The Dying and Deathless Musician in Modern Greek culture: Nikos Xylouris and Manos Loizos

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The aim of this paper is to explore the way that the image of popular musicians in Greece is informed, modified and transformed by death. The image of the dying musician has become established in Greek tradition and is a common motif in both oral and literary sources where the death of the musician is invariably presented as both a personal and national loss. Indeed, it can be argued, that it is at the point of death that the musician truly "belongs" to "the people". In the case of Nikos Xylouris and Manos Loizos, both musicians were loved and esteemed by friends, colleagues and the general populace alike. Their respective deaths were documented in great detail. Despite the abundance of information, however, the posthumous images which evolved drew on generic, mythic images of the dying and deathless musician already in existence in the culture. My focus is on exploring this process.

Introduction: The Posthumous Development of Image

The image of the dying musician seems to have become established in Greek tradition and is a common motif in both oral and literary sources where the untimely death of the young musician is invariably presented as both a personal and national loss. The funerals of these popular musicians are often national events attended by intellectuals, cultural leaders, writers, artists, actors, musicians and, of course, by [the] “λαός”.

The same posthumous respect that is accorded other cultural figures, including poets and politicians, is also accorded to popular musicians. In death the musician

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1 A mourner who attended Xylouris’ funeral, said that he knew Xylouris “better than I do many of my friends”, despite the fact that he had never even met him (The Athenian March, 1980:15).

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is embraced most passionately by his/her people; indeed, it is at that point that s/he truly "belongs" to them. In addition, the death and sense of loss is all the more poignant if the musician has died young; the image of unfulfilled potential and talent cut short is a potent one. Consequently, it is immaterial how much truth is in the image that was created of the musician while s/he was alive or in the myths that invariably accompany his/her passing. The story is, however, true to the image of the musician that was created both before and especially after death. That image can then be used to fulfil any number of ideological, nationalistic and personal purposes.

The depiction of Nikos Xylouris and Manos Loizos embodies this process which is an ongoing one. Both musicians were chiefly exponents of entechno laiko tragoudi and their ascendancy coincided with the military régime and its immediate aftermath. Their careers were relatively brief, with a short period of great success in the 1970s. Their untimely deaths in the early 1980s prevented them from establishing the kind of career which generates the legends of the Tsitsanis and Theodorakis variety; nor did they attract the hostile criticism that the latter were also periodically subject to. Their recordings are extant, enjoying a new popularity via sales on the Internet and regular re-issues. In addition, Greek television stations have recorded dedications to them; biographies have been published as well as numerous articles, particularly in the popular press. Indeed, there is no dearth of information about their lives as is often the case with other Greek musicians, in particular, pre-war rebetes.

At the time of their death neither Xylouris nor Loizos were considered to be pivotal artists. This was due to the comparative brevity of their careers and the fact that the musical genre with which they came to be associated mostly — entechno laiko tragoudi (a large component of which was politically-orientated) — did not afford them the same wide exposure often accorded to exponents of laiko tragoudi. Rather, their seminal role in the history of popular Greek music has been established retrospectively and posthumously. In fact, their death proved to be the catalyst for the most interesting aspect of the evolution of their respective images.

Both Xylouris and Loizos were loved and highly respected by friends, colleagues and the general populace alike. They represented markedly different segments of

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4 See Kondovas, Ta Nea, 11 February 1980; Kakaounakis, Ta Nea, 8 February 1982.

5 This genre can be defined as popular Greek music of the 1960s and 1970s which incorporated western melodic elements and often used lyrics based on famous modern Greek poetry.

6 Xylouris died of cancer on 8 February, 1980 and Loizos died from a stroke on 17 September, 1982.


8 See D. Michael 2010 (forthcoming) “Μαύρη Γάτα’: the tragic death and long after-life of Anestis Delias”, Journal of Modern Greek Studies (Aust & NZ), vol 14, for an analysis of the development of images for musicians which are based on very few substantive sources and which also leads to extensive myth-making.

