

# Roots: Intellectual Speculation for Some, a Matter of Fact for Others

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This year's topic, "Searching for Roots: An Uninterrupted Journey", is possible to interpret as an invitation to self-reflection: isn't it a sign that there's something disturbing when the roots have become so distant and there's a need of searching for them? A situation typical more for white Europeans than, for instance, the Romany musicians of our continent or – at random – for the inhabitants of Mali, Algeria, or Cuba. Local musicians just play without speculating about any roots.

Let us try to analyze this year's topic in more detail. The aforementioned roots are the basis of music, whose continuity should be our current music events, which means the stage defined in the second part of our title with the words "uninterrupted journey". A tension arises between the two parts of our topic: if our search for roots demands a greater effort or surmounting of obstructions, then the journey in question, or to say it better, the continuity between tradition and today, will be disturbed.

In my paper I would like to bring forward several examples of how to overcome our lost link to roots. But first it is necessary to sum up the reasons for this disturbance in continuity. In the case of the Central and Western Europe, the causes of this break are generally known. Among the most important belongs a change in people's customs that had lasted for over two centuries. The year 1781, when Joseph II issued a charter that abolished serfdom thus enabling the country people to buy themselves out of indenture and move to towns, can be considered a benchmark. This was, however, a part of social changes that were taking place in the whole of Europe. Eight years later the French revolution began, and thirteen years after that the production of steam engines was standardized, which marked the onset of a multi-decade process now called the Industrial Revolution.

Conditions in the isolated villages of the 18<sup>th</sup> century proved to be favorable for a far greater diversity of music in comparison with today. On the other hand, life in towns, modern communication, and the media contributed to a disappearance of the diversity. The disappearance was, paradoxically, helped by changes that were then perceived positively, such as schools of music and the spread of the piano and equal temperament. In contrast, Ukrainian pianist Michail Alperin considers music conservatories deadly enemies of folk music.

Within this 200-year-old process, the folk music of many countries acquired a new function, among which non-musical factors unfortunately prevailed. This shift affected, for example, Nazi Germany and the communist countries in the Eastern block, where a mass-organized production of folklore became a tool of state propaganda. Apart from the political shift, a social shift took place. As an example, I mention Greece, a country that, from our Central European perspective, is viewed as an oasis of authentic and traditional music: "The Greeks perceive their music as a national heritage and not as a legitimate artistic form. An authentic folk music impersonates here a scene to the national holidays and church festivals, though no one considers the music an independent art. Most of my colleagues coming from bands of well-known celebrities play music they in reality cannot bear."<sup>1)</sup> This quotation comes from a musician who has a moral claim on his rather extreme view; that is, he has the highest demands even on the music he himself creates. Ross Daly has lived in Greece for twenty five years and belongs among the most recognized players of the lyra, a Cretan music instrument. It is worth mentioning that this musician is of Irish descent, but that did not prevent him from acquiring Greek culture as his own. His parents worked as diplomats which enabled Ross in his boyhood to feel far more intensively what most of the receptive town dwellers of the industrially developed world came to realize: a separation from their roots. To paraphrase the topic of this year's colloquium: The journey is interrupted; the roots must be searched for.

Ross Daly set forth on the journey following the path taken by the non-conformists going from West to East since the 1960s. This 'Silk Road of Hippies' went through Greece, Turkey, and Afghanistan, with the ultimate goal of spirituality in India as well as hemp in Nepal. In contrast to his precursors, Daly traveled to India to learn to play the sitar. He soon learnt that a foreigner could hardly match the Indians and their millennium of uninterrupted musical tradition. This obstacle of a sensible musician, who remains but an outsider, was precisely described by American minimalist composer Steve Reich: "I found out while being in Africa that I was just a tiny grain driven by an enormous wave. Many of my friends literally drowned in Indian music. When studying a foreign culture, you meet up with a huge power. And if you are uncertain whether to be, for instance, an Indian composer or a 'western' composer with an Indian touch, you will be lost."<sup>2)</sup>

1) Personal interview by the author, as published in *Rock & Pop*, July 2001, World Music column, as "Pěšky s oslem přes Krétu: Řecká identita Rosse Dalyho".

2) Personal interview by the author, as published in *Volume* cca 1994, as "Steve Reich: Zapomínání není žádná ctnost", available online <http://world.freemusic.cz/index.php/steve-reich-zapominani-neni-zadna-ctnost/>.

