The following article appears courtesy of Paul Kotapish, a musician in Open House, The Quirks, Hillbillies from Mars, and more recently, Wake the Dead.
Paul is also a writer, illustrator, and web editor; in the words of Matt Kramer at Acoustic Guitar, he's also a " heckuva nice guy as well!"
Paul generously sent this article ' ready to publish ' to Irish Bouzouki and for that we are very grateful. Thanks Paul!

ANCIENT TONES

The bouzouki’s long journey from rembetika to rock ’n’ roll and beyond

By Paul Kotapish

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Mention the word bouzouki, and people think either of Zorba the Greek or G.I. Joe’s favorite weapon. The cognoscenti might conjure images of smoky tavernas, free-flowing retsina, and crockery flung in abandon. Some Celtic music fans would associate the bouzouki with Irish jigs and reels, but few would link it with bluegrass and old-time hoe-downs, and virtually no one would make the leap to Swedish fiddle tunes, rock ’n’ roll, and jazz. But the bouzouki has found its place in all these musical styles, and it’s popping up more and more in the hands of guitarists.

GREEK BEGINNINGS

The bouzouki’s roots extend back to the long-necked lutes of ancient Persia and Byzantium. The earliest bouzoukis are very similar to the contemporary Turkish saz, and the bouzouki appellation was probably derived from the Turkish name for the mid-sized bozouk saz. The saz family of instruments is characterized by bowl-shaped backs (often carved from a single piece of mulberry wood); long, thin necks with tied gut frets; a free-floating bridge; and three double or triple courses of wire strings. In 20th-century Greece, the movable gut frets yielded to fixed wire frets and a standardized tempered scale, and the long neck was wedded with a Neapolitan mandolin-style ribbed back. The standard tuning was D A D.

The history of the bouzouki is forever entwined with rembetika, the highly improvised Greek music often compared with American blues. The rembetik culture bloomed in the underworld of prisons and hashish dens in the port cities of the Aegean Sea and western Asia Minor in the early 1900s, reaching its zenith in the years between the world wars. A typical early ensemble might have included a singer, two or more bouzoukis playing melody and simple chords, and a tiny version of the bouzouki called the baglama providing a staccato rhythm accompaniment. The songs, with lyrics about drugs, hookers, money, love, and death, were based on a variety of ancient modes and traditional dance rhythms, and they were characterized by expressive improvised introductions called taxims, impassioned singing, and bouzouki breaks between verses. Among the most influential of early players--or rembetes--were Márkos Vamvakáris and Ioannis Papaioannou.

Eventually rembetika's roughneck reputation softened and the bouzouki entered the mainstream--partly due to a fine player and prolific composer named Vassilis Tsitsánis. Tsitsánis fused the old dance rhythms with more elaborate chord progressions and a westernized harmonic sensibility, and his lyrics had a more conventional appeal than the rough-hewn tales of the earlier artists. Tsitsánis became the first national star of the bouzouki and made the instrument socially acceptable. When he died in 1954, 200,000 mourners brandishing bouzoukis and baglamas filled the streets of Athens. Among the many virtuosos who followed in his wake was Manis Hiotis, who added a fourth course of strings to the bouzouki and changed its tuning to C F A D (like the first four strings of a guitar tuned down a step). The new arrangement allowed a greater range and flexibility and fostered the evolution of a showier style.

THE IRISH CONNECTION

Johnny Moynihan introduced the bouzouki into Irish music in 1966 when a friend sold him an instrument he'd brought home from a Greek holiday. Moynihan retuned the instrument and began using it at gigs at the Enda Hotel in Galway with Andy Irvine and others. Irvine recalls the reception of the bouzouki as less than felicitous; in fact he implored Moynihan to go back to the mandolin. Despite the initial flack, the sound caught on, and Moynihan and Irvine were soon playing the instrument in Sweeney's Men. Irvine gave Donal Lunny a bouzouki, and their experiments with multiple double-course instrumentation became the core sound of the legendary band Planxty and set the standard for rhythm sections in subsequent trad bands. Lunny later participated in another seminal Irish revival group, the Bothy Band, that also featured the bouzouki/guitar combo as a key element in its sound. The bouzouki is well-suited to playing simple modal backup, which is entirely appropriate for the traditionally unaccompanied jigs and reels of Irish music. According to fiddler Kevin Burke, "It was more accepted than the guitar by the tune players because of the modal nature of the tunes. The conventional 'folk' guitar chords usually define quite strongly the difference between major and minor, whereas many of the melodies don't. The bouzouki lends itself to 'vaguer' chord shapes that seem to suit the Irish music better. This same major/minor issue is, I suspect, what led to the popularity of D A D G A D tuning on the guitar, which allows a drone effect to be employed."

