

An Appreciation of Savina Yannatou, by Bill Loumpouridis

Savina Yannatou with Primavera en Salonico

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Have you ever noticed that once you buy a car, you suddenly become aware of how many cars of the same make and model are on the road? I had no idea how many Saab convertibles there were on the road until I purchased one, my disappointment with the commonality of my individual expression increasingly palpable with each sighting.

In the case of more meaningful observations (although what could possibly be more meaningful than individuality in a mass produced world?), once aware of a concept the mind can find depth and continued deeper meaning as contemplation and meditation are allowed to take root.

I recently visited Cusco Peru, ancient capital of the Incan empire. While there we befriended a local artist named "Mamani", who spoke at length about the universality of religious iconography. On Mamani's desk was a spiral notebook where he was meticulously translating Hebrew Scriptures into Spanish, and from Spanish into "Chikwae", the local Incan tongue, his own personal Rosetta Stone and manifesto to the universal unconscious. During his recitation to us, he displayed a variety of Incan artifacts, European tourist brochures, and Mesopotamian texts, all the while pointing out common themes and iconography. It was these cross-cultural interrelationships which he reinterpreted and drew inspiration from in order to arrive at his visual artistry.

Arriving home a few weeks ago, I found myself continually meditating on this sense of "connectedness", in spite of violent daily evidence in our news media to the contrary. It is in this context that I experienced a recent performance by Savina Yannatou, who provided more than just a soundtrack for my meditations. Rather, she provided a sonic analog that expanded and heightened the perceptions I had garnered through my karmic meanderings.

Savina and her unrivaled band-mates - Primavera en Salonico? demonstrated that regardless of how inspiring we find monoliths from our past, what resonates most are temporal real-life experiences. It is there where we are able to experience ideas in the present, not as observers, but as participants in a larger multi-cultural milieu.

The performance experience was at once a masterpiece of design and execution, of passion and restraint, of high concept and meticulous minutiae.

Structurally, Savina introduced pairs of songs together as couplets, her pacing throughout the show masterful. It became clear as the set progressed that this was her way of juxtaposing 2 compositions in order to illustrate both the interrelationships and differences of her selections.

The majority of the set consisted of lullabies and wedding songs from various cultures, universal themes of birth and renewal. Couplet after couplet, Savina demonstrated a range and depth that is well beyond what I thought any one performer was capable of as she blended a multiplicity of Mediterranean styles from Europe, the Middle East and, as an encore, the Caribbean.

Every nuance and gesture, her tone and disposition, her accent and cadence shifted seamlessly among these harmonized cultures. In one case, she effortlessly shifted from Hebrew to Greek lyrics during her rendition of a Hebrew lullaby that was at once haunting and mystifying. When exactly did the shift in languages occur? I was left wondering at the fluidity of the transition. Her vocal range stunning, Savina was also capable of Diamonda-Galas-like vocal percussions, at one point even echoing jarringly unfamiliar aboriginal sounding reverberations from her voice box.

In keeping with the vocal treatments, instrumental transitions occurred nearly imperceptibly. As great as Savina's performance was, her band nearly stole the show with their virtuosity. When juxtaposing songs of dissimilar tempos and rhythms, her band-mates Primavera en Salonico provided what went well beyond accompaniment. In the same way a parent gently holds the hand of a young child crossing a street, the band guided the audience through a seamless journey of rhythms, tempos, styles, and emotions. Savina herself often stood mesmerized by them, joining the audience by being focused on the depth of expression and expansion of the themes she had introduced through her vocals just moments earlier. This sonic repartee ensued throughout the performance, as the band members fed off of each other's creativity and inspiration spurring each other to greater depths of expression.

Individually, each band member held the audience fast with their passion and talent. Primavera's masterful slide guitarist was equally at home on accordion and various finger instruments. Their flutist caressed and contorted with his flute in ways that seemed almost too personal. The percussionist bound the band together with rhythms and sonic cues that wove together dissimilar styles seamlessly. The bass player was equally comfortable plucking distinctive notes from strings of his electric bass or, using the bow which he often shared with the percussionist, harmonizing with the other instruments.

The audience responded to the conclusion of the performance with a standing ovation. Savina and Primavera en Salonico acquiesced with an unexpected choice for an encore. Rather than a safe, crowd-pleasing encore, Savina chose one of her least accessible pieces to close with. As she uttered and exclaimed impossible raw percussive sounds the audience was unsure how to interpret what they were hearing. As the song evolved to safer territory they were visibly relieved as they applauded for the more traditional treatment which ended to the song.

By the time the show was over, I felt as though I had been given a thorough treatise on the universality of musical styles throughout Mediterranean cultures, much in the same way Mamani served as the exemplar of similar notions with his visual incantations. As we plied into my mass production Saab and drove home, we agreed that we had just experienced something that went beyond musical performance. Like life itself we found the experience both familiar and revealing about ourselves and the world around us. Mamani would have loved it.

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