

December 10, 2006

PARTY DESTINATION OF THE YEAR

Amid the Minarets of Istanbul, Club Music Pulses

By **SETH SHERWOOD**

IT was supposed to be a day of mourning.

At exactly 9:05 a.m. on Nov. 10, traffic abruptly stopped throughout [Istanbul](#) as a citywide lament of sirens and car horns resounded among the venerable Roman ruins, Byzantine churches and Ottoman-era mosques of the millennia-old metropolis. Taxi drivers stood at attention in the frozen sea of traffic. Some motorists wiped tears from their eyes. Exactly 68 years ago to the minute, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the beloved founder of modern Turkey, drew his final breath.

But by evening, the ebullient sounds of the fourth annual Phonem electronica festival had replaced the dirge, and the only handkerchiefs getting moistened were the ones drying the sweat of the dancing crowd at the club [Babylon](#) (90-212-292-7368; www.babylon.com.tr). As the upstart [Turkish](#) electro-rock outfit Portecho delivered its pulsating beat — courtesy of bass, drums and impressive computer wizardry — it was clear that the crowd had U-turned from nationalist nostalgia to the radiant future of the fast-rising band before them.

“We’re having a lot of fun; are you having fun?” asked the singer, Tan Tuncag, between songs, while his bandmates adjusted matching skinny New Wave ties. Judging from the roar of the hipster crowd, the answer was a resounding “evet!” (“yes!”).

For anyone who still envisions the former Constantinople as the fossilized capital of three long-vanished empires or reduces the city to its Islamic prayer calls and headscarves, the noise blasting from clubs like Babylon and festivals like Phonem should serve as a wake-up call. Fueled by increasing affluence, greater links with the West, and a sizable under-30 population, this sprawling city of domes and minarets is emerging as one of the world’s most exciting night life centers.

“Ten years ago you were lucky to have something hip happening once a month,” said James Snow, a music and entertainment writer for Time Out Istanbul and an 11-year resident. Nowadays, he said, there are so many concerts, shows and club events that “people tend to treat Sunday as another night to party, and the weekend doesn’t really end until your alarm clock wakes you up on Monday morning.”

“So many people are starting up bands every day or reviving and remixing traditional musics with a set of turntables,” he added. “The city has a buzz to it right now that is almost visceral.”

You feel the buzz most intensely along the teeming pedestrian boulevard of Istiklal Cadessi —a kind of Street of Sound in central Istanbul. Come nightfall, strings are tuned, amplifiers are plugged in, needles drop into grooves and microphones crackle to life at Babylon, Indigo, Balans and dozens of other pubs and clubs that lurk in the labyrinthine side streets.

Like spinning the dial of an iPod, strolling these passages results in a rapid succession of musical bombardments: bubble-gum Turkish pop, jazzy Arabesque, traditional acoustic fasil music, D.J.-spun house, avant-garde indie rock, throbbing electronica.

Capturing Istanbul's sprawling musical mosaic became a personal quest for the German-Turkish film director Fatih Akin, whose film "Head-On" won top honors at the 2004 Berlin Film Festival. To do so, he tracked down more than a dozen Istanbul artists — from the Kurdish folk-rock singer Aynur to Ceza, a politically outspoken hip-hop star — tracing their distinctive paths and delving into the roots of contemporary Turkish music.

The result last year was "Crossing the Bridge," a sonically stunning document of a metropolis with a unique geography (it straddles [Europe](#) and Asia) and mix of ethnicities (Turks, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Jews and Gypsies) that has long made it an eclectic and creative cauldron.

The biggest challenge, according to Klaus Maeck, the film's producer and music supervisor, was simply choosing which artists to feature.

"There are so many bands, but also so many musical directions," he said, lavishing special praise on the "very freaked-out" East-meets-West psychedelia and carnivalesque belly dancers of the group Baba Zula.

Though skeptical about Turkish music before his involvement in "Crossing the Bridge," he said he was quickly won over and made it his goal "to put Istanbul on the international music map."

The ancient city has also become the latest hot spot on the European clubbing circuit. At the center of the party whirl is [360](#) (90-212-251-1042; www.360istanbul.com). Three years old but already a minor legend around the Continent, the bar-restaurant sports the neo-industrial décor and airy interiors of a TriBeCa art collector's loft. On any given weekend night you might find a D.J. and live musicians collaborating on an electro-funk dance mix as a polyglot crowd in salon-fresh hairstyles and Zara clothes rattles cocktails under the red L.E.D. sign flashing the words "Hot Pornstar." For hard-core house-music heads looking for a wee-hours fix, the sleek [Crystal](#) nightclub (90-212-261-1988) imports top international talent to its sexy purple-glowing confines.

"The sound system is great, and the enthusiasm is high," said D.J. Heather, a fixture of the Chicago house-music scene, as she prepared for her 2 a.m. guest spot at Crystal. Amid a reverberating bass powerful enough to sink a battleship, a crowd of Istanbul clubbers — some in track suits, some in business suits — danced under a giant mirror ball. Many were still arriving from the Portecho show at Babylon, which had ended a couple of hours earlier. "They're cultivating a real house-music scene

here," she continued over the throbbing din.

At dawn, the call to prayer sounded from mosques all over the skyline. For the slumbering faithful, it was a rousing summons to the religious duties of another day. For the throngs of nightowls still hopped up on Red Bull and vodka, it was a citywide reminder for last call.

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