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‘Drunk’ *rebetiko* blues fusion: dissecting two contemporary songs

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RESUM

Rebetiko és un estil de música folk que té els seus orígens a finals del segle XIX en ports i presons, i ha estat descrit com «el blues grec». El *rebetiko* comparteix paral·lelismes amb el blues pels seus orígens en les comunitats marginades; tanmateix, mentre que el *rebetiko* evolucionaria amb contribucions dels refugiats d'Àsia Menor als ports de la Mediterrània oriental, el blues té els seus arrels en els africans occidentals forçats a abandonar el seu país per a convertir-se en esclaus als Estats Units. Prohibit durant dècades, el *rebetiko* i les seues característiques escales orientals (*drómoi*) han estat transmeses oralment entre els músics, motiu pel qual ha donat lloc a inconsistències en la documentació i discrepàncies entre autors. Per a abordar aquests reptes, els *drómoi* foren recopilats a partir de divuit fonts, per a posteriorment reimaginar-se i reharmonitzar-se, i finalment utilitzats per a la creació de cançons interculturals com «9 + 7 = 8» i «Σουρουλέμης & Γιαβουκλός». La fusió de *rebetiko* i blues s'examina a través de la seua dissecció, la qual se centra en l'orientalisme de les progressions de dotze compassos amb l'ús de *drómoi* i l'adaptació de sistemes d'escales d'acords de jazz. Les anàlisis mostren interpretacions que fan la sensació de “borratxo” mitjançant l'alteració de compassos asimètrics, així com a través de la utilització d'una sensació inspirada en Dilla. Aquest article suscita debats sobre com s'aconsegueix la modernitat a través de la barreja cultural.

Paraules Clau: *Rebetiko* i blues; occidentalització de *rebetiko*; *songwriting* intercultural; ‘drunk’ *rebetiko*

RESUMEN

Rebetiko es un estilo de música folk que se originó a finales del siglo XIX en cárceles y puertos, y ha sido descrito como «el blues griego». *Rebetiko* comparte paralelismos con el blues en sus orígenes entre las comunidades marginadas; sin embargo, mientras que el *rebetiko* evolucionó con contribuciones de los refugiados de Asia Menor en los puertos del Mediterráneo oriental, el blues tiene sus raíces en los africanos occidentales que se vieron forzados a abandonar su país para convertirse en esclavos en los Estados Unidos. Prohibido durante décadas, el *rebetiko* y sus características escalas orientales (*drómoi*) se han transmitido oralmente entre los músicos, lo que ha dado lugar a inconsistencias en la documentación y discrepancia entre autores. Para abordar estos desafíos, los *drómoi* fueron recopilados a partir de dieciocho fuentes, posteriormente reimaginados y armonizados, y finalmente utilizados para la creación de canciones interculturales como «9 + 7 = 8» y «Σουρουλέμης & Γιαβουκλός». La fusión de *rebetiko* y blues se examina a través de su disección que se centra en el orientalismo de progresiones de doce compases con el uso de *drómoi* y la adaptación de sistemas de escalas de acordes del jazz. Los análisis muestran interpretaciones que dan la sensación de “borracho” a través de la alteración de compases asimétricos, así como mediante la utilización de una sensación inspirada en Dilla. Este artículo suscita debates sobre cómo se logra la modernidad a través de la mezcla cultural.

Palabras Clave: *Rebético* y blues; occidentalización del *rebético*; *songwriting* intercultural; ‘drunk’ *rebetiko*

ABSTRACT

Rebetiko is a style of folk music that originated at the end of the nineteenth century in prisons and ports and has been described as «the Greek blues». *Rebetiko* shares parallels with blues in its origins among marginalised communities, however, while *rebetiko* evolved with contributions from Asia Minor refugees in the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean, blues traces its roots to West Africans who were forced to leave their country to become slaves in the USA. Banned for decades, *rebetiko* and its characteristic Eastern scales (*drómoi*) have been transmitted orally across musicians, resulting in inconsistencies in documentation and discrepancies between authors. To address these challenges the *drómoi* were collated from eighteen sources, then re-imagined and re-harmonised, and finally used for the creation of intercultural songs like «9 + 7 = 8» and «Σουρουλέμης & Γιαβουκλός». The fusion of *rebetiko* and blues is examined through their dissection that focuses on orientalism of twelve-bar blues progressions with the use of *drómoi* and the adaptation of jazz chord-scale systems. The analyses showcase interpretations of ‘drunk’ feels through the alteration of asymmetrical time signatures, as well as by utilising a Dilla-inspired feel. This paper prompts discussions on how modernity is achieved through cultural blending.

Keywords: *Rebetiko* and blues; westernisation of *rebetiko*; intercultural songwriting; ‘drunk’ *rebetiko*

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The myth of «the Greek blues»

The urban myth that *rebetiko*¹ is «the Greek blues» has been repeatedly disinterred and become a subject of fervent discussions. Sometimes the dialogues escalate to intense disputes between musicians, journalists, or even enthusiasts and listeners. This regurgitation has caused some listeners to disengage from one genre or the other, while others only embrace what they personally deem authentic. Others retain their attention while seeking for elements that they acknowledge as proof of a common ground between the two genres. Dafni Tragaki confirms that «one of the most commonly applied descriptions of rebetiko song was that which described the music as ‘the Greek blues’» (2002: 52, 2007: 24). Daniel Koglin portrays a television presenter of various series about *rebetiko*, who describes one the songs as «pure blues» (2016: 10).

