Embracing the Melange

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> I was told by a friend of mine who spent a lot of time with certain Aboriginal tribes ... that there was one community that have a strange little detail in their language … which was not the exact equivalent of the word 'I', but a word that they used in its place, that quite literally implied 'everything within my perception'. If a person said that word… what he actually meant was not just the contents of this particular body, but it would mean you, and you, and you, and you, and this room and everything I can imagine… all of this constitutes 'I'. (Daly, 2022)

The Rattlin' Bog

Halfway up an Athens hillside, amid a cluster of squares and churches, sits a quiet neighbourhood park and a sleepy café-cum-community centre. It's an unnaturally hot afternoon in May 2022, and the site is slowly coming to life, spurred by the cicadas and a flat-backed Celtic bouzouki plucking away at 'Craigie Hills'. Orange and green fabric sways around the stage, and footpaths wind through pine trees to a hut covered in children's art and bilingual renderings of Irish folk stories (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Site plan of the Athens Irish Festival (Image used with permission from Inis Arts)

The Orthodox church which overlooks the site strikes a pensive bong. It's 4pm. The park is deserted, save for some volunteers and musicians taking a *souvlaki*-break[2] and chatting in English and Greek. Soon though it will be bubbling with people, as the formerly sleepy café,

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[2] Greek street food.

now stylised as 'The Cat and the Moon Pub', dishes out potato cakes and *tzatziki* to the sound of Irish songs coming from the stage – playfully dubbed the 'Rattlin' Bog'.

Founded a few weeks prior, the Athens Irish Festival (AIF) joins a handful of earlier musician-led and community-led folk festivals, such as the Athens Celtic Musical Festival, and the St Patrick's Day Festival, founded in 2014 and 2015 respectively.[3] While Irish music has existed in Greece at least since the early 2000s, the festivals have both catered for and catalysed a love for Celtic/Irish music. The initiatives have been supported through statutory funding (including Culture Ireland, the Irish Embassy, the Irish Institute of Hellenic Studies in Athens and Greek municipal funding), corporate funding, and in some cases, ticket sales.

In this piece I set out to explore the microcosm of the Athens Irish/Celtic music scene, instigated by my experience at the AIF in 2022. I drew on recordings, informal conversations, and my own experiences as a bilingual musician playing folk music.[4]

My interest in different experiences of the same music grew from my undergraduate dissertation, which argued that listeners' perceptions of music performed by buskers around the Acropolis are both a consequence and a catalyst of undisclosed narratives: we might be *hearing* the same song, but we are all *listening* for something different. I was intrigued by the thought that a musical moment can forge an ephemeral singularity from something far more complicated. I wanted to explore how this contributes to the formation of community in the Irish and Celtic scene in Athens, and how it affects the music.

Naturally, my answers are biassed by the things I listen for and the meanings I extract, which are linked to the way in which I relate to my heritage culture(s), their musics and the people around me. As Timothy Taylor puts it, 'our concern for our ethnographic subjects' or interlocutors' identity is really our concern for our own identity, a concern that we frequently project onto those we study' (2014, p. 318).

My perspective is the conglomeration of multiple positionalities. Variously, I have been an audience member and volunteer. I studied music at university, and occasionally perform, though not at AIF. I spent part of my childhood in Greece, listening to folk-rock and studying three instruments, including the traditional (and much to my chagrin, compulsory) tamboura/saz.

As a child, I had very vocally hated all Greek traditional music on principle. As a teenager in the UK, as I watched new schoolmates lug their sazes to school while I no longer had to, I was struck by the emotions the saz evoked: at once familiar and unfamiliar, confronting, uncomfortable, infuriating (was the blasted thing following me?!) and yet compelling. I became interested in how we 'see' and interpret our surroundings, and how pre-existing connotations (good and bad) assert themselves, and affect the way we relate to others.

Once at university, I picked up the saz again (this time willingly!), as I wanted to interrogate these emotions further. I started (and continue) to learn 'properly', through a Turkish and Greek repertoire; within months though, I was experimenting with the English folk songs I was doing for my singing recital – and that felt truer to me. Finding people with similar interests was difficult. But through that festival, I met many bilingual musicians, with interests and life experiences similar to mine.

