

SOUNDING OUT...

ATHENS

Thanks to the Olympics, Athens is expecting a huge influx of visitors this summer. But a night of *retsina* and *rebétika* beats an unfinished Olympic stadium. **Marc Dubin** reports

Athens, as the Greeks like to say, is Greece's largest village – its population of over four million often just one generation removed from the remotest corners of the land. This social profile long meant a decidedly parochial music scene, but things began to change after the colonels' junta fell in 1974.

First came a revival of live *rebétika*, the music of the Greek social margins which drew on urban Asia Minor roots but developed in the refugee quarters of Athens and Piraeus after the 1923 arrival of over a million forcibly exiled Orthodox Christians from Anatolia. The rebellious essence of *rebétika* appealed to a generation grown up under the dictatorship and repelled by its propagandistic use of rural folk music. At the revival's early-80s peak, every neighbourhood had its little *stéki* or joint where enthusiastic musicians attempted to reproduce the ethos of the clandestine *tekédhes* (hash-smoking speakeasies) of the 20s and 30s, or the more legitimate music clubs of the 40s and 50s.

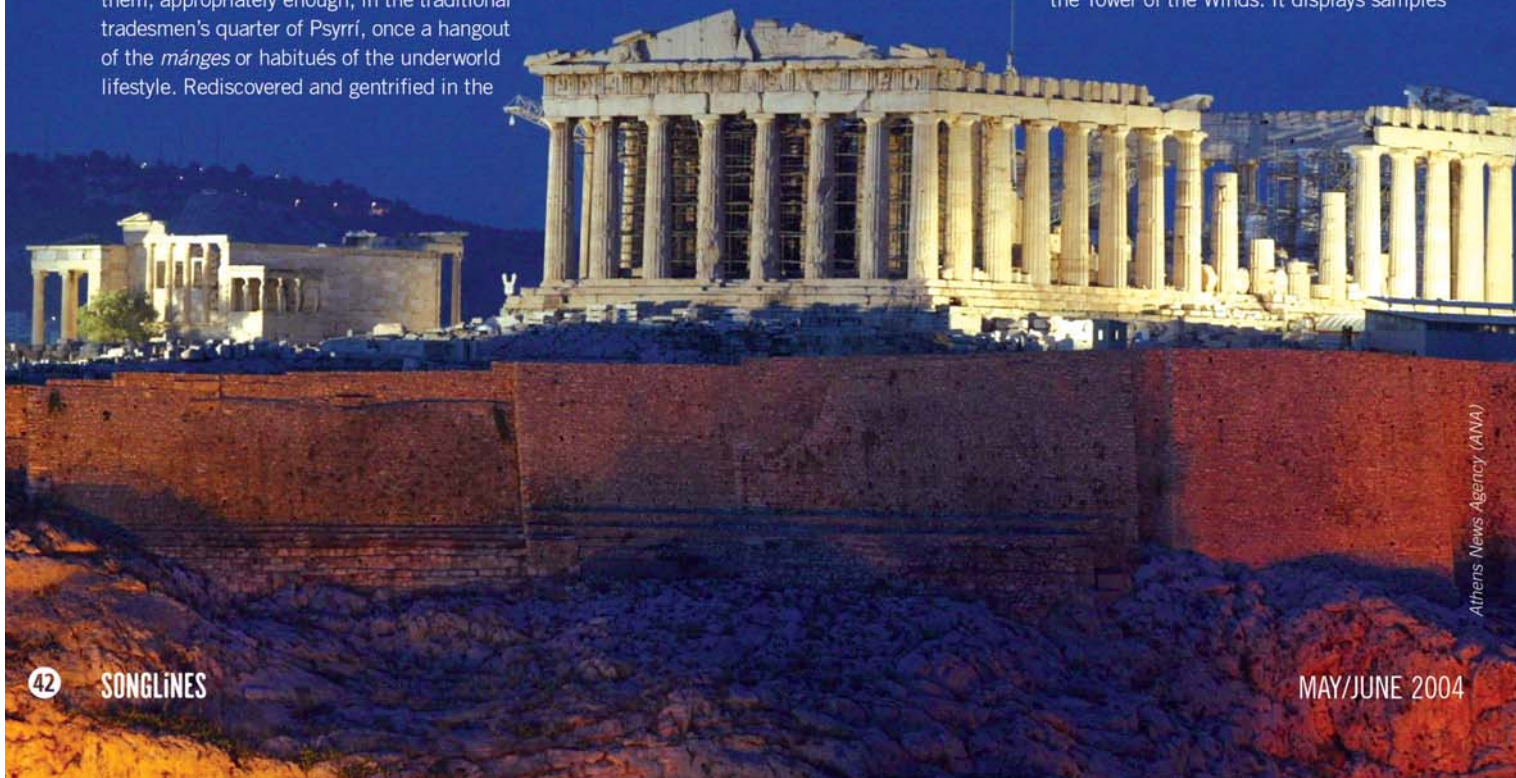
Times, and trends, have moved on, with less than a score of clubs now devoted to tasteful, unamplified *rebétika* – most of them, appropriately enough, in the traditional tradesmen's quarter of *Psyrri*, once a hangout of the *mánges* or habitués of the underworld lifestyle. Rediscovered and gentrified in the

