

# Danse Macabre

Andrew Katzenstein

**Lament from Epirus:  
An Odyssey into Europe's  
Oldest Surviving Folk Music**  
by Christopher C. King.  
Norton, 304 pp., \$29.95

**Kitsos Harisiadis:  
Lament in a Deep Style, 1929–1931**  
an album produced  
by Christopher King  
with Vassilis Georganos.  
Third Man Records, \$15.00

**While You Live, Shine**  
a documentary film  
directed by Paul Duane

In 2009, the American record collector and audio engineer Christopher King bought a stack of 78 rpm discs while on vacation in Istanbul. A self-described obsessive for whom “the rare musk of shellac” is “the second most arousing smell in the world,” he waited impatiently to play his purchases. Their contents were mysterious: the labels were written in Greek, and King knew enough of the language to realize that they “made no linguistic sense.” He returned home ten days later. “Decades of listening to unvarnished prewar music—Delta blues by Charlie Patton and fiddle records by the Carter Brothers and Son,” he writes in *Lament from Epirus*, had not prepared him for what he heard when he dropped the needle:

Insistent droning voices and instruments merged, clashing against each other. One vocal threaded its way between instruments while another voice mirrored the lead singer an octave below. The music reached a crescendo, crashed, and repeated... it sounded like a massive coffee can of angry bees had been shaken and released in front of me.

The music deeply affected King. He felt as if he “had been taken apart and rearranged,” but the sensation was “pleasurable—a necessary catharsis.” It was love at first listen.

King learned that the records were made in the 1920s and 1930s by musicians from Epirus, an area straddling northwestern Greece and southern Albania. Eager for more, he contacted Elias and Vasilis Barounis, Athenian brothers who owned an impressive collection of Greek folk 78s and sparingly sold some to him for a few hundred dollars apiece. After Vasilis died in 2011, Elias sold their entire archive of Epirotic recordings to King—“something unprecedented among record collectors”—giving him the “staggering responsibility as a caretaker of this region’s ancient musical legacy on the 78 rpm disc.”

Elias couldn’t have chosen a more loving or passionate custodian. Born and raised in Virginia, King has remastered thousands of songs from their

original 78s, including works of Delta blues, Cajun, gospel, and Sacred Harp music. His unorthodox methods for capturing sound from these old records yield brilliant results. The music critic Amanda Petrusich observed that in King’s home studio,

the turntable...was littered with oddly sized bits—matchsticks, tongue depressors, little plastic ice-cream spoons—that he used to weigh down the tone arm based on assumptions he’d made or things he’d learned regarding certain studios or recording sessions. He accommodated for factors like am-

passionate; the instruments keen like wolves or flutter and swoop like hummingbirds. The insistent strumming and drumming, the pedal notes, the droning of strings and accompanying voices churn with a primeval energy. Aspects of the music suggest bluegrass, or free jazz, or the Velvet Underground, or the Carnatic music of southern India. But something sounds a bit off: the instruments aren’t quite in tune and aren’t playing quite the same melody, or the meter in a song intended for dancing is a fast 7/8 or 9/8 that no one, it seems, could possibly keep up with.

After this initial impression, though, aspects of the music become clear.



Musicians and dancers at a festival in Ganadio, a village in the region of Epirus in northwestern Greece, 2000

bient humidity, or a tilt in the floorboards, or a distraction on the part of the original engineer.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past seven years, King has released six albums—nearly ten hours—of songs from his collection of rural Greek and southern Albanian 78s. In *Lament from Epirus*, he recounts his odyssey, as he calls it, into the region’s music, its history, and the secrets he thinks it contains. King believes that he has found in Epirotic music the oldest folk tradition in Europe, one that began in pre-Homeric cultures, hasn’t changed significantly in hundreds of years, and reveals the origins and ultimate meaning of humanly organized sound. This engaging, well-researched, and peculiar book is not only a work of music criticism or a philosophical rumination on the meaning of music—it’s also a travelogue in which the writer goes native.

The first thing one notices about Epirotic music from the 1920s and 1930s is that it’s raw. This isn’t just a result of the grainy quality of the recording. The singing is full-throated and

<sup>1</sup>*Do Not Sell At Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records* (Scribner, 2014), p. 39.