Rebetiko and blues originated by marginal people of different continents at the end of the nineteenth century. Although *rebetiko* developed in the Eastern Mediterranean ports and blues in the Deep South of the USA, both share roots in marginalised communities. Nevertheless, a *terminus ante quem* cannot be determined for the genesis of *rebetiko* and there have been various debates about the definition and etymological origins of the term ‘*rebetiko*’. Koglin observes that «various types of Greek urban folk music which are now commonly subsumed under the umbrella category ‘rebetiko’ have given rise to much controversy» (2016: 23). Besides his accuracy, the important segment of his remark is labelling ‘rebetiko’ as an «umbrella category».

Widely known *rebetiko* songs have been covered by various artists, who infused them with other stylistic elements from genres like blues, surf rock, and jazz manouche. Koglin noticed that *rebetiko* is «often mixed with various older and contemporary ‘subcultral’ or ‘underground’ styles such as the blues ... hip hop ... reggae ... post-punk ... and Gypsy swing» (2016: 101). There are few complete albums where *rebetiko* was mixed, or attempted to be mixed, with blues, and in fact only four have been detected (Mystakidis, 2017; Pilali, 1994; Red & Vamvakaris, 1994; Sidiropoulos 1992). Other efforts of *rebetiko* blends have been scattered across Greek and international discography, usually with the appearance of one track within each album. For example, the American jazz guitarist and composer Jonathan Kreisberg covered a Markos Vamvakaris’s *rebetiko* song in jazz style and is included in the middle of eight pieces in his album *Shadowless* (2011).

Rebetiko and blues share some sociocultural characteristics, however there are hardly any musical similarities. Before proceeding with the songwriting, jazz was considered an *a priori* better candidate for more sophisticated melds. Jazz’s roots lie in blues, has a relevant sociocultural background, has embodied and developed the twelve-bar blues progression, and has adapted modality, complex harmonic structures, irregular time signatures and polyrhythms. *Rebetiko*’s rudimental rhythms are expressed with unevenly divided time signatures, arising from traditional, folk and provincial dances, and encompasses a rich pallet of oriental scales that are called *drómoi*.² In order to compile a comprehensive portfolio that accomplishes fusions of different elements of *rebetiko*, blues, and jazz, highlights refined tone qualities with a touch of ‘exoticism’, and showcases distinct approaches, 18 songs were written, recorded and produced. Two were selected to exhibit the proposed ‘drunk’ *rebetiko* blues marriage.

¹ Plural: *rebetika*. Also transcribed as *rembetiko* (*rembetika*), or with the latinised spelling *rebetico* (*rebetika*).

² The *rebetiko* modal scales are called *drómoi* (δρόμοι), which literally translates as roads, routes, or paths. The singular noun is *drómos* (δρόμος).

Artistic decisions

The song with the wrong operation in the title, «9 + 7 = 8», was written in 2022, while «Σουρουκλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» was written in 2023. They were both recorded in 2023 at the Zero Gravity Studios, with additional recordings at the PolyZoid Studio. The former was released as a single on 17 November 2023 under the pseudonym Nassos Conqueso (see Figure 1). The date was selected to align with the fiftieth anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic uprising,³ because of the song's political dimension. The latter followed on 14 February 2024 to coincide with the Valentine's Day as a joke, since the song is about an idiosyncratic couple with contrasting temperaments (see Figure 1). The songs, along with eight other tracks, will also feature on the album *Mississippi Rebetiko: Unmolding These Figs*, scheduled for release the following year.

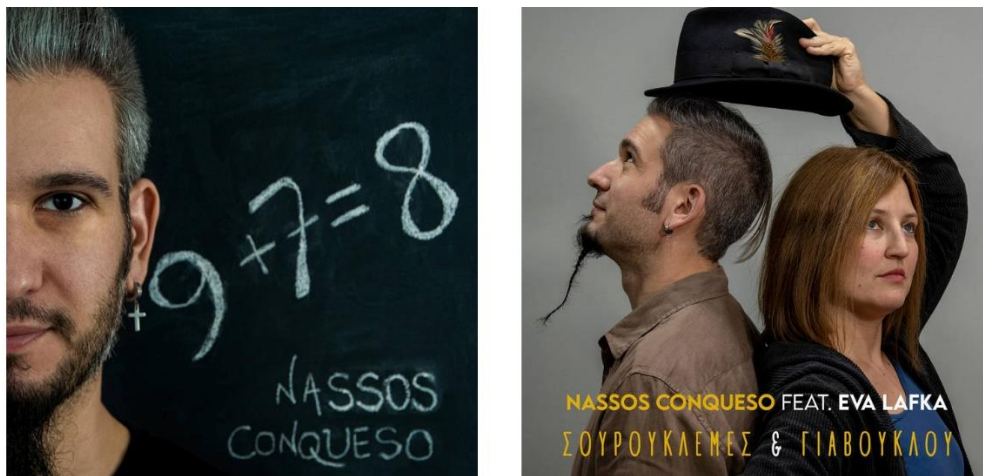


Figure 1. Covers of «9 + 7 = 8» (2023) and «Σουρουκλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» (2024)

After composing the pieces, I created lead sheets and scores, and I provided them to trusted musicians who recorded the nine songs of the album. The musicians who contributed to these two songs are listed in Table 1.

