Echoes of Greece in American Soundscapes: The Tsibiti Guitar Phenomenon and the Blues Connection

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Introduction: Modernity, Immigration, and Music

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, remarkable developments unfolded across nearly all domains of human activity. Driven by industrialisation, the intensification of both collective and individual pursuits led to an unprecedented flourishing of intellectual life. The economy, demography, education, the arts, and politics were all transformed in the whirlwind of modernity. This shift permanently reshaped the cultural landscape of humankind. Scientific and industrial innovations gave rise to a range of new consumer products. Along the trade routes established during the colonial era, global networks emerged that facilitated not only commerce but also the rapid circulation of cultural products on an unprecedented scale.[1]

From its inception, the recording industry has both utilised and expanded these global networks. Music became increasingly detached from live performance and acquired a new form of portability.[2] Initially stored on cylinders and later on discs, it spread rapidly across cultural boundaries. In this way, the technology of sound recording and reproduction contributed to the formation of an immense corpus of musical works, one that remains in a constant dialectical relationship with each new act of musical creation. The cosmopolitanism established in the nineteenth century — mediated through discography — profoundly shaped

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[1] See Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Blackwell, 2009); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (Pantheon Books, 1987).
[2] See Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (University of California Press, 2010), 17–21.

the development of music.[3] As a result, diverse musical expressions were no longer confined to their local or regional communities but actively participated in shaping a repertoire with universal characteristics: they influenced this repertoire and, in turn, were shaped by it.

These cultural exchanges were particularly prominent in the United States, a key hub where heterogeneous populations converged. The so-called 'New World' became a powerful magnet for immigration as people crossed the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in pursuit of improved living conditions. Cultural interactions within the United States were both intense and wide-ranging, involving white American citizens, African American descendants of the millions of enslaved Africans forcibly transported during the colonial era, and the numerous ethnic groups comprising the new waves of immigrants. These dynamics gave rise to unprecedented urban environments. Major American cities expanded rapidly, acquiring distinctly metropolitan characteristics. A striking example is New York City, where the population grew from approximately 800,000 in 1860 to 4.8 million by 1910.[4]

An unparalleled degree of musical syncretism naturally came to characterise this cultural landscape.[5] The local repertoires of immigrant communities were subject to a remarkable process of osmosis. Historical discography bears clear witness to this phenomenon: record catalogues from the first half of the twentieth century reflect a

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[3] Indicative bibliography: Anastasia Belina, Kaarina Kilpiö, & Derek B. Scott (eds.), *Music History and Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2019); Ruth F. Davis & Brian Oberlander (eds.), *Music and Encounter at the Mediterranean Crossroads: A Sea of Voices* (Routledge, 2021); Franco Fabbri, 'A Mediterranean Triangle: Naples, Smyrna, Athens', in *Neapolitan Postcards: The Canzone Napoletana as Transnational Subject*, eds. Goffredo Plastino & Joseph Sciorra (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 29–44. Also see the collection 'Cosmopolitanism in Greek Historical Discography' that Níkos Ordoulídis and Leonárdos Kounádis created in Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, https://tinyurl.com/ykm7n93z.

[4] Michael Herbert Fisher, *Migration: A World History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 90.

[5] Níkos Ordoulídis, 'I Ellinikí Mousikí stin Amerikí' *Ta Néa*, December 17, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/225enfcv. All Greek personal names, song titles, and bibliographic references are presented in transliteration. In the bibliography at the end of the article, in addition to the transliterated titles, English translations of the originals are also provided

pronounced multiculturalism marked by stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.[6] Immigrant populations represented a significant market segment, one that the two major American record companies (Columbia and Victor) actively sought to engage. Musicians from almost every European country recorded material intended for the respective national audiences within the immigrant communities.[7]

Simultaneously, the cosmopolitan environments of urban centres fostered stylistic hybridity and the adaptation of older musical traditions, including their gradual 'Americanisation'. British folk ballads, Neapolitan songs, Spanish folk melodies, Viennese waltzes, excerpts from opera and popular musical theatre, as well as various Latin idioms, represent some of the key elements within the musical corpus that took shape in the United States. In certain instances, musical expressions relinquished their local character to varying degrees, acquiring global dimensions and contributing to a more modern and commercially oriented aesthetic experience.[8] Tango and jazz serve as notable examples of this transformation.

These interactions found clear expression in recorded products. As the recording industry advanced both technologically and commercially, demand for its output increased at an extraordinary pace. The figures illustrate the scale of this growth: in 1900, sales of records and cylinders in the United States totalled approximately 3 million; by 1921, the number of records sold had risen to around 140 million.[9] An ever-growing number of musicians

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[6] See for example the *General Catalog of Greek, Turkish and Albanian 'Orthophonic' records* (February 1939) which lists tangos, foxtrots, rhumbas, waltzes, and serenades alongside rebetika, oriental music, as well as comedic sketches and songs, https://tinyurl.com/ybmp2h5b.
[7] Ronald Cohen, *Folk music: The Basics* (Routledge, 2006), 43–4.
[8] William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.
[9] Pekka Gronow, 'The Record Industry: The Growth of a Mass Medium', *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 59.

participated in recording activity as companies sought to respond to evolving consumer expectations.

The Greek-speaking communities were not excluded from these cultural exchanges. Although the number of Greek immigrants was considerably smaller than that of their British or Italian counterparts, they nevertheless represented a noteworthy consumer market.[10] Recordings of Greek interest in the United States encompassed a wide array of genres: urban folk (*rebétika*), folk songs from the mainland (*dimotiká*) and the islands (*nisiótika*), light popular music (*elafrá*), *amanédes* (a form of improvised vocal music), songs from musical theatre (operettas and revues), comic sketches, popular songs from Europe and the United States adapted with Greek lyrics, church hymns, and marches. This extensive discography was further enriched by records that had initially been recorded and released in Greece and were subsequently reissued in the United States, as well as by recordings made in Greece but released exclusively for the American market.[11]

Greek musicians in the United States frequently toured the country, performing in venues located in cities with significant Greek-speaking populations. However, they did not operate in isolation.[12] Greek orchestras often collaborated with musicians of diverse ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural character of urban centres. Audiences were rarely ethnically homogeneous, yet they often shared cultural familiarity: Greeks, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, Albanians, and other Balkan communities frequently celebrated in the same venues. This cultural fluidity was also reflected in the discographic output. Record companies

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[10] Aléxandros Kitroéf, 'I Iperatlantikí Metanástefsi', in *Istoría Tis Elládas Tou 20ou Eóna. Vol. 1, Part 1: I Aparkhés 1900-1922*, ed. Níkos Chatziiosíf (Vivliórama, 1999), 128; Yióta Touryéli, *I Brouklides: Éllines Metanástes Stin Amerikí Kai Kinonikí Metashimatismí Stis Kinótites Katayoyís 1890–1940* (Ethnikó Kéntro Kinonikón Erevnón, 2020), 44–7.

[11] Richard Spottswood, *Ethnic Music on Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893-1942. Vol. 3: Eastern Europe* (University of Illinois Press, 1990), 1133–234.

[12] George Katsaros noted that musicians were expected to have a broad repertoire encompassing Greek, Arabic, Armenian, and Turkish songs. See Steve Frangos, *Interview with Greek Musician Yorgos (George) Katsaros,* 19 April 1987, State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, https://tinyurl.com/ymcv6xr6.

competed for immigrant audiences and artists — among Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Turks, and other Balkan populations — which led them to tailor their offerings to the musical preferences of these communities.[13]

The Greek Guitar in America

Understanding the rise in popularity of Greek-speaking guitar repertoire in the United States presents a complex challenge. The cultural networks shaped by modernity remain under-explored and are often difficult to trace, due to the volume and intricacy of transnational cultural flows. The prominence of the guitar within Greek-speaking musical traditions in the USA did not emerge in isolation but formed part of a broader process of social acceptance that developed over several decades.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the guitar appears to have established a firm presence in the New World. Since around 1820, it has been a popular instrument along the East Coast of the United States.[14] The U.S. Music Publishers Association has compiled a catalogue of scores and musical works released by twenty of the largest publishing houses in the country. This catalogue includes 726 entries for solo guitar, 2,309 songs featuring guitar accompaniment, and thirty-four instructional manuals. These figures would likely be considerably higher if unpublished or unregistered publishers were taken into account. Initially, familiarity with the guitar was largely confined to the upper and middle social classes but gradually permeated the lower classes, including African Americans in the South and immigrant communities in urban and rural areas.[15] The popularity of guitar-related

[13] Yiórgos Yiánnaris, 'I Ellinoamerikániki Mousikí Koultoúra', *National Herald*, November 11–12, 1995, 3, https://tinyurl.com/2k5ka6pa.
[14] Peter Danner, 'The Guitar in Nineteenth-Century America: A Lost Social Tradition', *Soundboard Scholar* 7, no. 1 (2021): 4 and passim.
[15] Danner, 'The Guitar in Nineteenth-Century America', 1–2.

musical traditions was further amplified with the advent of the recording industry. In the early decades of the twentieth century, guitarists who had previously enjoyed modest local acclaim evolved into the first widely recognised guitar stars, such as Eddie Lang and Riley Puckett.[16]

Turning to the Greek context, the guitar had already been incorporated into various types of ensembles within the musical traditions of Greek-speaking populations by the mid-eighteenth century. The Italian traveller Alessandro Bisani attested to its use in Smyrna as early as 1788.[17] By the mid-nineteenth century, guitar recitals were being held, and from the end of that century, mandolinatas and estudiantinas further contributed to the instrument's growing popularity.[18]

A study of the historical discography reveals that the guitar maintained a consistent presence in diverse types of folk and light music ensembles from the earliest days of recorded sound in the late nineteenth century. Within this broader context, Greek immigrants became acquainted with the guitar, both as a lead instrument and through the model of the solo guitarist-singer, which, in turn, facilitated the incorporation of this model into Greek-language repertoires and its entry into discographic production.