Consequently, my encounter with this scene felt very meaningful. Hence, my reflection is inevitably less of an objective inquiry and more of a metafictional illustration of the issues it discusses. Its chief limitation is that it adds another layer for readers to unpack, while trying to

[3] The classical-oriented Paxos Festival, registered as a British charity in 1987 and presently in receipt of both Greek and international funding, also features an Irish folk music branch, inaugurated in 2017.

[4] While this piece has not undergone an official ethical review through an institution, identifiable people have given consent and approved their representation in the article prior to publication.

relay an already refracted image. (I often think that partaking in music is perhaps a more ‘authentic’ experience than writing about it!)

My perspective may misrepresent the interactions happening on the ground. There are many issues that, in the interest of both brevity and objectivity, I cannot address; these include aspects of the English-speaking and EAL-speaking[5] diasporas’ experiences related to heritage, class, age, sex, gender and histories of migration, alongside questions about the way in which Greeks (including return migrants) relate to the English-speaking world and/or the diasporic communities. Nonetheless, I’ve tried to convey something of the social and musical transformations catalysed by AIF and its sister festivals in the hopes that this can inspire further conversation.

Who are the people?

Athens is not the first European capital that comes to mind when thinking about cultural diversity, or, indeed, folk music; yet it is developing rapidly. While Athens has been home to immigrant communities for decades, the financial crisis of 2007–2008 spawned a thirst for regeneration which created a burgeoning cultural scene. Social media and the short-stay rental market transformed certain neighbourhoods into such havens for tourists, slow travellers and digital nomads that they are now among the most gentrified areas of the city.

At the festival, I was struck by how this diversity is reflected in its participants – more so than in non-folk gigs I’ve attended. Listeners included more or less equally first-generation migrants with English as a first or additional language; second- and third-generation ‘diasporic’ English-speaking migrants (often half-Greek) with varying levels of connection with their heritage cultures; return migrants who studied or worked abroad and returned with their bilingual families; and people who may have no lived experience of the cultures, but have a passion for the music. As people mingled and chatted while the bands played, musicians, organisers, attendees and volunteers spoke English and Greek, both on and off stage.

Performers are just as mixed, and predominantly local. Some are professional musicians, some have other jobs and others are starting out. Some are still at university and others approaching retirement; the gender split is roughly equal. Event organisers are also increasingly inviting musicians from Ireland to perform as they want to connect with cultural happenings there.

The festivals act as large-scale community and musician-led get-togethers where people who meet throughout the year at weekly and monthly sessions, folk choirs, gigs and community events come together in the low hundreds. Tunes and songs on migration, love and loss chosen from the internet, or learnt during someone’s travels, are sung and danced to for hours on end.

Is this a diaspora?

I have struggled to describe what I saw and felt at AIF. I kept returning to language as the core of what made it meaningful. The bilingual nature of the scene draws attention to the histories of travel and migration shared by many attendees. Early on, I thought the obvious place to start would be to speak of two broad groups – English-speaking and Greek-speaking; ‘diaspora’ quickly came to mind as a term that might reflect the makeup of the audience: people who are or have been away from their homeland and negotiate their experience through music.

Is it, however, appropriate? Diaspora is a weighted term that also calls to mind ‘forced dispersal, exile and loss’ (Lidskog, 2016). Concerning English-speakers, we could question whether it is even appropriate to use it for people whose language carries polarised connotations: of coerced economic migration on the one hand (e.g. those who learnt English as

[5] English as an additional language.

an additional language and migrated for work), but also of the undisputed financial privilege of people born in the Anglosphere, which denotes dynamics of exclusion. Athens is also home to many less visible, more disenfranchised communities who speak a multitude of languages, whose contemporaneous experiences of displacement should not come as an afterthought.

Further, conflating English-speaking demographics, or even those from a UK and/or Irish heritage into one hotchpotch group, is at best imprecise and at worst offensive. While there may be significant cultural similarities, it conceals culturally-specific attitudes towards self and other and all but erases British colonial history. While people of American, Irish or Scottish heritage can feel a strong sense of national identity in an international setting, some people identifying as English, or more broadly British, migrants conversely feel ill at ease with their heritage, and fervently reject 'expat' migration for greater cultural integration (Leonard and Walsh, p. 9). I remember inviting British friends – both fluent Greek speakers – to a session: whereas one said he'd been before and liked it, the other felt uncomfortable, because 'we can do that in the UK. We're here, we should be listening to Greek music'.

