

# MELBOURNE REBETIKO FESTIVAL

## THE SURGE OF THE UNDERGROUND

**MELBOURNE REBETIKO FESTIVAL (GREEK BLUES) was presented in Melbourne in 2018 and 2019 to great success.**

The main festival was an all-day event and ticket prices were reasonable at \$69 full and \$55 concession for a full day. Audiences could come in and out of venues at their own will.

There were some club events at the Greek Cultural Centre of the Greek Community of Melbourne, and several pop-up gigs over a week prior to the main event.

This case study looks at the communications, branding and audience development strategies of the Melbourne Rebetiko Festival.

Melbourne has the largest Hellenic community outside Greece, with over 300,000 Victorians identifying as Greek.

The aim was to present a contemporary and high-quality production of Rebetika (plural) or Greek Blues in Melbourne's primary acoustic music venue, the Melbourne Recital Centre (MRC).

The festival had international and local acts, and developed a partnership with community organisations, other festivals, and ethnic and alternative media.

The three producers Kon Karamoutzos, Con Kalamaras and Fotis Kapetopoulos sought to engage a diverse and intergenerational audience and not just Greek Australians.

The COVID19 Pandemic ensured that it was not presented in 2020 and 2021 however there are discussions to revamp the festival in 2022 with a local focus, and to add an international aspect in 2023.



Rebetiko is a unique micro-tonal eastern style Greek urban music. It is built on Byzantine, Turkish, Sephardic Jewish, Arabic, Armenian, and Greek musical traditions. Like the blues the form is diverse in terms of styles and influences.

Themes like those in Flamenco, and African American Blues, are about love, loss, poverty, migration, drug use, and oppression. Rebetiko has a global reach and in 2018 it was recognised as unique intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO.

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## What is Rebetiko music?

Rebetiko, came to life in the Greek communities of Turkey, around the turn of the 20th Century. The music was brought into Greece by over one million Hellenes that were ethnically cleansed from Turkey. The process included state sponsored expulsion, burning of cities like Smyrna (Izmir), the theft of property, forced death marches, starvation, and massacres.

The music found its true form in refugee crowded city ports and inner-city ghettos of Greece. Later in the migration hubs of New York City, Chicago, and later in Melbourne. These Greek refugees were seen as ‘Oriental’ and were looked down upon by the mainland Greek leadership desperate to become more ‘European’.

Rebetes, as the purveyors of the music and lifestyle were called, were outsiders, bohemians. During the 1930s and 1940s, right-wing governments sought to imprison and censor them. Many used heroin, cocaine, alcohol, and hashish and sang about it.

Pioneering female Rebetes flaunted their pansexuality and disdain for Orthodox conservatism. Musicians were jailed, and their music was initially banned. Yet, from this marginalised position, they instigated a musical explosion.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, the music melded Jazz, Italian Canto, and other western forms, to become more popular. It was first recorded in nascent Jazz, Blues and Bluegrass studios, in New York City and Chicago by new Greek immigrants to North America. Recently Rebetiko has includes new African-Greek sounds, Rock, Rap and Hip Hop.

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## Programming

Con Kalamaras, was the artistic director, Kon Karamoutzos producer and Fotis Kapetopoulos the marketer. They all have full time work in media, arts, and marketing. And all wanted a festival that featured international as well as local and community acts. Their aim was also to have up to 50% female artists and as many cross-cultural programs as possible.

The 2018 festival was headlined by Salonika based ensemble Pliri Ntaxei and in 2019 by Athenian ensemble Rebetien and Japanese Rebetiko musician Atsushi Tookaya. Atsushi Tookaya equated, Rebetiko, to Enka, a Japanese ballad style.

In 2019, the ensemble Rebetien for example, used accordion, bass-guitar, bouzouki, double bass, and violin and blended original compositions with Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean, and Balkan tunes.

