

DER Podcast: Mary Zournazi on MY REMBETIKA BLUES

by Seth Kurke, Program Manager, Collections & Outreach, DER



Mary Zournazi on set and behind the camera for the memorable scene with Stelios and Jim.

SETH KURKE: It's a pleasure to meet you. And thank you for taking the time to meet me and discuss your film *My Rembetika Blues*. I've just got to say that as a music lover and someone who has traveled to Greece and Turkey, the film resonated with me despite my lack of familiarity with Rembetika. It was a pleasure to be able to learn about this style of music. As we all know, every great story has great characters with richness and depth and complexities. Your film is no exception. One of the most interesting characters in the film was you.. Could you talk about the role that you take as a character in the film and how that influenced the story's narrative?

MARY ZOURNAZI: *My Rembetika Blues* started out as trying to think about my relationship to the music and what is this music, how it affected me in a really deep way like a body memory. When I heard it I was like "what is this telling me? What is this music? Why has it affected me?"

When I initially did the film, it had several cuts, probably about four major run-throughs. And at the fourth one, there was no real story cause I wasn't actually in it. It was sort of piecing together some ideas, and the music, its history, the revolutionary aspects of it.

Also I wanted to draw out the cross-cultural nature of music as well. But at the fourth major cut, there was something missing. It was my history... of my grandmother and her parallel relationship to the music. So I went to Egypt and Turkey to trace that history, which helped bring a narrative arc to the film.

I see my character as a mechanism to allow audiences to connect and lead them through a story, as I did in my previous film *Dogs of Democracy*. It's something that the great Agnes Varda spoke about. She sees herself as part of the work itself. And that's how I see myself as well, as part of the work. So my documentaries and the ones that I am going to make in the future will have a similar kind of style, which allows people to get a real sense of the personal. But it's not only my own personal experience. It's a universal personal that's trying to connect people deeply to issues that matter. And by inserting myself as a character is one way of doing it.

SK: And it worked brilliantly.

Not to go too far off track,, but part of a conversation I had recently regarding your film was your approach to having somebody, a character, that's connected on a personal level to the story take the viewer along for the ride. In a way it is like being invited to a party where you don't know anybody and somebody's able to take you through and introduce you to everyone. So speaking to that, in your film you are taking us through and introducing us to some of these characters. We get to know an Orthodox priest. We have a rapper. I'm an avid record collector and to see the record store, I'm like, if I get a chance to interview you, I need to know about this record store and the owner because to me, these are the little embers that keep the flame alive, the greater flame. So could you talk about your journey of bringing these characters together, how you met them, and how they came to be part of the story you were telling?

MZ: A lot of the characters came about organically. I would run into somebody and they would say, you know, you should meet so-and-so; there was that kind of flow: where I would meet someone and then get introduced to someone else.

But then there are often random encounters on the street like the buskers in Athens, Greece. There were the four guys you see in the film, but in fact in the group there was a woman singer as well, but she wasn't available at the time to film. Another busker in Thessaloniki I happened to run into was just singing a song and he, in a way, encapsulated everything that I wanted to capture about the music. One of the other characters is talking to him while I'm filming, and he says, "yeah, this song, you know, it comes from everywhere. It's a folk song and everybody claims this song as their own." That was one of the things that every character in the film, every element of the film, was trying to look

at: the intercultural, amazing amount of identities or sounds or mixes of sounds or experiences that make up who we are. It doesn't directly answer your question, but it answers one part of your question. I mean, somebody like Negros tou Moria. I came to him through a friend who said there's this hip hop artist that is totally influenced by rembetika. And so that's how I got to meet him. That was just by word of mouth. And then he turns out to be this incredible character.

SK: You mentioned the word "genre" and applying it to something so vast, fluid and adaptable and the way that things get labeled when they're trying to commodify it for, let's say Amazon music. I love when there's something a little bit deeper and richer, that can dissolve those borders, so that you can look beyond it and understand that this is still evolving. And that it also carries with it a deep past.

