

Critics' Forum
Film and Music
Lyrics Need Not Apply
By Sam Ekizian

With his unique repertoire of folk-inflected rock, Gor Mkhitarian has established himself as a creative force both within Armenia and in the diaspora. He has released three critically acclaimed Armenian-language albums: “Yeraz” in 2001; “Godfather Tom” in 2003; and “Episode” in 2004. Not content with that success, Mkhitarian has set out to parlay these accomplishments into his most ambitious venture to date, an English-language album.

I recently met with Mkhitarian to discuss the upcoming release of this new English-language album, tentatively titled “Green Grass.” Seated in a small Glendale café, Mkhitarian welcomed me with a warm and disarming smile. However, I could not help but retain a certain skepticism regarding this new project. After all, I had become quite fond of Mkhitarian’s work—his albums occupying a permanent and prominent place in my collection. I found it hard to separate Mkhitarian’s familiar sinuous sound from the textural depth added by the Armenian lyrics.

Our conversation started on a more general note. Mkhitarian recounted his early experiences both in Armenia and in the United States, elaborating on how these helped shape his music. He also talked about his influences, which included a diverse group of artists from Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin to Rouben Hakhverdian and Ophelia Hambartsoumian. Mkhitarian added: “when I first started to listen to Bob Dylan, I did not understand the lyrics, but I understood the soul.” This stuck with me as we started to discuss the new project and listened to several of the completed tracks.

“Green Grass” is very much a collaborative effort. The album is being produced by Mkhitarian and co-produced by Erwin Khatchikian, keyboardist for the band Slow Motion Reign. The album also features vocals by Sebu Simonian from the band Aviatic as well as oud-play by John Berberian.

Over the course of three full-length albums, Mkhitarian’s command of the delicate balance between instrumentation and vocals has improved substantially. The new album brings unique dimensionality to the more stripped-down aesthetic of the earlier releases. “Green Grass” boasts capable songwriting, melodic intricacy, unique instrumentation, and layered synth atmospherics. It contains new material as well as various songs plucked from Mkhitarian’s previous releases. These earlier tracks have been thoroughly reworked and translated.

Deceptively complex riffs and Gor’s strongly accented vocals ground these multifaceted songs. Their layered sonic approach—tumbling drums, accordion and piano flourishes, tightly strummed guitars, and lively oud—is also the perfect conduit for drawing on cultural traces, something ever-present in Mkhitarian’s music. Lyrically, the songs are earnest and confessional, touching on desire, alienation, and heartache.

One of the featured tracks, “Stigma,” immediately casts aside all notion of pretense by prominently showcasing Mkhitarian’s distinct accent. Rather than taking away from the composition, this serves to add a certain honesty and authenticity (to the track), as Mkhitarian sings “The tell-tale mark of my disgrace, The burning brand upon my face, My better half has been erased...” Interestingly, “Stigma” reaches its emotional apex with the faint nudge of a few piano keys inducing an immediate and visceral reaction.

“One Song” is perhaps the most complex and eclectic track. The arrangement includes accordion flourishes, bursts of pulsating electronic twangs, and even pop, Celtic and Armenian melodies. These are introduced individually, as the song slowly reveals its stylistic depth.

“Nothing at all,” featuring lead vocals by Sebu Simonian, is most akin to a pure rock song. It purposefully lacks the layering evident on the other tracks, relying instead on a more minimalist aesthetic emblematic of Mkhitarian’s earlier work. This seems all the more appropriate, as Simonian sings “...there is nothing at all, there is nothing you can do for us...”

“Memory of a Breakdown” combines gossamer textures with linear ambient sound. Frolicking strings are caught between waves of atmospheric electronic sound, as Mkhitarian offers: “Queen of night, don’t set me free Madness is a luxury, go ahead and make a fool of me. Wash away the fears I’ve known, take away this flesh and bone...” The song ultimately blossoms with the luxurious embellishments of John Berberian’s oud.

After listening to the cuts, Mkhitarian adjusted his tall frame in his seat and, in a contented tone, said of the album: “I don’t have any illusions. I’m not out to save the world. It is just something I wanted to do. It is something I needed to do.” After listening to the completed tracks, I had to agree. Regardless of the English-language lyrics, I understood the soul.

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Sam Ekizian has been involved with the Armenian cultural and music scene for over two decades and has helped introduce artists to West Coast audiences.

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