Fotis Vergiopoulos from **Rebetien** [ below ] in, *Neos Kosmos* said; [“Rebetien’s dense acoustic timbre is built on accordion, double bass, violin, bouzouki, and guitar. Vergopoulos says Rebetien enthusiastically “embrace the gramophone sounds of the 1930s of Asia Minor, \(Turkey\) and Greece.”](#)





• [Rebetien \[ above \] listen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=0N6wNfwZZG0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0N6wNfwZZG0)

The Melbourne Rebetiko Festival included Australian musicians like, Irene Vela (Habibis) who blended Greek, Balkan and Middle Eastern music; Mairead Hannan (Xylouris Ensemble) with Cretan and Irish Rebetiko music; Irish Australian Greek musician, Paddy Montgomery; and Meyhané who revived almost extinct songs; George Doukas & the D Strings a ten- piece ensemble and string quartet; and the Mandolins of Smyrna, (now Izmir) as well as the Melbourne based Zourouna which is made of Lebanese, Jewish, Turkish and Greek musicians.

Fifty percent of all performers were women, traditionally Rebetiko has always been a space for women. The festivals included community youth and dance groups. This was essential as community and youth groups also generate greater ticket sales given the families of those performing want to come see their children perform.

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• The all-female Rebetiko ensemble **Porpoura** outside the ABC Studios, Melbourne.

## Partnerships

The Melbourne Recital Centre (MRC) was the key partner. MRC agreed on a 60/40 split, if the festival failed to make the cost of the venue, then it would be gifted as a sponsorship.

MRC is an exceptional venue however it is costly. The costs included, technical support, ushers, tech staff, green rooms, the concert hall and the smaller Salon, the bar, and the front of house, bump in and bump out. In total it was around \$28,000 to \$30,000 for the full day of the festival.

MRC's desire to engage new diverse audiences, as well as their charter to present diverse world music was at the centre of their decision.

MRC provided public relations support, direct marketing through their extensive mailouts, inclusion of the festival in their 30,000 programs and paid display advertising in mainstream media, *The Age*.

Two other important partners were the Greek Cultural Centre of the Greek Community of Melbourne, Victoria, (GCC), and the Sydney Greek Festival, or the Greek Community of Sydney, NSW.

The GCC provided an underwriting for any losses. It provided its venues free, for club events, and the Festival launch, and extended, legal, administrative and promotional support.

GCC promoted the festival through their extensive database of Greek community members, social media. They assisted in negotiations with partners and artists.

The Sydney Greek Festival added the international acts on their program, generating income for the Melbourne Rebetiko Festival artists.

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) and the City of Melbourne became funding partners, in support of venues, artists, and promotions.

Other partners included the Port Fairy Folk Festival, Australia's leading folk and roots music festival, WOMAdelaide, and WOMAD New Zealand internationally renowned world music and roots music festivals. These provided extra performance opportunities for international performers, and income for the festival.

The festival developed partnerships with *Neos Kosmos* Australia's leading Greek Australian media, in Greek and English, SBS Greek Radio, and PBS 106.7FM. Each of the media outlets provided pop-up gig

opportunities for artists that were broadcast on their radio, social and digital media channels.



- Social media, SBS Greek

[2018 6 June, Marios Papadeas, Con Calamaras, and Wayne Simmons: www.facebook.com/sbsgreek/videos/1719278924803818.](https://www.facebook.com/sbsgreek/videos/1719278924803818)

## Branding

In terms of branding and colour, the festival producers wanted to move away from the national colours of Greece, blue and white. It was felt that blue and white would have a nationalist tinge which runs counter to the ethos of Rebetiko music.

The branding and visual imaging reflected the authentic colours of Greece – ceramic, tans, yellows, and burnt orange.

The designer was given several images which included the ancient Greek colour pallet, and photos of contemporary Athens. They were briefed about the anti-authoritarian nature of Rebetiko music, and how Rebetiko in various forms is still a music of resistance.

The designer Greg Foster was given materials on Greece's Financial Crisis of 2008-2017, the protests economic austerity that ensued. Then they were furnished with images of an emerging post Crisis Athens, witnessing a cultural renaissance. They were asked to incorporate the 'feel' into a design for posters, flyers and media releases, and all social media. The design had to resonate with traditional values as well as contemporary activist feelings.