Tsibiti Guitar Performers

Under these conditions, three Greek guitarists, Yórgos Katsarós, Gust (Kóstas) Doússas, and Kóstas Bézos, developed a distinctive technique during the 1920s and 1930s. This technique has been referred to by scholars and musicians as tsibiti guitar (τσιμπητή κιθάρα; literal

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16 Jeffrey Noonan, *The Guitar in America: Victoria Era to Jazz Age* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 117–37.

17 Alessandro Bisani, *A picturesque tour through parts of Europe, Asia and Africa* (J. Davis, 1793), 102, cited in Stávros Kouroúsis & Konstantínos Kopanitsános. *I Ellinikí Kithára stis 78 Strophés* (I Istoría tis Ellinikís Mousikís, 2023), 15–6.

18 Nikos Ordoulidis, '1911: Estudiantina Oriental on the Road', *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique moderne et contemporain* 5, (2021).

translation: pinched guitar), although there is no evidence that the term was used by the guitarists themselves.

Yórgos Theoloyítis, known professionally as George Katsaros, was born on 20 December 1888 on the island of Amorgos, Greece, and immigrated to the United States in the 1910s. He gained considerable popularity amongst Greek-speaking communities and toured extensively across the USA, South America, Australia, and South Africa. His discography comprises sixty-four recordings, spanning from 1927 to the early 1950s. He recorded for several labels, including Victor, Columbia, Metropolitan, Standard, Balkan, and Grecophon. In the late 1950s, he retired from the recording industry and settled in Tarpon Springs, Florida. He continued to perform in nightclubs and at social events, with numerous mentions in the daily press throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He passed away on 22 June 1997 in Tarpon Springs.[19]

While numerous historical records exist for Katsaros, documentation for Dussas is scarce, and, unfortunately, no photographs of him have yet come to light. He was born on 13 March 1897 in Kallipolis, Asia Minor (then part of the Ottoman Empire, now Türkiye), though the exact date of his immigration to the United States remains unknown. His recording career comprises eighteen tracks made for Columbia in Chicago. He passed away on 23 October 1949 in Lodi, California.[20]

Bezos was born in 1905 in the village of Boláti in Korinthía, Greece, and passed away on 14 January 1943 in Athens. His passport, issued in March 1934, lists his profession as that of an actor. In addition to acting, Bezos worked as a musician, stage designer, cartoonist, and

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[19] For Katsaros biography see: Panayiótis Kounádis, *Is Anámnisin Stigmón Elkistikón: Kímena Yíro apó to Rebétiko*, Vol. 1 (Katárti, 2000), 220–9; *Is Anámnisin Stigmón Elkistikón: Kímena Yíro Apó to Rebétiko*, Vol. 2 (Katárti, 2003), 94–111; Steve Frangos, 'The Last Cafe Aman Performer', *Greek Music in America*, ed. Tina Bucuvalas (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 119–36; Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános. *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 39–47. For Katsaros' discography see: Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 48–55.
[20] For Dussas' biography and discography see: Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 74–9.

journalist. He gained considerable popularity as the conductor of the Hawaiian orchestra Áspra Pouliá (White Birds). His overall discographic activity within the domain of light music comprises approximately 120 recordings, in which he participated as a singer, guitarist, or composer.[21] In 1930 and 1931, he recorded a series of thirteen songs under the aliases A. Kostis and K. Kostis for Victor, in which he employed the technique of the tsibiti guitar. Although these recordings were made in Athens, they were originally released exclusively in the United States.[22]

The characteristics that link these three guitarists are: (a) their use of the tsibiti guitar technique, and (b) the fact that their recorded work was originally released in the United States. These are discussed subsequently.

a) The Use of the Tsibiti Guitar Technique

There are very few references to the tsibiti guitar technique in existing literature.[23] The earliest identified mention appears in the work of Ilías Petrópoulos, who erroneously commented on Katsaros' song 'Píno kai marazóno':[24] 'Zeibekiko. A very old record by Katsaros. It is accompanied by a guitar played tsimpita [with plucking], to resemble a

[21] Toni Klein, 'Constantinos Bezos and the Kostis Enigma', Liner notes to the album 'A. Kostis, The Jail's a Fine School', Mississippi Records MRP-097, 2015, https://tinyurl.com/4beszr29.
[22] For Bezos biography see: Kounádis, *Is Anámnisin Stigmón Elkistikón*, Vol. 2, 112–123; Klein, 'Constantinos Bezos and the Kostis Enigma'; Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 56–68. For Kostis discography see: Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 68–73.
[23] Dimítris Mistakídis, *Laikí kithára: Tropikótita kai Enarmónisi* (Pringipéssa, 2013), 385-6; Dimítris Kostópoulos, 'O Yórgos Katsarós kai i Laikí Kithára: Mia Istorikí-Mousikoloyikí Proséngisi' (Master's Thesis, National Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2017).
[24] Giorgos Katsaros, 'Píno kai Marazóno', RCA Victor BS024399 – 26-8105-B, New York, September 26, 1938, https://tinyurl.com/j225menb.

bouzouki'.[25] However, Katsaros himself never made such a claim in any of his many interviews.[26]

The tsibiti technique is based on principles also found in other playing styles, such as fingerpicking or flamenco guitar. It may be considered a simplified adaptation of classical guitar technique: the three bass strings are struck with the thumb, providing basic harmonic and rhythmic support, while the index and middle fingers pluck the treble strings to produce vertical chords and melodic lines. Kostis stands as an exception, who likely used the ring finger as well, given that some of his recordings, such as the instrumental 'Troúba', require a high level of technical proficiency.[27]

Although the three guitarists are commonly associated with the tsibiti guitar style, none employed it exclusively across their recorded repertoire. Katsaros utilised the tsibiti technique in twenty-two songs,[28] combined it with conventional methods, such as arpeggios and vertical block chords[29] in thirty songs, and relied solely on conventional techniques in twelve recordings.[30] In a video recording of Katsaros' concert, a technique resembling rasgueado, traditionally found in flamenco and classical guitar traditions of Western and Central Europe, is also evident.[31] While rasgueado typically involves striking the strings with all four fingers (index, middle, ring, and little fingers — the latter only rarely), Katsaros

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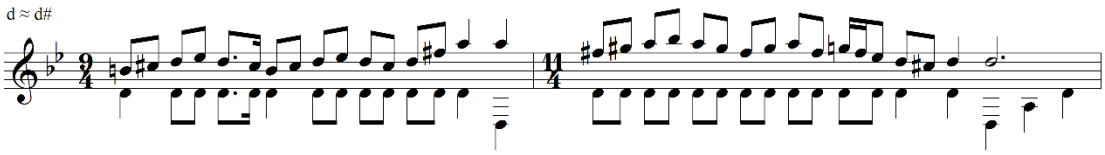
[25] Ilías Petrópoulos, *Rebétika Tragoúdia*, 10th edition (Kedros, 1991), 47.
[26] For Katsaros' interviews see Steve Frangos, *Interview with Greek musician Yorgos (George) Katsaros,* 19 April 1987, State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory (Interview to Steve Frangos) and Interviews of Giorgos Katsaros (Theologitis), Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, May 1987– June 1988, https://tinyurl.com/377vvemk.
[27] A. Kostis, 'Troúba', RCA Victor CG-755 – V-58080-B, Athens, May 20, 1930, https://tinyurl.com/542mvu2t.
[28] E.g. Katsaros, 'Ellinikí Apólafsis', RCA Victor CVE-38934 – 68829-A, Camden, New Jersey, June 16, 1927, https://tinyurl.com/4ur5dj2b; 'Stis Síras ton Aníforo', RCA Victor CVE-40362 – 68960-B, Camden, January 13, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/5evpn9ew; 'To Kaiméno to Gaidouráki', RCA Victor CVE-45052 – 7-59065-A, Camden, May 18, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/2vkued6s.
[29] E.g. Katsaros 'Ke Yiatí Den Mas to Les', RCA Victor CVE-45055 – 7-59065-B, Camden, May 18, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/yc5vywx8; 'Me tis Tsépes Adianés', Columbia 206624 – 56345-F, New York, 1934, https://tinyurl.com/h6dzeaxp.
[30] E.g. Katsaros 'Vasilikós', Metropolitan 190-B, ca. 1945, https://tinyurl.com/4ybt6brb.
[31] Concert at the Conference of the Hellenic Diaspora in Thessaloniki, December 3, 1995, https://tinyurl.com/6w595ejd. See also his concert at the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus, May 31, 1988, https://tinyurl.com/3t7r5dd9.

appears to use only the index and middle fingers. Dussas employed the tsibiti style exclusively in eight songs[32] and combined it with conventional techniques in nine.[33] In Kostis' recorded repertoire, at least two songs feature a guitarist playing the melody with a plectrum.[34]

Although all three guitarists utilised the tsibiti style, clear performative differences distinguish each musician, making their individual approaches readily identifiable.