9 An approximate definition of laiko tragoudi is post-war urban popular music usually with the bouzouki as a main instrument.
Greek culture — Xylouris the Cretan and Loizos the Greek Diaspora in Egypt; however, through their music, they touched their compatriots in comparable ways. Similarly, in their fight against the Junta and the censorship that plagued their careers in the early 1970s, they became popular heroes. Their private lives seemed untainted by the excesses of success to which so many other musicians had (apparently) succumbed and their names were virtually untouched by scandal. Neither Xylouris nor Loizos were ever subjected to sharp criticism which may, in fact, be partly a consequence of their own predilection for keeping a low profile. They rarely gave lengthy interviews (whether through design or circumstance) and their images were far more dependent on their music and the words of their songs, as well as their political activities, than were those of other more vocal artists such as Theodorakis and Kazantzidis.

Both men were perceived to be modest, virtuous and extremely talented. By general consensus it was understood that their contribution to entechno laiko tragoudi and political song was significant. Xylouris would forever be identified with the Cretan Resistance song “Πότε θα Κάνει Ξαστεριά;“, as would Loizos with his equally defiant “Ο Δρόμος“. Both were in their mid 40s when they died and neither of them was thought to have reached their artistic peak. They are, in fact, archetypal examples for how death transforms the images of popular musicians in modern Greek culture.

It is remarkable, for instance, that despite all the contemporary sources and easy access to the details of Xylouris’ and Loizos’ lives, the images which emerged after their death nevertheless took on an almost mythic character, as if the particular had become absorbed into the universal. Idealised qualities were superimposed onto the individual qualities of the two musicians and their images were subsequently transformed. Reports on their deaths and funerals attached images and symbols from Greek history, mythology and literature to the already potent image of the dead or dying musician, including immortality.

The transformation of their images included a re-affirmation of the images of each man while he was alive. Xylouris, for example, who had been the “Archangel of Song” while alive, became the “Archangel” fighting Death and by implication, Digenis, the legendary national hero, or Herakles, the hero of Antiquity. Likewise, Loizos, who had been the embodiment of gentleness while alive, became the personification of nobility and melody. This, in turn, indirectly alluded to another gentler, more chivalrous, perhaps more pristine time in Greek history that may have existed in the past.

10 In the last few years, there have been, however, descriptions of personal flaws or failings, particularly with regards to Loizos. See Geramanis, Τα Νεα, 16 July 2002; Sousis 2007.

11 Xylouris apparently said: "Τουφέκι το τραγούδι μου κι η λύρα μου" (Skiadopoulos, Τα Νεα, 9 February 1980). Likewise, Loizos stated in a 1966 interview (Ant. S., Avgi, 27 August 1966) that he considered it his duty "να κάνει ό,τι μπορώ με την τέχνη μου για να λείψει αυτή η δυστυχία [της κοινωνίας]". Similarly, a report on Loizos’ concert tour with fellow composers Leondis and Mikroutsikos in 1981 indicated that they all believed that "τραγουδάνε για να σμίξουν τον κόσμο" (Α.Ε., Rizospastis, 19 June 1981).
or was destined to exist in a Socialist future. Furthermore, it seems that the nature of their death and how they faced death was just as important in the transformation of image as the death itself. Xylouris had battled cancer for ten months, while Loizos died in Moscow, courageously, and alone. Both musicians became national heroes posthumously in the media.

