing for attention was the sneaky acoustic trio of Paul



John Bilezikjian, Belinda Underwood, dancer Yemaya, and Souhael Kaspar

Michaël Ritter

Ohanessian on oud, "Dangerous" Daniel Eshoo (of the bands Ancient Echoes, Za'atar, Smyrna Time Machine, and Moh Alileche's Amazigh Ensemble) on qanoun, and an Armenian drummer whose name was lost in the din and whose button-down demeanor gave way to a rhythmically hip attack on bongos. The instrumental fare merited closer attention than incidental music, as it was assigned at this community social. The rippling melodies hewed closely to Middle Eastern modalities, while the tie-dyed Ohanessian could be heard dropping well-placed quotes from as far afield as Mongo Santamaria's jazz standard "Afro Blue." The impish oudist maintained his mischievous deadpan throughout. I don't think his half-Assyrian and Armenian bandmates were any the wiser, but the tonal surprises were delectable.

Genial host Father Mesrob could be found weaving between the tables, booths, kebab barbecue, and Armenian food stalls, trying to shake hands and personally greet every guest and get caught up with each parishioner's extended family tree. Most of the hands he reached out for were otherwise occupied juggling paper plates stacked with Armenian delicacies, bottles of pop or Cilica (Kilika) Armenian beer, with sacks of produce or bolts of embroidery precariously pressed under the

visitor's arms. Bend an ear in any direction, and, in addition to English and Armenian, one could pick up animated conversations in Levantine Arabic, Aramaic, Assyrian, Greek, Russian, and Farsi. One gregarious Armenian could be heard introducing his teenage daughter and son as Tara and Ara, then leaning over a napkin to scrawl their names showing that they spelled the ancestral homeland's famous peak (biblically associated with the landing of Noah's Ark) Ara'arat backwards in defiance of the Turkish Republic's maps that claim all of these ethnically cleansed lands.

Like an Irish ceilidh, the St. Vartan's Armenian Bazaar is a multi-generational event with high-energy octogenarians as likely to be gesticulating in Eastern Mediterranean hand jive as breaking into spontaneous dance steps with a food-laden teen. Amid all this agreeable chaos the one language not likely to be heard, although often still used at home, is Turkish. This became a prickly issue for the featured guest musician, the innovative oud pioneer and popularizer John Bilezikjian. "Johnny B. Oud," as he is affectionately known in the freewheeling Middle Eastern music scene (and in Hollywood film circles, where he is an in-demand session player and musical director), had traveled up the coast from Los Angeles with his group. Both of his sons were off with Armenian-American thrash rockers System of a Down doing a Hurricane Katrina victims' benefit concert, so Bilezikjian was accompanied by his wife, Helen, an accomplished singer of classical Armenian repertoire herself, who was pressed into *kef time* duty as percussionist and harmonist. An amazing Armenian drummer whose polysyllabic name was reduced to simply "K" joined the Bilezikjians from Fresno. Most surprising of all was klez-jazz virtuoso Stu Brotman, from the band Brave Old World, who showed a remarkable facility for the tricky 7/8 and 9/8 rhythms of Armenian music.

While John Bilezikjian had a few requests to play some staples of his repertoire that happen to be in Turkish (in his 30-plus years of recording he has sung not only in Armenian but in Arabic, Turkish, and Greek), he pointedly declined at St. Vartan's. At one point, in the face of persistent requests from the dance floor, he attempted to withdraw behind his oud, demurring. "Oh, no. I've learned not to start World War III." Bilezikjian could not resist honoring the memory of his beloved Armenian grandmother, who had taught him traditional Turkish songs from better inter-communal times long before the Armenian genocide by Ottoman Turks in 1915. But as he carefully explained to the crammed and overheated gym, he had too much respect for the sanctity of the memorialized victims of that genocide to sing in the Turkish language in an Armenian church, where so much familial pain has been compounded by continuing official Turkish denial of any genocidal campaign or ethnic cleansing of Armenian and Greek Christians from Asia Minor.