Many Epirotic dance songs have simple melodies, which allow for embellishment and improvisation. Lead parts are typically played by violin and *klarino* (a type of clarinet), accompanied by *laouto* (a stringed instrument similar to the oud) and *defi* (frame drum). *Klarino* and violin players in particular display virtuosity with quick runs of scales, trills, and large intervallic jumps, especially of the minor sevenths that give the style one of its most distinctive characteristics. Even when doubling a melody with the violin, the *klarino* lithely adds flourishes and filigrees around its partner.

King writes that the vocabulary and timbre of the music mimic the region’s craggy landscape and its fauna: “Phrases imitate sounds found in nature: the singing of a nightingale, the babbling of a brook, the baying and barking of animals, and the surge of a storm.” To achieve this mimetic effect, violin and *klarino* players use scoops and bends that elide distinctions between pitches, almost imperceptible grace notes in the upper registers, and heavy vibrato.

In songs that include one or two singers, *klarino* and violin offer countermelodies behind the vocalists, and instrumental improvisations alternate with sung verses. Songs with more than two singers use iso-polyphony, in which some voices state or respond to a

melody while the rest remain on fixed tones. Iso-polyphony has a hypnotic effect: the moving parts play off against the static ones, which gives the music a tension that always tends toward the keynote but only rarely resolves. Singers in iso-polyphony use no vibrato and channel sound through their nasal passages, creating a buzziness when harmonies are close and a powerful, limpid tone when the voices collapse into unison.

King emphasizes two types of Epirotic songs: the *skaros* and the *mirologi*. Both are played in free rhythm and feature improvised solos from *klarino* and violin. The *skaros* takes its name from a word referring to the practice of grazing sheep at night, when they are thought to have better appetites. It is believed that the *skaros*, variants of which exist throughout the Balkans, began as tunes played by shepherds on the flute to convey specific instructions to their flocks, and some still use music to communicate with them. Listeners “who are attentive to the *skaros* are drawn into a calm, trance-like state,” King writes.

The word *mirologi* typically refers to vocal laments; there are versions of them in Homer and on ancient epitaphs. In some parts of rural Greece, women sing *mirologia* beside the graves of family members every day for years, until the bones of the deceased are exhumed and put in the village ossuary. Epirus is the only place where *mirologia* are performed instrumentally, and musicians preserve the lugubrious mood of the sung versions found elsewhere in Greece:

*For the world is a tree, and we are  
its fruit,  
And [Charon], who is the  
vintager, gathers its fruit.*

The second-most-mountainous region in Europe, Epirus has harsh weather and little arable land. As one Epirote told King, “Life has always been hard in the mountains, everything has always been uncertain.” Ancient Greeks believed the entrance to Hades was here: the Acheron River that Odysseus—and later Dante—crossed to reach the underworld flows, in reality, west from Epirus’s mountains toward the Ionian Sea. Pilgrims hoping to summon the ghosts of departed loved ones visited the Nekromanteion, a temple located in a cave near the Acheron. For days, and for a considerable fee, they underwent purificatory rituals, including the consumption of pork, oysters, and a type of bean that induced hallucinations. When the supplicant was ready, he slaughtered a sheep and was led to a central chamber, which spirits could enter from the beyond. Priests hidden in a second chamber impersonated the deceased, barked to suggest the presence of Cerberus, and manipulated

Nikos Economopoulos/Magnum Photos

pulleys that sent up objects to dazzle the impressionable pilgrim.

The difficulty of life in Epirus has been compounded by military failures and foreign invasions. Romans, Byzantines, Serbs, and Venetians all controlled it at various times, and Ottoman rule lasted from 1430 until 1913. While memories of the Ottomans are sour, they granted Epirus a degree of independence and access to foreign markets; during this time, the region was enriched by trade, cultural exchange, and contributions from émigrés who sent money back home. Lord Byron celebrated Epirus's striking landscapes in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and inspired other Englishmen, including Edward Lear, to visit. One contemporary visitor called Ioannina, Epirus's largest city, "the Manchester and Paris" of northern Greece.

Though the population has decreased precipitously since World War II, as residents moved to cities within Greece or to the US, Canada, Australia, and Germany, Epirotes retain close ties to their homeland. Many return each year to see family and to participate in summer festivals called *panegyria*. The number of residents in a village during these festivals can increase from a few dozen to thousands.

When King heard that modern Epirus had a vibrant musical culture in which the same songs and styles as those on old recordings continued to be played, he "disbelieved that this music could still exist in the world unchanged."

