



→ POSTCARD FROM...

# Crete

The hills are alive with the sound of lute music, as Jane Cornwell discovers when she's introduced to a very talented family

The singer and lute player George Xylouris (pictured), aka Psarogiorgis, is well-known in Greece, particularly in his homeland Crete. But up in the mountain village of Anogia – a 'wild west' town where men with barrel chests and piercing eyes wear baggy trousers tucked into long boots and fire guns in the air at weddings – he's a bona fide celebrity. "Psarogiorgis!" they cry, as this bear-like man drives through town in an old Renault with the windows wound down and the music of his father, the great Cretan singer, *lyra* player and living legend Psarantonis, keening on the stereo. Men leave backgammon games outside cafés to saunter over, working worry beads, and shake the heir apparent's hand; there is *raki*, clinked first in shot glasses.

Just a child when he started playing the lute at the knee of his uncle Giannis Xylouris (Psaroyiannis), the Heraklion-based George Xylouris used to accompany his famous father at village functions. He contributed to several group recordings before striking out on his own and forging a reputation as the most accomplished player of the long-necked *laouto*, a fretted lute strummed with a long plectrum. A singer and musician both respectful of tradition and open to innovation, George Xylouris plays the lute as a solo instrument; songs old and new muse on themes of love, liberty and the beauty of nature.

Years spent living in Australia sharpened his love of cross-genre collaboration: a recent Australian tour saw both Xylouris and acclaimed Australian rock drummer Jim White wiggling out alongside the bearded, darkly eccentric Psarantonis.

Music is endemic to the Xylouris clan. George's sister Niki is one of the few female Cretan singers; his brother Lambis plays the *oud* (lute) and George's three Greek-Australian children played alongside their father and grandfather at this year's WOMADelaide. Then there's George's



wife Shelagh Hannan, a flautist hailing from an Irish-Australian musical clan. A documentary embracing both dynasties – *A Family Affair* – is in the works in Athens.

The most famous Xylouris died in 1980 but is here in Anogia in spirit: the singer and *lyra* player Nikos Xylouris, George's uncle. Part of the movement that brought down the Greek military junta in 1973, Nikos sang songs of rebellion at the Athens polytechnic as the colonels sent in the tanks; the little white house in which he was born is now a free museum plastered with posters and memorabilia.

It's a Sunday; the clan gathers for freshly cooked lamb above the town, by a white church on a rocky mountaintop of scrubby trees and mineral springs. Percussionist Yianni Papatzanis, a diminutive George Clooney look-alike, arrives in a car dusted by the island's famous south wind and is greeted with much backslapping.

The following week Papatzanis joins George and lutenist Dimitri Sideris onstage at Ali Vafi's Garden, an open-air venue in the coastal town of Réthymnon, where posters advertising the concert are plastered over the town's Venetian walls. The garden, with its orange and lemon

.....  
**Songs old and new muse on themes of love, liberty and the beauty of nature**

trees and outdoor bar, is packed.

The trio's arrival is greeted with loud applause befitting musical royalty. Sitting on a raised platform flanked by Sideris and Papatzanis – who plays his large *daouli* side drum with brushes and later with sticks – Psarogiorgis begins with 'Kampanes', a original composition as melodic and delicate as it is emphatic and dramatic. His lyrics come in impassioned bursts, and his accompanists sing harmonies.

'To Pervoli', a traditional song about a beautiful garden, is sung *a capella* with the crowd swiftly joining in. The verses from the epic *Erotokritos* – a poem written in Cretan dialect during the Venetian occupation and turned into rhyming couplets over 10,000 lines long – are gripping and authentically bardic. Instruments are downed for Papatzanis's rich tenor rendering of 'Kosme Krise', a poem about the meaning of life, turned into song the Cretan way. **N**

.....  
**ONLINE** [www.xylourisensemble.net](http://www.xylourisensemble.net)

**VIDEO** Watch a video of George Xylouris on our YouTube channel