Katsaros frequently employed the fingerstyle guitar technique during song introductions, while accompanying his vocals with vertical chords and heterophonic bass lines throughout the singing. Additionally, he often played the tonic chord or the fifth followed by the tonic prior to the commencement of a song.[35] The most distinctive characteristic of Katsaros' performance style is his rhythmic fluidity — primarily, though not exclusively, in the *zeibekiko* rhythm — manifested through the addition of one or two quarter notes to the 9/4 time signature, and the imitation of the rhythmic flow of melodic development within the isocratic accompaniment:



[32] E.g. Dussas, 'To Moró Mou', Columbia W-206518-1 – 56277-F, probably New York, May 1930, https://tinyurl.com/yn8y4mv6; 'To Kaloyeráki', Columbia W-206401 – 56229-F, probably New York, December 1930, https://tinyurl.com/4j5hbtc6; 'I Vasílissa', Columbia W-206586 – 56310-F, probably New York, April 1932, https://tinyurl.com/ynsnwe2v.

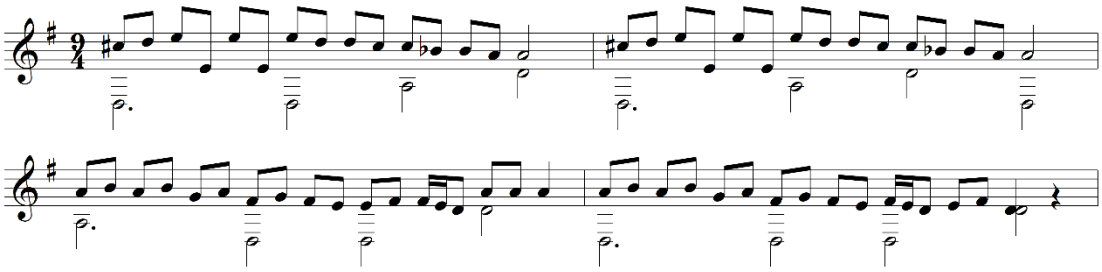
[33] E.g. Dussas, 'To Korítsi', Columbia W-206515 – 56242-F, probably New York, May 1931, https://tinyurl.com/y846ydj9; 'Kouklítsa Mou', Columbia W-206626 – 56346-F, Chicago, November 1934, https://tinyurl.com/5b29jrf3; 'I Miliá', Columbia W-206635 – 56352-F, Chicago, February 28, 1935, https://tinyurl.com/384jrj8v.

[34] E.g. K. Kostis, 'Toúto to Kalokeráki', RCA Victor 2W-175-2 – V-58092-A, Athens, May 21, 1931, https://tinyurl.com/3prpc8dr.

[35] E.g. Katsaros, 'I Tavérna ke to Zári', RCA Victor CVE 57380 – V-58040-B, Chicago, November 5, 1929, https://tinyurl.com/2s4exz53; 'Mas Pígan Exoría', Standard F-9014-A, ca. 1947, https://tinyurl.com/3djz89uk.

Example 1: The introduction of Katsaros' song 'Mas tin Skásane'.[36]

In contrast to Katsaros, Dussas' recordings exhibit a distinct accompaniment style. Rhythmically, Dussas emphasises solely the first beat of each submetric division, effectively rendering a skeletal framework of the 9/4 time signature grouped as 3/4 – 2/4 – 2/4 – 2/4.[37] Harmonically, he employs an alternation between the tonic and the dominant (the first and fifth degrees) of each chord. Both of these characteristics are illustrated in example 2.



Example 2: The introduction of Dussas' song 'To Kaloyeráki'.[38]

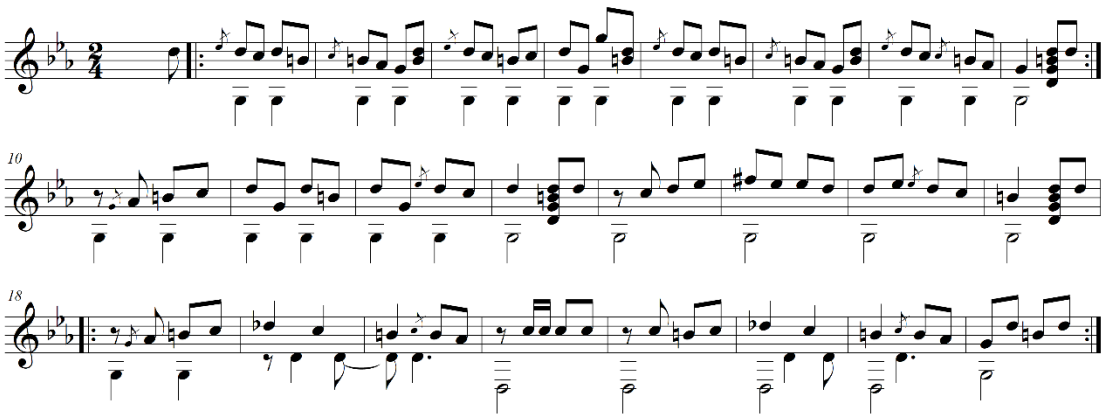
Dussas' style demands a higher level of technical proficiency, characterised by relatively faster tempos and the use of ornaments such as the appoggiatura:[39]

[36] Katsaros, 'Mas tin Skásane', RCA Victor CVE 40363 – 7-68980-A, Camden, March 3, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/y2nncjns.

[37] For aptaliko zeibekiko rhythmic pattern see: Mistakídis, *Laikí kithára: Tropikótita kai Enarmónisi*, 30–1.

[38] Dussas, 'To Kaloyeráki', Columbia W-206401 – 56229-F, probably New York, December 1930,. https://tinyurl.com/4j5hbtc6.

[39] The practical execution of the appoggiatura on the guitar is commonly referred to as a pull-off in instructional manuals. See for example: Troy Stetina, *Heavy Metal Lead Guitar, V*ol. 1 (Milwaukie: Hal Leonard Pub. Corp, 1991), 7.

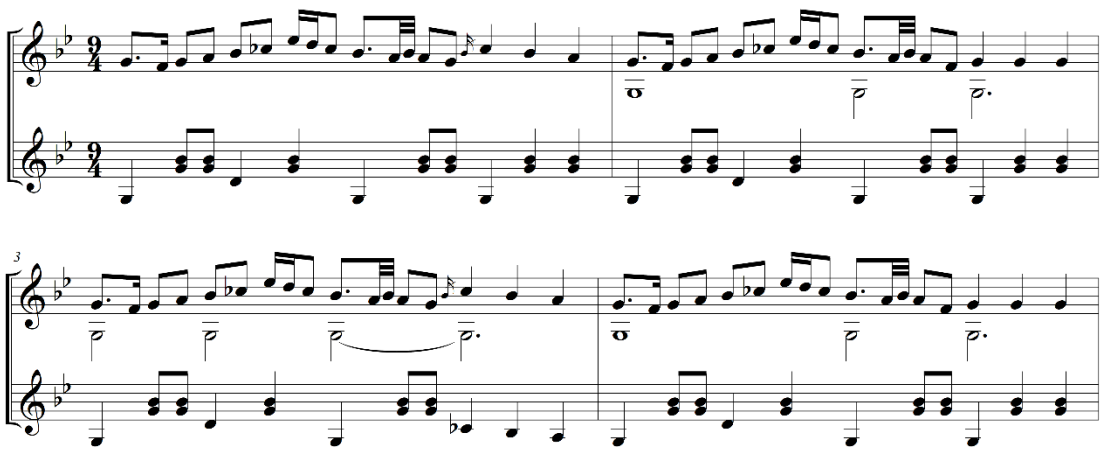


Example 3: The introduction of Dussas' song 'O Paraponiáris'.[40]

Kostis' discography reveals a different approach, featuring recordings with two guitars. During the recording sessions in May 1930, the second guitarist was Yórgos Karrás,[41] who played at a lower volume, rendering the second guitar's presence subtle. He appears to use the fingerstyle technique, thereby avoiding the pronounced attack produced by a plectrum. Frequently, Karrás emphasised melodic development by doubling the melody an octave lower, contributing to the dynamic contrast, as illustrated at the end of the third measure in example 4:

[40] Dussas, 'O Paraponiáris', Columbia W-206516 – 56242-F, probably Chicago, May 1931, https://tinyurl.com/472t8hy5.