But this transformation of image does not occur for every popular musician. Certainly, death can add some measure of sanctification to anyone, but comparatively few musicians are accorded immortality by their image-makers. The necessary requirements for this exclusive veneration include youth (often), talent, untimely death, coupled with a virtuous character, devotion to music and a love for the Greek people which supersedes his/her own personal needs. Poverty is another important element and it is no coincidence that both Xylouris and Loizos died relatively poor and that their funerals were paid for by the state.12

Another intrinsic and related element to the posthumous transformation of the images of Xylouris and Loizos is politics. Both men were politically active under the Junta and suffered general harassment and/or imprisonment and torture for their political views. Moreover, they did this in the living memory of the people who later wrote about them. Both musicians were perceived not only to have sung about freedom and social justice but also to have fought for them. Long after the fall of the Dictatorship, Xylouris and Loizos seemed unswerving in their beliefs and socio-political objectives right up until their death. Therefore, the heroes were never tarnished, their ideals never compromised. And that, just as much as any other element, ensured them their place in the mythic realm of the tragic, dying and deathless musician.

**Nikos Xylouris: The Archangel of Song**

Δύο ολόκληρες μέρες ο “αρχαγγελικός” τραγουδιστής χτυπιότανε με το Χάρο [...] Πέθανε φτωχός.13 [For two whole days the archangelic singer fought Death... He died in poverty.]

Nikos Xylouris began his career in his Cretan homeland14 and eventually moved to Athens in 1969 where he spent the last eleven years of his life. He worked with most of the new, aspiring composers of the time (in particular, Markopoulos, Xarhakos and Leonidis) and sang songs representative of musical genres other than the Cretan, traditional genre he had been brought up with.15 His professional partnership with the composer Markopoulos was particularly fruitful and led to his success in records and in the boîtes of Plaka during this period. In November 1973 he became involved with the student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic and, although the chronology is

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unclear, he was later arrested.\textsuperscript{16} Certainly, he was under the surveillance of the Junta for most of the early 1970s and censored accordingly.\textsuperscript{17} He recorded, or was involved in the recording of, over 25 albums in just under 10 years and figured prominently in the night life of Athens, both in \textit{boîtes} and the theatre.\textsuperscript{18} This was further supplemented by concert tours and appearances all over Greece as well as some trips abroad.\textsuperscript{19} By the mid-1970s he had reached the zenith of his popularity and fame.

Despite a decline in his career by 1978, he had refused to significantly alter his style or repertoire.\textsuperscript{20} In early 1979 he opened his own record shop and seemed to be changing direction. It appears that he no longer belonged. Lianis observed that the “political song” was dying and that artists such as Xylouris could no longer draw the kind of audiences in Plaka they once had: “Οι καιροί αλλάξαν, άλλα ζητάει ο κόσμος”\textsuperscript{21} The time for Xylouris’ particular socio-political commentary (expressed in the songs that had become synonymous with his name) was past. It was 1979 and the Junta had been gone for nearly five years. Audiences wanted (or so it seemed) escapism and recreation from their musicians, not calls to social revolution. Xylouris could not maintain the momentum of his career in such a changing world. This dilemma, however, was superseded by the onset of his illness and his subsequent death. He was diagnosed with cancer in May 1979 and died in February, the following year.

Had he lived, said the composer Leondis: “Θα ’ταν ο πρώτος ανάμεσα στους ερμηνευτές των έργων μου” [“he would have been the most significant performer of my work”] (\textit{Rizospastis} 9/8/80). This was echoed by many others in the days and months and years following Xylouris’ death, the main sources being newspaper articles and one biography written posthumously. An analysis of the newspaper articles written about Xylouris from 1970 onwards reveals a pattern of response that is also reflected and amplified in biographical material and anecdotal remarks made by other musicians. Consistent images, epithets and symbols recur principally based on the impressions which had evolved of his character, his motivations and his values while he was still alive. The images of Xylouris which emerged during the 1970s remained fairly consistent throughout his life. They became far more explicit, however, and more elaborate during his illness and, certainly, after his death.