Fotis Kapetopoulos said to the designer: "Make it as though anyone from Fitzroy or Collingwood can see the poster and know that it is a really hip music gig, and at the same time ensure that any Greek of any age can relate to it as their own."

Visual communications entailed the use of ancient, medieval, and contemporary motifs. It needed to reflect the branding line "The Surge of the Underground" and be culturally diverse, or universal not ethnocentric.



- 2018 and 2019 Melbourne Rebetiko Festival posters; designer Greg Foster.

The design appealed to Rebetiko, Folk, Rock, and alternative music audience segments. The 2018 poster featured the neck of bouzouki, guitar, and the tag line “100 years of Greek Urban music of the Underground from Istanbul, Athens, Thessaloniki and Melbourne”

The 2019 festival used the Memento Mori which reflects the ever-present reality of death in rebetiko. The design was also used on T-Shirts, on all social media, media releases, posters, and flyers.

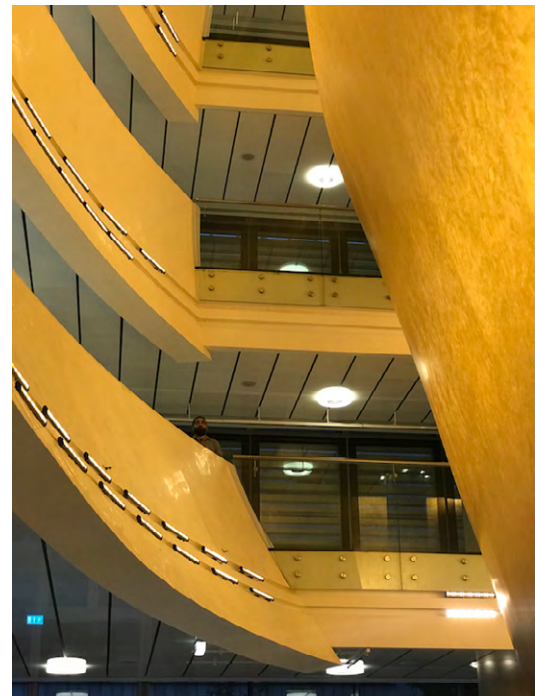
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• Embros bar, Athens 2018.



• Ancient Greek colours are not blue and white.



• Onassis Cultural Centre, Stegi, Athens 2019, [www.onassis.org/onassis-stegi](http://www.onassis.org/onassis-stegi)

## Audience Segments

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Naturally the largest audience segment was the Greek Diaspora of Melbourne from the over 300,000 people that identify as Hellenes. However, there was a concerted effort to capture several other segments.

The producers knew of the appeal of Rebetiko to Greek and non-Greek audiences and more importantly the diverse psychographics inherent of those segments.

### Snapshot of the segments targeted

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- Second generation Greek Australians, born in Australia, between 35-years and 70-years old.
- New arrivals from a post financial crisis Greece of 2012, aged 25years to 35years old.
- World and progressive music fans who would go to Port Fairy or WOMAD style programs.
- Roots and Folk music fans with left leaning politics.
- Jazz, Improvisational and Rock music fans.
- Community workers, activists, welfare workers, academics, and artists.

- Jewish, Turkish, Armenian, and Arab Australians who view Rebetiko as part of their musical traditions.
- Hellenophiles and those who have travelled to Greece, who love all things Greek.
- Greek food purveyors, Greek restaurant, and café owners.
- Social Justice Activists, e.g., university students, anti-globalisation, environmentalists, and feminists who could associate Rebetiko music as part of the anti-capitalist narratives emanating from Rebetiko music, anti-fascist resistance, and Greece's Financial Crisis.
- ABC Radio and Radio National listeners, largely middle class and politically progressive.
- Conservatives and traditionalists (Greeks) who see Rebetiko music as part of their history, their memories of migration and their heritage.
- Greek schools, youth, and dance groups – who brought in the families of the young people performing.
- International backpackers looking for a new experience.
- Music and dance students from all the leading tertiary institutions.

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• Audiences at Melbourne Rebetiko Festival Laki Sideris.



