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An islander's notes: The man, the lover, the expat musician on the streets of Athens'

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHY Parinaz Adib of works by unknown graffiti artists

An islander's notes

The man, the lover, the expat musician on the streets of Athens

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Lazarus is a Cuban street musician living in Athens, Greece. This article tracks both his life history and his encounter with the author who was researching busking in the city. It is a study at the confluence of art and anthropology, an exploration of ethno-biography as a mode of representation, and a reflection on ethnographic fieldwork.

KEY WORDS ethno-biography, street music (busking), fieldwork

Much of what follows comes from several conversations Lazarus, a Cuban saxophone player, and I had. I was in Athens, a bustling and cramped metropolis, for a total of one month. Lazarus and I became fast friends and played together on several occasions in the area of Athens around the Acropolis called the Plaka, a known tourist area, and the ideal place to find entertainers. We had little in the way of formal interviews and instead spoke as friends, although he was aware of my project and my plans as an Anthropology student conducting research in Athens. For this reason, as much as I would like to, I cannot quote him directly.

This being a study at the confluence of art and anthropology, it was very much influenced by an attention to affect. It follows both my encounter with Lazarus and his life-story, as he narrated it. I will not be making a concrete argument, except to say that music is a skill that many people (Lazarus in particular) have used to survive in the midst of a massive economic downturn in the Greek economy. Lazarus was saved by his saxophone.

Biography of Lazarus

He barely eats, He hardly sleeps
He stands all day and plays
Notes float along the street
He's a lover in every kind of way

A handsome man, without a plan
From an island far away
With melody he does what he can
Always at work, always at play

Born in Cuba in 1968, he was the youngest of three children. He began walking at six months old, a child who just had to move. After a few months he was hospitalized because walking on soft bones had caused them to warp and he was unable to walk. For the next four years he saw only one room in a religious hospital, cared for by nuns and priests, he waited for his legs to work again. Upon leaving the facility, he found he was different than his peers. He had been around older people for most of his childhood and found it difficult to fit in with children his own age. Soon afterward, he didn't specify how long, presumably a couple of years, he began playing with girls, sparking a lifelong passion for ... well, passion and girls. He had male friends, but spent a great deal of time with girls his own age, and once he had grown more, girls who were sometimes much older. Growing up he loved Bob Marley, funk, and jazz, most of which was not to be found on the radio or in music stores anywhere in Cuba, where the only music played and on the radio was traditional and maybe some rock. He had many Bob Marley records and spent hours listening to them.

He went to "polytechnic" school and was the only one of his siblings to graduate, his sister had children and stopped going and his brother dropped out to work. According to him, he was the "prodigal son" and his mother was very proud. Early on it was clear he would go far, and so he has. A driven man, he then enrolled in military school at about 15 and spent a few months there before being shipped off to Angola. Cuba had supported the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*, or People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) in Angola since its struggle for independence in 1974–75 and sent troops and other personnel to their aid, so he told me. At the age of sixteen, Lazarus convinced his superiors to let him go and fight. He spent 11 months in Angola, a touchy subject and one not easily or happily relived. After that time he was pulled out by the Cuban authorities and made a lieutenant at the military academy, after only a year or so of actual schooling and a year of brutal war. He was offered a career in the military, but refused and left. It was not his calling. Ever a lover, never a fighter.

Lazarus married a Cuban woman and had two children with her, to whom he continues to send money when he can from Athens. The marriage fell apart when he went to school for a few months to become a barber and opened his own barber shop. Through the barber shop he supported himself while attending music school in 1995, studying saxophone. Out of his class of 30 musicians, he was the only one to graduate. His life was busy and exciting through these years, running a small business, going to parties, studying, seeing friends, and traveling. He found that he had no time to play saxophone, though he studied the books and had a theoretical knowledge of music in general. When it came time for exams, he practiced feverishly, often until very late at night. He told me he used to hide in his closet, putting clothes under the door and in his sax to muffle the sound, and he played all through the night. When it came time to award the diplomas for the class of 1999, Lazarus explained that many of his classmates had dropped out, largely because they could not handle the pressure of the school although they still played beautifully. Lazarus was brought before the judges and when asked if he thought he deserved a diploma, he took a leap and told them he did because he knew the material and worked really hard and so on. Whether or not his speech was actually persuasive the judges awarded him—and only him—a diploma. The accreditation allowed him to teach music. In spite of this, after graduation he literally hung up his sax and instead concentrated on running his barber



Lazarus in Athens, Greece.