The term “αρχάγγελος” [“archangel”], for example, appeared regularly,\textsuperscript{22} as did “λεβέντης” [“fine, brave man”].\textsuperscript{23} Gradually, his name became synonymous with his
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Cretan origins, his personal integrity, strength of purpose and commitment to an ideal. In particular, his Cretan heritage (and especially his rural heritage) underlay much of his later images of Simple Man, Man of Principles, Socio-Political Activist, Bearer of Tradition and Innocent. The Cretan image was part of a reiteration of the stereotype that already existed in mainland Greece about the Cretans. Essentially, it was perceived that noble Crete — “η λεβεντομάνα” — was the source of manly, brave and chivalrous (implicitly incorruptible) men who played important roles in the development of corrupted or corruptible mainland Greece. In Xylouris’ case this was further vindicated firstly by his collaboration in 1973 with Jenny Karezi and Kostas Kazakos, in their famous Το Μεγάλο μας Ταίρκο, which was a musical-satire covertly anti-Junta and secondly by his involvement with the Polytechnic uprising which reinforced his by then already established image of Socio-Political Activist.

The heroic images which had been established by late 1973 pervaded most reports about him up until his death. It was only after he died, however, that these images were brought together to form a composite, complex image that stressed his personal virtue and nobility of character, his creativity, his affiliation with Nature, his indomitability and his warrior status. Indeed, the courage Xylouris showed in his struggle against the Junta was further delineated by the bravery with which he faced death.

The use of the epithet “αρχαγγελικός” or variations of it were extensive. His private “Golgotha”, and the explicit associations with a Christ-like or Digenis-like struggle (and, by implication, ultimate victory) reinforced not only the image of the hero but the image of the semi-divine. His funeral was described as “λαϊκό προσκύνημα”, that is, a popular act of worship or pilgrimage and the whole nation appeared to be grief-stricken by his passing.

26. Ta Nea, 26 June 1973; see also Theodoraki, Apogevmatini, 19 February 1980.
31. He was presented “Σαν καινούργιος Διγενής [...] ἔδωσε τη μάχη της ζωής του”. (Sioubouras, Apogevmatini, 9 February 1980. The suggestions of indomitability and immortality naturally underlie this particular image. See also Skiadopoulos, Ta Nea, 9 February 1980; Kakaounakis, Ta Nea, 11 February 1980.
33. All the newspaper obituaries which I examined used similar terminology and expressions.
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The Composer of Social Change: Manos Loizos

Πιστεύαμε ότι κάνοντας τραγούδι κάναμε και πολιτική, και νομίζω ότι αυτό ήταν σωστό.34 [We believed that by creating songs we were also making a political statement, and I think we were right.]

Manos Loizos, a leading light in the new generation of composers who began to make their mark in the 1960s,35 was another figure who, despite his original talent and his memorable songs, remained somehow on the periphery of mainstream media coverage while alive. Like Xylouris, his image took on grand proportions when his illness was diagnosed and his death abruptly followed. He died suddenly at the relatively youthful age of 45, alone, in Moscow.36

He knew his greatest commercial success in the immediate post-Junta period when many of his earlier songs could at last be recorded, free of censorship. His radical left-wing politics and his close association with entechno laiko tragoudi and political song also meant that he was excluded from widespread coverage by conservative commentators. As such, most of Loizos’ contemporaneously created images are drawn from left-wing or liberal sources.37

Born in Alexandria, Egypt, of Greek parents,38 Loizos was seventeen when he arrived in Athens in 1954.39 He already played violin, guitar and piano and his early years in Greece were marked by his passion for music, his poverty and his espousal of Marxist ideology.40 Coming under Theodorakis’ influence in the early 1960s he eventually gained recognition as a composer.41 From the mid-1960s onwards his music became increasingly popular due to its strong melodies, originality and left-wing socio-political content. Works such as Τα Νέγρικα (1966), Ο Σταθμός (1969), Θαλασσογραφίες (1970), Να ‘χαμε τι να ‘χαμε (1972) and Καλημέρα Ήλιε (1973)42 helped establish the earliest images of Loizos which were of the Socio-Political Activist and Progressive New

34 Loizos in Kotti, Rizospastis, 5 July 1981.
37 It is very difficult to make an accurate assessment of the right-wing’s response to his death. Certainly, newspapers like To Vima and Kathimerini did not directly mention his death on 17 September 1982, nor did they publish obituaries.
38 Papadopoulos, 1983:22.