Recording musicians	Instrument
Michalis Atsalis	Electric guitars
Nassos Conqueso	Vocals, μπαγλαμάς (<i>baglamás</i>), harmonica, ποτηροκομπολόι (<i>potirokombolói</i>), Rhodes piano, programming
Yiorgos Kalodoukas	Electric guitars
Christos Kladas	Tenor saxophone
Katerina Koti	Electric bass guitar
Eva Lafka	Vocals
Dimitra Mitropoulou	Vocals
Adam Moore	Lap steel guitars
Sotiris Ntouvas	Drums, kashishi
Christos Spiliopoulos	Trombone

Table 1. List of musicians who contributed to the recordings

³ The Athens Polytechnic uprising occurred between the 14th and the 17th of November 1973. It was a massive student demonstration of rejection of the military junta that ended in bloodshed. The annual commemorations take place on the 17th, which also inspired a long lasting Marxist-Leninist urban guerilla organisation to name themselves *Επαναστατική Οργάνωση 17 Νοέμβρη* (Revolutionary Organisation 17 November) (1975–2002).

Three guitarists and three vocalists were involved, as well as a bassist, a saxophonist, and a trombonist. For «9 + 7 = 8», however, I took on the familiar role of multi-instrumentalist, as I also recorded *μπαγλαμάς* (*baglamás*), *ποτiroκομπολόι* (*potirokombolói*), Rhodes piano, harmonica, and I did some programming. The trombonist recorded several layers, while the saxophonist brought his multicultural improvisational skills. A second saxophonist agreed to record some tenuto notes to enrich the colour, but the improviser dealt with them too.

Musical decisions

Creating such blends involves the exploration of various compositional factors, which must be followed by decision making and determining limitations. This not only helps organising the songwriting tools and excluding the superfluous, but also eventually boosts creativity. Thus, the key elements that were taken into account were the selection of musical forms, rhythms and *rebetiko* dances, scales and *drómoi*, as well as chord progressions. To these, other components were added, such as themes, subjects, modes of address, and use of slang in the lyrics. Other critical ingredients include the instrumentation and the production decisions.

Musical decisions: forms

After collecting data from Efstathios Gauntlett's DPhil thesis (1978: 492-497), and analysing them using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics, it is clear that the strophic form was prevalent in both 'Classic' and pre-'Classic' *rebetiko*. In traditional anonymous *rebetiko*, the most common structures were iambic octosyllabic couplets. Then the trochaic and decapentasyllable followed as the second most popular metre and syllabic verse respectively (Polyzoidis, 2024: 150). The prosodic data from the subsequent periods, derived from Gauntlett's thesis (1978: 498-537), were separately analysed. The analyses show that a substantial amount of the songs are strophic couplets, and a smaller percentage are structured as strophic quatrains. A quarter of the 'commercial' *rebetiko* songs, and a smaller portion of every other phase contained a refrain or a chorus (Polyzoidis, 2024: 151).

The twelve-bar blues progression has been expressed in different ways, and still remains the most commonly used form in blues. The songwriting guide in *Songstuff* (2000-2023) presents it as an individual type of form by labelling it the «AAB Song Form, also called 12 Bar Blues Song Form» [*sic*]. On these terms, each twelve-bar blues stanza is expressed by this "AAB", however, given that the stanzas repeat continuously, the form resembles an extended strophic (AAA) form (Polyzoidis, 2024: 151). John Covach marks it as «The Twelve-Bar Blues», which is divided into three four-bar phrases of «Question-Question-Answer», and functions over a verse-chorus scheme (2005: 66-69).

To achieve the maximum contrast and effectiveness, various combinations of *rebetiko* forms and the twelve-bar blues, along with other typical songwriting forms, were utilised when creating over a dozen original songs. However, the Verse-Chorus and its related Verse-Chorus-Bridge forms dominated, often over blues progressions. For the song «9 + 7 = 8» an extended version of the AABA form, also known as the thirty-two-bar form, which is untypical for both *rebetiko* and blues, was employed. Therefore, the song was written in the «AABA BA» form, and a twelve-bar blues progression that involves a 'refrain' or 'answer' was used in the A sections that is the verses. «Σουρζουλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» makes use of the Verse-Chorus form in which the verses are built over a twelve-bar minor blues progression.

Musical decisions: time signatures and related dances

The form of a song often determines its direction, but the time signatures that are essentially connected to certain dances in *rebetiko* underscore how the song, or some of its sections, were shaped by the traditions of *rebetiko*, blues, or jazz. To examine rhythms and approaches, Pavlos Sidiropoulos's posthumous album *Ta Μπλουζ του Πρίγκιπα* (*The Blues of the Prince*) (1992) and EP *Ανέκδοτες Ηχογραφήσεις με την Κιθάρα του* (*Unreleased Recordings with his Guitar*) (2003), where he attempted to «marry Blues with Rebetiko» (Iliopoulos, 1992, 1997, 2003, original capitalisation, my translation), as well as Brendan Perry's 2020 album, where he reinterpreted *rebetiko* songs in his way, were transcribed and analysed. Additional data were collected from Koglin's selection of six representative songs from three *rebetiko* periods (2016: 137). Spotify was also used as a supplementary source, and its five most popular *rebetiko* songs, based on their number of plays, were analysed. Finally, six songs were added to the list as empirical selections, considering that they are widely known, mainly because they have been covered multiple times by various artists.