PHOTO COURTESY: JEREMY COOPER

shop, that is until the future founder of Manana Reggae came in for a shave. Manana Reggae was, according to Lazarus, the first reggae band to be formed in Cuba.

This man, I never found out his name, asked Lazarus if the saxophone on the wall belonged to him. When Lazarus said yes, but that he didn't play much, Bob told him he was starting the first reggae band to play in Cuba. To this point the music scene had been dominated by traditional and rock music. Lazarus, who grew up listening to reggae records, was intrigued. Yet, because he did not think he could spare the time and the offer didn't seem very serious, he refused. After a time, Bob came back, saying he had a few members and they were jamming regularly, he again invited Lazarus to come and join; again he refused. He was nonetheless becoming more and more interested. After another couple of weeks, Bob came back and, finally, Lazarus decided to join them for a jam. From that point on, they were known as Manana Reggae, touring all over Cuba, becoming wildly popular as a local act. About the same time, another band approached Lazarus to play bass, this band was Frijoles Negro, a funk/hip hop band, also a novelty in Cuba at the time, and he accepted. The latter became quite famous in Cuba and, according to him, toured with the North American group, The Roots.

He was with these two bands for five years, touring all over Cuba. During which time he met a Greek woman who was vacationing there. Lazarus wooed her and they began to date. Over the next couple of years she returned to Cuba several times to visit him. Then, in 2004 with the Olympics coming to Athens, Lazarus decided to go and visit her in Athens, where she was staying for work. Once there, he had planned to stay for only a few weeks, but his girlfriend suggested they get married, largely as a way to get him papers



Lazarus in Cuba, performing with Toronto poet and singer D'bi Young.

PHOTO COURTESY: JEREMY COOPER

so that he could visit her there and not have trouble. Trouble being problems with racist police, difficulty with visas etc. They married, and Lazarus stayed in Athens for longer than expected, however, after about four months (yes, months) they split and he was left on the streets in Greece for about a month. Meanwhile, his life in Cuba had dissolved, the bands were moving on, and the barber shop was in decline. Lazarus was stuck. Eventually he got himself back on his feet, but by that point had very little in Cuba to go back to. He has visited on occasion but essentially he has stayed in Greece, living mostly in Athens ever since 2004.

After he had begun to establish himself in Athens, using his saxophone as a way to make money to survive, Lazarus met a guitar player in his late 20s. He and Lazarus began jamming. However the young man had some substance abuse issues, and Lazarus said he would not be in his band until he cleaned himself up. Lazarus has never liked drugs and alcohol and, more importantly, did not have time to waste. Eventually though, the two of them started the funk rock band Fundracar. Lazarus, being an eternal fan of reggae, suggested they play a couple of reggae songs, so they added them to the “repetory”—to explain, Lazarus’ English was conversational but lacking in grammar, he would say he when talking of women or men and he said “repetory” instead of repertoire, something I found rather charming). Soon after, Sony took notice of them and offered them a large contract ... as a reggae band. This was a huge opportunity, but unfortunately most of the band had to be replaced because they were rockers as opposed to Rastas. They got a drummer and bass player who were cousins from Kenya and began cutting an EP album. They released the EP and began touring, however, it soon became apparent that there were rifts in the band. Lazarus wanted to be writing good music and, again, did not want to waste time.