Further variables diversify these experiences, such as age, class, gender and linguistic competence, as well as whether people have migrated themselves, and/or were born into a migratory context. The latter two stand out to me as key elements of this music scene. Language, personality, and the way we experience the world are inherently linked: bilingual people 'become somewhat different versions of themselves when they speak another language' (Marian, 2023, p. 89). While I feel this is true of any person who has migrated, Pavlenko (2005) asserts that there is a further distinction between people bilingual since childhood, and 'late bilinguals' who learnt their second language later in life. I remember thinking about this at a family event where some of the children spoke Greek with volunteers and English with their parents. Native bilingual children must have a different understanding of their identity to older migrants – often their parents – some of whom never learn the host country's language.

Therefore, I feel that to homogenise people(s) on account of a language renders invisible the identity-forming experiences which determine how connections are formed within demographics, between demographics, and with the host culture. It is also unlikely to be reflective of how people see themselves. Instead, it might be more reflective of a host culture-centric viewpoint. Herzfeld (1988, p. 18) argues:

> Modern Greece does not fit comfortably into the duality of Europeans and Others, especially as Greeks are themselves ambivalent about the extent to which they are European... Some Greeks, some of the time, claim a European identity that other Greeks claim they have either never attained or never desired.

On some level, conflating English-speaking demographics might be to invoke the tourist gaze discussed by Urry (1990, p. 26), or to homogenise people on account of the Western powers' contemptuous history. Nonetheless, this viewpoint still merits consideration, as othering the colonial Western powers highlights the distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed. Leonard and Walsh (p. 13) note that cultures drawing on 'Celtic' heritage are more readily celebrated in migratory contexts. Indeed, while the love for Irish music is a global phenomenon, its Greek manifestation includes a romanticised camaraderie between two cultures that both have histories of suppression and loss, that has recently begun to be consciously explored (see the film *The Laughing Boy,* which was screened at AIF 2022).

Since both viewpoints yield results, we could opt to look through two lenses: one seeing a language binary, and another seeing many distinct groups that use English, and the local Greek population. Still, that excludes the experiences of Greek return migrants and return diasporic migrants who exist in many of these groups at the same time. In short, none of these viewpoints alone do the people justice.

But their simultaneous presence and the oscillation between them is reflective of the experience one might have while attending an event in Athens: at AIF, communication and signage was in both languages; performers and organisers used both languages on stage. Listeners sat on the ground and chatted, and from a distance you couldn't tell who spoke what. Then, wandering through the park as if on a soundwalk, one minute I'd hear Greek teenage slang, and the next I'd find English-speaking people just moved from central Europe, then a frazzled volunteer swapping languages mid-sentence. Wherever you looked, there were 'opposite' life perspectives and voices crashing and melding into each other, and I felt as if the people around me symbolised every potential migration history, every conceivable experience that might have brought someone there; communities that might know *of* each other, but haven't actually met and for that moment, people's differences and similarities existed side by side. It was humbling, staggering and exhilarating, and I found myself constantly switching viewpoints, undecided as to who I was being in that moment, and even more in the dark as to how people saw me – contemplating the impossibility of definitions, and the beauty and the agony of the history that makes people move.

I'm still unsure whether calling this a diaspora is accurate; but what I saw in the festival was a meeting point for people drawn together by 'being physically in one place and mentally in another' (Lidskog, 2016). Migrants, return migrants, and the children of migrants have all felt loss and homesickness – whether on leaving Greece, arriving here, or (perhaps most perplexingly) both. Language connects people who have experienced migration, forging a closeness through music that transcends national borders.

The following sections explore the plurality of this community, its impact on the music and the experience of performers.

Dialogic communities

At the core of any communal musical practice sits some sort of derived value, and the notion of belonging – a desired destination, which in diasporic contexts can feel like chasing something always just out of reach. While the main goal of the festivals is to create a space for Irish music, I believe the byproduct is a space for explorations of a more personal nature. Musicking allows us to explore, affirm and celebrate values and imagined relationships – 'not so much [the ones] which actually exist in our lives, [but more so] those that we desire to exist and long to experience' (Small, 2010. p. 183).