Lunny, Irvine, and Moynihan all played four-course instruments based on octave mandolin tuning--either G D A E or G D A D. All three focused on accompaniment, although each carved out a unique approach. Lunny's style, for example, incorporated rhythmic grooves based on strumming or arpeggiating chords, with transitional bass lines and melodic fragments tying together sections of the tunes. Irvine's approach was more melody-oriented, weaving contrapuntal lines in and around the tune. Similar experiments melding the bouzouki with Irish music were happening elsewhere as well. Alec Finn was fooling around with a three-course instrument, tuned modally D A D. He developed a rollicking accompaniment style based on a cross-picked roll interspersed with snatches of melody line. For 25 years, his incredibly tight duets with Frankie Gavin have been the backbone of De Danann, the only band from that fertile period still playing today. Dave Richardson of the Boys of the Lough was using a flatbacked bouzouki-like instrument to play tunes in a very traditional way, doubling the melody in unison or octaves rather than as accompaniment. Meanwhile, the bouzouki was gaining a toehold across the Atlantic.

THE NEW WORLD

Ironically, many of the first recordings of bouzouki music were made in America in the early years when the bouzouki's association with rembetika made it unpopular among Greek record companies. American experiments using the bouzouki in unconventional settings predate the Irish invasion by nearly a decade. David Lindley, Solomon Feldthouse, and their cohorts in the band Kaleidoscope were incorporating bouzoukis and sazes into their spooky amalgam of tradition, invention, and psychedelia back in the ’60s. Lindley grew up hearing Greek music right alongside flamenco and bluegrass, and for him it was natural to combine the sound of the bouzouki with everything from banjos to screaming slide guitar. “We loved the twang,” he says.

Still, it was bouzouki in the context of Irish music that fomented real interest in the instrument. By the mid-’70s the cream of the Irish revival scene made its way to America via albums, concert tours, and folk festivals. The Boys of the Lough, De Danann, and the Bothy Band all made appearances stateside, and each band prominently featured a bouzouki in its lineup.

It is easy to understand why the instrument caught on over here in this new context. The relatively straightforward Irish fiddle and pipe tunes are appealing on first blush--their familiar harmonic structures and 32-bar forms are a comfortable fit for most American listeners. Then there’s the sound of the bouzouki. The paired strings, relatively deep pitch, and fast decay time tend to produce a sound not unlike the instantly appealing clang of the hammered dulcimer, but without that instrument’s relentless drone and messy overtones. The typical tunings are stacks of adjacent fifths and fourths, and you can get satisfying tones from the instrument with very little effort. Open chords sound huge and rich with a clarity difficult to achieve on guitar, and melodic lines are sonorous thanks to the chime of the double courses. American guitarists were smitten.

“Playing melody on the low two courses is a really exotic sound,” says Stanley Greenthal, one of the first American Irish music enthusiasts to incorporate the bouzouki into his arsenal. “It’s an ‘out there’ kind of sound.” Chicago cittern player Joseph Sobol calls it “instantly arresting. It’s like the combination of all the fretted instruments with a little bit of harpsichord.” To Zan McLeod the beauty of the instrument is its clarity of timbre. “In a band with some low end-like the bodhran in De Danann-the bouzouki sounds great, whereas a guitar tends to be too muddy,” he explains. “It’s also great with just one other instrument-like a mandolin. You get that stringy and twangy texture thing.” Trying to explain the sound of a bouzouki can be tricky. While bluegrass mandolins “bark,” and Martin dreadnoughts “boom” and “chuck,” the bouzouki had no real onomatopoeic terms of its own until Roger Landes coined some new ones. Now players and builders around the country analyze the sharpness of a bouzouki’s “ping,” the

clarity of its “chorng,” and the depth of its “thrum.” Like “twang” and “bark,” you recognize “chorng” when you hear it.
The Irish-style bouzouki took on a life of its own in the Midwest. Missouri native Gerald Trimble, originally a guitarist, saw the bouzouki’s potential. “I tried to make it an instrument that could play more than just backup. I wanted to be able to improvise, play leads, and take the instrument to a new dimension.”

