

## “MANELE” – A MUSICAL GENRE SELLING THE “ROMANIAN DREAM”

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**SUMMARY.** The article studies the origins of “manele”, by presenting a short history of the people who produce and perform them. Local and foreign musical influences are traced and analyzed. The study concentrates on the impact that the “manele” phenomenon has had on various other music styles, particularly on traditional folklore and gypsy band repertoire. Particular insight into the genre’s commercial success is also provided. The booming of a profitable music industry, along with the intrusion on daily urban life, is scrutinized by means of a series of interviews based on a scientific questionnaire.

**Keywords:** Manele, folklore, song, tune, culture, tradition, gypsy, fusion, influence, kitsch

World culture and more specifically world music seem to be living in a time of proliferation, diversification, globalisation, and commoditisation. It is hardly a mystery how all these trends owe their emergence to the wider phenomenon of globalization. For those of us exposed daily to the consequences of the globalizing processes it is sometimes difficult to notice their side effects. Some of the processes involved in the globalization of world music could be reduced to one-word definitions, such as borrowing, blurring, mixing, juxtaposing, annihilating, accommodating, assimilating, synthesizing, etc. Applicability is not an issue anymore, as long as in the open cultural spaces that we inhabit everything goes. As a result, at the looping end of this proliferation spiral, many of the sideline tendencies pass the test of the collective preference, and leave the melting pot of globalization as part of the mainstream artistic output.

That is exactly the case of “Manele”, a relatively local musical phenomenon, and at the same time a meta-genre, a sort of musical “love child” fathered by globalization. The “Manele” represent a repertoire of songs that appeared almost accidentally, at the confluence of Western popular culture, traditional Gypsy band music, and various Near-Eastern musical idioms. The phenomenon is specific to certain areas of the Balkans and probably Turkey.

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However, the “Manele” circulating in Romania constitute the principal interest of this study. The repertoire in discussion has a short history of little more than a decade; however, it represents an accurate reflection of what proliferation has meant to world music during the respective period. All kinds of sub-genres and currents have branched out from “Manele” right from the beginning, making it an especially hard-to-label phenomenon. In fact, if we were to trace back all the influences incorporated into the “Manele”, we might need to go as far back in time as the origins of the very people who brought these tunes to the world music scene. In the mind of individuals who know a thing or two about the “Manele”, this entire phenomenon identifies with the Gypsies and the Gypsy culture of Romania. It is rather paradoxical, and perhaps unique for a musically inclusive genre making a big career this very day to be exclusively associated with, and attributed to a singular well-defined group, specifically the Roma ethnic minority.

The Roma (people), commonly known as Gypsies, are traditionally nomadic people found throughout the world. While the term Gypsy is often attached to anyone leading a nomadic life, the Roma share a common biological, cultural, and linguistic heritage that sets them apart as a genuine ethnic group. When they first arrived in Europe over five hundred years ago, the Roma were called Gypsies in the mistaken belief that they had come from Egypt. Recent research shows that their journey actually began in India. The Roma people (Rromanò) are Indian because of their origins and European (trans-national) due to their projection. The theory of their Indian origin (more precisely in the northwest of the Hindustani subcontinent) is shared by most contemporary researchers [led by the prominent historian and linguist Vania de Gila Kochanowski, a Rromanò himself]. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic tribes invaded India, and forced the local populations to start a great migration westward. It is believed that the second migration occurred during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when another wave of Roma left their homes in the aftermath of a Mongolian invasion. From then on, the Roma exodus was continuous.

The Indian migrants, coming from different tribes, crossed Persia first. There they were mixed and formed a people designated *Dom o Rom*. A large part of them continued their travel to Europe, so that their descendants are the Roma of today. Depending on the geographical area that they occupied, their customs, and the dialectal variant of their language, large groups of Roma were formed and have survived until the present time as *kalé*, *lovári*, *sinti*, *kalderash*, *boyash* and *manouche*. Most Roma speak some form of *Rromani*, which is primarily a spoken rather than written language. The various Rromani tribes are divided into clans, each composed of a number of families related by common descent or historical association. Clan leaders sometimes assume the title king or queen, while their subjects adopt the religious faiths of the countries in which they live. Generally, they prefer to carry out religious rituals as part of their own folk observances.

Today’s world population of Roma is difficult to establish with certainty. Estimates suggest that there are between approximately 15 and 30 million Roma worldwide. Probably 10 million Roma live in Europe, making up that continent’s largest minority population. The largest concentrations of Roma are found in the Balkan Peninsula, in central Europe, in Russia, and in the other successor republics of the Soviet Union. Smaller numbers are scattered throughout Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Americas. Although historically renowned as wanderers, the vast majority of nowadays Roma live in settled communities. Because the Roma are widely dispersed, their culture and social organization vary considerably. However, a unifying force is their language, Rromani, which consists of a number of dialects belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages. Until recent years, most Roma were illiterate, and illiteracy rates remain high in most Roma communities.

