

# 31ST GREEK FESTIVAL OF SYDNEY

## MELBOURNE BASED BAND REBETIKI PAY TRIBUTE TO THE GENIUS OF VASILIS TSITSANIS

all had the same cultural vein. It took a lot of effort, a lot of blood, sweat and tears, but these migrants through hardship managed to gain acceptance. They spread their music, although they were careful to change things, by eliminating the eastern influences in their songs and slowly the smyrneiko school died out. The violin disappeared, and so did the santouri, the oud. Then Vamvakaris came to the fore and started playing songs of the underground, of the hashish world, the world of stabbings and violence and living outside of the law. We have thought that it would be great to do a concert about Vamvakari, but there is something special about Tsitsani. He started a live conversation with the Greek people. Before Tsitsani the rebetes were marginalized, after him they became accepted. The music became mainstream, and touched the hearts of the nation.

**How does Rebetiki approach a song? Do you stick to the original or do you modify it to suit yourselves first and then the audience?**

That's a good question. We started off by trying to be truthful to the original and that is still the driving force of the band. But it's very, very hard, to the degree that it's almost inevitable to add your own touch. But we tried to maintain the original theme of the songs, at least with the orchestration and with a lot of the playing. We don't try to copy it note by note, but we try to keep that feeling. You need to be true to these songs and you need to try your hardest not to stuff them up. It's our cultural heritage and you don't want to fool around with it.

**But hasn't traditional music changed a lot before it was passed down to us? Isn't it true that if you don't build on tradition, it has the tendency to die?**

That is very important: you need to keep tradition alive. The important thing about that is also to help it move forward. All of modern composers in Greece have taken what they can from tradition, they have taken the instruments and brought the music into the 21st century. That's fantastic. There are many composers that do a great job and are faithful to our music and traditional. But there also many that are not. Tradition is an evolving thing. We need to create our own but also respect what we have found. In the beginning we felt like we were studying the music. But after a while we realized we love it more than we love to study it. That was the driving force: to take what we could and what we like and bring it back to life.

**Rebetiki have also released a couple of albums.**

We have. They were mainly covers and orchestrations of old songs that we fiddled around with a bit. Sometimes you can't avoid being a little creative and try and do something with your own flavor. We fooled around a bit with some old rebetika we tried to play in a modern way. It's a bit of a mixture.



Photo: Georgia Metaxas

**How do you approach songwriting?**

The last four of five years we have acquired a nice little collection of originals, still with the instruments we have and love. We have recorded them, but haven't come around to releasing them. I think that's an inevitable step to do something original, when you have been playing tradition music and have been drawing from the wealth of information. We have a few people here in Melbourne, people that we try and work with that write wonderful poetry. We are working on releasing something in that vein very soon. But how do we approach songwriting? That's an interesting question. Usually I find that I have something in my head that bother me, a social issue or something. I don't mind love songs but I prefer something with a bit of satire, something that has bit of social impact. Sometimes we will sit together, start with a little phrase and build on it, add instruments, work on it and then record it. You experiment, you keep at it and the song evolves. Songs are like building something: you have to work hard at them, go back and look at them again. They don't leave you alone sometimes, they keep eating at you. But at some stage you have to stop and say "this is the best I can do, I am going to record it" and that's it.

**Have you introduced your own compositions into your live repertoire?**

We used to play at this place here in Melbourne for around six years. But we

haven't played live for a while as we all have a lot on our plates. But we did play a lot of these songs live. Because we wrote in that tradition it was hard to tell them apart from original rebetika songs. When people are not paying attention, we sneak them in (laughs)!

**Personally as a music lover I find it more interesting when musicians throw in their own compositions, rather than constantly interpreting other people's songs.**

It makes you feel alive! Everything else is great but playing your own songs is a life giving force. Not from a kind of pseudo point of view, but it does make you feel alive. Another thing about playing music with your friends is that it's a fun thing to do. It's fun to open a window into this world of the 20s and 30s, it's fun to listen to that world.

**You were saying earlier that you haven't played live for a while. Is that because of a lack of proper venues?**

There are still venues here in Melbourne, but most of them are restaurants, not the kind of venues that suit the music. I don't expect the music to be the focal point of someone's night out, but I don't find these venues appropriate. When we are playing Vamvakaris, people are enjoying their saganaki! I don't enjoy it as much as I used and that is one of the reasons I sort of took a step back. If we find a venue that suits the music, that's a wonderful experience. Apart from the changes in the social aspects, there are also those in

politics and economics that have changed the landscape. Sometimes the conditions are not ideal. I have a lot of friends that don't mind it so much, they still play at restaurants. They need to work and they have no other choice. If you want to work and play Greek music you have to go to a Greek tavern, a zaharoplastio (cake shop).

**It might have to do with the core message of rebetiko. When people make money they stop connecting to it somehow.**

The funny thing is that this type of music has become quite popular in Melbourne. People love the genre. After 20 years it's a constant trend. But I think people have another focus. Plus things have changed. Melbourne itself has changed.

**What can the audience at your Sydney performance expect from Rebetiki?**

We are doing a very skeletal type of performance. It's only the four of us, we don't have a violin or an accordion, so we are going to make it a very bare, essential performance. There is only guitar, bouzouki, baglama and a tzoura. It's very sparse musically, but I think this way is a good way to play music unadorned, without basses, without piano. Tsitsani used some of this instruments later on, but it was forced upon him by the record companies. All he wanted was a baglama, a bouzouki, a guitar... But we will try and go through a scope of Tsitsanis' songs, from the time he started writing as a teenager to the time of his death.