• Dancing in Foyer of Melbourne Recital Centre, not usual and had to be negotiated.

# Audience development

The festival had a limited budget for audience development, marketing, and promotions, however there was a concerted effort to use traditional and non-traditional strategies.

## Engaging partners in communications

- Greek Cultural Centre (GCC) assisted in audience engagement, as the Greek Community of Melbourne, Victoria validated the program for many of Victoria's Greek community.
- GCC email-outs, social media ads, and promotions created the all-mighty word of mouth and ensured that it would be difficult to be Greek and not know about the festival.
- The GCC linked the festival to Greek primary and high schools, and after-hour Greek schools, community dance and music groups, which ensured a multigenerational penetration.
- Melbourne Recital Centre (MRC) ensured that acoustic, classical music fans of the Centre knew of the Rebetiko Festival.
- MRC promoted the festival on their social media, their email outs (30,000), program, and display ads in *The Age* Victoria's main broadsheet newspaper, as well as rock sized posters outside the venue.
- The WOMADelaide and Port Fairy Folk Festival provided profile for the festival and allowed the live recording of international acts to be played on social media. These became viral.
- *Neos Kosmos* – Australia's leading Greek Australian media provided editorial in Greek and English, online and in print, half-priced display ads, electronic newsletters, social media support, and an opportunity to play live at their offices which was recorded and went viral across all social media.



• [Neos Kosmos feature in English 2019](#)

- *Neos Kosmos* audience included traditional Greek speaking older Greek Australians, and second-generation English-speaking Greek Australians, while the *Herald Sun* targeted mainstream audiences and families and *The Age* mainstream and middle class culture lovers.

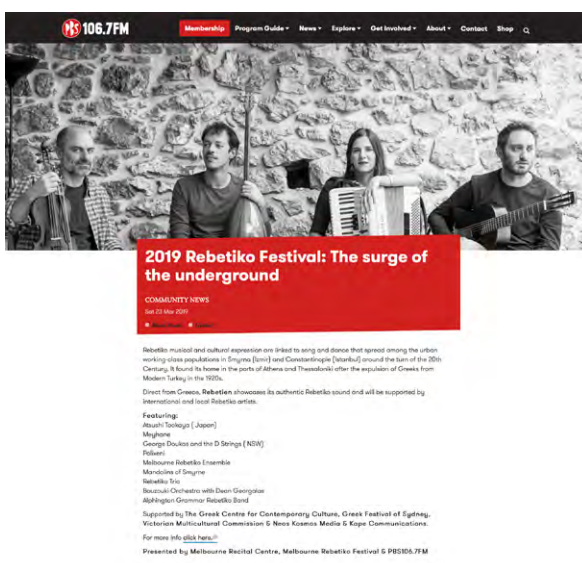


• Greek language press in *Neos Kosmos* 2018.



## Collateral, media, and promotions

- The festival produced 10,000 Flyers and 2000 distributed by a professional company to high Greek areas like, Oakleigh, Malvern, Preston, Northcote, and Reservoir and inner city creative clusters of Melbourne like Fitzroy, St Kilda, Footscray, and Collingwood.
- Those interested in Greek and world music, in the arts, and in culture, would see the posters and flyers.
- Starling Communications were hired to focus on *The Age*, ABC and *Herald Sun* and the festival producers targeted all ethnic and alternative media.
- Advertising in *Neos Kosmos* media, Radio Hellas, Radio PBS, and ads (by the Recital Centre) in *The Age* covered the Greek, the socially aware non-Greek and arts and culture segments.
- PBS 106.7FM alternative radio, provided discounted ads, and interviews as well as opportunities to play live on radio, and postings on their website. They targeted university students, alternative music audiences, and progressive inner city audience segments.