The title of «9 + 7 = 8» betrays that some daring rhythmic experimentation was involved. For the development of the verses of this song, two *rebetiko* dances with irregular time signatures were combined to create a compound new rhythm. The construction of the foundational rhythmic structure was achieved by alternating a 9/8 *karsilamás* dance, which is grouped as 2+2+2+3, with a 7/8 *kalamatianós* dance, grouped as 3+2+2. This two-bar rhythmic element adds up to 16/8, which mimics two bars of 4/4 with a misplaced quaver (Polyzoidis, 2014: 158), as seen in bars 3 and 4 of Figure 2.

Figure 2. The verses of «9 + 7 = 8», underlining the groupings and highlighting the two-bar structure

The grouping of the two dances underlines the first two bars of the lead sheet in Figure 1. This contrasting grouping adds to the intricacy, which disoriented some of the best recording musicians. Nevertheless, the outcome was successful, ultimately creating a distinct 'drunk' feel. Since extended AABA songs include contrasting bridges, the time signature and the associated dance that was selected for this section increased the complexity. The chosen rhythm is a 9/4 *aptálikos* dance that is divided into 5/4 plus 4/4, essentially grouped as 3+2+2+2, as presented in Figure 3. The 9/4 *aptálikos* dance, with its uneven grouping, mirrors the song's thematic tension, adding an unpredictable and complex element to the bridge.

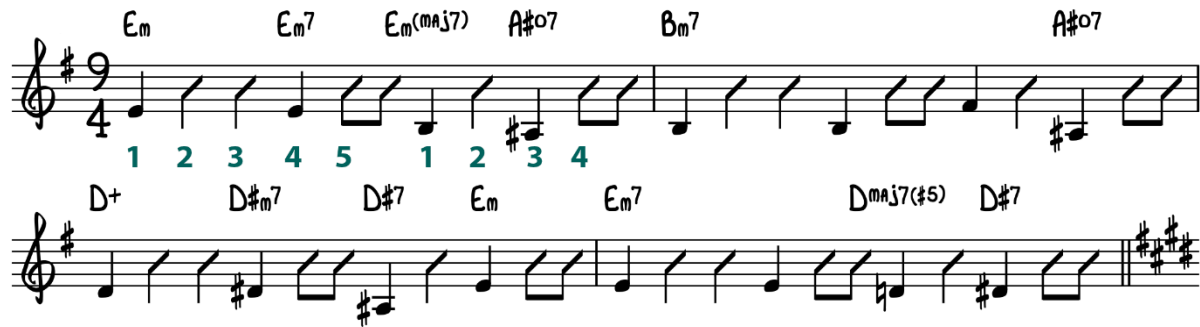


Figure 3. The bridges of «9 + 7 = 8», underlining the grouping.

The intention with the track «Σουρουκιλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» was to evoke a ‘drunk’ feel, inspired by the innovator of this feel, the record producer, rapper, drummer, and songwriter J Dilla (Esen, 2020). By infusing this *rebetiko*-blues fusion with a ‘drunk’ feel à la J Dilla, the track both honours its roots and bridges contemporary musical sensibilities. Drawing inspiration from his name, I coined the term ‘ντίρλα’ (*dírla*), as fortuitously, it is a Greek slang that means ‘drunk’ (Polyzoidis, 2024: 159). Therefore, the song incorporates a subtle interpretation of the typical ‘drunk’ feel. It begins as a 4/4 swing minor blues utilising the Dilla-inspired ‘drunk’ feel. Although, the choruses complement the verses by employing a 4/4 straight *hasávikos* dance twisted to a ‘ντίρλα’ rhythm. This ‘ντίρλα’ feels were not explicitly notated (see Figure 4), as it would be pointless to request from all the musicians to scrutinise such a puzzling music score. Instead, they were required to play over the drummer Sotiris Ntouvas’s recording after listening to it closely. The rhythms were initially generated in Logic Pro, using MIDI, and were provided to the drummer for reference. Ntouvas was then encouraged to create an ‘inebriated’ sound contributing to the overall atmosphere.



Figure 4. The verses of «Σουρουκιλεμές & Γιαβουκλού»

Musical decisions: scales, modes and *drómoi*

Choosing and combining the right scales and *drómoi* can be a challenging task, as different approaches yield distinct outcomes. There are limitless possibilities: from using one or more *drómoi* over blues progressions to employing the blues scale over chords derived from a specific *drómos*; juxtaposing a *drómos* and the blues scale in separate parts of a track versus blending their notes within the same melody; or adapting the chord-scale system into a novel chord-*drómos* system (Polyzoidis, 2024: 161). The selection of scales and *drómoi* can also shape the harmonic

lexicon, except in cases where one of the blues progressions is pre-appointed.

Drómoi trace their roots in Turco-Arabic *makamlar*⁴ and Byzantine *échoi*.⁵ These have been adapted for fretted instruments, predominantly the *bouzoúki* and *baglamás*, and are thus often perceived as twelve-tone equal-tempered interpretations of the corresponding *makamlar* and *échoi*. These renditions, however, vary among musicians, resulting in inconsistencies due to the oral transmission of the tradition over generations. Consequently, discrepancies arise between sources regarding *drómoi* terminology, key signatures, pitch content, and starting notes, amongst others. This lack of consensus can confuse musicians when discussing melodies and leads to mismatched harmonic structures and ambiguity in primary versus secondary chord degrees.

