

The aesthetics of imperfection and hybridization: What is so interesting about Turkish funk and pop music of the 1960s and 1970s?

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Abstract

Turkish funk and pop music of the 1960s and 1970s is very little known outside Turkey, though its special character makes it worthy of consideration. Today, the periphery is the new center, and B-music (following Andy Votel's term) has become the new A-music—more and more people are focusing on phenomena of hybridization, where the former periphery (like Oriental culture) and the former center (Western culture) have come to intersect (and an ex-B-music can now be regarded as a model for a future A-music).

But what is so special about Turkish funk and pop music? A specific aesthetic was developed through imperfection and hybridization. Due to the media technology used in the studios (instruments, sound, and mixing), and due to the an attitude toward the cultural industry that allowed an interest in following tradition and making experiments at the same time, Turkish musicians and producers built up something extraordinary, blending Western and Oriental cultures in an exceptional manner. This paper tries to explore that specific approach, basing the analysis on some characteristic listening examples.

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Turkish funk and pop music of the 1960s and 1970s is very little known outside Turkey, though its special character makes it worthy of consideration. Not much research has been done on the subject¹ and this paper, while imperfect, is a small attempt to take things a step further.

To give a first impression, here is a tune by Mogollar called “Cigrik,” recorded at the beginning of the 1970s:

MP3 snippet 01_Mogollar, “Cigrik” (0–1.54)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvcCnGvaIVY>

¹ See Gerald Johan Van Waes, “Anadolu Pop and Progressive Crossovers from Turkey—A Historical Perspective,” <http://psychevanhetfolk.homestead.com/files/turkey.txt> (accessed March 23, 2011); Sebastian Reier, “Türkischer Funk. À-Go-Go am Bosphorus,” ZEIT ONLINE May 13, 2009, <http://www.zeit.de/online/2009/19/tuerkischer-funk> (accessed March 23, 2011); and Gokhan Aya, “16 Turkish Beat, Psych & Garage Delights. Ultrarities [sic] from beyond the Sea of Marmara,” liner notes for the compilation V. A., *16 Turkish Beat, Psych & Garage Delights*, Grey Past Records, Dust 002, 2001.

Today, the periphery is the new center, and B-music (following Andy Votel's term²) has become the new A-music (just think, for example, of genres like cumbia digital or favela funk). More and more people are focusing on phenomena of hybridization, where the former periphery (like Oriental culture) and the former center (Western culture) have come to intersect. Ex-B-music is now regarded as a model for a future A-music, and reissues and compilations are coming out constantly to prove this development, especially over the last two or three years.³

I am a white middle-class German—how did I get in touch with Turkish music? In 2006, the L.A. record label Stones Throw put the “Stones Throw Podcast #12” online, called “Turkish Funk Mix” by Beat-Producer Egon⁴, and in 2007 they followed up with a proper release, the hip hop-style double album *Dr. No's Experiment* by DJ and producer Oh No, which was based exclusively on Turkish funk and pop music samples.

Hip hop producers and beat creators are continuously searching for new beats, finding fresh material in the former periphery. As an example, here is DJ not-I, working with the track we've heard before, Mogollar's “Cigrik”:

MP3 snippet 02_DJ not-I, “Mash Touch It Cigrik” (Busta Rhymes, Mogollar), (0–0.48)

But what is so special about Turkish funk and pop music? Simplifying things a little, one could say that Turkish funk and pop music developed its specific aesthetic through imperfection and hybridization.

The term imperfection has to be put into relation. Imperfect—compared to what? Here the standard of comparison is the sound of Western pop music produced in technologically well-equipped Western studios with all the means of high fidelity, effects, filters, equalization, and so on.

The term hybridization is used in its biological sense, meaning something which is a product of two different species that have been crossbred. A hybrid is something consisting of different origins, transgressing the old order of the former species to build up something new.

Coming back to Turkish pop music: Where did it all begin? In 1965, the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* held the first edition of an annual music contest. First attempts of imitating Western pop music had been undertaken since the start of the 1960s, but the language barrier was hard to overcome. Accordingly, the most estimated band in Turkey was not The Beatles, but rather The Shadows or The Ventures, whose instrumental music did not pose the problem of incomprehensible words. At this point, *Hürriyet* had an idea: the lyrics of the pop tunes should be written in Turkish, or traditional songs should be rearranged in the style of Western pop music, with electric instruments.