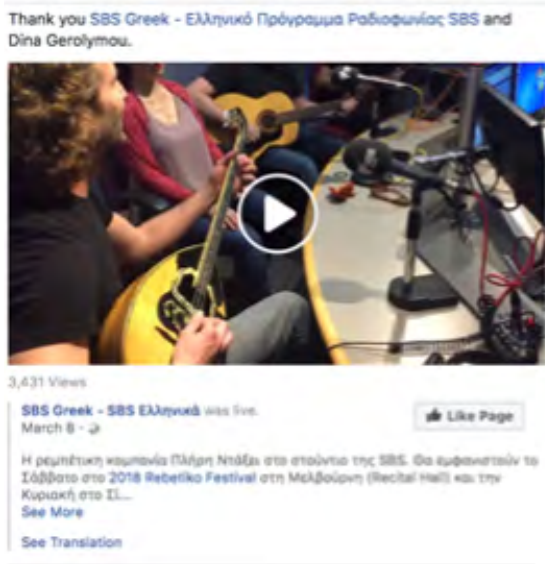
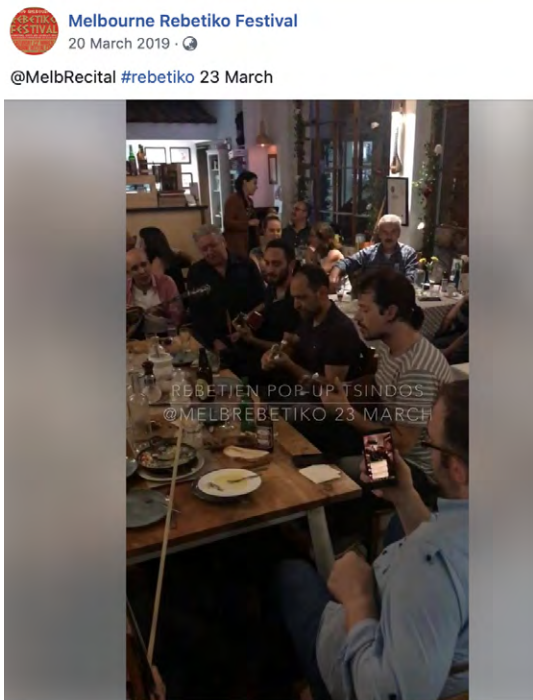


- [PBS 106.7FM partnership targeting progressive and young people; www.pbsfm.org.au/news/2019-rebetiko-festival-surge-underground](http://www.pbsfm.org.au/news/2019-rebetiko-festival-surge-underground)



- Posters in Oakleigh, a high Greek area.
- Triple-J Radio – promoted the festival and played music of international bands – which like 3 PBS targeted university students, alternative music audiences, and progressive segments.
- Regular social media posts of the musicians playing live, as well as highly targeted ads on Facebook and Instagram.
- Promotions include giveaways and live performances in studios which created a sense of excitement.
- Other ethnic media included, Australian Jewish News, 3XY Hellas Radio, Rhythmos Radio (Greek), SBS Greek, Sephardic, Arabic and Turkish Radio.
- Pop-up gigs were presented at *Neos Kosmos*, *Herald Sun*, 3PBS, ABC RN and SBS Radio. The *Herald Sun* pop-up gig was played live on YouTube and on the *Herald Sun* site, it was viewed by hundreds of thousands mainstream audiences, while ABC RN targeted the educated middle-class audiences who listen to Jazz, World Music and Classical.

- Live YouTube and Facebook performances from WOMADelaide, WOMAD NZ, Port Fairy Folk Fest
- Live music performance from Tsindos Tavern in Melbourne was professionally filmed on video and went live.



- Social media, SBS Greek
- [2018 8 March, Pliri Ntaxei; https://www.facebook.com/sbsgreek/videos/1627437460654632](https://www.facebook.com/sbsgreek/videos/1627437460654632)