The others were much younger and comfortable writing cliché songs, as in simple, lowest common denominator stuff; not in it for the music so much as the money ... and spending most of their time in bottles and clouds. They were also not making any money because Sony had sunk so much into them that everything they made touring was going back to the company. Lazarus was not happy about this. Though he was close with the band, he was forced to leave because he simply could not support himself with the little wages he earned from the band, who to him, seemed to be drowning in indulgence and laziness. Lazarus returned to being a solo act, busking most of every day and playing in bars, restaurants, and clubs most nights. It is hard to earn a living as a musician anywhere in the world, and my friend is unsupported by family in a crumbling economy trying desperately to make ends meet. In years past, making money as a musician in the tourist areas of Athens was not impossible, but in the last years especially people have been working less (often laid-off), there is little money flowing, and the trouble with riots and unrest makes tourists nervous so there are fewer of them as well.

Over time he had five children with four different women and was expecting a sixth child with a fifth woman; in fact, as I write this sentence his new daughter has been born. He tries his damndest to send them money when he can and to visit his far-flung family (as two live in Cuba, one in London, one in Latvia, and the rest in Athens). However with the ongoing economic crisis in Greece, it has been very hard for him to maintain these connections and fulfill these obligations with any sort of regularity. Luckily he has created support networks based around his various girlfriends and his many friends, but he lives hand to mouth. He plays all day long, sometimes forgetting to eat, and generally makes between 80 and 150 euro in a day ... but that is pretty optimistic. In clubs he averages about 40 euro for a few hours of entertainment. He is doing better than some, and only he knows just how much he is struggling.

Our Time Together

When I met him, Lazarus was standing in his favorite spot in Plaka, just below the Acropolis under a large tree. I heard a saxophone floating on the breeze and went to investigate. At first I was planning simply to give him some money and take his picture, as I had been doing with most of the buskers I had seen. I had just come back from the music store, where I had purchased an acoustic guitar (I needed something to play for the time I was there) and upon seeing it, he immediately struck up a conversation, asking me to jam with him. I was thrilled, as earlier an interview had fallen through, and I was in the midst of wondering where my project was going. I sat down and began playing along as best I could. He was playing jazz (not my strong suit musically) so I was trying to contribute nice sounds, but he seemed to be really enjoying it, and I immediately noticed his energy. He is a musician who plays with heart, which is harder to find than one might think. We began talking and after a time went to get dinner. He took me to his favorite restaurant, in the “black town” as he called it, the dangerous and unruly area around Omonia Square where immigrants from much of the world conglomerate. As we went he told me that he much preferred playing on the street to playing in clubs and such because in establishments the managers will often try to jerk around the musicians and not pay them what they are owed (a practice not uncommon in Canada as well), but on the street he is his own master and



Lazarus and the author after a day of swimming and spearfishing.

PHOTO COURTESY: JEREMY COOPER

decides when to play, when to stop, where and what to play, et cetera. He was a gentleman as well because, although I could see he didn't have much, he paid for my dinner (which was tasty and cheap). As we were parting ways, he told me he was playing at Cafe Plaka in the Plaka neighborhood in a few days and that I should come and see him; we exchanged what contact information we could (I did not have a phone, so it was email) and went our separate ways.

That Friday, I went with a number of my classmates to see his show. I had told them about it and they were quite intrigued. Lazarus was happily surprised to see me. I had not emailed him so he thought I wouldn't come. He told me that he played in this place once a week and that he would lend me his electric guitar so that the next week we might play together. I was very excited about this, I had been wondering how far I could connect with the music scene while I was in Greece, partly for fun and partly for research. His show was excellent; he and another Cuban man played Latin jazz and gave a dance lesson, making a point of dancing with every woman in the place. Lazarus and his friend were excellent dancers, and they made quite a spectacle whirling around the floor. A day or so later, I met him and he gave me his only electric guitar, showing me how trusting he could be. For all he knew I could have just left the country with it the next day, so I was rather surprised he chose to leave me with it. In any case, this only served to cement our friendship. Via Facebook, he sent me the songs that we would play that night, and I spent the next days practicing. When Friday rolled around again, we met at Cafe Plaka and practiced some more, before the show. My classmates all came to encourage me. It was interesting to see people's reactions. In the Cafe was the only time and place I saw Greeks dancing with any gusto. In the club district of Gazi, no one dances to the music, they stand around and drink,

and nowhere else did I see anyone dancing with abandon ... apparently Latin jazz makes everyone's hips move. Lazarus was paid 45 euro for the night.