[41] Klein, 'Constantinos Bezos and the Kostis Enigma'.



Example 4: The first 4 measures of the introduction of Kostis' song 'Ísouna Xipóliti'.[42]

As a result, a distinctive guitar vernacular emerged, markedly different from the typical folk guitar duets of the era,[43] in which one instrument performed the melody while the other provided harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. The instrumentals 'Troúba' and 'Dertilídikos Chorós',[44] in which the second guitar complements the first to such an extent that it becomes difficult to discern the precise contribution of each — particularly in the articulation of open-string strikes — clearly exemplify Kostis' overall aesthetic.

b) The Original Release of Their Recorded Output in the United States

Katsaros and Dussas lived and worked in the USA, where their recordings were released. Kostis, however, recorded in Athens during the period when Tétos Dimitriádis[45] served as Victor's international repertoire manager from March 1930 until the end of 1931, undertaking

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[42] A. Kostis, 'Ísouna Xipóliti', RCA Victor CG-750-1 – V-58061-B, Athens, May 20, 1930, https://tinyurl.com/y6ppt2p5.

[43] See for example: Kóstas Roúkounas, 'Dervísena', Odeon GO-2178 – GA-1821, Athens, 1935, https://tinyurl.com/4yuu7uyb.

[44] A. Kostis, 'Troúba', ibid, and 'Dertilídikos Chorós', RCA Victor CG-754 – V-58080-A, Athens, May 20, 1930, https://tinyurl.com/y52n8myp.

[45] Tétos Dimitriádis (1897–1971), a Greek immigrant from Constantinople, was a prominent figure in Greek discography in the United States. See: Steve Frangos, 'Theodotos 'Tetos' Demetriades', in Bucuvalas, *Greek Music in America*, 369–73; Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Elliniki Kithara*, 35–37.

a series of recordings for the company.[46] It is already known that Dimitriadis had recorded rebetiko songs featuring guitars (e.g., 'Chartopaíktis')[47] and was aware of Katsaros and his commercial success in the USA.[48] Given Dimitriadis' interest in rebetiko, it is likely that he persuaded Bezos to record songs of a similar style. There is no evidence explaining why these recordings were not released in Greece; it is possible that Dimitriadis and other parties involved believed this particular sound would not gain popularity in the domestic market, or perhaps Bezos himself did not wish for these works to be published. Contractual or legal obstacles may also have played a role, or, more simply, it may be that no one took an interest in this.

Between Rebetiko and Blues: A Myth in theMaking

In public discourse over recent decades, discussions have frequently emphasised the influence of pre-war blues on practitioners of the tsibiti guitar style. This stereotypical perception appears to stem from a confused conflation of rebetiko with the blues. The following sections of this article aim to analyse and clarify the problematic association between the blues and rebetiko, with particular focus on the tsibiti guitar.

Tetos Dimitriadis was the first to link Greek popular music with the blues within discography. On 1 March 1928, he recorded a song entitled 'Original Greek Blues' in New York, and on the 15th, he re-recorded an instrumental version titled 'Original Greek Blues

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46 Steve Frangos, 'Theodotos 'Tetos' Demetriades', 370; Dino Pappas, 'Tetos Demetriades: Blending Greek and American Music', *Laographia: A Newsletter of the International Greek Folklore Society* 12–13 (1995): 12–16.
47 Nóntas Sgourós (Dimitriadis' alias), 'Chartopaíktis', Victor CVE 48551 – V-58014-B, New York, January 8, 1929, https://tinyurl.com/yxz7tr4h.
48 An advertisement for Dimitriádis' record store appeared in the Greek-language New York newspaper *Ethnikós Kírix* (no. 5116, April 29, 1929, 3), featuring Katsaros' record containing the songs 'Tóra ta Paírno', RCA Victor CVE-45053 – V-58016-A, Camden, May 18, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/4k4xnryp; 'Póte Mávra, Póte Áspra', RCA Victor CVE 45054 – V-58016-B, Camden, May 18, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/5cf3nhpa.

(Melancolias Griegas)'.[49] However, this association is neither with rebetiko nor with guitar-based folk blues. The recording combines the sound of a popular jazz orchestra with the so-called popular blues of the time, infused with the 'exotic' and 'oriental' hijaz mode.[50]

In contemporary discography, rebetiko is often referred to as 'Greek blues'.. Examples include compilations from the 78-rpm era such as 'Café Rembetika: The Birth of the Greek Blues', 'Rebetiko: Blues, the Greek Way', and 'Rebetiko au Bouzouki: The Greek Blues' — an album by Paraskevás Grékis featuring instrumental reinterpretations of laikó songs.[51] Another notable reference is the album 'To Blues Sinantá to Rebétiko',[52] a collaboration between Stélios Vamvakáris and the African American guitarist and singer Louisiana Red.

In the bibliography, the doctoral thesis of Nássos Polyzoídis stands out, presenting issues of convergence and divergence between blues and rebetiko.[53] There are two articles by Stathis Gauntlett: 'Rebetika, the Blues of Greece — and Australia' and a brief description of rebetiko in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*. The latter begins: 'The 'Greek blues', also known in Australia as the 'Piraeus blues'.[54] Also worthy of mention is 'Rebetika and Blues' by Sákis Papadimitríou where, in two parallel columns, he quotes an outline that

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[49] Dimitriadis, 'Original Greek Blues', Victor CVE-43304 – 7-68978-B, New York, March 1, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/yc42yhdw; 'Original Greek Blues (Melancolias Griegas)', Victor BE-43363 – V-41-A and Orthophonic S328 (reissue), New York, March 15, 1928, https://tinyurl.com/sd9cucdh.

[50] For hijaz mode and its association with exoticism see: Derek Scott, 'Orientalism and musical style', *The Musical Quarterly,* 82, no. 2 (1998): 313–14.

[51] 'Café Rembetika: The Birth of the Greek Blues', Nascente NSCD 064, 2000, https://tinyurl.com/5y36fawj; 'Rebetiko: Blues, the Greek Way…', Akti AKT 517871, 2004, https://tinyurl.com/y7xf6k7e; 'Rebetiko au Bouzouki: The Greek Blues', 2015, https://tinyurl.com/5f4r3cae, cited in Nássos Polyzoídis, 'Fingerstyle Rebetiko: The Revival of a Lost_Technique', *Quadrívium - Revista Digital de Musicologia* 10 (2019): 2. The term λαϊκό (laikó) generally means popular, even though as a translation it is not quite accurate, mainly concerning aesthetic. The term is used in its transliterated form denoting the significance referring to the post-war, Greek-speaking, bouzouki-based, urban folk-popular repertoire. See: Dafni Tragaki, *Rebetiko Worlds* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 62; Nikos Ordoulidis, *Musical Nationalism, Despotism and Scholarly Interventions in Greek Popular Music* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), x.

[52] Stelios Vamvakaris & Louisiana Red, 'To Blues Sinantá to Rebétiko', Seventh Dimension SD-LP-007, Athens, 1994, https://tinyurl.com/2w77edar.

[53] Polyzoidis, 'Blending Rebetiko with Blues, Jazz, and Rock: Intercultural Songwriting and Analysis' (PhD diss., Bath School of Music and Performing Arts, Bath Spa University, 2024).

[54] Stathis Gauntlett, 'Rebetika, the Blues of Greece – and Australia', in Bucuvalas, *Greek Music in America*, 105–18; 'Rebetika', in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore,* ed. Gwenda Davey (Oxford University Press, 1993), 343–4.

'identifies and summarizes certain analogies that seem to exist' between these two genres.[55] The press and the internet abound with similar references, signalling a persistent use of this stereotype.[56] Two television specials on the subject are also noteworthy. In the documentary TV programme 'Rebétiki Istoría: Smírni–Pireás–Thessaloníki', presenter Níkos Volonákis introduces a discussion 'on the relations between two different genres, two different forms of musical treasures, between Greek rebetiko songs and American blues'. In the show *Stin Iyiá Mas*, Spíros Papadópoulos presents 'a marriage of rebetiko with tango, flamenco and blues'.[57] Finally, two documentaries merit mention: *My Rembetika Blues* by Mary Zournazi,[58] which 'explores the rebetika blues with sensitivity and profound rawness, as a musical narrative of the first great and bloody population exchanges of the 20th century',[59] and Philippe De Montignie's *Rembetika*,[60] in which the narrator, Antony Quinn, says:

> 'Rebetika, the music of Greece. Music which was once despised and oppressed, the music that belong to the hashish smokers, the outcasts, the Greek underworld. But the world is now witnessing the revival of that music. Rebetika, the blues of Greece'.