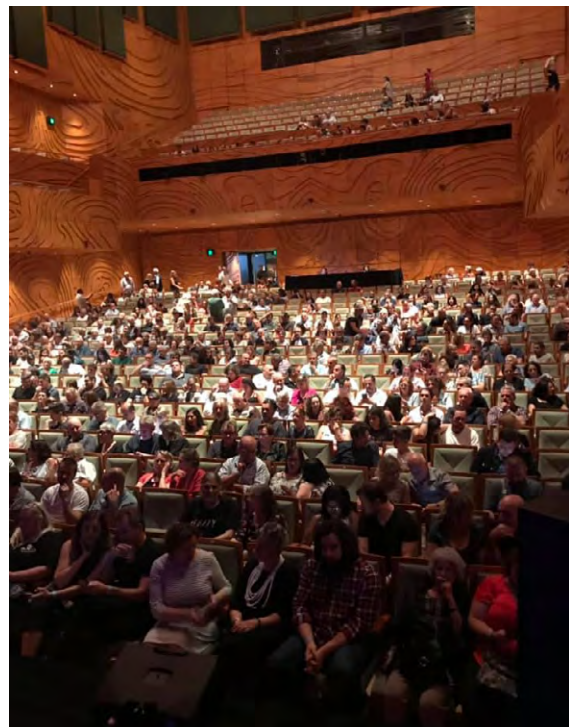
- [Tsindos Tavern live pop-up gig 2019 MRF \[listen\]](#)



• [Rebetien live in Herald Sun studios; www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pgw7430tyuw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pgw7430tyuw) [ listen ]

## Outcomes

- Promotions were effective and ran over eight weeks across various platforms social media mainstream media traditional media and the additional use of pop-up gigs added value and a sense of excitement pride to the festival.
- The visual communications – poster and merchandising – were rarely seen in traditional Greek music events in Melbourne – targeted progressive and non-traditional audiences as well as traditional audiences.
- The Melbourne Rebetiko Festival secured an 85% house that is 800+ tickets sold in a 1100 capacity venue.
- The festival garnered of media across mainstream, alternative and ethnic media.
- The Partnerships with the Greek Cultural Centre, Womadelaide, Port Fairy Folk Festival and others proved resilient, and they expressed commitment for more programs.
- There was strong interest from future sponsors and venues.



- The audiences were 85% full at the start of the program, Melbourne Recital Centre.

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## Challenges

A key challenge was resources, it was difficult for three full time workers, the producers, to run a festival of this nature on a part time basis, without more resources.

The use of volunteers was very effective, the producers harnessed the passion of those who love the Rebetiko music as volunteers.

In the long run, there is need for full time or at least part time administrators working for programme of this nature.

The partner organisations such as the Greek Cultural Centre and the Melbourne Recital Centre were very supportive however, there is need for paid staff in the future.

The cost of the Melbourne Recital Centre was significant, and while the festival posted no loses, the margins were tight.

After paying for the venue, the artists, national and international flights, accommodation, the marketing and hosting, and the producers did not make enough money to pay for all their efforts.

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## Rebetiko Festival: nostalgia is not a dirty word

BY FOTIS KAPETOPOULOS | MARCH 17, 2019 |

• Feature in arts media  
Daily Review 2019 at  
[dailyreview.com.au/rebetiko-festival/](https://dailyreview.com.au/rebetiko-festival/)

## Conclusion

The 2018 and 2019 festivals were successful in promotions, media, and audience development. The profile of the audiences was broad in terms of age, class, region, and gender.

It reflected traditional Greek families, progressive arts and activists, young university and high school, students, and world music audiences.

It was an intergenerational audience that included grandparents, parents, young people, and children. Of course, Greeks and non-Greeks.

Over 50% of the audience were women ranging in age from 25-years to 68-years of age. The predominant audience was Greek, given it is a Greek music form, however there was a significant non-Greek cohort Anglo Celtic, Jewish, Lebanese, Turkish and others. Anecdotal evidence suggests that up to one quarter of the audience was non-Greek.

The audience development marketing and promotional strategy was effective and reveals that a multipronged effort is effective as is the development of strong partnerships.

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**NEOS KOSMOS**  
THE HELLENIC PERSPECTIVE SINCE 1957

## ‘Rebetiko is not only Greek music, it’s Australian music’

The Melbourne Rebetiko Festival is underway and Fotis Kapetopoulos outlines what makes it particularly relevant today, not only to Greeks, but to the broader community



<https://neoskosmos.com/en/2018/02/23/life/music/rebetiko-is-not-only-greek-music-its-australian-music/>