

Elefteriades popularizes a fusion of music, styles from different cultures

Producer and promoter discusses the roots of his success, from former nightclub owner to international record-maker



Elefteriades: "Fusion music is very delicate"

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Amor y Libertad - love and freedom - was Ernesto Che Guevara's life philosophy. It was also the name of a legendary Latino club in Kaatik where Michel Elefteriades - owner, promoter, founder of Lebanese fusion label Elef Records and all-round musical entrepreneur - first made his name.

Every Saturday night - Elefteriades, whose father is Greek and mother Lebanese - would take to the club's stage, his long, curly hair held back with a red band, his fingers adorned with silver rings, giving him the look of a Gypsy.

Amor y Libertad, decorated with pictures of Che and a mix of antique and tropical accessories, was Elefteriades' playground, his arena to experiment with and understand the audience's tastes. Here he celebrated his first successes as the manager and producer of Spanish guitarist Jose Fernandez, who has since gained fame in Lebanon.

And on weekends, Fernandez bewitched clubbers with his fusion of Spanish Gypsy folk-love and songs of Umm Kalthoum.

Although Amor y Libertad was Kaatik's hotpot, it eventually closed, leaving many Latino addicts hoping the club would re-open somewhere else. But Elefteriades was 'interested' - it wasn't financially viable to run a club - and he left partying and turned toward producing full time with his Elef Records imprint.

"When I was studying fine arts in Paris, I liked to experiment with clothing - I mixed a Vietnamese jacket with Scottish pants and Indian shoes," he recalls. "I did the same with food. Now, I'm into mixing music from different cultures."

Elef Records is all about this experimentation, fusing Latino sounds with Arabic lyrics, and Gypsy rhythms with Arab melodies - a genre Elefteriades has popularized over the last few years.

While still running Amor y Libertad, Elefteriades brought a group of old Cuban musicians to Lebanon and then searched for a young, professional but unknown Lebanese singer to join them in the studio.

"I told the singer to keep the sweetness of Arab songs, whereas the Cubans should maintain the energetic salsa rhythms," he explains.

After months of experimenting and rehearsing, the band performed at Amor y Libertad to test people's reactions. By summer 2000, the first CD by Hainis y Sou Cubano was released, soaring onto the Virgin's Magastone's top 10 best-selling albums list.

The album was so successful that Elefteriades, 34, was able to convince Warner Music International to sign a contract with him in 2003.

In the swish downtown offices of Music Master - Warner's representatives in Lebanon - Elefteriades has changed little from those days in Amor y Libertad: Despite his success, he still wears the silver rings and bracelets, his hair remains long and curly, and he is still restless and talkative.

The success of Hainis y Sou Cubano's first album encouraged Elefteriades to produce a second album, though with younger Cuban musicians. He also plunged into other projects: starting long Hanaah and the Village Brass Band, a mix of Middle Eastern music with Balkan Gypsy music; and recording songs with The Shehade Brothers, who sing tunes from around the Mediterranean.

Muni al-Hawle, whom Elefteriades characterizes as the "Lebanese Pablo Casals," also recorded a CD with Elef Records. And today, the young producer is working on an album of his own music, which is so "out of space" that he says he can't describe it.

Elefteriades' deal with Warner obliges him to produce five albums a year on the Elef imprint, with a commitment from

Warner Music International to distribute them worldwide.

It is, according to Elefteriades, the first time an Arab label for fusion music has received such a deal from one of the world's biggest music firms. "Fusion music is very delicate," he says, "You have to pick the basic elements that characterize the music style, and see if they match with each other."

With Hainis y Sou Cubano, Elefteriades kept the sweetness of the Arab melodies, eliminated the violins, but retained the Cuban rhythm. For him, fusion music is something that occurs naturally over time.

"I don't care for the purity of a race or a culture. It's all fusion," he says. "Music doesn't evolve without fusion, either. If there hadn't been a fusion with other music styles in Lebanon, we would still sit on a rock, bang

|| You have to pick the best elements and see if they match with each other'

two stones against each other and make humba-humba."

Elefteriades has not only tried to bring exotic sounds to Arab music as a producer but also as an events organizer.

Last week he brought the a thigh-slapping performance of Greek dance to UNESCO Palace, and from 1999 until last year, he was responsible for the Byblos International Festival program, bringing folk performers from around the Mediterranean region - including the likes of Goan Brejovic - giving the festival a unique character.

It was here that he discovered a passion for Gypsy music. Elefteriades started to become interested in Lebanese Gypsies and already this year he has traveled to the Balkans to assist a festival of Gypsy music. Indeed, his next experiment will be a fusion of Gypsy music.

It is not by chance that Elef-

terades has been so successful with the idea of fusion music in Lebanon. DJ Said Mrafi has made a career out of mixing Arabic string-heavy music with Western dance floor beats. Fusing Arabic melodies with salsa music - two genres with so much passion and sexuality - would no doubt also be a hit.

Part of it may be current fusion but, on the other hand, Elefteriades recalls that he grew up in an ambiance where musicians from abroad would come weekly to Lebanon.

His father, a tour organizer for bands, owned a nightclub in Ajloun. At the age of 20, Elefteriades began working there as a DJ, fusing Arab hits with Edith Piaf - and noticing that the Lebanese public liked it.

"The thing is also that I work a lot. I lead a normal life... live in a normal apartment and rarely take a vacation," he explains. "I don't spend my money on luxury, but I re-invest it in my projects."

Yet Elefteriades still thinks of moving abroad - probably to Spain. It might be the right place for his passions: Gypsy music is widely renowned there as flamenco, and salsa is regularly played in the nightclubs.

"In a country like Spain, it is easy to work with foreign musicians," he says. "They live there - I don't have to find bring them over when I want to work with them."

In Lebanon, besides travel expenses, accommodation and salary, a producer pays the government \$400 for work permits for each artist who enters the country.

"Apart from that, you are not free to produce whatever you want due to the censorship," Elefteriades adds, though without specifying what he means.

Also, for CDs that are exported, high taxes must be paid.

"I tried to speak to the respective ministers about these problems," he says, "but I guess that it is easier to speak to your politicians anywhere else than in Lebanon."