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[55] Sákis Papadimitríou, 'Rebetika and Blues', in *Rebetika: Songs from the Old Greek Underworld*, eds. Katharine Butterworth & Sara Schneider (Aiora, 2014; Kompoloi press, 1975), 41–5.
[56] See: Konstantínos Siríngos, 'Rebétika kai Bloúz - Trópi Zoís kai Mousiká Páthi', *National Herald*, April 21, 2016, 6; Maria Paravantes, 'The Rebetiko: Greece's 'Blues' Recognised by UNESCO', *The Greek Vibe*, 11 December, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/ysbynyh4; Tasos Kokkinidis, 'Greek Rebetiko Meets American Blues at New York University', The Greek Reporter, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/jh6ypent; Dimítris Papayeoryíou, 'Rebetiko, the Greek Blues', Tripin, n.d. https://tinyurl.com/367brdux; Pános Savvópoulos 'Rebétika kai Blues, Drómi Parállili', *Grammata* 24, 2016. https://tinyurl.com/2et6u7a4; Eranistís, 'I Parállili Poría Rebétikon kai Blues', Eranistís Blogspot, March 23, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/4z5hhfc4; Ánna Piátou, 'Rebétika, ta Elliniká Blues', Diablog, June 15, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/2pthnvjh; Panayiótis Tzavélas, 'Apó to merákloma ton Rebétikon, Sti Yoiteftikí Parétisi ton Blues', City Status, September 26, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2mwrkmv2.
[57] *Rebétiki Istoría: Smírni–Pireás–Thessaloníki* (8th episode, ERT3, 2000), https://tinyurl.com/38uujsj8; *Stin Iyiá Mas* (NET, 29 March 2008), https://tinyurl.com/4n77wjv5.
[58] Mary Zournazi, *My Rembetika Blues.* Ronin films, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/465u6xnx.
[59] "My Rembetika Blues' – A Journey through history, beats and grooves that tell a story', *Néos Kósmos*, October 30, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/367xwct3.
[60] Philippe De Montignie, *Rembetika*, Wombat productions, 1982, https://tinyurl.com/3fr43t3t.

The association between rebetiko and blues in public discourse in Greece stems primarily from their shared social contexts rather than from musical similarities. The two main points of convergence are their connection to the worlds of the marginalised and oppressed lower social classes, and their common tone of protest, which, according to relevant literature, characterises both rebetiko and the blues. For example, the website Bluesway states that:

> 'Both rebetiko and blues are marginal musical cultures that emerged as alternatives to the dominant music scene. They express the desires and sorrows of common people, who are condemned to obscurity. The themes of the two different genres are common: love, social protest, opposition to authority, hope, liberation from the sufferings of life'.[61]

This condition is dramatised with striking clarity in the song 'S' éna Bar tou Misisípi énas Náftis ap' ti Síra', from the eponymous album by Stélios Vamvakáris:[62]

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[61] 'I istoría tou blues', *Bluesway*, December 20, 2011, https://tinyurl.com/47dxuw4j. Similar examples may be found in Rovíros Manthoúlis, 'Blues kai Zoí', *Huffington Post*, July 25, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/4pkwmjns; Eranistís, 'I Parállili Poría Rebétikon kai Blues', Eranistís Blogspot, March 23, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/4z5hhfc4.

[62] Stélios Vamvakáris, 'S' éna Bar tou Misisípi énas Náftis ap' ti Síra', Casablanca 528 982-1, Athens, 1995, https://tinyurl.com/5t4efn9c.

Σ' ένα μπαρ του Μισισίπι	*In a bar in Mississippi*
ένας ναύτης απ' τη Σύρα	*a sailor from Syra*
με τους μαύρους τους μπλουζίστες	*brought the dance floor around*
έφερνε την πίστα γύρα.	*with the black bluesmen.*
Φυσαρμόνικα, κιθάρα,	*Harmonica, guitar,*
νέγρικα διαμαρτυρίας	*protest Negro songs*
και ο μπαγλαμάς να παίζει	*and the baglamas is playing*
«ζήτω η ελευθερία».	*'Long live freedom'.*
Ουίσκι και spirituals	*Whiskey and spirituals*
και πρόσωπα θλιμμένα	*and sad faces*
κι ο μπαγλαμάς εδάκρυζε	*and the baglamas was wailing*
για όνειρα χαμένα.	*for lost dreams.*
Όμορφη νέγρα αγάπησε	*The sailor from Syros*
ο ναύτης απ' τη Σύρα	*loved a beautiful Negro girl*
με ήχους άλλους έδεσε	*he bound his own fate*
και τη δική του μοίρα.	*with other sounds.*

The term 'songs of protest', used as a classificatory category based on the lyrical content of rebetika songs, appears to have been introduced by Ilías Petrópoulos and subsequently employed by Státhis Damianákos.[63] In contrast, scholars do not concur with the view that

[63] Petrópoulos, *Rebétika Tragoúdia*, 20–1, 102–11; Státhis Damianákos, *Kinonioloyía tou Rebétikou* (Plethron, 2001), 179–82.

blues is fundamentally characterised by a tone of protest. Pioneering researcher Samuel Charters, for instance, noted that, although the blues emerged as a musical expression born out of racial segregation, protest constitutes only a small chapter within it.[64]

The notion of protest carries particular ideological weight in the realm of discography. Notable examples include the album 'Negro Songs of Protest',[65] a compilation of blues songs from the 1933-1937 period and released in the USA in 1973, and Pete Seeger's album 'Songs of Struggle & Protest: 1930–1950',[66] which features re-recorded versions of traditional blues and folk songs.

However, the connection to marginalised communities and the tone of protest are features common to most urban popular music genres that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under similar social conditions: the tango of Buenos Aires, the fado of Lisbon, the rebetiko of Athens and Piraeus, and the blues of both the Southern countryside and American cities.[67]

Focusing on the tsibiti guitar, similar associations can be observed: in February 2018, two compilations were released entitled 'George Katsaros: Greek Blues in America, Vol. 1' and 'Kostas Dousas: Greek Blues in America, Vol. 2'.[68] In this instance, the link between Katsaros and Dussas with the blues is made evident by their activity in the USA.

In the liner notes to the album *Amerika* by Dimítris Mistakídis, we observe that these correlations extend into technical aspects: '[The tsibiti guitar style] is a technique clearly influenced by the blues and fingerpicking techniques of African American musicians of the

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64 Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (Avon, 1963), 12 and 152–73; 'The Blues' Angry Voice: Negro Songs of Protest', in *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writing, 1956-2004* (Marion Boyars, 2004), 131–42.
65 V.A., 'Negro Songs of Protest', Rounder 4004, 1973, LP, https://tinyurl.com/2ysww6bt.
66 Pete Seeger, 'Songs of Struggle & Protest: 1930–1950', Folkways FH5233, 1964, LP, https://tinyurl.com/28nb9phk.
67 Dafni Tragaki, *Rebetiko Worlds*, 116.
68 'George Katsaros: Greek Blues in America, vol. 1' and 'Kostas Dousas: Greek Blues in America, vol. 2', Death is not the end 022 and 023 respectively, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/5bjexsa4 and https://tinyurl.com/yrdabpwf.

time'.. Indeed, in the opening taksim of the song 'To west', Mistakídis combined the laikós drómos ussak[69] with the minor pentatonic scale, merging the rebetiko style with the blues.

The stereotypical associations appear to stem from the commonality of the protagonist's instrument, the guitar, on two levels: the shared performative practices and the visual resemblance of the performers.

Tsibiti Guitar and Blues: Common Performance Techniques

Examining the performance practices, two common threads emerge regarding the handling of the guitar: (a) the use of similar techniques for sound production, and (b) the employment of alternate guitar tunings. Fingerpicking and the tsibiti guitar technique share fundamental similarities. As noted above, it is sometimes suggested that Katsaros and Dussas were directly influenced by fingerpicking. However, it should be emphasised that, in all musical traditions where the guitar is played with the fingers rather than with a plectrum, the performance techniques are almost identical despite individual differences: the thumb strums the lower strings, while the other fingers play melodies, arpeggios, or vertical block chords.[70] This pattern can be observed in classical guitar, flamenco guitar, fingerpicking, tsibiti guitar, and other plucked string instruments such as the banjo. A basic difference among these guitar traditions concerns the number of fingers involved: in tsibiti guitar, usually three fingers are used (thumb, index, and middle), whereas in classical or flamenco guitar, four fingers are typically employed (occasionally, the fifth finger is also used in the rasgueado technique).

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[69] The term *laikós drómos* [popular mode] refers to a modal music entity, used by Greek musicians of popular genres to describe a mode. See: Ordoulidis, 'The Greek Popular Modes', *British Postgraduate Musicology* 1 (2011): 2–5. Also see: Mistakídis, *Laikí Kithára: Tropikótita kai Enarmónisi*; Níkos Andríkos, *I Laikí Drómi sto Mesopolemikó Astikó Tragoúdi: Shedíasma Laikís Tropikís Theorías* (Topos, 2018).