The next night, we played at a bar that was near the Acropoli metro, I felt a lot more comfortable with our "repetory" and so the show went a lot better. Again my friends came to watch, and again we all danced halfway through. It was the first time Lazarus had ever played at this bar, so I was honored to be there for it. The way it worked was that he would play a set (about an hour and a half) and then I would join him for the second half, after which we would jam. If he needed to fill more time, I would let him finish on his own. He was paid 40 euro then. After that night, he lent me his amplifier so that I could practice better. There was another gig the next Friday. He was always very generous, I knew he was struggling financially (he was quick to say so) but he never let on to it in his actions or in his generosity and always insisted that he pay for my food and drink, though sometimes I simply wouldn't let him. He talked always about the pressures of 'Babylon' making his life very difficult, he was referring to the crisis taking place, but more broadly to the financial systems that brought it about as such things are not present in Cuba. He often didn't pay for transit because such things are free in Cuba, and he felt he shouldn't have to pay. The use of Rasta terminology was simply part of his vocabulary, likely due to his upbringing in reggae in the Caribbean.

That week, he and I went to his favorite place to swim, about an hour out of Athens, and we spent the afternoon there, spearfishing and talking about life. It was a very nice afternoon and I learned a great deal about his life that day. The day after, I went to his *garrida's* house (he used the word a lot referring to his pregnant girlfriend) and we spent the day jamming with bass and guitar, playing several of the songs I have written in order to play them at the gig that weekend. When it came time to play the last show, I met him near where we had played the previous Saturday, at a sports bar below a traveller's hostel near the Acropolis Museum. It was a decent show, again the first time he had played there. He was constantly searching for new places to play, so it was a first for both of us. The environment was not as conducive to jazz music as the other places had been, it was loud and boisterous. Again my 'cheering section' came to support Lazarus and I which was nice, but the audience aside from them was scattered and fluctuating. We played the songs I wrote, which went over better than I was expecting and involved singing in English. When I had played on the streets for fun and research, people seemed to enjoy it, but generally the only ones who made and comment or acknowledgment were English speakers, evoking a kinship related to language. Other buskers were not moved. Once, an American went well out of his way to come and give me some money because he liked the song I was playing, more importantly he could understand it, which I think was a comforting thing for him. In any case, I found language to be a unifier, which was good at the gig because there were primarily Americans and Australians in the audience so they understood my songs (though they had obviously never heard them before). This facilitated a better connection with the audience. This was a clear indication that tourism in Athens was not dead, many still come from all over the world, often young people, to explore the ancient city. I never found out how much Lazarus was paid that night, but I would guess around 50 euro.

The next day, I met Lazarus for the last time, and we spent a few hours busking at his favorite place, where we met, then I returned his guitar to him, and we said our goodbyes and parted ways. I left him some money in his guitar case, because I knew if I gave it to

him he would not accept it: he has too much pride. It was bittersweet to say goodbye, it was very nice to have spent the time with him, and he gave me much knowledge and many stories, but it is a shame that I won't see him again, at least in the foreseeable future.

Conclusions

Just like me, Lazarus is a moving, feeling being, as Brian Massumi (2002) would say. Nailing my concepts too neatly would have taken away some of the affective intensities and potentialities—the singularities—of our encounters I intended to transmit through this biography.

Lazarus has had a long and exciting life, and it has taken him to a rather difficult spot in Athens. He would love “a stable job” in a factory or a farm or anything, and to only play music for fun. This is close to impossible though, because of the current economic conditions and skyrocketing unemployment in Greece, so he is forced to exhaust himself with his melodies trying to earn enough to feed himself and send support to his various children. He would like to leave the country; however he does not have enough money to do so. He remains cheerful and optimistic nonetheless and really is luckier than many. He is far from descending into addiction, and he has a skill that is really more of a passion with which he can make an acceptable living. He has an amazing spirit and a solid drive, but very little traction. The crisis is affecting everyone in Greece differently, but it is on everyone's lips, and when his are not around his horn, or on a lady's, they are lamenting his difficult situation, but always doing so with a smile on his face.

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