Turino (1999) explores the power of music to facilitate connection through indexical communication – the process by which we understand signs unconsciously. This solidifies social identity by conjuring a shared understanding of the same experience. However, since 'musical indices are able to condense great quantities and varieties of meaning – even contradictory meanings – within a single sign' (Turino 1999, p. 235), we can question whether everyone has the same understanding of what community they are partaking in. Small (1999) argues that what enables a community to be (per)formed, is the assumption that people around us are experiencing something akin to what we are.

Given the multiplicity of backgrounds of these festival audiences, I believe the scene accommodates multiple imaginings: the domestic tourist gaze, the sense of a fellow migrant as kin, a performance of Irish-Greek left-wing camaraderie, a yearning for lost roots, as well as more confronting yet fruitful polarities between North and South and East and West. People yield different perceptions of the music too: someone raised in Ireland who visits Greece to perform, must experience song and setting differently to someone recently returned from the US, the UK or Australia, to someone born in Greece to an English-speaking parent, or someone who has no lived experience of these cultures, but fell in love with the music through the Internet.

The multilingual context adds further layers. Bilingualism renders individuals internally dialogic too. As Small (2010, p. 134) puts it, '"who we are" is at the same time composed of any number of individual "who I am's"'. At the festivals there is potential for an infinite regression of semiotic chains, and of new individual and collective identities to be formed: 'the contexts of dialogue are without limit' (Holquist, 2002). It's perhaps not by chance that at the sound of 'Craigie Hills', people (including myself) stopped in their tracks, and turned around to listen in reverent silence: that song could strike a chord with anyone who's experienced migration or goodbyes, no matter what their personal story.[6]The beauty of this multicultural musical setting is that it provides countless opportunities to see something of yourself reflected in those around you – bringing disparate facets of your life closer together until they start to feel like a whole.

Musicking differently

A local form of the music is fast emerging with bands' repertoires peppered with adaptations and nods to other traditions – such as mixing Greek and Irish songs, using odd metres, Greek polyphony and local instruments. I asked local performers, and musicians connected tangentially to the festival how they felt about fusion and experimentation, and their responses were polarised: while many with stronger ties to Ireland or the English-speaking world relish it, others worry that it might be 'inauthentic' or 'sound stupid' because they 'don't know enough about Irish music'; at the extreme, particularly for those with formal classical or traditional training, there seems to be a desire to study and emulate pieces first, as true as possible to their 'authentic' form.

Perhaps this stems from a broader trend in Irish traditional music: the growing professionalism and virtuosity among performers, preoccupation with authenticity among listeners, and the demand for 'the real stuff' (Sommers Smith 2001, pp. 116-117). However, their responses are also in line with Tsioulakis' 2008–2009 findings on jazz musicians in Athens, which suggested that professional instrumentalists saw a connection between 'skill and technique' and 'authenticity' (Tsioulakis, 2011, p. 2) and felt that acquiring technique and a better understanding of the genre would lead them to experience a 'promised land destination' – 'a locus where this music was believed to flourish' (ibid., p. 11).

It is easy to attribute this to the fact that neither genre is native to Greece, leading people who do not feel ownership over the music to be self-conscious, disinclined to offend or be embarrassed. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of foreign language learning anxiety and linguistic insecurity: worries that one's natural way of speaking is inferior to the socially accepted norm, which Labov (1972) linked to a tendency to hypercorrect one's speech, and emulate the pronunciations of people perceived as 'superior'. To this we could add the nature of orally transmitted music to encourage learning through observation and emulation, creating an imbalance of power, and perhaps leading learners to feel insufficient, unqualified and exposed.

I also have a strong feeling, given that most local performers of Irish music are well versed in *paradosiaka* and *rebetika*, that the roots of this thinking also lie in those genres' value systems, where virtuosity is synonymous with quality and credibility. Particularly given the revivals of these genres in recent decades, the growing professionalism among instrumentalists, and the advent of music high schools where all children receive at least nominal training in Greek traditional and classical music, I believe this received paradigm of stifling craftsmanship and of learning 'properly' from one's elders permeates the Athens scene and can subconsciously guide people's approach to Irish music. This might suggest an interesting

[6] Iernis and Chrysoula Kechagioglou sing Craigie Hills at the Athens Irish Festival, May 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkuCFpOdGys

application of local value systems on an imported idiom, and a 'bilingual' (subconscious) rather than just hybrid (conscious) – approach to music-making.