[70] Deviations from this norm are rare; for instance, Wes Montgomery is noted for exclusively striking the guitar strings with his thumb.

Regarding tunings, they are a fundamental performance tool, both for the tsibiti guitar and for pre-war blues. In tsibiti guitar, alongside the standard tuning, various alternative tunings are employed, such as drop D, open G, open B, open Dm, and open Gm.[71] African American blues guitarists predominantly use open tunings, notably open G and open D.[72] Concerning tuning, the liner notes to the album 'Amerika' by Mistakídis state:

> 'George Katsaros and Kostas Dussas [...] adopted the open tunings they found there [in USA] and adapted the melodies of their homeland and their own compositions to the new data, thus creating a new, autonomous way of performance, clearly influenced by the fingerpicking technique of African American blues musicians'.

Ian Anderson, editor of the 'Amerika' review in the renowned British music magazine *fRoots*, concurred with the above view:

> '[Katsaros and Dussas] adapted the open tunings used on the early recordings of the African American bluesmen to traditional Greek songs and compositions reflecting the hardships of the era'.[73]

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[71] Indicative recordings: Katsaros, 'Paízo Póka, Paízo Pinókli', RCA Victor CVE-57378 – V-58046-B, Chicago, November 5, 1929, https://tinyurl.com/7fdz2bj9; A. Kostis, 'Troúba', ibid; Katsaros, 'A! Kakoúrga Élli', RCA Victor CVE-38953 – 68829-B, Camden, June 16, 1927, https://tinyurl.com/cs9hy8vv; Kostis, 'Stin Ipóga', RCA Victor CG-753-1 – V-58061-A, Athens, May 20, 1930, https://tinyurl.com/2rzpr5yy; Katsaros, 'Póte Mávra, Póte Áspra', ibid.

[72] For example, Son House's 'My Black Mamma – part 2' (Paramount L.409 – 13042, Grafton, Wisconsin, August 1930, https://tinyurl.com/3k3axt7a; Skip James' 'Hard Time Killing Floor Blues' (Paramount L.752 – 13065, Grafton, February 1931, https://tinyurl.com/732sdba6) employ open G and open D tunings, respectively. For alternative tunings on the guitar, see Mark Hanson, *The Complete Book of Alternate Tunings* (Music Sales, 1995).

[73] Ian Anderson, 'fRoots playlist - Album choice', *fRoots*, no. 409, July 2017, 57.

This view is further supported by the text accompanying the digital album 'Sound Adaptations of Rebetika Tsimpita' by Antonía Káttou:

> '[…] the adaptability of these folk musicians leads to the technique of African-American blues, where musicians adopted special tunings that they found in America and the guitar playing technique of finger-picking'.[74]

The use of alternative tunings, not only on the guitar but also on other stringed instruments, was a widespread practice throughout the first half of the twentieth century and earlier.[75] While alternative tunings are relatively rare in flamenco and classical guitar traditions, they appear to be standard practice in Greek-speaking and neighbouring musical cultures. This is evident in instruments such as the three-string bouzouki, members of the saz family, the oud, the lute, the lavta, and various types of lyres. Comparable practices can also be observed further east, in the plucked and bowed-string instruments of the folk and classical traditions of North Africa, Persia, and India.

Before the advent of discography, tunings were adapted to the vocal and performance idiosyncrasies of each instrumentalist or singer. This individualised approach is evident in the Greek-speaking discography up to 1940. For instance, the variety of tunings used by Katsaros on guitar and Markos Vamvakaris on bouzouki served not only to create distinct sonic environments but also to align their instruments with their vocal ranges.[76] Later, alongside the

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[74] Antonía Káttou, 'Sound Adaptations of Rebetika Tsimpita', Bandcamp, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/559bc8w5. Also see Simon Steiner, 'Post-Rembetiko: Antonia Kattou Geht Neue Wege', Diablog, 23 February 2023, https://tinyurl.com/ys6erfc5.

[75] For guitar tunings in blues see: David Evans, 'The guitar in the blues music of the deep South', in *Guitar cultures,* eds. Andy Bennett and Dawe Kevin (Berg, 2001), 11–26; Matt Backer, 'The guitar', in *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, ed. Allan Moore (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116–29.

[76] For bouzouki tunings see: Kouroúsis, *Apó ton Tambourá sto Bouzoúki* (I Istoría tis Ellinikís Mousikís, 2013), 13–16.

standardisation brought by both formal and informal musical education, this diversity diminished significantly, giving way to more established, standardised tunings.[77]

Focusing on the world of the guitar in the U.S., we observe the widespread use of various types of tunings. Commercial guitars often came with beginner song manuals that recommended open tunings. There is no evidence that Katsaros and Dussas interacted directly with African American blues musicians or encountered such manuals. In his numerous interviews and narratives, Katsaros never mentioned this influence. However, it is reasonable to speculate that he was familiar with the use of various tunings on Greek folk instruments, given that he was an active musician before emigrating to America. In a series of interviews conducted by Panayiótis Kounádis, Katsaros recalled working as a guitarist and singer in clubs and hotels in Athens and Piraeus.[78] He also mentioned being familiar with the local hashish dens where rebetiko was performed. Given this, it is likely that he was already aware of the various tunings before his migration.

On the contrary, the limited biographical information available about Dussas does not allow us to draw similar conclusions. Finally, Bezos was certainly familiar with various tunings, given his close association with the Hawaiian steel guitar — an instrument primarily based on open tunings.[79]

The Similarities of the Protagonists

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[77] In the Greek discography post-1945, the use of alternative tunings on the bouzouki was exceedingly rare. Prominent bouzouki players such as Vasílis Tsitsánis, Yánnis Papaioánnou, Apóstolos Kaldáras, and Manólis Chiótis did not employ alternative tunings at all. Furthermore, contemporary bouzouki method books make no reference to their use. See for example: Paúlos Pafranídis, *To Tríchordo Bouzoúki* (Fagottobooks, 2020); Vaggélis Trígkas, *Méthodos gia Tríchordo Bouzoúki*, Vol. 1–3 (Trígkas, 2014); Vaggélis Liólios, *I Technikí tou Bouzoukioú* (Liólios, 1999). A similar pattern is observed with the guitar. In the post-war discography, alternative tunings are rarely documented, and they are likewise absent from folk guitar method books.

[78] 'Interview of Giorgos Katsaros (Theologitis)', Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, ibid.

[79] See John William Troutman, *Kīkā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

Studying and comparing photographic and discographic evidence reveals notable similarities between Katsaros, Dussas, and pre-war blues musicians. Their main unifying characteristic is the archetypal troubadour figure — simultaneously singer, instrumentalist, composer, and lyricist. As solo performers, they played the same instrument and shared similar techniques. In public discourse, they are often regarded as 'authentic' bearers of tradition and key figures in pre-modern collective cultural expressions.[80] Reflections on the notion of authenticity frequently appear in YouTube comments on songs by Katsaros, Dussas, and Kostis:

> 'It smells of sea and authenticity tonight'.
>
> 'Bravo!! A historical masterpiece!! An authentic interpretation!'[81]
>
> 'Authentic, they describe the daily lives of people. No relation to today's, which are based on how commercially viable they can become'.[82]

Through the lens of 'authenticity', artists like Blind Willie McTell can be seen as embodying the primordial, ritualistic essence of the blues — distinct from the modern electric concert sound that emerged later:

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[80] For a discussion on the issue of authenticity in music, see Salli Anttonen, *A feel for the real: Discourses of authenticity in popular music cultures through three case studies* (University of Eastern Finland, 2017), 23–46. This study provides an extensive overview of the discourse surrounding authenticity in music.

[81] ΔΗΜΗΤΡΙΟΣ-η7ι and Ikarosfly7, comments on the video of Dussas' song 'I Tráta' ('I Tráta, 1932, Chicago Kostas Doussas'), YouTube, https://tinyurl.com/2p8yyk35.

[82] Georgiosntinas8931, comment on the video of Kostis' song 'Stin Ipóga' ('Stin ypóga, 1930, A. Kostis'), YouTube, https://tinyurl.com/544v4bf6.

> 'Semi-mythical in his own time, a shadowy legend to the blues revivalists, and known mainly to blues connoisseurs today, Blind Willie McTell was in many ways the archetypal early bluesman. Bob Dylan depicted him as such, painting pictures of chain gangs, burning plantations, and bootleg whiskey in his song of the same name. And yet, the reality isn't that simple. In as many ways as McTell was a typical bluesman, he was also an atypical bluesman. An independent spirit and a true original, Blind Willie McTell was unlike anyone in his or any other time'.[83]

Similarly, Katsaros sings 'old rebetika', traditionally associated with enclosed, clandestine spaces such as hashish dens:

> 'Katsaros belongs to the realm of mystery, to the mythology of rebetiko. And I say this because when Tsitsanis had not yet been born, when Vamvakaris was 8–9 years old [...] Katsaros was working in America and recorded for the first time in 1919'.[84]

Sometimes, their 'authenticity' is perceived as the antithesis of the commercial glamour and virtuosity exemplified by artists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan and Manólis Chiótis.[85] However, the phenomenon of the archetypal troubadour is not exclusive to these musical traditions; it was a constant feature of the pre-recorded era and the early decades of recording activity. In the USA, blues musicians did not hold a monopoly on this role. Numerous examples appear across the heterogeneous and diverse country and folk music traditions,

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[83] 'Nobody Sings The Blues Like Blind Willie McTell', The Document Records Store, May 5, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/muydu4tc.