The Roma have exerted a significant influence on the artistic history of Europe (famous fortune-tellers, dancing bears, circus caravans, etc.). Many Roma traditionally worked as musicians and entertainers, and Rromani influence has been particularly strong in the field of music. Rromani folk music has inspired many European composers. The popular *flamenco* songs and dances of Spain were originated by the Roma, and they have retained a distinctive Rromani spirit. Rromani musical traditions continue to flourish in many parts of Eastern Europe, especially in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia.

In Romania, the “Manele” are primarily associated with singers of Roma origin, many of whom have previously tried careers in traditional Gypsy music, or even folk music. The “Manele” are always sung in the Romanian language, never in Rromani, and this represents one of the peculiarities of the phenomenon. Most “Manele” performers are young and live in urban areas of Romania, where everybody speaks the language of the majority. Therefore, they are probably not even familiar with Rromani at all. They are certainly musically illiterate, but have a natural talent for enlivening this kind of music. It is practically impossible not to associate the “Manele” with a lifestyle of partying and revelling, while these performers really look like, and come across as, genuine revellers. In most cases, the singers are accompanied by a small band, sometimes by secondary vocalists and, on rare occasions, two or three high-profile “manelists” team up to perform together.

The accompanying bands usually include traditional instruments such as the fiddle, clarinet, accordion, dulcimer, and a species of double bass. The newest and more commercial additions (or replacements) are the saxophone, bass guitar, drum set, sometimes piano, or the unfailing synthesizer. As opposed to traditional Gypsy music, the “Manele” are always plugged in, amplified, and digitally edited before commercial release. When performed live, they seem to

follow very precise stereotypes, with the purpose of minimizing the resources involved, as well as the risk of going wrong. It is worth mentioning that some live “Manele” performers do not bother bringing a band along, but rather playing back a negative of the accompaniment, while others go as far as to doing the familiar lip-sync-ing.

Since there is no notation to “Manele”, the performers enjoy much liberty in terms of ornamentation (which is always very rich, melismatic), and overall structure of the songs (alternation of chorus, refrain, and instrumental interludes). The entire arsenal of elements specific to tonal-functional music is present, such as phrase-like lines, tonal harmony (abusing the use of harmonic sequences), chromatic modulations, applied chords, regular and irregular rhythmic groupings, and strictly patterned meter. All these traits diametrically oppose the “Manele” to the language and structure of all species of authentic folklore or traditional Gypsy music.

While the sound language of “Manele” highlights a mixture of Western and Oriental elements, which provide an imminent richness, the texts remain undoubtedly their weakest parameter. They seem to represent the only entirely determined part of a song. Texts appear in either the form of a detailed and moralizing narrative, or an outpouring of sentimentalism. The themes are repetitive from song to song, revolving around money, wealth, women, love, hate, enemies, family, etc. To an audience of more refined tastes and expectations, these themes and their basic, narrow-minded treatment might come across as cheap, even fulsome. Moreover, there is an unreasonable amount of slang to the “Manele” texts (which, until recently, has not been specific to the Romanian language). The “Manele” are essentially butchering the language in terms of both grammar and pronunciation; they are slowly but steadily deriving their own dialect.

One can get a very clear idea of the scarcity and simplicity of expression by just reading the song titles on the reverse of a compact disc booklet. They are more than suggestive, ranging from summarizing the entire message of the songs in extremely naïve terms, to putting it very bluntly and being very graphic. The colourful album covers, as primary sources of contact with the repertoire, are supposed to help sell the records – which they apparently do. Here are a few title samples along with the names of the respective performers (in the neatest translation we are capable of providing): Aurel Miracle – *Some of Us Have Sexy Babes*, Don Genove – *I Cheated on My Wife*, Maxx Feat. The English Guy – *Seven Beatings and a Handcuffing*, Kamarad & Play AJ – *Womanizing All Night Long*, Vali Thunderstorm – *The Lord Made Me Filthy Rich*, or *Enemies Are Dying*.