past decade, *Psyrri*'s become home to a vibrant musical scene. Since the millennium, abandoned industrial premises in *Gázi* (named for its gas works) and *Rouf* in the west, have also been adapted as clubbing venues. South of *Psyrri*, the colourful 19th-century *Pláka* district appeals visually to tourists but its tavernas offer indifferent food, while local music venues never really recovered from being closed down by the colonels. Other than these central neighbourhoods, there's no special concentration of Athenian nightlife, aside from refugee-settled (and historically Communist) *Kesarianí*, mostly hovels and dirt lanes until the 50s. Since 1991, roughly a million immigrants have poured into Greece, and the Greeks themselves have taken to international travel in a big way, resulting for the first time in a decent selection of foreign music performances and exotic restaurants.

Music, drinking and eating commonly go together in Greece, but a musical night out in Athens can be of near-Scandinavian expense. A meal usually starts at €20, while a bottle of wine can easily be more and there's often a minimum consumption of €30-35 per

person. If you don't fancy the expense of the more formal venues, there are equally entertaining, normally priced *koutoukia* (musical tavernas) or *mezedhopolia* (like a Greek tapas bar), where performances take place towards midnight on an unpredictable basis; guitars and accordions on the wall are unslung from their hooks by often gifted amateurs. Music or no, you'll eat better here – typical fare includes *loukánika* (country sausages), *bakaliáros skordhaliá* (hake with garlic sauce), seafood, fried vegetable slices and house wine to wash it all down. It's rarely more than €17 per head.

Athens has two weekly Greek-only listings magazines: the well-established *Athinorama* (www.athinorama.gr), which tends to be more thorough and easier to decipher, and relative newcomer *Time Out* (www.timeoutathens.gr). They're both out on Thursdays and sold at the better-stocked *periptera* (kiosks). In keeping with the progressive globalisation of Greece, Athens now has an excellent world music/jazz radio station, Kosmos (93.6FM). A *Pláka* bright spot is the Museum of Greek Popular Musical Instruments at *Dhioyéous 1-3*, overlooking the octagonal structure known as the Tower of the Winds. It displays samples



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of almost everything that has ever been played in Greece from *bouzoúkis* and *lýras* to bagpipes and bells worn by carnival masquers. Headphones are provided for sampling the music.

REBÉTIKA VENUES

Perivoli t'Ouranou

About the only recommendable Pláka outfit, with 1980s rebétika revivalist Yiorgos Tziortzis leading the band. Thirty-five euros minimum per person, including set meal. Closed Sundays and Mondays; open until 4am other nights. (Lysikrátous 19, Pláka, metro Akrópoli, +30 210 32 35 517).

Plateia Iroön

Located at the heart of the district, this informal musical restaurant was the first to open in Psyrrí in 1994. Guitars and bouzoúkis hanging by the bar herald quality acoustic music (Tuesday-Sunday nights, also Saturday and Sunday afternoons). The food's good too, especially *plevrótous* mushrooms and Cretan cheese-and-tomato pie. (Platía Iroön 1, Psyrrí, metro Monastiráki, +30 210 32 11 915, www.psyrri.gr/platia_iron/en/index.html).



