

# Grapevine

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## Whose Dance Is It?

### Appreciation vs Appropriation of Music in Choreography

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A recent collaborative workshop with Judy King sparked an unexpectedly rich debate on the issue of “cultural appropriation”. The discussion centred on the use of the theme music from *Schindler’s List*, a haunting piece composed for a film set during the Jewish Holocaust. The question was whether choreographers and dancers are aware or reflect on the provenance and the cultural context of the music chosen for a choreography. The deeper questions emerged in our conversation about ownership, context, and responsibility. What does it mean to move to music so closely tied to historical trauma? And how does intention intersect with cultural sensitivity? Our conversation opened the door to a broader exploration of cultural appropriation within our own practices. We touched upon the question of how sometimes dominant groups adopt elements of a minority’s traditions, music, or customs, without permission, acknowledgement or proper understanding.

In today’s folk and circle dance communities, it seems that a wider conversation needs to start in folk and circle dance spaces – workshops, festivals. We rarely pause to ask what our music is carrying with it. For example: do we have the right to change the original intention or meaning of the music we use? Are there

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responsibilities that come with our choices? And when does sharing become erasure?

To illustrate the difference between *appreciation* (bridge-building) and *appropriation*, I would like to discuss the example of two well-known melodies – *Misirlou* and *Sari Aghjik/Gelin* – which provide insights about the debate.

## *A Shared Song – or a Lost Origin?*

At first glance, the Greek *Misirlou* (“*Girl from Egypt*”) seems like a good example of “cultural exchange.” I have seen it danced by Greeks, Armenians and other groups; it seems to belong everywhere at once.

Emerging from the multi-ethnic environment of the late Ottoman Empire, the song passed fluidly among Greek, Armenian, Arab, Turkish and Jewish musicians. In cities like Smyrna (today’s Izmir) and Istanbul, these communities lived, worked, and performed side by side, drawing from common musical systems.

When Theodotos “Tetos” Demetriades (1897–1971) recorded *Misirlou* in 1927, he was not claiming ownership of a foreign piece – he was documenting a sound that already belonged to a shared cultural ecosystem. And yet, from the perspective of cultural appropriation, this “shared origin” presents a challenge. When a song belongs to everyone, it also risks belonging to no one. Without a clearly recognized source, its deeper cultural meanings can be diluted or forgotten altogether.

Appropriation is not always straightforward. In 1962, guitarist Dick Dale (Richard Anthony Monsour) released his now iconic surf rock version of *Misirlou*. His Lebanese heritage complicates any simple accusation of appropriation. And to be fair, Dick Dale wasn’t exactly borrowing from a world he didn’t know – he grew up with this sound in his own family. Still, that doesn’t settle the question.

Dale’s electrified version, later popularized globally through the film *Pulp Fiction*, which essentially reshaped how audiences understood the song. For millions, *Misirlou* is no longer an Eastern Mediterranean folk melody, it is a symbol of American surf culture. What unsettles me is what happened next: the cover became the “real” version for much of the world. The global audience recognizes the adaptation but not the original source.

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## *The Problem of Recognition*

For me, cultural appropriation comes down to a few recurring issues: who gets credited, what context gets lost, and who has the power to shape the narrative.

The title *Misirlou* isn't just a catchy name. It comes from the lyrics: the singer is in love with an Egyptian woman – beautiful, distant, unattainable. In the Ottoman world, Egypt carried a kind of glamour and mystery. That matters, because when we use the melody as a generic “cool surf riff,” we strip away the entire story the song originally carried.

## *When Sharing Becomes Erasure*

Even as *Misirlou* might seem complicated, *Sari Aghjik* (*Sarı Gelin*) feels less ambiguous. In regions marked by historical trauma, particularly the legacy of the Armenian genocide, claims over cultural material are rarely neutral.

