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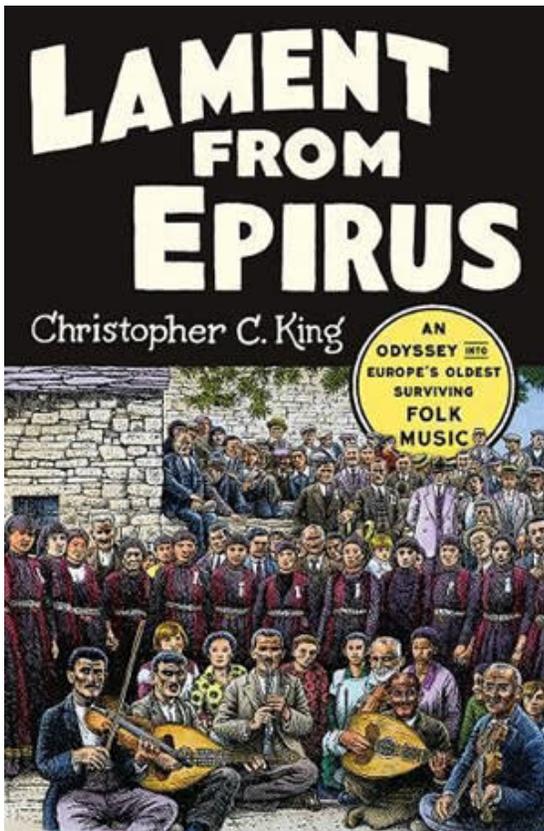
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## Lament From Epirus by Christopher C King – Roma holiday

A passionate record collector embarks on a Greek musical odyssey in this captivating travelogue

Ed Ward 3 HOURS AGO



The kid's grandfather told him to clear out the tarpaper shack, the last former tenant house on the farm, so he could burn it down before clearing the land. Inside was a ruined gramophone — the ceiling above had long given way — and a metal box containing about 20 old 78rpm records. One of them was “Dark Was the Night,” a guitar solo with some barely audible humming by the black evangelist Blind Willie Johnson.

If you have never heard this performance, I urge you to do so as soon as you can. It's not like any other piece of music ever recorded. It was etched into the gold record put on the Voyager spacecraft and launched into the void in 1977 to explain our presence in the universe.

You can see why the kid, Christopher C King, grew up to be a folk music fanatic and 78 record collector of some renown — and why his search for an experience like the one he'd had as a boy led him to a remote area of Greece, the subject of this remarkable book. His journey began in Istanbul. As he and his wife were exploring the city, they found a street selling nothing but gramophones and records. He bought a few and brought them home to Virginia. Several were by one Kitsos Harisiadis and were strikingly different from the more familiar Greek pop: more emotional, more plaintive.

The kind of dogged research for which 78 collectors are notorious revealed that Harisiadis was from Epirus, in northwestern Greece on the Albanian border, remote as it could be. Records from the region were rare, but King found two brothers who were as passionate about rural Greek music as he was about rural American music. Soon, boxes of 78s were flying to Virginia from Athens. One day, a larger box arrived from the brothers. In it were two 12-inch 78s by one Alexis Zoumbas (below), described by the brother who'd sent it as “deep.” King cleaned them and put the first one on: “Lament From Epirus.” After playing it, he felt devastated. “I needed a smoke.” He'd found

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something as moving as Blind Willie Johnson.



The majority of this book is the tale of King stumbling around Epirus in search of this music, obsessed by it and by the story of Zoumbas, who'd recorded in New York in 1926, where he'd fled, possibly pursued by a murder rap. He died there, too, ostensibly at the hand of a jealous woman. He was long gone, but the music, with all its haunting power, remained.

The search takes King all over Epirus, fuelled by his obsession. Along the way, he discovers that the musicians who created this are Roma, a people, originally from India, whom Europeans once called "gypsies". They've been in eastern Europe for a

millennium, treated as scum for most of that time. "They only want us for our music," one Romani musician tells King.

But Roma music plays an important role in Epirotic culture, deeply embedded in life and ritual. Epirus is marginal enough that neither tourism nor mass media have penetrated the area to drive out this music and its performance. It's not a spoiler to say that King found what he was looking for, and he tells the story well.

I do question some of his musical analysis, especially as he discusses the modes/scales the musicians use, some of which would seem to derive from Indian raga. A quibble, perhaps, but maybe also a key to what allows the Roma to function as the oppressed "Other" while also moving the Epirotic soul, much as African approaches to European music became irresistible to the Americans who'd once enslaved them. A more serious problem: with the importance that geography plays in this tale, would it have killed the publisher to supply a map?

Now go find "Lament From Epirus" — it's on CD and YouTube thanks to King — and listen to it. That, in the end, was what drew me to the book: I needed to know what this allegedly pre-Homeric stuff sounded like and how it survived. King tells us, and I'm glad he did.

### **Lament From Epirus: An Odyssey Into Europe's Oldest Surviving Folk Music,**

Christopher C King, *WW Norton*, RRP\$29.95, 304 pages

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