All that remained of other musical traditions he loved were slowly decaying 78s, not a living culture. The music of the Mississippi Delta drifted to Chicago and Memphis, where it went electric; hillbilly music was eclipsed by country and western; Ukrainian fiddle music disappeared, in both Ukraine and America, within two generations of the first wave of emigration to the US. So when a friend invited King to Epirus, he enthusiastically took the chance to visit the "land and music that time forgot."

At the beginning of his voyage, King, like the supplicants who went to the Nekromanteion, hoped to contact the dead—in particular Kitsos Harisiadis and Alexis Zoumbas, two musicians from Epirus who recorded about ninety years ago. He was determined to find out more about their lives from their descendants and other Epirotes who had known them. But he soon found that Epirus's culture "embraces life and death equally," and that the present contained a vitality he was sure had vanished.

King began collecting records in the mid-1970s when, at age fifteen, he came across a box of pristine gospel 78 rpm discs in an abandoned sharecropper's cabin on his grandfather's property, an event he recounts with almost religious awe. In his book he offers few other details about his personal life, perhaps because so much of it has involved the music he's remastered—work for which he's won a Grammy and been nominated for five others. After college he was briefly a janitor and an under-

taker—a job well suited to his morbid disposition—and until his vacation to Istanbul he had spent only a few weeks outside Virginia, including a three-day stint in a philosophy Ph.D. program at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. He depicts himself as a proud outcast and Luddite who's most comfortable at home, surrounded by his records.

Salty and self-deprecating, he is a lively and informative guide to Epirus. We watch him transform from a "sheltered, misanthropic record collector" into a modern Greek villager as he falls in love with the ways, rituals, and cuisine of Epirus. He is especially enamored of *tsipouro*, a grape brandy known as *raki* elsewhere in Greece, which, he says, "tastes like the heavenly fluids produced by two angels fucking."



A print by Edward Lear showing Artá, a city in Epirus, and the surrounding region; from his book *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania, &c., 1851*

He learns how to distill it and argues, unconvincingly, for its psychotropic qualities.

King takes us to important sites in Epirus and through its history, but he's most lively when describing the summer festivals. *Panegyria* last all night, with lots of food, liquor, music, and dancing. The band sets up in the center of a village square, surrounded by the villagers, who, arms linked, dance with intricate footwork in concentric circles around the musicians. King beautifully evokes his first *panegyria*, in the town of Vitsa:

We took in the whole works—the gears and the springs of the celebration: the cascading clarinets echoing from the village center like snake charmers' hypnotic flutes, the disorienting smoke rising from the *souvlaki* pits, the hundreds of people orbiting the musicians, the unhinged aura of everything.

That night he blacked out, waking the next morning to find himself covered in blood and his glasses in three pieces. Miraculously, he had "no hangover. I was just at a loss as to where my skin had gone." His wounds became a badge of honor, and he later refers to himself as "a Vitsanian by adoption."

Meanwhile, he hunts for facts about Kitsos Harisiadis and Alexis Zoumbas. Harisiadis, a *klarino* player, lived in Epirus his entire life and made only twenty-four recordings, all between 1929 and 1931. Fourteen of these tracks are included on King's latest release,

*Lament in a Deep Style*. Harisiadis's tone is sweeter than many other *klarinists*, but most striking is his fleet, effortless virtuosity. Although music in Epirus is passed down from one generation to the next, technique is not, and every musician develops an idiosyncratic way of playing. Harisiadis, for example, would give lessons while sitting on one side of a gorge with his student on the other side: unable see the master's fingers move, the student had to figure out how to imitate the sounds he heard.

Harisiadis, King discovers from those who knew him, had a reputation for saintliness: he "had only one desire: to heal people through his music." He is said to have played for hours every day to laborers at the marble mill in Klimatia, his home village. The few

state of *having the blues* with which I had no prior experience.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his life, King has been particularly fixated on music from isolated communities that developed unique idioms, techniques, and timbres. "If there's any one continuous thread through anything that I have," he has said, "it's deeply, deeply rural and backwoods. It's almost like it turns its back to the city." He prizes music that displays an "emotional intensity" and reflects "an inextricable bond between the soil and people"—"the interconnections between a place, its people, and its music." Yet the very discs he loves from the 1920s and 1930s also led to the disintegration of the music they captured—a kind of original sin that at once preserved and destroyed untainted folk traditions:

When mass commercial recording began, almost every ethnic and rural musical expression commenced an accelerated process of homogenization, a sad urgency toward bland uniformity. . . . Regional styles, repertoires, and, perhaps most crucially, interactive and contextual functions went from being a central component of a culture's music to a quaint, antiquated notion. . . . Everyone wanted to sound like those heard on the most recent technologies: disc and radio.