To address these inconsistencies, the *drómoi* were collated from 18 sources. Duplicates were removed, and the names were set based on the frequency of their appearance in the literature with the same intervals. These *drómoi* were treated as hybrid scales/modes with specific idiosyncrasies, and for clarity, they were categorised as major, minor, dominant, or diminished. For the composition of «9 + 7 = 8», the *Poimenikós* minor and *Nikériz* *drómoi* were interwoven throughout both verses and bridges. In contrast, «Σουρουλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» deviated from this approach by assigning the *Sabá(h)* *drómos* to the verses, and the blues scale to the choruses.

The *Poimenikós* minor *drómos* (also referred to as Romanian minor or *Souzinák*) is represented by the spelling 1 2 b3 #4 5 6 b7 8, based on eight sources (Balena, 2014: 26; Hewitt, 2008: 43%; Krionas, 2003: 62; Papakostas, 2015: 150; Payatis, 1987: 7, 2010: 19; Pyrgiotis, 1995: 100; Stamatis, 2011: 167; Stylianos, 2019: 625). The *Nikériz* *drómos* (or *Nigríz*) ascends with the spelling 1 2 b3 #4 5 6 7 8, but descends like the *Poimenikós* minor, according to four sources (Floudas, 2009: 17; Goumas, 2013: 20; Mystakidis, 2012: 184, 2013: 245; Sarakatsianos, 2011: 53). These two *drómoi* are closely related, and according to Dimitris Mystakidis, they belong to the same family (2020). The *Nikériz* *drómos* also includes a captivating trisemitone between the minor third ($\flat 3$) and the augmented fourth ($\sharp 4$) degrees, which gives it a distinctive quality.

The *Sabá(h)* *drómos* appears to have an alternative version, which does not resolve on a perfect octave, but ends on a diminished one instead. As a result, it has two possible spellings: 1 2 b3 b4 5 b6 b7 8 and 1 2 b3 b4 5 b6 b7 b8, according to twelve sources (Floudas, 2009: 16; Gavalas, 2013: 35; Hewitt, 2008: 45%; Krionas, 2003: 62; Mystakidis, 2012: 170, 2013: 362; Nikolopoulos, 2013: 32; Papakostas, 2015: 148; Payatis, 1987: 7, 2010: 17; Polykandriotis, 2009: 32-33; Pyrgiotis, 1995: 98; Stamatis, 2011: 167; Stylianos, 2019: 625). The verses of «Σουρουλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» are constructed around a theme that is subsequently transposed to the subdominant degree, aligning with the changes of a minor blues progression inspired by minor jazz blues standards. Ultimately, the theme is modified to fit the harmony of bars 9 and 10. The use of the diminished octave ($\flat 8$), which some listeners may perceive as a major seventh ($\flat 7$), results in a smoother yet intricately tangled melody line. In this way, the chord-scale system is reinterpreted into a chord-*drómos* system (see Figure 5).

⁴ Plural of *makam*. [Turkish] *makam*, also transcribed as [Arabic] *maqam* (plural *maqamat*), is the equivalent of a mode in the Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Iraqi music. Despite the similarity in nomenclature, these musics differ, as they have dissimilar microtonal subdivisions, and inconsistencies in names and family formations.

⁵ Plural of *échos* (ἦχος). They are the equivalent of modes in Byzantine music, within its eight-mode system.

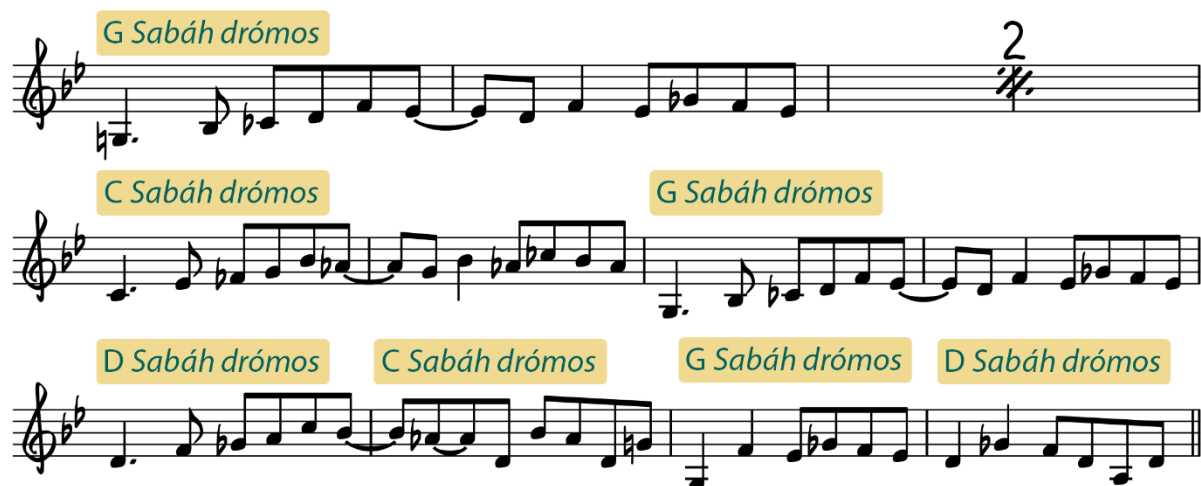


Figure 5. The adaptation of chord-scale system to chord-drómos system in «Σουρουλεμές & Γιαβουιλού»

