

## BIOGRAPHY



MARKOS VAMVAKARIS, also known as the father or the grandfather of the rebetika songs, composed the few songs chosen for translation and inclusion in the present study. He was born in 1905 in the island of Syros in the Aegean Sea. At the early age of fifteen, and for economic reasons, he moved to Piraeus in mainland Greece where he learned

to play the bouzouki. He began writing rebetika songs as early as 1932. Others, equally famous and influential rebetika song writers and singers, are Vassilis Tsitsanis, Yannis Papayioannou, Bayanderas, Kostas Roukounas, Loukas Dalaras, and most recently, his son, George Dalaras, one of the most gifted singers and entertainers in Greece today. As for the women performers whose voice became identical to the rebetika songs, there are Rosa Eskenazi, Sotiria Bellou, and Marika Ninou.

## Selected Rebetika Songs

PHIL PASTRAS

In December of 2002, George Pilitsis called me on the telephone to ask if I'd be interested in collaborating on his most recent project in translation. He was working on the lyrics of *rebetika* songs and thought that my background in blues, jazz, and American popular music in general made me the ideal candidate to find ways of casting the translations in the rough equivalent to the slangy, street-wise Greek of such composers as Markos Vamvakaris. I have always been a big fan of *rebetika*, so I told George I'd be delighted to give it a try, though it might be a while before I could turn my attention fully to the project, as I was currently working with famous jazz musician and composer Horace Silver on his autobiography. George explained that the translations so far were as literal and accurate as he could make them and gave me a free hand to translate those, in turn, into versions that were as colloquial, idiomatic and slangy in English as the originals were in Greek. He promptly mailed his manuscript to me, but, alas, all I could do at the time was to give the translations a quick glance and call George to tell him I was intrigued by the possibilities. Unfortunately, by the time my work on the Horace Silver project was winding down, George's health had already begun to fail and, before I knew it, he was gone.

When I was invited to contribute to the *festschrift* for George, I immediately welcomed the opportunity to get to work on the translations. I must say, George and I had worked before on the translation of Yannis Ritsos' dramatic

monologues, a project that was eventually published as *The New Oresteia*, but our work on Ritsos, difficult as it always is to translate poetry from one language to another, did not prepare me for the difficulties of translating song lyrics imbued with the idiomatic density of *rebetika*. I offer the seven lyrics I consider near completion and plan to continue until I've finished the rest. I have made no attempt to duplicate the stanzaic forms or rhymes of the original lyrics, but instead have focused primarily on trying to capture the spirit, tone, and attitudes of the idiom and the genre.

It was a privilege to know George as a close friend and collaborator and hope to do justice to this, our last project together. I miss him dearly.

## SELECTED REBETIKA SONGS

Translated by Phil Pastras

### YOU POURED THE POISON (1937)

And if I do get drunk at night,  
hey, it's because of the blues  
you've poured for me, bitch,  
poisoning my heart.

Quiet down, now, and  
change your mind—  
I can't stand it any more,  
the torture you leave behind.

Do as I say,  
you'll have nothing to lose.  
We'll get along just fine--  
a couple of cholos.

### THEY'VE PUT ME BEHIND BARS (1936?)

They've put me behind bars,  
all because of your eyes.  
The guy you said you loved?—  
I cut him to size.



Cruel, evil woman,  
 you set my heart on fire.  
 When I get out of here,  
 I'll be ready to cut ten more.

All this for you, babe—  
 I want you for myself.  
 Anyone with the balls to stand in my way  
 will rue the day.

On prison walls,  
 on my body, too,  
 I carve your heart, sweet thing,  
 and, when I see it, think of you.

#### CLEVER LITTLE THING (1936)

I'd smash even my bouzouki—  
 my main man—  
 because I'm blue  
 heart-deep for you.

The first year, you said  
 you'd follow me—  
 palaces we'd build,  
 golden the life you'd live, a lady.

But now you put me down,  
 clever little bitch,  
 now I've lost all the cash  
 I carried in my stash.

#### LOULAS\*

For hours, Loulas feeds me--  
 hours, and I waste away—  
 for hours, it casts a blue spell over me  
 and I speak to no one, no way.

My mind wanders—here, there—  
 with all my logic,  
 and I feel how, in a moment,  
 my coffin will arrive.

Never, not for a moment,  
 can I forget that—  
 not in this world, where I was born  
 never to rest.

Mother Nature left me  
 bitter blues and troubles  
 that pass and lose themselves  
 only with ganja.

O my wastrel life,  
 give me a break—  
 what did I do to make  
 my eyes brimful of tears?

\* Loulas=the bowl of the narghile, or water pipe.

## SIX HOOKERS

Six voluptuous hookers,  
good-looking, blackeyed,  
out for a stroll in the market  
and everyone's scandalized.

They're looking for a fool—  
a john, some guy with a hardon—  
all six hang on  
to eat up his pay.

Once they've gobbled up even the small change,  
he's left pulling out his hair—  
they wear him out  
then leave him with nothing but despair.

## AT MICKEY'S JOINT (1934)

I've been straight all morning,  
so now I badly need a toke or two  
at Mickey's joint—  
he's got the pure black hash.

I'll go get stoned  
and bust the blues wide open  
and make the burning quit my heart,  
and make the poison go away.

As for the life I've led,  
I'd do it all again—  
in this world of hypocrites,  
I gladly play the dervish, to the death.

I choose death  
before I'd put black hash away—  
I smoke the bong  
and down the dregs.

## I'M SICK OF BITCHES (1935)

I'm about to lose it—  
I'm sick of bitches.  
My mind's made up:  
a monk's habit for me.

Of all my paychecks,  
not a dime left over—  
spent it all on them, then wandered off,  
chump change in my pocket.

Fussin and fightin,  
all-night hassles, quarrels—  
kicked ass on a regular basis,  
then paid for my mistakes.

I'll change my way of life, now—  
they've left me dead broke—  
I'll study monkery,  
far away, monastic.