Yet the Athenian setting is also nourishing. The gradual undoing of attitudinal barriers surrounding tradition, together with the inception of institutions like the Labyrinth Musical Workshop[7] have led to younger generations taking up untempered instruments across the country. As Kallimopoulou (2009) discusses, younger generations have rejected the canonicity of earlier decades in favour of experimentation with multiple genres. I believe this encourages the diasporic search for roots: once you have explored one side of your heritage, it is almost impossible to not turn a quizzical gaze towards the other. It is perhaps not surprising that many performers of Irish music in Athens started in *rebetiko* and *paradosiaka*.

And so questions of identity and authenticity are always floating in the air and are sometimes openly interrogated in the scene. Ross Daly, speaking in his capacity as a figurehead for modal music in Greece, and as a person of multicultural heritage, left his mark in one such discussion organised by the AIF team. When asked about reconciling music-making and identity, he offered this advice:

> Music is the language of my dialogue with what I perceive to be sacred... which is that which is united. [...] It would have made no sense for me to be a musician who only plays things from Crete and [to] get rid of the rest... it doesn't make sense to try and conform to a prescribed pattern of being or a tradition; you can't be something that you're not. So accept your nature and go along with it [and] find your sound. (Daly, 2022)

While some bands have been exploring this space for some time, toying with the genres' similarities, performing Greek music in the English-speaking world and (mostly) Irish folk music in Greece, the curiosity to explore folk fusion is in its infancy. Nonetheless, there are distinct approaches we can identify: i) hybrid instrumentation; ii) hybrid rhythms and harmonies; and iii) hybrid songs, which can be further separated into performing songs one after the other, or layering them so both are heard simultaneously (See figure 2).[8]

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[7] The Musical Workshop "Labyrinth" was launched in 1982 by Ross Daly and a group of friends. Labyrinth's goal is the initiation of primarily young people into a creative approach to traditional musical idioms from various parts of the world. It is a meeting point for musicians and students and is widely recognized as a leading force with respect to education, in the field of modal and traditional music in general. (adapted from their website)

[8] This experimentation can be self-deprecating, heartfelt or mathematical. The songs below are some examples of this fusion practice. I would encourage those interested to refer to the video descriptions for the creators' explanations of their work. Iernis are to my knowledge the oldest Celtic and Irish band in Greece, who I believe chose this 6/8 Thracian *zonaradiko* as a nod to the similarities between the *zonaradiko* and the *jig*. Tir Fada are likewise one of the most prolific local Celtic bands; while I do not know the story behind it, the first medley is reminiscent of a 'melody association' from my own practice, where one folk tune calls to mind another, and they are inevitably tied together (which is how a few years back in an older folk duo, we ended up with 'Apo Xeno Topo' tied to Scarborough Fair). The last two are a 9/8 adaptation of the 'Drunken Sailor' in a *rebetiko* style, and a melding together of Irish and Greek songs on Thessaloniki, and indeed of the Irish and Greek people who live there (see description for more details).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5mwYcdMVdI, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kI13rnVNyA0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0765kj57Mc, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QphzbDH0A-M

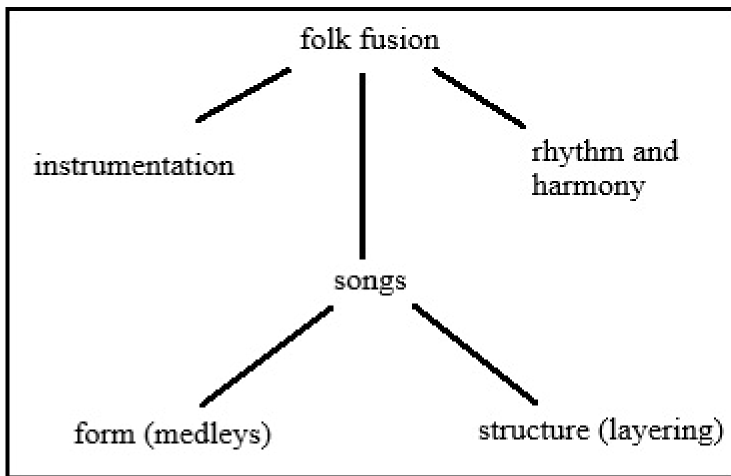

Figure 2: Approaches to folk fusion

These bands form the backbone of the Irish festivals in Athens. Festival setlists are usually predominantly 'pure' renditions, but there will also be instances of fusion – often humorous, and a broad range of instruments featured both in the shows, and in session playing; a non-exhaustive list includes: lavta, Cretan lute, Balkan accordion, nyckelharpa, Uilleann pipes, alongside the standard bouzoukis, mandolins, violins, guitars. The music sometimes sounds 'authentic' and other times arguably not. With the mixed sounds, practitioners and audience, performances oscillate between a celebration of heritage and 'imagery and rhetoric produced chiefly for external consumption' (Markwick, 2001, p. 37) for the domestic tourist. A liminal space reflective of the practitioners' positionalities: a presence and an absence, both there and not there enough; pained, loving and humorous in equal measure.