In contrast to the ongoing disputes between authors and musicians about the *drómoi*, the blues scale is generally accepted as a standard. Typically presented as a hexatonic scale that resembles the pentatonic minor scale with the addition of a diminished fifth (1 $\flat 3$ 4 $\flat 5$ 5 $\flat 7$ 8), its flattened degrees are commonly referred to as «blue notes». Nevertheless, Andy Jaffe argues that the term blues scale is a misnomer (1996: 39), and the widely accepted pitch sequence (Aebersold, 1996: 5, 2000: 12-15; Alexander, 2014: 215; Balena: 52; Berg: 36-37; Berle, 1997: 68-70; Blatter, 2007: 88; Boling, 1993: 55; Celentano, 1998: 15; Chappell, 2007: 26; Charupakorn, 2015: 19; Clay, 2018: 28; Duckworth, 2010: 209; Ferguson, 1999: 20-21; Fischer, 1995a: 26, 1995b: 38-39; Ganapes, 1995: 46, 2000: 5; Gelling, 1998: 13-14; Govan, 2002: 129; Griffiths *et al.*, 2015: 33; Harnum, 2001: 222; Harrison, 1999: 285, 2009: 55; Hewitt, 2008: 247-248; James, 2011: 182; Levine, 1995: 219; Neely and Schroedl, 1997: 54; Nettles & Graf, 1997: 98-100; Powers, 1979: 10; Pyrgiotis, 1995: 53-54; Ring, 2018; Rubin, 2012: 22; Schmidt- Jones, 2007: 159; Sheldon & Skinner, 2001: 7-18; Vogl, 2007: 41; Wharram, 2005: 72; Winterson and Harris, 2014: 47; Wyatt, 1997: 47; Wyatt and Schroeder, 1998: 71), also known as the «minor blues scale» (Beato, 1990: 32-33; Gavalas, 2013: 11; Greenblatt, 2004: 3-36; Hewitt, 2013: 137-138; Rawlins and Bahha, 2005: 30) dominates over other versions ranging from pentatonic to decatonic, which can be detected in up to three sources. The blues scale is often extended by integrating the major third of the underlying chord. This amalgamation over the tonic chord overlaps with the *Sabá(h) drómos*, where the diminished fourth ($\flat 4$) can be perceived as the enharmonic equivalent of the tonic chord's major third.

Musical decisions: chord choices and progressions

The twelve-bar blues serves as a foundational platform across various genres beyond blues. As Christopher Meeder notes, «the 12-bar blues was already a common form in jazz by the time the first jazz recordings were made» (2008: 12). Artists have sometimes used variations of the typical progression or adapted it to their needs. For example, John Mayer's 2013 album *Paradise Valley* features a twelve-bar blues in a country and folk style, where he adds colour with suspended triads and compresses bars 9 and 10 into a single bar, effectively transforming it into an eleven-bar progression. This adaptability makes the twelve-bar blues progression – along with its variations, including eight-bar and sixteen-bar formats – ideal for experimentation. Regarding *rebetiko* progressions, given the insufficient number of sources, and once again a lack of unanimity between authors and musicians, the *drómoi* were reharmonised in a contemporary context to shape a thesaurus of chord choices. Table 2 displays the diatonic triads, seventh tetrads, and extended chords that were built from the *Poimenikós* minor, *Nikríz* and *Sabá(h) drómoi*,

together with some alternatives that can be built from their enharmonic equivalent notes.

<i>Drómoi</i>	Triads	Seventh chords	Extended chords
<i>Poimenikós</i> minor, Romanian minor, <i>Souzinák</i>	i, II, bIII, #iv ^o , v, vi ^o , bVII ⁺	Im ⁷ , II ⁷ , bIII ^{maj7} , #iv ^{o7} , Vm ^{maj7} , VIIm ^{7b5} , bVII ^{maj7#5}	Im ^{13#11} , II ^{11b9b13} , bIII ^{maj13#9#11} , #iv ^{o7b9b11b13} , Vm ^{maj11b13} , VIIm ^{13b5b9} , bVII ^{maj13#5}
<i>Nikríz</i> / <i>Nigríz</i>	i, II, bIII ⁺ #iv ^o , V, vi ^o , vii / VII	Im ^{maj7} , II ⁷ , bIII ^{maj7#5} , #iv ^{o7} , Vm ^{maj7} , VIIm ^{7b5} , VIIIm ⁷ / VII ⁷	Im ^{maj13#11} , II ^{13b9} , bIII ^{maj13#5#9#11} , #iv ^{o11b9b13} , Vm ^{maj11b13} , VIIm ^{13b5} , VIIIm ^{7b9b11b13} / VII ^{7b9b13} / VII ^{7#9b13}
	i, II, bIII #iv ^o , v, vi ^o , bVII ⁺	Im ⁷ , II ⁷ , bIII ^{maj7} , #iv ^{o7} , Vm ^{maj7} , VIIm ^{7b5} , bVII ^{maj7#5}	Im ^{13#11} , II ^{11b9b13} , bIII ^{maj13#9#11} , #iv ^{o7b9b11b13} , Vm ^{maj11b13} , VIIm ^{13b5b9} , bVII ^{maj13#5}
<i>Sabá(h)</i>	i / I, II ^{sus2b5} , bIII / iii ^o / III ^{b5} , bIV ⁺ , v, bVI, bVII ^{b5}	Im ⁷ / I ⁷ , II ^{7sus2b5} , bIII ^{maj7} / IIIIm ^{7b5} / IIIIm ^{maj7b5} / III ^{7b5} / III ^{maj7b5} , bIV ^{maj7#5} , Vm ⁶ , bVI ^{maj7} , bVII ^{7b5}	Im ^{9b11b13} / I ^{9b13} , II ^{11sus2b5b9b13} , bIII ^{maj13b9} / IIIIm ^{7b5b11b13} / IIIIm ^{maj7b5b11b13} / III ^{7b5#9b13} / III ^{maj7b5#9b13} , bIV ^{maj7#5#9#11#13} / bIV ^{7#5#9#11} , Vm ^{6/11b9b13} , bVI ^{maj7#11b13} , bVII ^{13b5}