In 1983 Trimble collaborated with Scottish fiddler and producer Johnny Cunningham to make First Flight, a breakthrough recording featuring the bouzouki-or cittern, as Trimble called his ax at the time-playing traditional Irish fiddle and pipe melodies. Trimble’s next project was Heartland Messenger. “Johnny encouraged me to explore the music of Missouri fiddlers and the Ozark musical traditions that were part of my heritage,” he recalls. The resulting album was probably the first to feature the bouzouki as the lead voice in traditional American music.

Roger Landes, also from the heartland, has been devout in his efforts to adapt Irish music to his hybrid five-course bouzouki. “The great players all say that it goes back to the pipes, that at its core, Irish music is wind music,” he says. “My quest has been to take that information from the pipes and move it to the fretboard.” His success can be heard on his solo release Dragon Tunes and on his earlier work with the band Scartaglen. Landes recognized the burgeoning interest in the instrument among American pickers, and he thought a formal gathering was in order. He sent a message over the Internet, and within 24 hours he had 80 bouzouki nuts clamoring to participate. The resulting gathering-called Zoukfest-took place in Weston, Missouri, in July, 1998. It featured a week of workshops, demonstrations, and concerts and was successful enough to become an annual event. Joseph Sobol is another Midwesterner who is having a big impact on the scene. His 1999 release Citternalia demonstrates a highly idiosyncratic method of eliciting the subtleties of Irish phrasing and ornamentation on the cittern, a term he prefers to bouzouki (see “The Name Game,” page XX). “I played classical guitar as a kid,” he says, “and I was able to adapt my tremolo technique for the ornamental triplets in Irish music.” Sobol uses a specially constructed thumbpick plus three fingers with acrylic nails to attack his five- and six-course instruments.

"I mostly play cittern because it has everything," he says. "You can get a frailing sound, a three-finger sound, and a mandolin sound." Bluegrass maven and songwriter Tim O'Brien has been incorporating bouzouki into his American roots and original music for years now. Like many others, his interest in the instrument was sparked by hearing the Irish bands of the '70s and '80s, but he has adapted the instrument in a personal way. "I wanted another texture, another sound that didn't cover up the guitar" he says. "At the beginning, I didn't know the chords, so I got interested in weird, simple things," he adds. His recent CD The Crossing draws on the old sod for inspiration, and there is bouzouki on nearly every track. "I probably use my Kemnitzer bouzouki for about 50 percent of the music in my live shows," he says. "I'd be lost without it. Plus it's a conversation piece. People are always asking what it is."

Transplanted Alabaman Chipper Thompson is breaking new ground with the bouzouki in his bluesy roots-music ensembles in New Mexico, particularly with his use of slide. The instrument is also finding a comfortable niche in mandolin ensembles and can be heard on recent recordings ranging from the radical experiments of Radim Zenkl to the more traditional sounds of Butch Baldassari.

ENTER THE LUTHIERS

The bouzouki might have remained a curious footnote in the history of Irish music if it hadn't been for the active involvement of some pioneering luthiers. The Greek bouzouki in its traditional form requires dexterity and balance: the large bowl back demands that the player sit cross-legged. The Irish players wanted an instrument that could stand up to the volume and intensity of fiddles, flutes, accordions, and pipes, and they turned to luthiers willing to explore new territory.

Johnny Moynihan credits the first flatback bouzouki to Irish guitar maker John Bailey, who set about trying to re-create a Greek-style instrument but found it too troublesome to deal with the ribbed back. His 1963 experiment was a one-off, but Moynihan has played the thing for years, inspiring subsequent builders and players.

The first modern bouzouki designed expressly for playing Irish music was built by English luthier Peter Abnett. In 1970 he collaborated with Donal Lunny and others to develop an instrument with a four-course Greek bouzouki neck and a shallow-arched, three-piece back. Abnett, who is still building today, calls his instruments Irish bouzoukis.