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Composer. He claimed that he primarily used music as the medium for his own (often socio-political) message and this was further highlighted by his unwavering stance against censorship. Consequently, another early image of Loizos was that of the Man of Principles which was reinforced by his tireless fighting for the rights of all musicians expressed through his commitment to EMΣΕ (The Greek Musicians’ Union). Other images associated with his efforts were articulated more explicitly towards the end of his career: Man of Virtue, Servant of Music and Servant of People. The images which became integral to his overall image as a political and social activist, as a man with heart and vision, had therefore already been established by the late 1960s. These images were also implied in mildly liberal newspapers such as Ta Nea which gave substantial coverage of Loizos’ activities from 1971 onwards, without ever directly mentioning his politics or his connections with KKE until after his death.

Interestingly, no other image of a more personal nature was presented in any newspaper or magazine until his death. The comparatively few interviews which were published were brief, dealing with the issues he was involved with, his work or his ideas about music. Undoubtedly, his association with the radical Left was an impediment to his receiving wider, more varied (apolitical) exposure but this may have also been due to his low-key style which focused on the cause he was fighting for and not on his own personality. Even in his illness, it was the political image that seemed to predominate, if only because he was in a hospital in Moscow.

This imbalance was redressed posthumously when the image of the Socio-Political Activist became one part of a new eclectic image which accorded equal significance to the (formerly subsidiary) images of the talented, dedicated “melodic” composer and of the gentle, loving person. This composite image revealed the depth of the

45 Avgi, 29 January 1966.
46 Loizos’ own songs had already been censored. See Leonaritis, 1966 in Papadopoulos, 1983:154–156.
48 This can be seen, for example, in the reports on the 1981 joint concert tour of the composers Loizos, Leondis and Mikroutsikos. See Odigitis, 25 June 1981; K. R., Ta Nea, 19 June 1981; A. E., Rizospastis, 19 June 1981.
50 Ta Nea, 18 September 1982:4.
53 Ta Nea, 12 November 1976; Rizospastis, 30 October 1976.
54 Ta Nea, 7 September 1982; Rizospastis, 24 September 1982; Gionis, Eleftherotypia, 16 September 1986.
personality and the complexity of both his ideological stance and his creativity. For the first time his political stance was linked to the strength and nobility of his character.

The discrepancy between depictions in the media while he was alive and after he died is extraordinary. The brevity of most of the articles about Loizos between 1966 and August 1982, easily gives the impression that he was essentially peripheral to the mainstream of Greek popular music, even though attendances at his concerts were very high. After his death, his status as a brilliant composer was stated definitively. His loss was perceived to create a great vacuum in Greek music, a theme which has continued to this day. The obituaries depicted him as a man of enormous creative talent who had, moreover, influenced a whole generation of musicians.

Clearly, then, the transformative process of death impacted Loizos’ overall image which up until then had been dominated by the image of the Socio-Political Activist. The nature of his death played a crucial part in the evolution of this posthumous image. He had left Athens in August 1982 in order to seek medical aid in Moscow for the stroke he had suffered. By mid-September, however, he suffered a second stroke and died. The Greek public had been informed about the stages leading towards Loizos’ death. This is often an essential part of the posthumous transformation of the musician’s image. The new image is born as a result of the last days of the musician’s life, coloured by the events of sickness and death, and, most importantly, by the way in which the musician faces them. The musician’s struggle against death is observed with compassion and admiration and endured almost vicariously until the cathartic release at the funeral.

In Loizos’ case, the abruptness of his death came as a great shock despite the public’s awareness of his critical condition. Moreover, he died far from Greece, alone and cut off from his family and friends. Photographs of his coffin, upon its arrival from the Soviet Union, added poignancy to the image of the Lonely Artist which emerged at this time. In fact, it was the image of the enormously talented but vulnerable human being that came to the fore in Loizos’ obituaries, as well as the denial of his mortality.