Table 2. *Drómoi* triads, seventh chords and extended chords in a contemporary context

The songs «Dear John» (Conqueso, 2017) and «Uncannily Alike» (Sakké ConQuésó, 2018) that I have previously written and released employed the twelve-bar blues progression in D, based on the tuning of *tríchorda*⁶ (D-A-D). To deviate from this idea, «9 + 7 = 8» incorporates a twelve-bar blues progression in E, which resonates well with the electric guitar. This progression creates a feeling of familiarity that softens the awkward «ντίρλα» feel. The tonic chord was altered to a «Hendrix Chord» (E^{7#9}), with the augmented ninth's enharmonic equivalent concurrently serving as the minor thirteenth of the V chord (B^{7b13}) in bar 9. It is typical in jazz to replace the dominant seventh of the subdominant degree (IV⁷) in bar 6 with a diminished seventh chord of the augmented subdominant (#IV^{o7}), and since both *Poimenikós* minor and *Nikríz drómoi* can generate a diminished seventh on the same degree, the practice was followed (see Figure 2). The bridge section of the track was constructed by utilising chords that were built from the *drómoi*, and can be outlined as: || i Im⁷ Im^{maj7} #iv^{o7} | Vm⁷ #iv^{o7} | bVII⁺ VIIIm⁷ VII⁷ i | Im⁷ bVII^{maj7#5} VII⁷ || (see Figure 3).

«Σουρουνλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» is based on a theme that reflects the underlying harmony. Inspiration has been drawn from jazz standards like Mr. P.C. (1960) and Equinox (1964), but the common dominant seventh chord of either the fifth (V⁷) or the minor sixth (bVI⁷) degree in bar 9 has been replaced by a dominant minor seventh (v⁷) followed by a subdominant minor seventh (iv⁷) in bar 10, and then a tonic and a dominant minor seventh (i⁷ – v⁷) come in the subsequent bars. On this occasion, the chords of the second section, which is the chorus for this song, were meticulously chosen after merging the information from the literature. This resulted in five primary degrees, and more specifically i, bIII, bIV, bVII and bVII⁷, as well as six auxiliary degrees, which are ii^o, bIV⁷ or

⁶ Plural of *tríchorda* that translates as ‘three-stringed’, but it is used as a synecdoche for any instrument of the *bouzouki* family that has three pairs of strings.

bIV^{maj7} , bIV^+ , v , and bVI (Gavalas, 2013: 35; Mystakidis, 2012: 170, 2013: 362; Papakostas, 2015: 148; Payatis, 2010: 17; Polykandriotis, 2009: 32-33; Polyzoidis, 2024: 65+333). The process of selecting chords occurred with mindfulness so that the choices would complement the melody, as it was carved with the blues scale. Yet, dissonance appeared in a place, and a triad was eventually replaced to reinforce a more stable sculpture. The final progression consists of: $|| i | bIII | \% | bVII | i | bIII | bVII | i ||$, as seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. The chorus of «Σουρουλεμές & Γιαβουιλού»

Instrumentation

Another important element that affects the overall sound and atmosphere of a song is the selection of instruments. The proper selection would neither contribute to the '*ντίπλα*' effect, nor to the playability of *drómoi*. However, some instruments are typical in certain genres and traditions, and a fine combination would illuminate the optimal amalgamation of the Eastern Mediterranean sonic climate with the Afro-American blues and jazz sounds. For example, one of the characteristic *rebetiko* instruments is the *baglamás*, which is fairly uncommon in other genres. In contrast, brass instruments are typical in jazz, and they are frequently used in blues, but they are uncustomary in *rebetiko*. Therefore, these instruments were put together to achieve a unique timbral amalgam. The tracks include drums, electric bass, electric guitar, lap steel guitars, tenor saxophone, trombone, Rhodes piano, harmonica, as well as *baglamás*, *kashishi* (or *caxixi*), *potirokombolói*,⁷ and some programming. In addition, typical electric guitars were used, such as the emblematic Fender American Vintage '52 Telecaster, and an archtop guitar with flat wound strings.

Unorthodox techniques

To achieve the given goals, various unorthodox techniques had to be introduced and explained to the recording musicians. Musicians were selected scrupulously, based on their experience and expertise. For example, the '*ντίπλα*' feel, which evokes a unique rhythmic quality, played a crucial role, leading to the designation of Ntouvas as the primary drummer for the whole project. His extensive background in rock, jazz, punk, and various folk and *éntehno* Greek styles, along with his affinity for 'drunk' feels, made him an ideal choice.

