

# Kourelou

This London-based Greek musical collective are a mighty force, reckons **Elisavet Sotiriadou**.

**P**avlos Melas' band name, Kourelou, means patchwork, or a rug made of leftover pieces. They're incredible live: with many people on stage you can tell how well synchronised and talented they are to pick up musical cues from each other as they improvise. They are very intuitive musicians. Christos Georgakis who plays the piano says that often when they do gigs they reach a place when it is "unbelievably coordinated between them, on a spiritual and a musical level".

I have previously seen Pavlos perform with other artists, such as Mavrika (*fR* 357), Maryo (*fR* 353/4) and Moosootoo and he has worked with many others. Recently he did the Markos Vamvakaris (*fR* 384) autobiography translation into English from Greek, a project that took many trips to Greece.

As a band, London-based Kourelou are very prolific songwriters and whether they play live or in the studio they dare to experiment with the songs and the rhythms. "We don't play safe," Pavlos says. They take risks when they improvise, challenging the traditional Greek sounds and combining instruments, songs and sounds in a totally unexpected way. Kourelou capture each note, each rhythm, each melodic charm and give their own interpretations of well-known Greek folk songs and rembetika as well as their own music.

Costas Kopanaris, who plays percussion, says that musically he is also influenced by African and Latin music. "As I went deeper into this foreign path of music, the more I found common ground with our own tradition. It is amazing that it took me so many years to realise that we have tradition in Greece and that I had to go so far to understand it."

Costas allows those influences to flow through his playing. "I returned to Greece after studying and have played with various musicians. I try to put those elements from other traditions into Greek music. This thing they say about continuing the tradition and that we can put something from us in it: I'm not African nor Cuban, I'm Greek, however I did not only grow up with Greek music, I was raised listening to many different kinds of music in Athens and I try to include things that I believe fit in to what we play." And that is true of each individual musician in Kourelou.

Although the brainchild of Pavlos Melas (guitar), the eight-piece collective Kourelou (plus some external musicians



Photo: Carmen Zografou

who contribute on and off) has no need for a strong leader to steer the ship. Pavlos may be the man who talks the most at the interview, but he takes a step back and lets his bandmates do the solos. With nods and eye language they communicate during their set. No instrument stands above any other and no musician is more important than any other. Each of them brings in any influences, feeling and interpretation they have to the songs they play.

**I** met four of the band members, Pavlos, Christos, Costas and Nikos Kyriou (violin) – the others are Spiros Bolovinis and Oddyseas Elia (bouzoukis), Sophia Pehlivanis and Vangelitsa Giamaiou (vocals) – in a trendy Shoreditch bar for the interview. The last thing I expected was to be sung to by the warm sounds of Pontic music, but that is exactly what happened. Hearing about my Pontic heritage Nikos brought out his fiddle, and started playing it as if it were a Pontic lyra, right there in the middle of the bar. I was moved, as I was the first time I heard them play at Camden's Green Note. This is the essence of Kourelou, to convey those intense feelings only music can give shape and form to.

Their new album *Rags & Raindrops* is an excellent showcase of both their own compositions, with for example Nikos' fiddle improvisation, and folk songs given Kourelou's stunning arrangements. The versatile members of the band are all expe-

rienced musicians and their combined backgrounds cover music from the traditional to the classic realm and anything found in between. But their 'patchwork' name also refers to the many different traditions of folk music the band plays, from Greek island music to Makedonitika to Epirotita and Thrakiotika. *Mantilatos*, for example, is a cutting-edge arrangement of a traditional song from Thrace in the East of Greece, culminating in a brief piano solo towards the end.

During my first Kourelou gig, the crowded venue meant the band was squeezed in on stage, and – like Jamie Renton mentions in his Green Note profile this issue – I had to stumble through them to enter. The audience of Greeks and non-Greeks were moving to the Kourelou groove. They mixed the songs in such a natural way that I forgot we were travelling through Greece's regional, distinct sounds.

"We have enormous love and respect for Greek music. We choose songs we have either played or studied in Greece and we play them and interpret them as we understand them with the tools we have in our hands. However, some would argue it is an absurdity to combine bouzouki with Ipiritiko fiddle and a piano," Pavlos says. Nevertheless, no matter how illogical it may sound on paper, in reality it works.

[www.kourelou.co.uk](http://www.kourelou.co.uk)

