

# Notes on a Greek festival

...or how freedom was celebrated in Detroit

Hank Malone

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It is ironic that the recent "Freedom Festival" in Detroit was celebrated primarily in Detroit's Grecian community.

It is actually tragic, when you consider that modern Greece lies dying at the feet of fascist armies, and that many, perhaps most, of the inhabitants of Detroit's so-called "Greektown" are monarchists at heart, actually supporting the current Greek dictatorship. "Greektown, in short, is one Helluva place to celebrate a "Freedom Festival."

I have been trying for several hours, now, to find a way of talking about the amazing "Greektown" street festivals which have occurred in Detroit for the last three years during the long Fourth of July weekends. They are truly amazing, considering how they dwarf (with the possible exception of our recent "civil disorders") the spirit of any local civic event in recent history.

First, it strikes me as spurious that I should begin this article by condemning the festival simply because its political spirit is underlined by local Greek fascists. Everyone must know, by now, that though democratic politics was born in Greece, it quickly left home at a very early age, and never returned.

Closer to the point is this: when Americans think about "freedom" in relation to Greek people, they don't reflexively think of freedom movements and political heroes. (who knows, for instance, about Andreas Papandreu and the upcoming "long hot summer" in Athens?)

No, rather than political freedom, Americans associate with Greece the kind of personal existential freedom that is romantically linked to vigorous Greek peasant types—like Zorba, and like the prostitute Ilya whom Mama Mercouri made so famous in the film "Never on Sunday." There is something about this alleged Greek aimlessness, and sense of anarchy that seems thoroughly and discordantly human and desirable.

So if we are to appraise why the local festival has become so very popular, we must begin by seeing the participants largely as non-political Zorbas and Ilyas. During the five evenings when Monroe street was cordoned off (July 3–7), and tables and food stands set up in the streets, Detroiters found themselves drifting out of the horrible blood-stained world of American politics into the night-time world of exotic existentialism.

Detroiters found themselves congregating in a way utterly novel to most Americans—namely, in a great public street communion of random physical movement, supported by bouzouki music, Grecian street-dancing, baklava and shish-kabob, wine, and conversation. And all of this supported by an underlying philosophy of joyousness embodied in the myth of the Greek peasant. In a sense, if you knew what to do with it all, you couldn't have it any better. It was a superb event, a stroke of momentary genius on the part of Detroit's Chamber of Commerce.

This forage into freedom, however, brought problems to several who participated, if we are to believe what we read in some of the dazed faces milling about in the crowds.

The Greek, says Henry Miller, has a genius for using personal freedom, and so when he has a festival it is uniformly beautiful. But there is little if any such genius in the American, and so when a festival is thrust upon him the results are frequently ugly; festival becomes carnival, freedom becomes desperation, and joy perversely becomes an unending up-tight search for status and pecking-order in the crowds.

In other words, give an American half a chance for a genuine Revelation at a public event, and he'll probably botch the project, preferring instead to buy his way out of freedom, back into the American dream of "a dozen cars, six butlers, a castle, a private chapel, and a bomb-proof vault."

I believe there were three characteristic moods at the festivals in "Greektown" three kinds of people came together, and to the extent this was possible, fused their wide differences into something more like a kingdom than an insane asylum. I will call our three kinds of characters—The Shepherds, The Poets, and The British.

One must first imagine the Scene: a long downtown street blocked-off at either end, both sides of the street dominated by quaintly dilapidated small Greek business enterprises; little cafes, restaurants, barber shops, gift shops, Greek travel agencies, etc.

Throughout the narrow street little umbrella tables had been erected; surrounded with perhaps five or six chairs. Every few yards someone had set-up an outdoor grill where they were producing and selling (at exorbitant rates) Greek specialties (or perhaps Greek-American specialties) like barbequed shish-kabob and barbequed corn-on-the-cob.

To a very great extent, the mood was aimed at "authenticity", though it was marred by an occasional "cotton candy" concession, and a plethora of irrelevant State Fair portrait painters doing their pastels, surrounded by hypnotized onlookers.

Midway down the street, a wooden platform had been erected, where Greek musicians were entertaining through PA systems, and where, periodically, a belly-dancer (direct from Athens, Ohio) would perk up the crowds with a display of her terpsichorean prowess.

Beginning about eight p.m. nightly, the crowds came, the People, the hungry Grecophiles. They quickly settled themselves into chairs, and filled up every open space. Somehow, despite the closeness, they kept moving: in and out of the shops, cruising around, grooving the Scene, meeting old friends.

Every now and again a few people would create an open pocket in the crowds and begin a spontaneous dance. And most everyone drank and shouted and laughed and pointed and screamed. It was no place for the Hermit.

The British, the Poets, the Shepherds. Let us begin.

1. The British overwhelmed the Scene, torpid characters, largely unimaginative, lacking in personal resiliency; armchair voyeurs looking for a taste of excitement, but generally too lazy to take the efforts required for The Revelation and The Trip.

These were the people who overwhelmingly bought beer in preference to "retzina" or red Attikis wine. These were the people who requested that the musicians play Jewish songs, and who tried dancing the "Hora", and who nonetheless (despite the greater simplicity of the Hora) botched this also.

These were the people who felt the Greek-Americans in the crowds would somehow be grateful that they "tried" to dance the Greek dances, even while eating ice-cream and improvising their own "Booga-loo" variations with appalling results. The British were good-natured Bulls in this china-shop of Grecian tradition.

2. The Poets were the "purists" in the crowds, constantly bitching and upset by the tendency of this beautiful festival to tip-over completely and become an ugly American carnival. The Poets were terribly upset that the young high school girls ("greasers" with names like Judy and Shirley printed on their poplin jackets) would not realize that women really have no place in traditional Greek dances; that it was like defiling (shitting-on) an ancient and beautiful folk tradition.

The Poets hated the fact that the crowds were being aggressively corralled into "buying things" in the surrounding shops; that the motives of so many were strictly exploitative, and that money-making had become a major motif in the Festival.

3. And the Shepherds, of whom I include myself. Not that our view of the event was better or worse than anyone else's—but it was surely more humble, more charitable, and less destructive to both tradition and the living reality of Man.

The Shepherd's vision of the here-and-now has appreciated that this event had really and truly happened, despite any and all liabilities.

The Shepherds in the crowds seemed to sense how extraordinary this event was for Detroit—not a mysterious and cryptic Festival of the Arts, but one truly made of earth, air, fire, and water—full of humanity, with people talking to each other, touching.

At one point midway through my own evening, and midway through a bottle of Attikis red, while sitting on a storefront step, I could not help but think of Fellini's movie—"8-1/2". I could not help but utterly identify with the central character who finally, after a demoralizing search after "The Truth", succumbs as a Shepherd to the great wheel of the human condition. I could see myself joining hands with all the beautiful and bizarre and broken people; with the British, and the Poets, and I could see all of us dancing in the street together in wild pandemonium.

In fact, this is what we all did. The world became small again, as the old Greek world was, small enough to include everyone.

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