All through the sweaty hours of buoyant circle and line dances, *Karshilama* and *Tzifte telli* contradance and Smyrnaic stagger steps, as well as the epic Armenian folk songs, Bilezikjian hunched over his pear-shaped oud and, carefully eyeing the spontaneous formations before him on the gym floor, appeared to be a nimble quarterback calling audibles from the line of scrimmage. Highlights included the Armenian medley ending in the impassioned romantic "*Agchig-Hampartzoom Yajla*," with Bilezikjian's soaring voice sailing to Ara'arat altitudes carrying the ecstatic and irrepressible Middle Eastern call and response of "*Hai jahn! Hai jahn! Hai jahn! Jahn heh*." Bilezikjian's vocal sustain on this piece was nearly as hypnotic as his fingerwork down the fretless neck of his oud. "K," the Armenian drummer from Fresno, miraculously didn't throw his arms out of their shoulder sockets windmilling his attack on darbouqa. Electrical bassist Stu entered a Brave New Old World, playing the lightning tempos and quick changes of Bilezikjian's fleet-fingered oud runs and also coloring well outside the lines, reminiscent of the electric bass outsider Jaco Pastorius on a number of Bilezikjian's Greek and Arabic forays.

That side of Bilezikjian's sprawling repertoire received wider latitude two weeks later up the coast and inland at Portland, Oregon, during a rare appearance with his onetime collaborator, Arabic-percussion master Souhael Kaspar. Kaspar spent years in residence at a Syrian music



"Johnny B. Oud" - Bilezikjian, Underwood, David Reihls, and Kaspar

Michaël Ritter

academy in Haleb (Aleppo), the northern fortress town. It was in Haleb, Syria, in the early 20th century that an ancient indigenous Armenian population living side by side with Arabs and Jews gave sanctuary to and sheltered fleeing Armenians from across the Tigris River during the infamous Death March to the Deir Ezzor desert on the Syria-Iraq border, as so grippingly described in Peter Balakian's recent bestseller, *The Burning Tigris*.

Kaspar's expertise in traditional Arabic *maqamaat* meter sets a whole different stage for Bilezikjian's original oud compositions, often integrated into an extended dance routine, such as the one they recorded together back in 1995 on their *Magic* album. Although that nearly-20-minute piece named "Julia's Dream" features Turkish folk songs as well as Bilezikjian's own original improvisations, Kaspar sets the Turkish tunes to intermittent *balady* (or Arabic country) rhythms. In Portland, Kaspar's rhythm section included the expansive bassist Belinda Underwood, on a break from the original singer/songwriter duo she works in with her sister Melissa under the name of Beliss. But Underwood also gigs regularly with Middle Eastern dance music groups in the Northwest, so she



Armenian youth in a folk dance troupe

was a stranger to neither the metric precision required to accompany dance soloists nor to the melodic tapestries spun out between Bilezikjian and Kaspar.

The trio opened without any dancer on "Lail El Hob/Night of Love," a composition that Bilezikjian dryly attributed to Freddie MacMurray. This led to an inventive medley of "Besame Mucho/Yesterday (yes, Paul McCartney's)/Ya Mustafa," in which Kaspar's meter shifted across some far-fetched terrain, yet held together

even as Bilezikjian's vocals showed dynamic flexibility. There wasn't a hint of kitsch in these standards, now joined as admittedly strange bedfellows. Yemaya, the first dance soloist, appeared in an aquamarine silk costume, undulating with her arms to a tidal visual effect, and provided skillful karkabou (Moorish castanet) accompaniment as she performed a modern variation on traditional flamenco. Kaspar worked in some witty rimshots on darbouqa during "Jemillah/Im Anoush," the sections of

Bilezikjian's "Julia's Dream" that follow "Istenem Babacim." Kaspar's drum solo was so subtly articulated, I found myself closing my eyes and rolling with his time, despite the terpsichorean splendors of Yemaya. Other dancers later in the program were not as able to resist seductively over-reaching, although admittedly the more accomplished of these -- such as Tima Sargent, a dance diva based up in Seattle -- have a bit of a wink of the eye or tip of the hip going to let us know they are not taking their own voluptuousness all that seriously. Nevertheless, there were moments when Kaspar, his fingertips performing special effect syncopation on the taut skin of his tabla, simply had to put the drum aside, pull out a hankie, and proceed to mop his brow as Sargent danced from the floor of the Union Hall-cum-ballroom and up onto the stage to linger alongside the seated maestro at stage left. Dhavir Productions co-producer David Riehs, who leads his own Middle-Eastern band named Wazn, based in Portland, got to sit in on second darbouqa between Kaspar, Underwood, and Bilezikjian on a couple-three numbers that certainly extended the range of these well-traveled dance routines.

— Mitch Ritter (Beaverton, OR)

