

Western Influence on Armenian Music

The United States is one of the world's largest exporters of media and popular culture. Many great musicians, actors and writers find solace in the creative freedom offered by western countries. The impact that these artists once had on the world still resonates to this day, undeniably influencing modern musicians for generations to come. Legendary bands such as The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, and Led Zeppelin, to name a few, all met with massive success in western countries, particularly in the United States and England. Their fame quickly spread worldwide and inspired many other musicians to reproduce their sound, dress, and style.

One of these inspired countries is Armenia. While Armenia does boast an impressive resume of singers and jazz musicians, these talented Armenians have done little to change the course of musical history. The western artists are way ahead of the pack, achieving milestone after milestone, while the eastern countries absorb the new genres like a sponge only to repackage but not progress them. Although a handful of great Armenian artists such as Djivan Gasparyan, arguably the world's greatest duduk player, Norayr Mnatsakanyan, a highly influential vocalist, and a more dated legend, Sayat-Nova, are the leaders in traditional Armenian music, Armenian folk does not seem to stimulate enough interest outside of an Armenian household to make a monumental impact on music as a whole.

One Armenian band, however, has made a global impact on the music scene. System of a Down, a four man, 100% Armenian band, has undoubtedly influenced the hard rock/ metal genre. Their impressive resume includes three Grammy Nominations, three #1 CD's on American and global charts, and consistent radio play on a wide variety of stations. SOAD, as the name is frequently abbreviated, is definitely a famous and influential group.

The members of System of a Down are not simply talented musicians who happen to be Armenian; rather, their Armenian culture makes them talented musicians. From their first album to their latest, there are unmistakable signs of Armenian rhythms and melodies. The singer, Serj Tankian, frequently uses Armenian vibrato and trill techniques that are inherent in Armenian

folk music. The band has also recorded with traditional Armenian instruments such as the duduk and the oud, notably on the tracks Aerials and Nuguns. Anyone who has listened to Armenian music before will be able to identify the remarkable impact this band's culture has had on their music.

Another influential Armenian-American artist is Cher. However, she clings more to her Cherokee rather than her Armenian heritage. Furthermore, she does not incorporate a substantial amount of Armenian influence into her music. Her music can be compared to Madonna or Celine Dion without any recognizable Armenian deviations. System of the Down, on the other hand, has written numerous songs directly relating to Armenian issues. Both "P.L.U.C.K." and "Holy Mountains," the former being on their debut album and the latter on their latest, deal directly with the Armenian Genocide.

If System of a Down formed and stayed in Armenia, it is likely that they would not have been able to make a career out of music. There is no denying that Armenian rock artists in Armenia struggle to appeal to wide crowds. Even though there are talented bands here, such as the rock groups Sard, Dogma, and Renco Nation, and an abundance of gifted jazz groups, these musicians have difficulty attracting crowds away from traditional Armenian music and the newly popular rabiz craze.

Almost directly influenced from the United States, a "gangster rap" craze has swept the Armenian youth. In the late 80's and early 90's, United States mainstream was flooded by a genre of rap associated with violence, drugs, and self-gloating. The two prominent leaders of this era were born and raised in the United States. Biggie Smalls grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and Tupac Shakur met with fame in Los Angeles, California, the latter being the top-selling rap artist of all time. So far as mainstream is concerned, after these artists' death, rap has literally been at a standstill in the United States and other parts of the world.

These two artists introduced "thug life" into the hip-hop scene. After both artists met an early and violent demise, the hip-hop community went to work imitating Tupac and Biggie in an

attempt to cash in while the gangster craze was still hot. The result was an abundance of artists who fictitiously created their own personas upon entering a recording studio. While Tupac and Biggie wrote songs about their lifestyles – selling drugs and leading violent and lustful lives – these new musicians simply put on a façade to appeal to what was popular. As more and more of these fake artists became famous by literally lying about their exploits, the rap scene remained stagnant and unoriginal for years. Without any substance to their songwriting, these rappers set out to compose a radio-friendly single rather than a beautiful album which is what music should be.