[84] Panayiótis Kounádis in the TV show *3 ston Aera* (ERT, 1988), https://tinyurl.com/y7sjc53b.

[85] *'Rebetiko faded away when Manólis Chiótis added a fourth string to the bouzouki',* Antónis Xagás, 'O Ehthrós Diávike tis Píles', MIC, December 3, 2016, https://tinyurl.com/ypahrsr6.

including figures like Jimmie Rodgers and Woody Guthrie. Gradually, as record production and the entertainment industry became more systematised, the multifaceted qualities once concentrated in a single individual were transferred to specialised musicians and creators — songwriters, composers, and lyricists.

In the historical discography of popular music in Greece, artists of this solitary troubadour type are completely absent. There are no recordings featuring just one person both playing and singing. Since such cases appear only in the USA, we could speculate that Greek musicians were indeed influenced, to some extent, by solo blues or folk artists. However, this influence seems minimal; apart from Katsaros and Dussas, only three recordings have been identified in which a single individual performs all parts: 'Ntountou' and 'Chiótiko Syrtó' by Panayiótis Tsóros and 'Mousourloúm' by Mákis Patrinós.[86]

The Reality

The most fundamental coherent feature shared by the blues and the tsibiti guitar style— and indeed present in nearly all urban musical idioms that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century — is the way their repertoires are structured.

The recorded repertoire of Katsaros, Dussas, and Kostis is a rich mosaic of musical idioms that today might seem heterogeneous. Their work incorporates elements from rural folk music (*dimotiká*) and island traditions (*nisiótika*), as well as urban rebetiko and *laikó* genres. Additionally, influences from light music (*elafró*) and serenade (*kantáda*) are evident. These three guitarists frequently included tunes and melodies that circulate within wider cultural networks, representing shared musical heritage not only of Greek-speaking traditions

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[86] Tsóros 'Ntountoú', Victor CVE-57013-1 – V-58041, https://tinyurl.com/mrh6emds; 'Chiótiko Syrtó', Victor CVE-57015-1 – V-58041, New York, October 18, 1929, https://tinyurl.com/5n7ympha; Patrinós, 'Mousourloúm', Columbia W-206414 – 56270-F, New York, April 1931, https://tinyurl.com/3ar2raa3.

but also extending to Turkish, Armenian, and Bulgarian repertoires. Examples of these cross-cultural exchanges can be found in songs such as 'Dóktor'[87] and 'Póte Mávra, Póte Áspra',[88] which reflect the interconnected musical landscape of the region.

Specifically, Katsaros and Dussas, drawing from both urban and rural folk traditions, incorporated elements of light music into their repertoire. Bezos, influenced by the realms of light music and Hawaiian styles, produced a series of recordings featuring folk and folkesque songs often infused with theatrical elements. Although they are frequently labelled as representatives of the tsibiti guitar style and described in the literature as exponents of rebetiko, none of these artists recorded exclusively rebetiko songs, nor did they confine themselves to the tsibiti guitar's performative style.[89] An examination of their discographies reveals a diverse repertoire that resists rigid genre classifications and performative limitations.

In precisely the same way, the blues emerged as a fusion of elements from European and African musical traditions, situated within the long-standing heritage of American folk music.[90] Blues musicians drew upon a vast and shared repertoire of tunes and lyrics that

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87 In Turkish discography: Tom Stathis (Kirkilissiotis), 'Aman Doctor (Sheba canto)', Columbia 87589 - E7364, New York, ca. June 1921; Bayan Sarah Behar, 'Aman doctor kantosu', Metropolitan 2009A, New York, ca. 1940. In Armenian Turkish-speaking discography: Mgrdich Douzjian, 'Aman doctor', Pharos P544, New York, 1927. In Bulgarian discography: Kime Nanchoff's orchestra, 'Aman doctor', RCA D8QB-6364 – No. 8, USA, 1948. See Leonárdos Kounádis & Ordoulídis, 'O Giatros', Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/jeb5ys9z.

88 Katsaros, 'Póte Mávra, Póte Áspra', RCA Victor CVE 45054 – V-58016-B, Camden, May 18, 1928. In Armenian discography: Karekin Proodian, 'Tzerkis kenaren', M.G. Parsekian 125A – 519, USA, ca. 1920; Louis Matalon, 'Salla salla mendilini', Balkan 4009-B, New York, between 1942-1951. In the discographic catalogues, the following Turkish recordings have also been identified, which may be related to the aforementioned song; however, no audio material has yet been located: Ibrahim Effendi, 'Salla Salla', Gennett 190A, February 1924, New York. See: L. Kounádis & Ordoulídis, 'Sala Sala', Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/3y2zz87b.

89 Conway Roderick Morris, 'Greek Cafe Music', *Journal of the British Institute of Recorded Sound* 80 (1980): 79–117; Kounádis, *Fonés tou Rebétikou: Yórgos Katsarós* (Ta Néa, 2012), 14; Kouroúsis & Kopanitsános, *I Ellinikí Kithára*, 46–47.

90 See David Evans, 'The Development of the Blues', in *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, 20–43.

evolved over time in the New World.[91] The related literature often tends to romanticise folk music as authentic while portraying popular music as commercialised and less genuine.[92] Nevertheless, the blues were born and developed through a dynamic dialogue between folk musicians and the burgeoning entertainment industry. Gospel and spirituals, folk ballads, instrumental dance tunes, ragtime and bluegrass, collective work songs (also called work or labour songs), children's songs and games, lullabies, Tin Pan Alley hits, and minstrel show numbers[93] all contributed to the early blues sound. The so-called 'floating lyrics' — folk verses frequently reused by blues and country singers with varying melodies[94] — provided a foundational lyrical and thematic framework, which was later expanded upon as songwriters introduced original lyrics. As Buddy Guy expressed:

> '[Blues fans in Europe] wanted pure blues, when there ain't such thing. Blues always been a gumbo where you throw everything in the pot. Blues ain't no pedigree; it's a mutt. And as far as I'm concerned, mutts are beautiful'.[95]

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[91] See Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (Stein & Day, 1970), 26–31; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Duke University Press, 2010), 12. For a bibliography on the interracial nature of the formation of musical traditions in the American South, see Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues*, footnote 23, 284–85. For the conceptualisation of folk music in the USA, we refer to Ronald Cohen, who identifies repertoires as folk if they exhibit the following characteristics: (a) their origin can be traced to a specific region or associated with local cultural practices; (b) they are not attributed to any individual creator but have been shaped through collective processes; (c) they are traditionally performed by non-professional musicians; (d) the melodies tend to be simple, with limited complexity, enabling collective performance; and (e) they have been transmitted orally (Ronald Cohen, *Folk Music: The Basics* (Routledge, 2006), 1–2. Also see Bruno Nettl, *An Introduction to Folk Music in the United States* (Wayne State University Press, 1962), 1–7.

[92] Peter Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 29.

[93] A genre of musical theatre that flourished in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, in which white performers, often in blackface, caricatured African American life and culture, perpetuating a series of racist stereotypes. See 'Minstrel show', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 2, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/bd4zyucm.

[94] Carl Lindahl, 'Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler', *Journal of Folklore Research* 41, no. 2/3 (2004): 152.

[95] Buddy Guy & David Ritz, *When I Left Home: My Story* (Da Capo Press, 2012), 171.

In the recorded repertoires of the earliest blues artists, such as Frank Stokes, Lead Belly, and Henry Thomas, this diversity of genres is clearly evident,[96] paralleling the variety found in the works of Katsaros, Dussas, and Kostis. Sociologist Howard Odum's description is particularly illuminating:

> With a prized 'box' [the guitar], perhaps his only property, such a negro may wander from town to town, from section to section, loafing in general, and working only when compelled to do so, gathering new songs and singing the old ones.[97]

It is worth noting that when Odum recorded and collected African American folk songs, many contained elements that today would classify them as blues. However, in 1911, he appears to have been either unaware of or deliberately avoided using the term ‘blues'. Instead, his study characterised these pieces broadly as 'Negro folk songs’.[98]

Regarding their respective repertoires, rebetiko and blues follow parallel trajectories. Robert Johnson, before embarking on his recording career, performed folk songs and certain so-called standards deeply rooted in African American communities, interpreting them with lyrics drawn from the oral traditions of the South.[99] Upon entering the recording industry, he 'borrowed' melodies from others — for example, the tunes of 'Kind Hearted Woman' and 'Love in Vain' are derived from Leroy Carr's 'Mean Mistreater Mama' and 'When the Sun

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[96] Evans, 'The Development of the Blues', 25.