Stefan Sobell, probably the best-known of the British Isles luthiers, was the first to experiment with carved tops and backs on a bouzouki-like instrument. Ironically, it was a Portuguese guitarra, not a bouzouki, that got him started. “I didn’t know what to do with it until I strung it mandolin style: G D A E,” he recalls. “When I met Andy Irvine in the late ’60s, he tuned it G D A D, and that open tuning lent itself to accompanying songs and playing tunes. It made a lovely sound but without much projection. About the same time I got hold of an old Martin C-3 [round-hole archtop], which I got by trading a concertina and a car engine to some American kids. I thought if I could combine the big, projecting, clanging tone of the Martin with the shape, feel, and tuning of the Portuguese guitar, then I’d really have something.” Sobel called his creation a cittern because it resembled the Renaissance English instruments of that name. He was soon producing variations on that first prototype for string players all over the British Isles. He was among the first to add an additional pair of strings to the original four, a feature that has become a standard option offered by most luthiers. Sobel’s instruments were among the first to make the leap across the Atlantic, and they became synonymous with the exciting new soundscapes of the hot young trad bands
.

Among the largest of today’s dozen or so British bouzouki manufacturers is Roger Bucknall’s Fylde Guitars, which makes a complete line of long-necked lutes, including bouzoukis, citterns, octave mandolins, mandolas, and mandolins, and is unique in offering a fixed-pin bridge on some flattop models.

Rich Westerman was among the first American luthiers to try his hand at the modern bouzouki, but he had few resources to inform his first designs. He was a big fan of Donal Lunny’s playing and built his first bouzouki based solely on the photograph on the first Bothy Band album jacket, with no specifications and without a clue about how to string or tune the thing. The resulting ax sounded remarkably good, and he was able to sell his output through the Lark in the Morning mail-order house. Lark proprietor Mickie Zekley has been an active purveyor of bouzoukis and other exotic instruments since the early ’70s and was responsible for getting instruments into players’ hands when precious few were available. Lark still sells “a ton” of the flatbacked bouzoukis, according to Zekley, who reckons that the demand for instruments for the Celtic scene is still growing, as is the small but growing interest in traditional Greek and Turkish instruments.

Another early pioneer on the American bouzouki scene was John Stump, who built some splendid instruments for Stanley Greenthal and other Pacific Northwest players. Stump based his design on a vintage Gibson mandocello, although he modified the details somewhat. **Nowadays there are a couple of dozen luthiers handcrafting modern Irish-style bouzoukis in the United States, including Phil Crump, Rob Adams, Mike Kemnitzer, and Steven Owsley Smith.** California builder Phil Crump has been a guitar maker and Martin repairman for years. “Citterns are 80 percent of my business,” Crump says. “There’s a zillion guitar makers, but what’s driving me is my own interest in playing. I play cittern and I couldn’t find one, so I decided to get into it for myself.” Rob Adams of **Trillium** Octave Mandolins notes that the Internet has helped propagate the scene and that acquiring a once-rare custom bouzouki can now be arranged easily via e-mail and credit card. Mike Kemnitzer says that 20 percent of his advance orders for the next five years are for octave mandolins, bouzoukis, and mandolas. “I think it is mostly from people seeing Tim O’Brien playing the bouzouki,” he says, “and from mandolin players who want to round out their family of instruments.”

Steven Owsley Smith is a proselytizer for the potential of the instrument beyond its current roles. From his converted school bus workshop in Taos, New Mexico, the incessant tinkerer bases his archtop hybrids on American prototypes such as Lyon and Healy, and his newest instruments show the kind of fanciful invention reminiscent of Orville Gibson’s art nouveau mandolins. Smith says, “I am building instruments to meet the new demand of the current crop of players: soloists who want more ping per pound. The difference is really subtle. You get 90 percent of the tone in any cheapo instrument. It’s the last 10 percent that drives us over the edge and makes us want to scream when we get it.” Smith particularly likes the freedom of expression that the bouzouki offers him. “There are no set rules for the instrument yet, and there is an openness to new ideas, experimental visions,” he says. “It doesn’t matter if it looks like anyone else’s instrument.” Roger Landes credits Smith with making his efforts toward idiomatic expression possible. "The instrument that Steven made has an incredibly fast response time--much quicker than the flattop guitar, for example--and the carved top and back and small body size contribute to that clarity."

Among the few luthiers building the old Greek-style bouzoukis in North America are Michael Hubbard, Kalis and Company, and Lawrence Nyberg, who is making traditional bouzoukis and sazes as well as modern flatback forms. One interesting interpretation of the bouzouki is the "gittern" offered by Dusty Strings Co. in Seattle. It is essentially a 12-string guitar with the tonal characteristics of a carved-top bouzouki, and it makes a great instrument for the guitarist looking for that bouzouki sound.