Another rare technique involved the use of a slide in *drómoi* performances. In these two tracks, a lap steel guitar – characterised by its continuous slide technique – was incorporated. A significant aspect of the project was

⁷ Literally translates as [drinking] glass worry beads, but it is used to describe the technique of rubbing the lip of a taverna wine glass against a *komboí* (worry beads) that is suspended from a button of the musician's shirt.

integrating twelve-bar blues progressions with *drómoi*. While this occasionally created tension points, the resulting clashes can be interpreted as «blue notes», lending a quirky tonal quality to the sonic fusion.

An 'exotic' approach included adapting the chord-scale system, commonly used in jazz to a chord-*drómos* system. Here, scales and modes were replaced by *drómoi*, allowing for different *drómoi* to be employed over each chord. Although «Σουρουνλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» did not exploit this concept, focusing only on the *Sabá(h) drómos*, it was enhanced by incorporating the outlandish diminished octave of its alternative version, basically converting it into an octatonic *drómos*.

Other unconventional techniques explored included bending strings on *tríchorda*, connecting *drómoi* based on their brightness, conducting cross-call-and-response sections between *rebetiko* and blues or jazz, and blending Travis picking with *drómoi*. Some of these techniques were applied in other tracks, such as the ones featured in the recently released EP *Piraeus Blues: Moldy Figs* (2024) but analysing them falls outside the scope of this paper. While musical techniques create a unique sound, the lyrical content serves to deepen the emotional resonance.

Lyrics

Stories hold significant importance in songs, particularly in genres like *rebetiko* and blues, where suppressed individuals express their hard truths using vernacular language and slang. Both *rebétes*⁸ and bluesmen shared similar motivations for communicating in coded language. Elias Petropoulos claims that the *rebetiko* slang is «extremely rich in words, expressions and gestures» emphasising its poetic nature (1968: 13, my translation). So, «Σουρουνλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» integrates Greek slang and idioms throughout, including its title, where 'Σουρουνλεμές' translates to 'foolish' and 'unsettled', derived from the Turkish '*sürükleme*'.

Recurrent themes in both *rebetiko* and blues include love – encompassing desire, sexuality, jealousy and envy – alongside drugs, dissent and prohibition, censorship, betrayal and loyalty with contradiction between lovers and mothers, sailor's songs, minorities, and love for one's instrument. The lyrics for all the songs were crafted based on this categorisation, and thus «9 + 7 = 8» addresses themes of dissent and prohibition, and of minorities, while «Σουρουνλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» explores the most popular theme of all songwriting, which is love, but also touches on drugs and censorship.

Another perspective on lyrics involves the way the songwriters address their audiences. David Raymond Moor expands upon Lloyd Whitesell's concept of four «modes of address» (2008: 44-48), explaining that sophisticated songwriters often blend these modes (Moor, 2019: 113-115). According to this framework, the ironic lyrics of «9 + 7 = 8» are framed in the dramatic and political modes of address, while the heavily slang-infused lyrics of the duet «Σουρουνλεμές & Γιαβουιλού» fall within the dramatic and lyrical modes.

Conclusions

First and foremost, these songs accompanied by this paper set out to develop a new compositional grammar and vocabulary. To contribute to an evolving intercultural songwriting vocabulary requires retreat and reflection.

⁸ Plural of *rebétis* that is a *rebetiko* musician, or a person who lives his life in a way that is associated with the *rebetiko* culture.

Echoing Igor Stravinsky viewpoint, «to explain myself to you is also to explain myself to myself» (1947: 7). Since I have written songs in different stages of my research, my relationship with songwriting has undergone a series of transformations. Other songs, such as the 2017 «Dear John» involved more spontaneity, even though it followed a specific idea. Both «9 + 7 = 8» and «Σουρουκλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» were conceived after analysing songs, studying textbooks, listening, experimenting, meeting other artists and interviewing them, compiling a vocabulary, so they were influenced by all these processes. Their inception can be attributed to my subconscious, or as John Cleese advocates, the 'unconscious', which «was working on stuff all the time, without being consciously aware of it» (2020: 18-19).

«9 + 7 = 8» was the survivor of intense rhythmic experimentation. Several attempts felt uncomfortable, resonating with Frank Zappa who rationalises that «there's no glamour to doing the laborious job of developing a personal theory of harmony or a personal feel for how you want rhythm to function in you work» (quoted in Zollo, 1991: 323). Eventually a flow was established, and the rhythm not only marked the title, but provided inspiration for the lyrics that describe *rebétes'* and bluesmen's distrust of politicians and media. The bridges constitute an ironic comment towards the Greek government that followed practices it had accused the previously elected party of carrying out.

The final chorus of «Σουρουκλεμές & Γιαβουκλού» incorporates two techniques that, to the best of my knowledge, have not been observed in either *rebetiko* or blues. The «track driver's modulation» (Everett, 1997: 118) amplifies the track's energy, which is also supplemented by the «complement chorus» technique (Lavengood, 2021).

Today is the time of fast consumption, oversimplification, and over-repetition of online purchased progressions, premade with MIDI, and stock loops. According to Jeff Todd Titon, «no music exists independently of its roots or its social practice» (1977: 275), so studying the rich traditions of *rebetiko* and blues, analysing their songs, and fusing their elements with respect is as important and relevant as replicating and performing as authentically as possible their standards.

These songs can function as templates for other songwriters who use them as stimuli. Dissecting these songs can help artists break their routines and *modus operandi*, using them as scaffolding for creative development. Finally, more 'marriages' can be arranged between *rebetiko*, blues, and other styles that have been declared as comparable, like *fado* and tango.

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Cita recomendada

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