What did this music sound like? Here's one of the winners of 1967, bringing up a psychedelic feeling and some Ventures style by combining traditional elements with an electric instrumentation (note: the inconstant dynamics are on the vinyl and not a problem of digitalization):

² Andy Votel is part of the worldwide network and record label Finders Keepers. He released three various-artist compilations called *B-MUSIC—DRIVE IN*, *TURN ON*, *FREAK OUT*, *B-MUSIC—Cross Continental Record Raid Road Trip*, and *B-Music—Radio Galaxia*, see http://www.finderskeepersrecords.com/discog_fkr021.html, http://www.finderskeepersrecords.com/discog_b-comp.html, and http://www.finderskeepersrecords.com/discog_bms025.html (accessed March 24, 2011).

³ See the releases of the already mentioned Finders Keepers or releases of the record labels like Academy, Analog Africa, Now Again, Numero Group, Soul Jazz, Soundway, Strut, World Psychedelic Funk Classics, and many more.

⁴ See <http://www.stonesthrow.com/podcast/> (accessed March 23, 2011).

MP3 snippet 03_Yabancilar, “Agit,” (0–2.40)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9gtal4ya5Q

The contest organized by Hürriyet became so important because the newspaper released the music on vinyl and made the bands tour the country, laying the foundations for a distinctively Turkish pop and funk music.

What are its characteristics? Imperfection and hybridization, as stated before. Imperfection had to do with the technology used in the studios, with the instruments the musicians were playing, as well as with sound and mixing. Till the mid-1970s, some sources say even until the end of the 1970s, no studio existed in the country that would have measured up to the Western standard. Electronic instruments were new to the Turkish musicians; encouraged by the Hürriyet contest they electrified their own traditional instruments like the saz and burst into the low-end “studios” they had, where they went under the treatment of sound engineers and producers who often learned their craft through the experience. BUT: This was not a disadvantage, on the contrary. It makes the music rough, mysterious, psychedelic, unpredictable and surprising, full of exciting energy, and did not smooth things down by a too professional-sounding technology and too clever producers, like Phil Spector’s so-called Wall of Sound did with The Beatles.

Here is another, more jazzy example of that energy (note: this sample is taken from a reissue compilation, sound has been improved but frequency separation still remains a problem):

MP3 snippet 04_Emin Findikoglu, “Cecen Kizi,” (0–1.09)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_6_kzyevYQ

The sound technology used often provides a life of its own, some sort of “arte povera” sound with lots of reverb especially on the voices, a thin drum sound, and a bass ranging more in the middle. Often the sound engineers pushed a certain instrument or a voice drastically to the fore- or the background, volume levels are therefore very disruptive and inconstant, sounding strange to Western ears. This can be observed in some of the following listening examples.

The interest of the musicians in both following the tradition and making experiments at the same time led to the phenomenon of hybridization. Turkish musicians and producers built up something extraordinary, blending Western and Oriental cultures in a special way.

Again it was Hürriyet who promoted the idea. New interpretations of traditional Turkish music were allowed in the contest, as long as they were electrified. That rule was the definitive starting point for blending Western music, which was based on its media technology, and Oriental music culture, based on its structures as well as on its instruments. Here are three sound samples for different approaches of blending traditional and Western music, ranging from more traditional to more funky interpretations of the Turkish classic “Zühtü.”

MP3 snippet 05_Sevda Alpay (0–1.14). This version is done in a belly dance-orchestra style, but the saz is electrified. Note the volume fluctuations of the band in relation to the voice.

MP3 snippet 06_Oya (0–1.04). This version has more Western instruments, although in the whole it is not too far away from the Sevda Alpay example before.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1LBQdBogzE>

MP3 snippet 07_Esin Afsar (0–1.03). This version is played mainly on Western instruments, only a flanged electric saz remains, and it is a far more funky interpretation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uf61qOXO7Yo>

These three examples show the whole range of possible references from traditional to Western music.