Since, in King's telling, authentic music disappeared as the phonograph and radio spread, he dismisses all music made after 1941 as "garbage." His disdain extends to practically every aspect of modern life. *Lament from Epirus* contains jabs at, among other things, smartphones, Oberlin graduates and Brooklynites, contemporary pop music, the American middle class, Western funeral rites, hashtags, suburbanites who drink single-malt scotch, American urban culture, all of humanity, and the polka craze of the 1930s (an especially easy hit job). His aversion to a society he views as venal and mendacious is as intense as his sensitivity to the aural qualities of 78s. He told Amanda Petrusich, "It seems like I only enter into an abysmal depression every year and a half or so, and it's usually because of having to go to Whole Foods." King seeks in 78s the authenticity he finds lacking in modern culture, and for him authenticity almost always means suffering: "I prepare for death every day. I'm obsessed with it."

In Epirus, King found a culture authentic enough for him. It has largely resisted the temptations of consumerism and survived the twentieth century relatively untouched by globalization. Its people and music express a strong awareness of death, a joyous celebration of life, and a deep connection to their land. *While You Live, Shine*, a forthcoming documentary that follows King from Virginia ("hell") to the village of Vitsa and has marvelous footage of its *panegyria*, shows him at peace, happily turning meat on a spit

<sup>2</sup>Alexis Zoumbas: *A Lament for Epirus, 1926–1928*, a collection produced by King, was released in 2014.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

and joking with locals in a hesitant mixture of Greek and English. He tells the film's director that he plans to move to Greece "as soon as I fucking can"—before it's too late, presumably.<sup>3</sup>

The first time King listened to Epirotic music, he suspected that it contained "something behind the sound—an unknown intentionality, a function." In the book's final chapters, he speculates that human musical expression began not as entertainment or ritual but as a tool, "intended to heal as if it contained within itself potency, a spiritual utility." He believes that though most music lost this ancient function, Epirus's still possesses it. Indeed, Epirotic musicians view themselves as healers, as Yianis Chaldoupis, a *klarino* player from Parakalamos, told King:

When I play in a village I feel more like a psychiatrist or a doctor than a musician. I look around to see what the people need, what they need to hear for their souls. I look around to see what their pain is, what hurts them. Every village is different and they have different spiritual and emotional needs.

In claiming that Epirotic music has preserved its prehistoric function, King stresses that it has "steadfastly resisted assimilation—it shunned outside influences and seemed to only reference itself." There are, however, reasons to think that Epirotic music is not as pure as he suggests. Demetris Dallas, a Greek poet who has translated song lyrics for King, has noted the influence of music from Macedonia and Istanbul, as well as Italian opera, on songs that have been in the repertory for two hundred years. Even the Epirotic records King fell in love with, now almost one hundred years old, reflected instrumentation that had only existed since the mid-nineteenth century, a few generations after the clarinet was introduced to the region by the Ottomans. Tellingly, King never supports his claims about purity with concrete comparisons to music from the Balkans, Turkey, or even neighboring areas within Greece such as Thessaly, whose folk music bears many similarities to Epirus's.

This isn't the only major change whose importance King downplays. "At some point," he writes, "the occupation of making music in Epirus was entrusted to the Gypsies," and to this day most musicians in Epirus are Roma. Roma first settled in Greece six hundred years ago, coming in larger numbers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Epirus as in other parts of Europe, Roma have been marginalized—until the mid-twentieth century, the only careers Roma men could pursue were those of smithy, basket weaver, cobbler, and musician—and viewed with suspicion by the Greek villagers, who believed that Roma possessed supernatural powers. They, in turn, kept

<sup>3</sup>The title of the documentary comes from the Seikilos epitaph, a tombstone for a woman named Euterpe who died about two thousand years ago. The epitaph contains musical notation for a *mirologi* that also appears on it:

*While you live, shine  
Have no mourning at all  
Life exists a short while  
And Time demands its fee.*

their distance from Greeks, living in separate enclaves and speaking a different language among themselves.

The transmission of Epirotic music from Greeks to Roma may have caused a major interruption in the continuity of its traditions, but King doesn't explore the implications this might have. How can we know that the earliest Roma musicians in Epirus didn't profoundly alter the styles and forms of local songs? It's clear that *mirologia* have ancient roots, but how can we be sure of the connection between present-day Epirotic music and what existed before the Roma arrived?