Ross Daly came to a similar understanding. He regularly traveled eastward via Greece, and at one of his stops along the way he said to himself, "What if I stopped by in Crete and tried out the Cretan lyra?" The lyra is a symbol of Crete and belongs to the same family as the Central Asian spike fiddle *kamāncheh*. Daly chose Kostas Mountakis, a Cretan player, to be his teacher, an apprenticeship that lasted until Mountakis's death. In recent years, Daly he has organized summer workshops in Crete with master-players from the east Mediterranean area.



**Musician Ross Daly.**

Ross's decision to accept a different culture as his own is not unique. We can, for example, mention a whole generation of "cultural exiles", that includes a virtuoso who settled in Alepp, the cultural metropolis of Syria, and plays the *qānūn* (Arabic zither): Julien Weiss, a French Swiss. Weiss comments on his choice: "Back in the 1970s, I was playing jazz and classical, and like hippies I would be on travels to East, not much to India and Nepal though, but to Arabian countries. The then rock and roll seemed to me primitive. I liked Miles Davis and was on the best way to becoming a classical guitar player, but I failed to identify with it. Classic music became too detached from life, jazz was not my culture, I did not enjoy rock – and the only music that kept her face in Europe was the gypsy music. I decided to look for something new. I wanted to become the first European who will successfully learn to play the classic Arabic music, will not mix it with jazz or other genres, and will get in the essence of the music."<sup>3)</sup> Julien Weiss overcame the syndrome, voiced by Steve Reich, of losing oneself in a foreign culture. As the only European he plays with Sufian singers in the Al Kindi Ensemble.

A third example of how to create a new continuity out of missing roots is Stephan Micus, who, like Ross Daly and Julien Weiss, focused on the East. Micus lived in India for three years, he learnt the music there by a traditional method called *guru-shishya*, through which a student (*shishya*) becomes a member of his guru's family. In turn, the guru sets an example for the student in both music and life. Micus says: "I had a teacher and we would spend together all days, I would

3) Personal interview by the author, as published in *Rock & Pop*, September 2000, World Music column, as "*Splněný sen excentrického Švýčara*".



*Al Kindi Ensemble.*

eat with his family, took his lectures, and would return home only for sleep and practice. Although I am not an Indian, I did not find it hard. I had to practice eight hours a day, I needed plenty of discipline, and every day I discovered many interesting things besides music. I am convinced that in order to learn music of other cultures, one needs to live in the culture. It is not only about obtaining control over the instrument, but also getting in the local culture, learning about the culture's philosophy, architecture, food, and poetry."<sup>4)</sup> Micus, in contrast to Weiss and Daly, did not remain loyal only to one chosen cultural tradition: every time he entered a culture he later left the culture as well. He studied music in Africa, Japan, and in other places and the techniques he had learnt served him as means to reach his aims. There are further examples of 'cultural exiles' who become springboards for existing but endangered local traditions. A German musician Robert Zollitsch chose a Bavarian zither as his instrument. At age twenty seven, he obtained a scholarship for studying the Chinese *gugu* (7-string zither) at a music conservatory in Shanghai. He currently acts as a composer, decorator, player, and leader of the music group of his wife, the Chinese singer Linny Gong.

But let us return to the merit of the case: what should be done when the thread threatens to break, yet the roots remain within our grasp so that they may be brought back to life and turned up for the world audience's attention? At the

4) Personal interview by the author.

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was such a re-birth achieved at one of the quaintest Afro-American cultures: in the music of the Caribbean Garifuna people (the Garinagu), descendants of the Africans who saved their lives from the wreckages of slaveholders' ships and thus escaped slavery. There are about half a million of Garinagu, they live in Guatemala, Honduras, and above all in Belize, the only Middle American state where English is spoken. A musician and singer Andy Palacio was a director of the National Institute for Culture and History in Belize and thanks to his ten-year-work the Garifuna songs never vanished but revived on modern recordings. In 2007 Andy Palacio and his producer Ivan Duran obtained an award at the Womex festival for life-long merit. He also received 2008 BBC World Music award posthumously, as he died suddenly in 2007. At the same time of this colloquy, one of Garifuna's projects was part of the programme of Glatt und Verkhert music festival in Krems an der Donau, a town in Lower Austria.