MZ: Many people in Greece would hold rembetika as their own, and it is uniquely Greek. And I think what I'm saying is that, of course it is. But it is mixed in with this other history. Which meant that there were a lot of Turkish, Asian, Middle Eastern sounds that, as I show in the film, the Turks and the Greeks have, sort of, always been -in a sense- at war with each other and neither would admit that they've influenced each other. This music is a way of sharing. Actually the music is like a child of all these kinds of cultural connections.

SK: Thinking about the film and the music, I got a sense of the great Homeric stories of the Odyssey and Iliad and it seems that in a way you were taking your own personal odyssey. But also you're tracking the music's odyssey as well.

Shifting gears, you mentioned Agnes Varda as an influence. Are there any other filmmakers that inspired you for this film?

MZ: There's two great heroes for me. One is Agnes Varda. The other one is Wim Wenders who I've written a book with. I think cinematically, with his fiction and documentary, his style of filmmaking has deeply impacted me. Just his sense of space and capturing a kind of beauty of the road movie. *Until the End of the World* is one great odyssey too, you know. That's one great road movie. So I learned a lot from him and I've learned a lot through watching his films and films that he loves. I've had that kind of deep connection with filmmaking from a great master. I feel very privileged to have had and continue to have this relationship.

Agnes Varda and Wim are both amazing at bringing stories that don't necessarily have conflict in them and I'm interested in those stories that even though our lives may be full of conflict and terror and trauma and all of that, how do you bring to screen stories that are trying to heal or provide an alternative that actually enables us to understand experiences like forced migration or war. In Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, the way she puts herself in the film and the story itself, which is about how much we waste and the people that are left out

of societies because of the way in which capitalism works. I met Agnes in Paris actually and I wanted to make a film about her. But she really was an auteur of her own. So she didn't want anyone to make a movie about her. Soon after, I went to Greece and saw the stray dogs. I thought, if I can't make a film about her I can make one about something else. And that's how I got started.

So I think being able to tell stories like this, these are the master storytellers. This is what propelled me to make *Dogs of Democracy*, my film about stray dogs in Athens. There's a moment I captured in the film with three dogs crossing a busy street in Syntagma Square (Athens) and the car actually has to stop because the dogs are just barking at the cars as a pedestrian would.

SK: When I visited Athens, that is one of the things I remembered, watching the dogs travel the streets. They have somewhere to go. They had business to take care of. One of the important points made in the film is there was an immigrant influence to the music. How has it resonated with audiences that you've shown the film to?

MZ: Oh, it's been really interesting actually because the film is about the experience of exile and being forced out of your home and the trauma that goes with that. Not only the immediate generation, but the subsequent generation. So I'm talking about the forced migration of my grandmother and one-hundred years later the anniversary of the great fire of Smyrna, which is this September. I still feel, I still feel, you know, and I haven't lived it, but I can feel how it carries on.

During the Greek premiere of the film, I was sitting next to the Australian ambassador who is also Greek and has a similar background to my own. As I am sitting next to him, he's sniffing and I'm thinking I'm going to get COVID, you know, I mean, I'd already had Delta. Then as it turned out afterwards, he was telling me he was crying because it really moved him. It really touched something in him. It's not only Greeks. While Greeks really have responded to it very emotionally, it's also been how the other people in the audience as well have been moved by it from some level. They can relate to it because it's a story about love. And it's about loss and memory.

The film often has a song "Smyrneiko Minore" [originally sung by Marika Papagika] that gets played in different ways throughout several scenes. The singer in the song has this voice that, you know, it's beyond anything of a human range and it just comes from this real sense of reality where the depths of these experiences come from. If people who don't know about that history... they're shocked, they're shocked by the music and song and the experience. So it makes people connect more deeply than what it would be if it was just a documentary that tells you statistics or historical facts; it allows you to feel it. And I think

that's what film does: it can move you in a way that other artistic works cannot. Film has all of the elements. You have the sound, the music, the image.

SK: People talk about the death of cinema as a collective art form. And we all stream now out of convenience and accessibility but there's something also that is sacred about cinema and it needs to be protected.