When state-sponsored ensembles and musicians present such songs as exclusively their own – sometimes altering lyrics or omitting cultural references – the act can move beyond exchange into erasure. For marginalized or displaced communities, music is not just art: it is memory. To remove its origins is to rewrite history.

The haunting melody known as *Sari Aghjik* in Armenian and *Sarı Gelin* in Azerbaijani and Turkish has transformed from a shared regional treasure into a modern battlefield of cultural ownership. While Armenians point to the 1913 transcriptions by musicologist Komitas (1869-1925) and linguistic roots that translate to “Girl of the Mountains,” Azerbaijan claims the song as a pillar of its *mugham* tradition, centred on a legend of a “Blonde Bride.” This has become a case study in cultural appropriation through state-sponsored rebranding. By scrubbing Armenian historical ties from international stages and “weaponizing” the song to bolster nationalist narratives, the Azerbaijani state appears to erase the Armenian legacy by “Turkifying” the song.

## *What This Means for Folk Dance Communities*

These questions aren't abstract when you're standing in front of a room full of dancers, announcing the next tune, and realizing you don't actually know whose music you're about to use.

Every workshop, performance, or festival involves choices about representation

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and respect. Engaging with *Misirlou*, *Sari Aghjik*, or any traditional piece requires more than learning the steps or melody. It asks for an awareness of the song's journey – its migrations, its transformations, and the people who carried it forward.

Musical instruments, too, could be the subject of appropriation, as with the case of the Armenian duduk. The use of the Armenian duduk in film scoring is a case in point. In Armenian culture, the duduk has a very specific emotional and historical weight. After the genocide, as Sylvia Angelique Alajaji writes:

*Music has been used to situate Armenian diasporic communities in relation to their conception of 'home', wherever that might be, and their relationships to the past and present.*

But in Hollywood the duduk often gets used as shorthand for “somewhere vaguely ancient or Middle Eastern.” I’ve heard it in films – such as *Gladiator* and *Dune* – set in places where the instrument has no real connection. The result is that audiences recognize the sound, but not the Armenian Highlands.

## *Moving Forward*

I’m not arguing that culture should be fenced off. But I do think we have responsibilities. This means naming origins when we know them, preserving stories alongside steps, and recognizing the asymmetries that shape how music travels.

To give a personal example, I was invited to choreograph “a prayer dance” to one of the most well-known and loved Armenian hymns, called “Der Voghormia” (“Lord, Have Mercy”), sung every Sunday in Armenian churches during the Divine Liturgy. While, on several occasions, I have danced a prayerful “Pie Jesu” (“Merciful Jesus”) – the well-known hymn sung in Catholic Requiem Mass – I find it difficult to do so with “Der Voghormia.” Simply, because in Armenian culture or religious rituals it is not considered appropriate to dance to hymns. In short, it is culturally inappropriate.

Even as music endures because it is adaptable, the challenge for today’s folk and circle dance communities is to ensure that it does not lose the histories that give it meaning. These issues don’t have clean answers. But they do change the way I listen. Because in the end, the question is not just “Who can dance this?” but “Whose story are we telling when we do?”

*I would like to thank my artistic and intellectual partner Hratch Tchilingirian for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.*

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FOR FURTHER READING

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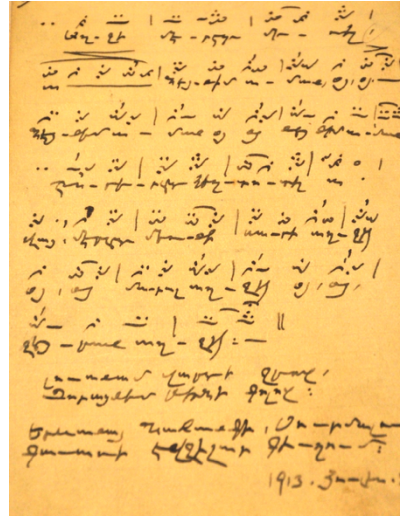
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