It seems as if Turkish music had just been waiting for electrification, so easily could its structure, instruments, and compositions be transferred to a new Turkish pop and funk music. This can be shown in the numerous in-between tunes, which move on a gradual scale between traditional and new Turkish music.

First an example of traditional Turkish music, already sounding a little proto-funky:

MP3 snippet 08_Bedia Akartürk, “Yaylanin Cimenine,” (0–1.42)

Some traditional tunes integrate a drum set or an electrified saz, but stay more or less traditional in composition and vocal melody:

MP3 snippet 09_Arif Sag, “Bizim Sarkimiz,” (0–1.42)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUjlt7BRjc>

Other tunes are made with pop instruments—electric bass, electric guitar or saz, organ, and drum set—but still remain traditional in composition and vocal melody:

MP3 snippet 10_Hakki Bulut, “Ben Köylüyüm,” (0–1.15)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IiW9OtGwo0o>

And some tunes are based on Western pop music structures but are played with a mainly Turkish instrumental setting:

MP3 snippet 11_Fikret Kizilok, “Söyle,” (0–0.59)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyWj66Vj-O4>

There seem to have been no restrictions; many musical concepts were developed between traditional and Western music, mixing them, changing them, building hybrids. A special hybrid is realized with Sevil and Ayla’s “Bebek.” In 1974, Sevil and Ayla took Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” from 1969 and blended it with Baris Manco’s “Bebek” from 1968, which was a really clever idea. Manco’s “Bebek” was plugged onto Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” both in terms of melody and lyrics, producing a hybrid that covers two numbers in one.

MP3 snippet 12_Baris Manco, “Bebek,” (0–1.03)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tTV1gzcgjc>

MP3 snippet 13_Sevil and Ayla, “Bebek,” (0–1.20)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCd9dFu5NOK>

Summing up, one could say that an imperfect, low-end media technology—right the opposite of today’s normative autotune—and individuals handling it in an imperfect way, can be of great value for the music. Whereas a too-perfect production can strangle the music it aims to enhance.

This imperfect production of music was also the choice method of operation in other B-music countries like Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Senegal, to name just a few, at the same period of time. But it seems none of these countries could provide such a strong musical identity and such a quantity and quality of music productions.⁵ The special manner of hybridization, following the Hürriyet principles, surely has to do with that. Looking at the

⁵ Except, for sure, India’s Bollywood music production.

cultural situation, some other aspects play a role, like the Atatürk spirit of modernization, the long democratic period in Turkey from 1961 till the end of the 1970s, the socio-economic development enabling both music production and consumption.

To conclude: the recognizable aesthetic of imperfection is not a result of a Kittlerian idea of misuse of media technology⁶, but more the point of a non-intentional intersection where low-end technology and limited know-how came together with the necessary enthusiasm for a new way of expression and self-definition, open to build hybrids not as a way of cultural clashes but of cultural mashes. This makes the Turkish pop and funk music so adoptable and interesting, even for a white middle-class German.

Following the theoretical concept of Byung-Chul Han, based on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity⁷ and called hybrid culture, the voice of the "Other" is already present in the self, as identity is based on difference. According to Bhabha, hybridity "reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter [...] the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority."⁸ Perhaps we can hear Turkish pop and funk music of the 1960s and 1970s as both: Western music through Turkish music and Turkish music through Western music. And sometimes, and that is interesting, no one's the boss, hierarchies are melting down—which could also become interesting for the future of music, since the future always lies in the past. Perhaps, as Byung-Chul Han says, "we are coming to a culture which, translated into acoustics, is opening itself to a hypercultural sonic space, without boundaries, with all the different sounds being very close to each other [...]. It's a hypercultural state of juxtaposition, simultaneity, and coexistence."⁹ And perhaps Turkish funk and pop music could be regarded as such a hypercultural sonic space—a space we could learn from.

⁶ See Friedrich Kittler, "Rockmusik—Ein Missbrauch von Heeresgerät," in: Peter Gente, Heidi Paris and Martin Weinmann (eds.), *Short Cuts. Friedrich Kittler*, Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2002.

⁷ See Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperkulturalität. Kultur und Globalisierung*, Berlin: Merve, 2005.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 114.

⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperkulturalität*, 2005, p. 13. The translation is mine.