55 Ta Nea, 8 December 1976; Ta Nea, 29 April 1981; Rizospastis, 7 July 1981.
56 Ladis, Rizospastis, 18 September 1983; Gionis, Eleftherotypia, 16 September 1986.
58 Rizospastis, 3 July 1982;
59 Ta Nea, 19 May 1979; Avgi, 28 September 1982; Rizos, 27 September 1982; Eleftherotypia, 27 September 1982.
61 Eleftherotypia, 7 September 1982; Akropolis, 23 September 1982.
His death was expressed as an interlude or a long sleep and in this way intimations of immortality were quickly established and have been reiterated ever since. In the past three decades numerous articles as well as three biographies have been written about Loizos, sometimes apostrophising him, bewailing the terrible state of Greek music and lamenting his passing. New intensely personal images have also been added as more commentators are attempting to strip away the myths and get to the “real person”: images of the Child, the Lover, the Dreamer, the Unfaithful Husband and Unreliable Friend — are now part of the composite image without having in any way damaged the essential larger-than-life portrait.

**Conclusion**

Since the death of Xylouris and Loizos, their images have become a composite of all those which were used to describe them while they lived. Specific images attributed to them have been brought together into a coherent whole and further embellished, often by resorting to the use of mythic or symbolic motifs. In one instance, for example, Loizos was identified with the Sun and the Source of all light. Compared thus to a force of Nature, it was inevitable that immortality was also bestowed upon him. The initial obituaries were instrumental in this evolution, revealing the different facets of their images as well as the transformation process which began to immortalise them. Their death was perceived as a national loss and, as such, their respective images became sanctified, transfigured and then regurgitated at every subsequent memorial service, dedicatory concert or public event of which there have been (and continue to be) an abundance throughout Greece.

Death appears to be the final rite of passage for a select few musicians who become, essentially, national heroes. The “facts” on which their images are initially based become the foundations for images which take on universal and mythic dimensions. Indeed, their perceived uncompromising value-systems and personal integrity form the cornerstone of their images to this day. In addition, their great talent as musicians,
their ongoing service to the nation (through their music) and their political activism have become increasingly important aspects of their respective images considering how jaded political life in Greece has become and how uniformly uninspired is its current popular music. Xylouris is repeatedly described as the symbol of Crete, the superlative Cretan musician72 whose voice is the Voice of the (Greek) People73 while Loizos is seen as the Great Composer/Artist “ο πιο μελωδικός”, “τον μελωδό της καρδιάς μας”74 who was also a flawed but exceptional human being.75

Concomitant with the increasing mythification of their images is the continued reiteration of their immortality. The death of the musician almost always generates questions about victory, defeat and immortality; the final resolution usually involves not only the musician but the nation itself. When s/he dies s/he becomes as one with the spirit of the whole nation; their music becomes the Greek people's heritage.76 Since a heritage survives as long as the people who are its custodians, then the musician who has created the work cannot, by implication, die.77 S/he may at times be neglected and perhaps forgotten, but s/he cannot die.78 Ultimately, the musician's immortality is inextricably linked to the cultural continuity of the nation. Loizos and Xylouris apparently believed in their own immortality79 and many commentators have since concurred with this view, often asking whether they have, in fact, died. The answer to that familiar rhetorical question must always be, in the case of the beloved, dying and deathless musician, the familiar, rhetorical answer provided by the crowds who attend their funerals: “Αθάνατος!” [“Immortal, deathless!”] they cry.

74 Rizospastis, 12 September 2001; Rizospastis, 3 April 2007.
76 L. M., Odigitis, 30 September 1982.
79 Skiadopoulos, Ta Nea, 3 September 1979; Papadopoulos, 1983:123.
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