As these imitation artists sold hundreds of thousands of albums that consisted of one or maybe two singles accompanied by ten filler tracks, the international community began to take note. Armenia experienced its own spin-off of gangster culture known as “rabiz.” No Armenian is stranger to the music, dress, and mannerisms of this sub-culture. This form of Armenian rap holds a similar message that derives from a comparable blueprint to modern American artists.

Although similar, Armenian rap portrays a less extreme message than American rap does. While the Armenian songs generally pertain to money, promiscuous women and expensive cars, Armenian artists seem to be more reserved about their content than the United States’ 50 Cent, The Game, or Fat Joe. There are many examples of the overly gangster culture that reigns supreme in popular American music, but I believe that 50 Cent’s music video “Piggy Bank” epitomizes the United States’ current rap scene. First of all, it is computer animated. The fact that it is animated shows that these rappers really live in a fantasy world where their inflated egos can only be brought to fruition through an unreality. In this video, 50 Cent is initially depicted as a boxer beating other rappers. After he is done obliterating his competition, he retires to his room located on a high floor in a lofty skyscraper. His desk overflows with money while he touts a large automatic rifle rapping “I’ll get at you, my knife cut ya skin” and “I’m in the hood, in the drop, Teflon vinyl top. Got a 100 guns a 100 clips, why I don’t hear no shots?” Next, 50 Cent is found rapping in a room dancing with a digitally sexy woman while expensive cars literally fall

from the top of the screen onto the floor behind him. This video includes all of the qualities that represent the change in many modern rappers' priorities from making good music to creating a thug image.

Even though Armenian rap music videos are not as ridiculous as their American counterparts, they still contain many of the key elements of American rap that infatuate such a wide variety of people. Armenian rap began to appeal to the masses in the early to mid 2000's. One of pioneers of Armenian rap is H.A.Y.Q. Their first hit was "Qami Pchi" and the music video of this song incorporates ideas exhibited by western artists. The video begins in a dark room lit up by the headlights of expensive cars while the band dances to their song. Throughout the song the female singer, Syuzi, sings provocatively on a bed and dresses in attire that would be frowned upon on Armenian streets. There is even a brief close-up of her front side, spanning from her upper thighs to her belly button about 1:34 into the song. Although this music video is completely devoid of violence, it still presents enough evidence to confirm the influence from western artists.

Another popular artist is Misho. He initially achieved popularity through Hay Tgheq only to later break off to make a name for himself as a solo artist. In his video "Qo Hamar," released in 2007, he produces an American PG-13 version of a gangster rap video. The rapper wakes up in a hotel bed with two sleeping women, rubs his head as if he had been drinking all night and starts to get dressed. He reaches into his closet to equip his jewelry and his pistol. After Misho puts on his clothes, he leaves the hotel to rap outside in a parking lot overflowing with his flashy cars. He eventually decides on the passenger seat of a shiny, black hummer and drives off. Misho arrives at his destination and exits his car to be greeted by hundreds of screaming fans awaiting his performance. Next, the video returns to that same hotel room where the song began. The only difference is that those two attractive women are now wide awake and dancing topless on the bed while Misho raps.

This video contains all the elements of a stereotypical rap video. It unnecessarily displays violence, in this instance in the form of a pistol which literally serves no purpose in the song other than to create a dangerous alias for the rapper. Furthermore, Misho's lucrative lifestyle is emphasized by his expensive cars and jewelry. Lastly, the very important ingredient to any rap video, sex, presents itself through the topless women.

Throughout the video, Misho is constantly on his cell phone. At the very end the viewer learns that he is actually talking to a girl, presumably the girl who "Qo Hamar" ("For You") is dedicated to. I find this ending peculiar. Since he woke up with two other women, I hardly believe that he may be in love as the song implies. Based on the fact that he is with these two women at different parts in the video, it leads one to believe that the musical cinematography is not utilized to create a video consistent with the lyrical content of the song, but rather to illustrate a fictitious image of the rapper. This unnecessary and almost awkward inclusion of popular foreign ideals, which blatantly do not correspond with the content of the song, exactly denotes how the influence from the gangster rap in the United States is prevalent in Armenian pop-culture and shows where these ideas end up in rap music videos.