To illustrate the attitudes that a large proportion of the Romanian public has toward the spreading of this repertoire, we conducted a series of interviews. The responses seem to illustrate the utmost concern that individuals from different

occupations share with respect to the proliferation of “Manele” into the public space. The interviews followed a very strict and concise questionnaire, identical for all respondents. This was due primarily to the fact that we needed to compare the answers in a statistical fashion. The interviewees had to meet the same criteria: they were all ethnic Romanians who had been exposed to “Manele” in some way. Besides the fact that they were all educated individuals, they practised different professions, and were both musicians and non-musicians. The particular questions contained in the questionnaire were:

- 1) How familiar are you with the “Manele” phenomenon?
- 2) In what context have you been exposed to “Manele”? Was it deliberate listening, or incidental?
- 3) Why do you think “Manele” are so popular among relatively different categories of people?
- 4) Do you think there is any artistic value to the “Manele” repertoire?
- 5) With what other musical genres can you associate “Manele”?
- 6) Do you see a future to this phenomenon? Do you think “Manele” are just temporarily fashionable, and will eventually fade away?
- 7) Do you personally like “Manele”? Why / Why not?

In addition to conducting these interviews, we researched a few online forums dedicated to the “Manele”. We also stumbled accidentally upon newspaper articles that were depicting the current state of facts in Romania, and particularly how the recent years’ reaction to “Manele” was unfolding. It looks like there are many passionate voices arguing that the “Manele” invasion has been annoying more and more Romanians. Other opinions invoke the freedom of expression to justify their opposition to any kind of censorship. The bitterest opponents of “Manele” are young intellectuals, some local politicians, and the members of extreme right-wing movements. They argue that the presence of the “Manele” on the Romanian show-business scene illustrates the decadence of the Romanian society in general. Nevertheless, it became clear that every sign of opposition is just a hopeless cry in the dark, since a very isolated minority is actively raising awareness and challenging the “Manele” proliferation.

It is generally characteristic of Romanians to be bothered by something and not do anything about it. Some clarifications are in order, though: people who are fighting back the phenomenon are not advocating a total ban on “Manele,” but rather trying to limit the extent to which they are imposed on innocent by-listeners. We also contemplated the possibility of witnessing a masked form of racism (against the Roma) in this antagonistic pursue. After all, the history of cohabitation with the Roma is abundant in cases of discrimination. However, we did not come across any facts that would indicate that this was the case today. None of the respondents expressed anything in this direction

either. They actually refrained from clearly casting blame on any one category of individuals. If we were to come up with an explanation, it would go along the lines of people not really perceiving any racial diversity within the Romanian society. They all regard diversity as normality because differences are not that significant, and have been present virtually forever. The only differences that people entirely acknowledge are the linguistic ones. Since most urban Roma (definitely those involved with the “Manele”) speak Romanian, they are simply not regarded as a different race. In some areas of Romania (especially in the south), different ethnic groups have been mixing for centuries, so that today’s population is very homogenous. Using the language as a means of establishing ethnic affiliation is much more relevant nowadays than using colour of the skin for example. In addition, during the most recent national census of 2002, numerous individuals of Roma ethnicity voluntarily stated they were Romanian. Consequently, the debate and antagonism appear to be a question of intellectual rather than racial nature. To put it simply, those who are slandering the “Manele” are doing so because they have had enough of it. They are resisting the obnoxious intrusion of the “Manele” into their regular daily activities, and are protecting from extinction what they regard as more authentic, traditional music repertoires.

Generally, the “Manele” represent a musical genre that emanates from subculture, and promotes cultural mediocrity. Nobody really argues the contrary, not even the people who promote it, or those who find it entertaining. They seem to be satisfied with the huge popularity and media support that the “Manele” are benefiting from, and obviously with the large financial returns. The impressive, albeit temporary, “Manele” vogue should be attributed primarily to the great impact of Western popular influences (such as the beat, the instruments used, the themes, and the attitude) on Romanian society as a whole. On the other hand, the commercial success, and booming of their profitable industry must have something to do with the cooperation of local record labels, radio stations, and television networks. Unfortunately, for most Romanians, the diverse array of phenomena that “Manele” have brought along has also meant intrusion on daily life, and contamination of what used to be a source of national pride: the folkloric heritage.

As our respondents revealed, most members of the public are very familiar with “Manele”, pointing out that in fact it is impossible not to be exposed to them if living in Romania. Generally, the public believes that, without essentially representing something bad, the “Manele” equate to very low quality popular music, which is also very toxic and addictive. [We must confess that we almost fell for some of the songs while listening to them repeatedly, in preparation for this study. It is probably in the human nature to grow fond of something because of being intimately familiarized with it.] In addition to stressing out the distinction between the “Manele” and other, supposedly more authentic, types of popular,

or folk music, the respondents were aware of the diversity of influences, the eclecticism, the commercial nature, and overall aspect of *kitsch* specific to the former.

As a conclusion, we believe that it would be difficult to radically dismiss the "Manele" for purely musical reasons. What this investigation seems to reveal is largely people's disgust toward the "Manele's" thematic repetitiveness and the marring of the Romanian language. As far as the infantilism of the message is concerned, one might conclude that it actually does a good job marketing some sort of a "Romanian dream".

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