Nor does King address what it would mean for a cultural heritage to be carried by an ethnic group that has been excluded from that culture. Although Roma now have more economic opportunities than they had fifty years ago, prejudice against them remains. King writes compassionately about the Roma's plight, but he ultimately romanticizes it, arguing that their cultural and economic vulnerabilities have "driven [Roma musicians] to perform in extraordinary ways," and that although most non-Roma musicians "have mastered the technique... there is thinness in the emotional depth" of their playing.<sup>4</sup> King doesn't directly argue that authentic expression can only come from members of subjugated groups, or that subjugation is necessary for the production of great art, but at times these seem implied by his aesthetic philosophy, which values suffering above all else.

Patrick Leigh Fermor wrote of Epirus's villages in the early 1960s that "nothing substantial had changed since the pilgrimage of Childe Harold and little enough since the reign of Pyrrhus" in the third century BCE. But others who visited soon after Fermor began to notice alterations. The English travel writer Arthur Foss, who went to Epirus in 1972, met a group of local women playing cards and watching a portable TV near the ruins of Dodona, the ancient oracle of Zeus, and he quotes locals saying, sometimes gleefully, that things had changed irrevocably. In the 1980s, the clarinetist Pericles Halkias, who emigrated to America and belongs to a dynasty that has produced some of the finest Epirotic musicians, said, "I don't want to go back to Greece, because of the deterioration of the music. I cannot hear the things that I like to hear." One can imagine an Epirote saying something similar two hundred years ago about the newfangled clarinet.

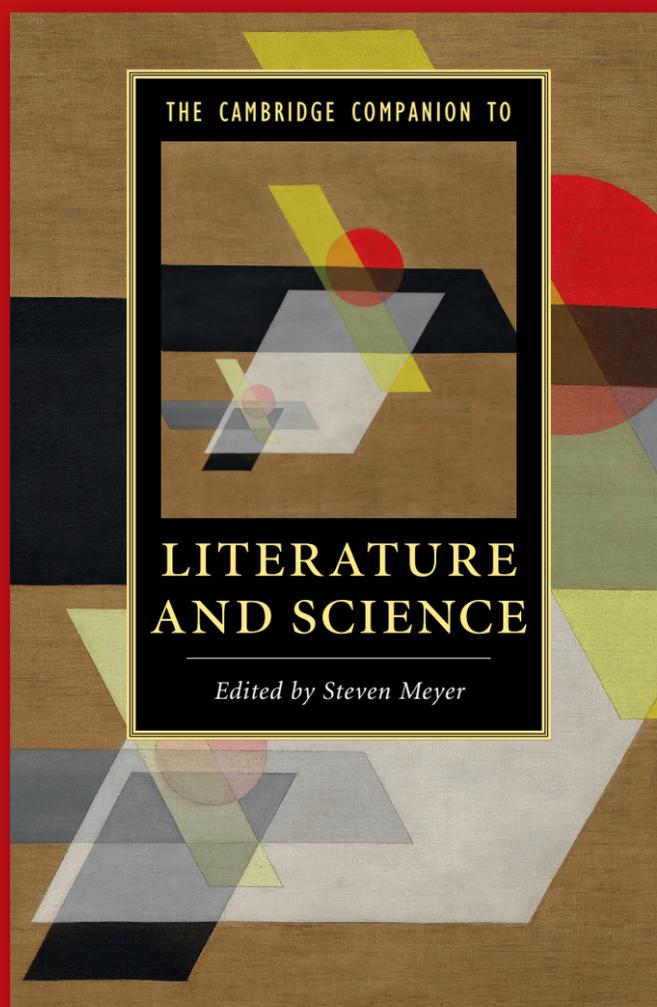
Younger Greeks continue to return to their ancestral villages for the *panegyria*, and some have given new life to Epirus's traditions by adapting its sounds to rock and electronic music. The line between authentic and inauthentic can never be firmly drawn—King concedes that modern Epirotic music is only "relatively pure" compared to that of a hundred years ago, though there's little doubt that he would view any musicians who deviate from tradition as apostates. The question is whether, as the young grow older, they will keep the music at *panegyria* as it was in their youth or introduce innovations, as their predecessors did. If they do, King will surely be there to complain. □

<sup>4</sup>For more about the music played by Roma and the long history of the romanticization of gypsy musicians, see Alan Ashton-Smith, *Gypsy Music: The Balkans and Beyond* (Reaktion, 2017).

# JUST OUT

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