FACTORY INSTRUMENTS

When **Flatiron** introduced its relatively inexpensive flattop mandolin-family instruments in the '70s, an octave mandolin and a longer-necked Irish bouzouki were included in the product line. Flatiron bouzoukis and octave mandolins were widely distributed in music stores and **were probably the first long-necked lutes most American musicians encountered**. Flatiron was acquired by Gibson--once synonymous with all things mandolin, including mandocellos and octave mandolins--but the company has no plans to reinvigorate that end of the product line at the moment. Several other big manufacturers are offering a bouzouki option on a limited basis. Ovation, for example, is offering an eight-string hybrid instrument as a custom order, and David Lindley is working with Tacoma to develop prototypes for a potential line of relatively inexpensive bouzouki-family instruments. [Check with Tacoma]

Among the most popular factory instruments are those sold under the **Trinity College** label, imported by Saga. These are inexpensive entry-level instruments for the beginner or casual explorer. For the more serious player looking for a fine factory instrument, Sound to Earth/Weber offers a full line of bouzouki and mandolin-family instruments in both modest flattop versions and more elaborate carved designs with a huge variety of styles and materials.

FUTURE OF THE INSTRUMENT

Ethnomusicologist and musician Chris Davis talks about the evolution of instruments across cultures and time and likens the diaspora of the bouzouki to that of the guitar, an instrument once identified with a specific European tradition but now universal in its applications. From its origins in the Greek underworld, the bouzouki is now firmly entrenched in the Celtic music scene, and through the influence of players like Tim O'Brien the instrument is making inroads in the bluegrass and old-time music scenes. Bouzoukis have also been adopted by pop and rock guitarists looking for a different sound, and the twang of double courses has graced albums by Jackson Browne, R.E.M., Tom Petty, and scores of other mainstream acts. Nor is the phenomenon limited to this country. The bouzouki is the fretted instrument of choice for leading trad bands in Scandinavia, France, and elsewhere. The future of the instrument may well lie in its ancient roots. Many players initially attracted to the instrument for its flexible role in Irish music are now exploring music from the region that fostered the instrument in the first place. Andy Irvine's East Wind recording explores the intersection of Balkan music and jazz, Stanley Greenthal has included Greek tunes on his recent recordings, and bouzouki pioneer Gerald Trimble has delved deeply into the ancient musics of Turkey and Persia. Joseph Sobol sums it up nicely: "We are fascinated by that combination of ancientness and modernity--tapping into that distant, ancient place."

Demand for the instrument keeps growing, and at the moment, demand for the best instruments slightly exceeds supply. Still, luthiers are making the instrument evermore available and pushing the envelope of design, construction, and materials, just as musicians are expanding the notion of what the instrument can do. There is every reason to suspect that the new millennium will be chock-full of spling, chorng, and thrum.

THE NAME GAME

Making sense of the bewildering array of long-necked lute-family instruments available to the modern picker is made more difficult by the lack of agreement among luthiers and players about what to call these new hybrids. There is general consensus about what constitutes a Greek bouzouki in its traditional and modern incarnations, and the mandola and mandocello have specific definitions within the confines of classical mandolin ensembles, but outside of that, nomenclatural pandemonium reigns. The identical instrument in different hands might well be called a mandola, a bouzouki, an Irish bouzouki, a mandocello, a cittern, a Celtic cittern, an octave mandolin, a blarge, or even a bizzar. The truth is that almost anyone playing the instrument today is aware of the multiplicity of available and contested terms, so it doesn't matter all that much. Guidelines will serve up to a point. Mandolins and mandolas are defined by their relative sizes and their fixed tuning schemes: G D A E and C G D A, respectively. The mandocello is nearly twice the size of a mandola and is tuned precisely one octave lower. After this it gets tricky, and the tag is likely to change from person to person. If it has three or four sets of strings and a really long neck, it's probably safe to call it a bouzouki. If it has a more modest length and is tuned G D A E, it can be called an octave mandolin, a bouzouki, or a cittern. There is a general tendency to call any five-course instrument of this type a cittern, but here again there is little agreement from luthier to luthier. When you move to six courses, the choice becomes a gittern or a bizzar, depending on the builder, with the latter term also applied to some four-course axes with guitar-shaped bodies.

Bouzouki Suppliers

WEB

Dan Beimborn's Cittern Pages, www.execpc.com/~danb/cittern.html.
Han's Irish Bouzouki Homepage, www.ice.el.utwente.nl/~han/bouzouki/.
Lark in the Morning, www.larkinam.com.

Selected Recordings

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