MZ: Absolutely. And, this is something Wim Wenders really wants to preserve: the sacredness of it, making sure it stays alive because it's a very different experience to watch it on a computer and then to watch it with an audience of 200 people who, either laughing or crying or, you know, however they are responding, it's totally transformative. We need to keep those spaces.

SK: What are your next steps, do you have any other films in the works?

MZ: I do. I haven't made it public but it will be a similar style of filmmaking. It will be about animals and animal-human welfare and new ideas of security. It's in response to what we've been going through, like the effects of COVID. It's also more of an ongoing story that we keep facing, and then I'm actually going to make a fiction film as well. It's called *The Cousins* and I'm co-writing with an Australian author, Christos Tsiolkas. That will be, for want of a better word, a bit more commercial.

SK: That sounds great, keep us posted as you continue. You'd already spoken about the music scenes of how they happen serendipitously. How did you make the choice to weave them so seamlessly in the final cut of the film?

MZ: That took so much work because as I said there were four major cuts. But in the end there was something missing and it was the way my story came in and also the consideration of where the music came in and did the music come first or did my story come first. That is how I came to work with a story editor which came about quite late in the piece. And she was fabulous. She just asked me all of these questions. At first I was quite resistant but she would really push me and I think her questions really helped me to think about how to reimagine some of the sequences and how to move one section forward.

But the most important thing I should say is the music composer of the film, K.BHTA. His music truly helps the film move along. He worked on *Dogs of Democracy* and we got a good working relationship. His soundtrack is a modern soundtrack, but he uses melodies of rembetika and transforms them into this electronic sound. It's quite an important element of the film. His work is quite strong. When you find people that you can work with that are really good, you want to keep that community. We've got a good understanding of each

other. I love his work, and he's very respectful of mine.

SK: Is there any movement that might be happening because of this film to get younger people involved, whether it's through hip hop music or any other avenue, like showing the film at schools or music conservatories?

MZ: Yeah, that's what I'm actually hoping will happen. And it has to a certain degree. It's played at different places, festivals, libraries, that kind of thing. But for me, it is actually a film that speaks to diasporas, but also war, different cross-cultural identities, Indigenous identities, black identity, you know, things of that nature. And the people, the characters are so incredible, I mean, you couldn't create more incredible characters. But I think people like Negros Tou Moria. He is now doing rembetika concerts. I mean, he never used to do that before the film per se. Now he is influencing younger people.

SK: Rembetika has a darkly humorous side that comes from tough and familiar experiences that's recognizable to many people, especially in the early days of the genre's traditions. Has it continued to attract those facing tough times?

MZ: Yeah, I think so. The music enables connection and humility and bonding. And that was something I wanted to show. Humans have the capacity to do that and through music is one way of doing it. Music has this kind of connection to feeling and soul and all of that, but it also is a mode of telling stories that I think is embedded within historical traditions of storytelling and music.

SK: What has the reaction been in the Greek Australian community?

MZ: I've shown it so far in four different cities. In Brisbane, which is up north from Sydney, it is becoming an international city and there is a Greek community there. It was such a lovely audience. It was a full house and they just were so moved by it. People were just coming up afterwards and telling me their own stories. It was really wonderful.

SK: What would you say are some takeaways that you would want viewers to get from My Rembetika Blues? You have mentioned a few things...memory, loss, war; is there something perhaps even more universal or something more philosophical or even spiritual that you might want people to take from it?

MZ: I made the film to get a really deep sense of feeling and loss that you have when you lose people or you lose a country or you lose relationships to your kin. But it's also about the potential for building joy, love, community and bonds. So I guess the takeaway is that we can connect and create more joyful experiences as opposed to constantly being traumatized

by our experiences. We have to document those histories and those experiences. We also need to find ways of telling stories that enable the kind of transformation of those traumatic experiences, to show that there are ways of healing, too. ■

This is a full transcript of the interview “DER Podcast: Mary Zournazi on MY REMBETIKA BLUES” which appears on the Documentary Educational Resources website:

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