There are plenty of other examples similar to these two videos. Artists such as Nor Tsorer, Erevanski, a Diaspora Armenian band, and Hay Tgheq all follow a similar blueprint that produces similar results. Although these artists are proficient at repeatedly producing the same feeling in their music, it is only natural that without change, they will eventually become unpopular and their fan base will fade away. When listening to these artists' music, one can not help but feel a constant emotion throughout their entire album. When contrasted to rappers such as Kanye West, most of these Armenian rappers have about as much musical depth as a kiddie pool. Kanye West albums make you happy, sad, energized, and relaxed throughout different points. Artists who habitually produce up-beat, catchy chorus songs are bound to die out once popular opinion shifts and these artists find themselves without the skills to significantly change their style.

Some rabiz artists do add a range of feelings to their music. However, the result is usually not good and these songs simply function as a number in order to sell an album instead of a single consisting of their popular music. While there always will be the hit songs of an album that receive more attention than the rest of the CD, it seems that albums are being forced out of rabiz artists because they know they can charge more for a twelve track album than a two track CD.

Fortunately the change that United States has needed for many years is finally coming. Some of the talented rappers that represent the underground in hip-hop are beginning to surface. On the Gorillaz' album "Demon Days," which has been certified double platinum in the United States and an astounding five times platinum in the UK, gifted guest rapper MF DOOM is featured on the CD's lead single "Feel Good Inc." Tonedeff, a diverse artist who not only raps but sings, plays piano, and produces his own music, is meeting with increased media exposure and success. In 2006, at the popular music festival Lollapalooza, he won the Last Band Standing contest. His record label, QN5 attracts some of the most creative and skillful underground rappers and producers such as Deacon The Villain, Kno, and Pack FM. These artists do not limit themselves to rapping, as many current gangster rappers do, but they can sing and play instruments as well. Undeniably the most popular talent is Kanye West. A nine time Grammy Award winning rapper and producer represents the epitome of a successful and gifted musician. Not only can artists like Tonedeff and Kanye West artists produce great music, but the content of their lyrics is not a repackaging of Tupac's and Biggie Smalls' message. These musicians are doing much to progress the genre of rap and therefore will come out on top in years to come. As history has shown us, as the western popular opinion changes taste, other countries will do the same.

Armenia may currently be in a creativity lull regarding popular music, but I wholeheartedly believe that it will change. Armenians are an intensely musical people and they love nothing more than to eat, drink, and dance to music. The charismatic Arto Tunçboyacıyan,

who has collaborated with many influential musicians such as Al Di Meola, Chet Baker, and System of a Down's Serj Tankian, stays true to his traditional Armenian roots while simultaneously progressing Armenian folk and other genres in interesting directions. In addition to working with other musicians, he has formed the successful Armenian Navy Band. Arto is an imaginative singer and songwriter who never fails to deliver an energetic show that delights audiences with the very different styles of music he is capable of performing.

Hopefully, aspiring Armenian musicians will look to Arto or other exceptional musicians for inspiration rather than repetitive rabiz artists. If the public shows increased interest to such musicians, music will begin to improve as a whole. One astounding band may dominate the new age of popular music or it may be the gradual influence of numerous innovative bands that slowly seep their way into the scene. While it may be impossible to calculate when this shift will occur and the change it will bring, the only thing for certain is that change is inevitable.

While the Armenian rabiz craze may currently show no signs of weakening, every trend must come to an end. Since gangster rap in the United States is on the decline, it is only a matter of time before this decline impacts other parts of the world. As more and more artists try to cash in on a dying genre, the public will grow weary of the jaded façade. This will leave the door invitingly open to new forms of expression. While no one can predict which genre will rein supreme, the coming change will only evolve the style that made modern rap so monotonous and uninspiring. With talented artists on the rise and some already sitting up top, we can all rest assured that a fresh and imaginative era of music, that many unappreciated musicians have been patiently waiting for, will finally earn the popular attention it so truly deserves.

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