Protoyenos

Established for five years now, this simply decorated, little-publicised restaurant with traditional wood and wicker chairs hosts acoustic rebétika on a traditional *pálko* (musicians' platform). Open Tuesday-Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons. The €20 menu includes house wine. (Protoyénous 10, Psyrrí, metro Monastiráki, +30 210 32 28 658).

Rakosyllektes

The name of this place, with its wood and stone interior, means "collectors of *tsipourá*", and the management has chosen the best of this firewater to serve with good mezédhes. Live acoustic rebétika Saturday and Sunday afternoons. (Karaískáki & Esópou 2, Psyrrí, metro Monastiráki, +30 210 32 22 240).



Stoa Athanaton

Atmospheric first-floor room, decorated with old paintings, photos and knick-knacks, in the Athens meat market. A largely Greek crowd attends in force – it'll be packed most days even for the afternoon set – to eat, drink, dance and sing along to well-loved rebétika and *laiká*. Programmes Mondays-Saturdays at 3.30pm and 11pm. Regular evening musicians include Takis Binis (who began his career with Tsitsanis in the 1950s), Haroula, Manolis Mexandonakis and Dimitris Tsaousakis (son of the great 50s star Prodhromos). Wine from €18, food from €15. (Sofokléous 19, central bazaar area, metro Monastiráki, +30 210 32 14 362).

KOUTOÚKIA AND MEZEDHOPOLÍA

Askimopapo

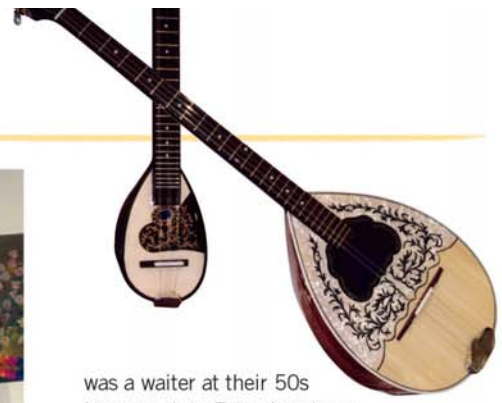
Going for almost three decades now, this classic mezzedhopolío has a *latérna* (cranked barrel organ) and unamplified music on Sunday afternoons. The food's excellent and reasonable. (Iónon 61, Áno Petrálona, metro Petrálona, +30 210 24 63 282).

Koutouki tou Othona

On the ground floor of an old mansion, adorned with photos of poets, actors and shadow-puppet figures; occasional rebétika music from a young band. Open nightly. (Kimíseos Theotókou 11, Kesarianí, +30 210 75 11 241).

To Steki tou Mitsara

Proprietor 'Mitsaras' (Dimitris Malissovias), a country boy from central Greece, is a self-taught master of the bouzoúki, and knew the legendary Tsitsanis and Bellou back when he



was a waiter at their 50s Hama club. Engaging decor of archival rebétika photos and suspended instruments. Reservations required Friday and Saturday nights; open nightly. (Kefalliniás 27, corner Konstantinopóleos, Bournázi district, +30 210 57 66 367).

OTHER MUSIC VENUES

Stavros tou Notou

The main hall consistently books top, cutting-edge Greek musicians, most recently Eleni Tsaligopoulou. Ten euros admission, plus €30 minimum consumption per table. The 'club' annexe (nightly) has featured Nikos Portokaloglou and Sokratis Malamas in the past; entrance €6-15 depending on who's playing. (Tharýpou 37 corner Frantzí, Néos Kósmos, metro Syngrou/Fix, +30 210 92 26 975).



Vox

Smart club, opened 2002, where popular singers like Eleftheria Arvanitaki perform for weeks at a time; an overcrowded dining area downstairs, plus two balconies. A table for four costs €185 on Friday or Saturday, including a bottle of whisky or two bottles of wine. Open Thursday-Sunday evenings; booking essential. (Ierá Odhós 16, Gázi, metro Thisío, +30 210 34 10 000).

Axum

Gathering place of the city's appreciable Ethiopian community, with authentic Ethiopian cooking and a (somewhat unreliable) band accompanying singers and dancers on Friday and Saturday nights. (Dhrossopóulu 183, Platía Koliátsou, Patisía, metro Káto Patisía, +30 210 201 17 74).