[97] Howard Odum, 'Folk-song and Folk-poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes', *The Journal of American Folklore* 24, no. 93 (1911): 259.

[98] Evans, 'The Guitar in the Blues Music of the deep South', 16.

[99] Bruce Conforth and Gayle Wardlow, *Up Jumped the Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson* (Chicago Review Press, 2019), 71.

Goes Down'.[100] Similarly, Katsaros, Dussas, and Kostis 'borrow' melodies and lyrics from diverse sources such as urban folk (rebétika), mainland folk songs (dimotiká), island folk songs (nisiótika), light music (elafrá), and serenades.

Both rebetiko and the blues originated within marginalised communities, rendering social exclusion a fundamental point of convergence between the two genres. 'The earliest blues singers […] were the drifters, the malcontents, the shiftless stragglers. They lived on society's lowest level, in the world of prostitution, illegitimacy, dishonesty, casual sexuality, and police brutality'.[101] Similarly, in the pre-war era of Greek urban folk music, an association with the marginalised world is evident:

> 'During the last quarter of the 19th century, marginalised or less marginalised groups of popular or sub-popular origin made their presence felt in the modern Greek public sphere […] The members of these somewhat subcultural and sub-social associations, as a continuation of the particular life they led, apparently had their own songs and cultural practices. The main characteristic of these songs was their 'maggiko' style, their slang vocabulary, while their themes referred to love and violent practices'.[102]

Regarding thematic content, beyond the focus on marginalised communities, other shared features emerge. Both blues and rebetika reflect the gradual transition from rural to urban life,

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[100] Johnson, 'Kind Hearted Woman', Vocalion SA-2580 – 03416, San Antonio, November 23, 1936, https://tinyurl.com/5bpewz58; 'Love in Vain', Vocalion DAL 402 – 04630, June 20, 1937, Dallas, https://tinyurl.com/ypmxaryw; Carr, 'Mean Mistreater Mama', Vocalion SL 1 – 02657-A, ca. 1934, https://tinyurl.com/cw7juswa; 'When the Sun Goes Down', Bluebird BS-85496-1 – B-5877, Chicago, February 25, 1935, https://tinyurl.com/nha8e757. See Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (Plume, 1998), 40 and 45.

[101] Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues*, 59.

[102] Kóstas Vlisídis,*Rebetologiká Poikíla: Éxi Meletímata*, (Ekdóseis tou Eikostoú Prótou, 2021), 15–45. Also see Vlisídis, *Ópseis tou Rebétikou*, Ekdóseis Eikostoú Prótou, 2004, 165–212. Vlisídis's research draws on testimonies from key figures of rebetiko, including Nikos Máthesis, Kóstas Roukounas, Stellákis Perpiniádis, Yiórgos Rovertákis, Vangélis Papázoglou, among others.

capturing the migration from the countryside to the expanding cities. For instance, Leadbelly's song 'Pick a Bale of Cotton' evokes the experience of working on cotton plantations:

You got to jump down and turn around and pick a bale of cotton,
you got to jump down and turn around and pick a bale a day,
well, oh Lordy, pick a bale of cotton, well oh Lordy, pick a bale a day.[103]

but he also addresses aspects of urban life in 'New York City':

When your gammy be callin', 'it looks like rain'
sit down inside, catch you a subway train.[104]

Likewise, Katsaros incorporated lyrics from the rural folk songs (dimotiká) of his homeland:

Τώρα τα παίρνω κι έρχουμαι, τα γίδια και τ' αρμέγουμε.

Now I take them and I come, the goats and we milk them.[105]

He also evoked the cultural experience of the urban American prior to the Great Depression of 1929–1939:

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[103] Leadbelly, 'Pick a Bale of Cotton', Victor BS-051295 – 27268-A, New York, June 14, 1940, https://tinyurl.com/37frme46.
[104] Leadbelly, 'New York City', Bluebird BS-051323 – B-8750, New York, June 17, 1940, https://tinyurl.com/3vb8njwm.
[105] 'Tóra ta Paírno', ibid.

Που πηγαίναμε στο θέατρο κι ηφωνάζαμε «ταξί!»

τώρα πάμε με τα πόδια έξω εις την εξοχή.

We were going to the theater and shouting 'taxi!'

now we walk out into the countryside. [106]

During the transition from rural to urban environments, a liminal space between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, was inferred; this liminality was reflected in the discography. Traditional music, forged in oral transmission, engaged in dialogue with new and modern music shaped within the commercial context of the recording industry. Gradually, the development of systematic commercial and promotional strategies by the recording industry engendered uniformity, leading to the blues acquiring specific and well-defined characteristics.[107] The evolution of Greek-language music follows a similar trajectory: the recorded output of artists such as Katsaros and Dussas is marked by genre diversity and stylistic fluidity, whereas later musicians and singers specialising in specific repertoires came to dominate. Thus, although it is difficult to categorise Katsaros or Dussas as representatives of a particular genre, it is evident that subsequent singers such as Stélios Kazantzídis and Manólis Angelópoulos[108] are firmly established as exponents of *laikó*.

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[106] 'Me tis Tsépes Adianés', ibid.

[107] Charters, 'Working on the building: Roots and influences', in *Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (Abbeville, 1999), 13–31. In reference to blues repertoire composition, see also Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (University of California Press, 1982), 16–105.

[108] Stélios Kazantzídis (Nea Ionia, 1931–Athens, 2001) and Manólis Angelópoulos (Kavala, 1939–London, 1989) were popular singers and prominent representatives of laikó music, with an extensive and influential discography. Indicative bibliography: Vasílis Vasilikós, *Stélios Kazantzídis 1931–2001* (KPSM, 2010); Yórgos Liánis, *Stélios Kazantzídis: I Foní, i Psichí, i Zoí tou* (Agkyra, 2017); Thanásis Lálas, *Stélios Kazantzídis: Thirío Anímero* (Armos, 2021); Tásos Karaískos, *Manólis Angelópoulos o Megálos Tsingános: ...ópos ton Gnórisa* (Atrapos, 2001).

These complex cultural interactions demonstrate that ideological and stylistic boundaries often obscure the profound interconnections between musical traditions. Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues',[109] one of the earliest recordings associated with the blues, appears to draw more from Tin Pan Alley than from Southern folk origins.[110] This, however, does not render the song any less authentic; rather, it highlights how genre classifications are 'infinitely mutable, arbitrary divisions of a continuum'.[111] A similar phenomenon is evident in Greek discography: the earliest recordings labelled as rebetika bear little relation to the aesthetic and symbolic meanings later ascribed to the term.[112]

Rebetiko and blues are not discrete genres formed within rigid boundaries and isolated from external influences; rather, they represent continuities and developments of earlier musical expressions that eventually gave way to subsequent forms. The early exponents of the blues appeared unaware of any specialisation within a distinct musical genre and did not perceive blues, folk, and popular music as aesthetically or stylistically separate categories. Peter Muir aptly articulated this phenomenon: 'The dualism between folk blues and popular music is an invention after the fact. Early blues performers did not recognise any conflict between the two genres […] Even musicians nowadays regarded as quintessential blues artists, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson, were highly versatile performers'.[113] A similar pattern is evident in the works of Katsaros, Dussas, and Kostis, whose musical identities were shaped through a process of influence and osmosis amongst

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[109] Mamie Smith, 'Crazy blues', Okeh S-7529-C1 – 4169-A, New York, August 10, 1920, https://tinyurl.com/tnebaefy.
[110] Cohen, *Folk Music: The Basics*, 36.
[111] Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (Amistad, 2012), 39.
[112] See the songs tagged as 'rebetiko on the label' at Kounadis Archive Virtual Museum, https://tinyurl.com/8w3nduj2.
[113] Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 29.

diverse musical expressions and trends, which were subsequently perceived as distinct and aesthetically autonomous.

Blues and rebetiko, alongside fingerstyle and tsibiti guitar, share a number of common characteristics: they exist at the threshold of orality, emerged as products of modernism, were influenced by urbanisation, and were shaped by the recording industry. Their commonality does not reside in performance style or aesthetic qualities, rendering any search for similarities in their acoustic environments potentially misplaced. Rather, cohesion is found in the manner in which old and new musical forms are integrated into the repertoires of blues and rebetiko, as well as in the dialectical relationship between artistic creativity and commerciality within a flourishing entertainment industry operating under capitalist frameworks.

In summary, it is evident that claims concerning the correlation between blues and tsibiti guitar remain unconvincing. While the evidence does suggest potential aesthetic influences and performative parallels, such a narrow focus obscures the broader reality: music manifested as a dynamic continuum within extensive cultural networks and at the pivotal juncture between tradition and modernity, and any ideological or genre-based distinctions were imposed retrospectively upon the whole.

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