And so I arrive at my personal learnings. While I don't play Irish music myself, meeting this community was valuable. Particularly when I was younger, I found it all too easy to focus on the inherent sadness of 'never being (there) enough', which I believe is a personal question first, and a musical one second. I loved training as a classical singer, but my soirees through traditional musics have been fleeting; one question I've been persistently hounded by however, is how music from the British Isles can be uttered with a saz, and what the instrument's contribution to the music might sound like; my practice means searching for a balance that remains true both to the genre and to the instrument. While I've been lucky to meet little resistance – none in the folk scene, and no more than some perplexed uncertainty by saz players ('why is it so… happy?'), this community was one of my catalysts: here were people exploring a musical blend similar to mine. It provided validation, feedback, and strengthened my resolve to 'own' the liminality and explore the sound. Coming up with a new adaptation and deciding 'how far is too far' is at once a hilarious and terrifying process: it calls upon you to brave the uncertainty, and accept that being your whole self is good, even if more learned musicians around you could argue otherwise. A friend of mine put this less eloquently but more effectively in one of our improv sessions: 'But what if people don't like it?' I asked. 'F*** 'em!' he said.

Embracing the melange

Music unavoidably changes in the context of migration. Songs are signified in different ways and for different purposes, and are necessarily perceived, interpreted, explored, affirmed and celebrated and therefore *musicked* differently – thereby making them a departure from their original forms, and arguably culturally specific, to each community and migratory context that chooses to perform them.

In Athens, language and music are inherently linked: Greek and English are sung and spoken on stage, becoming 'signs' to be performed between and during songs. For the diasporic person, the festival provides a *home away from home*, where children will not *lose their English*. For the bilingual performer, it's a liberating opportunity to negotiate nostalgia for a side of their heritage lost, speak with the audience in the mixed language many use at home, code switch at leisure, self-deprecate, and mimic this through music.

While sorting through my thoughts on identity, belonging, the hunt for authenticity and why I personally play (or don't play) music, I stumbled into trying to relay the experience of negotiating a bilingual identity through music and defending this against inflexible interpretations of tradition and authenticity.

Ultimately, the debate between musical hybridity or canonicity (= "authenticity") is for each practitioner to answer for themselves. For anyone struggling with their practice, contemplating the breadth and depth of human experience can provide a new perspective – one that defies the rhetoric of authenticity and absolves a musician from the guilt of never quite managing to achieve the result they wanted, and, for the diasporic mindset, from feeling like one is doomed to forever be on the outside of all cultures looking in. The local form of the music (whether to an individual or their surroundings) becomes a dialogic conglomeration of one's life experiences, to which they have an indisputable claim – an utterance authentic to the time, place, and the 'specific point in the history of defining [yourself]... out of all the possible existing languages available to [you] at that moment' (Bakhtin and Holquist, 2000). As Kallimopoulou (2009, p. 195) argues: 'The individual becomes thus the meeting point where varied or disparate musical inputs may be brought together – and it remains to be seen in which form these will eventually be synthesised.'

Conclusions and takeaways

There is a capacity within a single locus for multiple, contradictory imaginings. Our identities are an amalgam of increasingly diverse backgrounds and experiences; communities exist within communities, but there is unity in fragmentation. Music is both publicly and privately reflective of the performers' and listeners' identities and experiences. Within a diasporic, bilingual context, the result is a liminal space that contains both the 'authentic' traditions of the cultures of origin, and an amalgam of positionalities brought together. Music at these festivals reflects and catalyses change: 'the relationships at the end of the performance are not the same as those in the beginning' (Small, 2010, p. 140). Thus, performing change has the capacity to change us further, giving rise to a never-ending flow of new spaces, sounds and collective identities.

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