



Six of the Monday Night
Seven live it up at a
Mexican evening

For the love of song

A GROUP OF SEVEN MEN
TOUR RESTAURANTS AND
TAVERNAS IN LIMASSOL TO
PERFORM SERENADES EVERY
MONDAY NIGHT

They don't do it for fame. They don't do it for money. They don't do it to impress friends or family and certainly they don't do it to attract groupies. Even so, what they do is nothing less than marvellous. Seven men, all more or less in their sixties, gather together every Monday evening at a different Limassol taverna, enjoy dinner (usually fish) and wine (usually Cellar 62) then unobtrusively begin to serenade whoever happens to be within earshot, and just for the sheer enjoyment of doing so. Two of them softly strum guitars while others may beat out a rhythm with the silverware, but the essential sound is the harmonious, well-tuned voices of men performing songs they still love after a weekly habit that has endured for the last 14 years.

Many customers in the restaurants where they sing believe, as I did on my first encounter, that the seven are part of the establishment's entertainment, although they sing so well one might wonder how the proprietor could possibly afford them.

The songs, or cantatas, they sing are from a long gone era. Before television, before the internet, before mobiles, Cypriot families would, of an evening, cluster close to the radio to hear broadcasts from the continent and learn songs in Greek, Spanish, French, Italian or English. Then, round the post-dinner table, they would add these serenades to their already estimable repertoire of traditional songs to be intoned, usually a cappella, late into the night. Alas, when one attends family gatherings nowadays it is rare to see such communal singing, dancing or even story-telling. It is often visiting foreigners or relocated natives that insist on everyone getting up off their duffs for a display of Cypriot culture. Granted, once Cypriots do get started it's difficult to stop them, but some social critics have predicted that in 10 to 20 years the island's music and dance will be found only in the diaspora communities of London, Montreal, New York and Sydney.

Until that sad time, if it does come to

pass, we can at least rely on the 'Monday Night Seven', who have been providing free journeys to the land of musical nostalgia since 1993. The first time I heard the group (reduced to six lately, as one member has been ill), I was at a table of brothers and sisters in their fifties and sixties who knew the words to all the songs that were performed over a two-and-a-half-hour period - even the Spanish ones. And they all, slightly teary-eyed and with varying degrees of sonority, joined in the singing. To an expatriate American whose lifelong entertainment has been almost exclusively passive, this was a revelation. I was, to say the least, envious. In my travels, I had heard recordings from the 1950s and 60s of the famous Trio Bel Canto and the suave, splendid crooning of the seven reminded me of that much beloved combo.

In fact, many of the Monday group's selections are from the same era, but they like to sing serenades exclusively - serenades to love, to wine, to women, to the unique beauty of Cyprus. When a listener requests a tune that is not a serenade, they can usually accommodate. I asked for a song particularly endearing to one at our table, 'You Are So Beautiful When You Cry', and the seven performed it with exceptional poignancy and verve, though they insisted it wasn't "in our style". They possess a repertory that can easily carry them through several hours of performance - with only short wine-sipping breaks to lubricate - but usually limit themselves to two or three hours a session.

"We have only two rules that we stick by," said Panicos Savvides, one of the founders of the group. "The first is the person who pays for the dinner chooses the restaurant; the second, no women at the table." The reason for the former is logical. The reason for the latter is to avoid distracting female charms. They liken their musical synods to a religious ceremony with its respectful decorum and devotion, indeed watching them perform one is reminded of members of a serious but humane religious order at choir rehearsal. They only loosen these strictures during carnival week when they dress fiesta-style and expand their song book.

The group was started in 1993 by Panicos, a former policeman and road safety officer, and Costas Mavrogenis, a painter who created floats for the carnival. They started singing duets - with



Good food, good wine and good song

Panicos on guitar - at the Limassol Nautical Club every Friday night. One Friday they were forced to switch to a Monday, whereupon other men joined them and the group took off. In addition to Panicos and Costas, the current members are: Totos Theodossiou, a businessman and executive with the Cyprus Olympic Committee; Chris Komitis, an automotive engineer and the other group guitarist; Giorgos Vlamis, an electrician and professional singer in the 1960s; Dr. George Vassiliou, a cardiologist; and Vasos Lisis, a noted headwaiter and, with one year of participation, the novice. There have been some changes in membership over the years (many have

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desired to join) but the group adheres to the magic number seven. Most of the songs are in Greek (or Cypriot dialect) but, as in the repertoire of Trio Bel Canto and George Dalaras, a few Spanish serenades find their way to the table. Guitarist Chris, in his leisure time, also indulges in Flamenco guitar.

Once you have heard the 'Monday Night Seven', you understand why they

do in fact have groupies, or followers. One coterie of about 15 women followed them from taverna to taverna for quite some time, but their most devoted fan is an English lady who has been showing up at their Missa cantatas for 14 years, and almost never misses a ceremony. "She has even learned the songs in Greek for herself, so she can sing along - at her own table, of course." Many others phone Totos every Monday morning to learn where they will be singing that night. They often receive invitations to perform at parties or ceremonies, which they will sometimes accept, but when offered payment for their talents they nobly decline.

The more-than-pleasing sound of their combined voices can serve as a sophisticated background to dinner and conversation, but, more often than not, you are compelled to set your fork down and just listen. Some are even spirited to dance to these manly but gentle voices that evoke memories of a more romantic era. Theirs is such a refined, professional sound, it seems surprising they have never made a CD.

"We've thought about it from time to time," said Totos, "and, yes, some people have asked us about making a CD, but it's not our main concern. We just love to sing these songs and to carry on this tradition that has always been an important part of Cypriot culture."

But they have inspired others. "I know of only two smaller groups who do this too. Both are trios and both were started by my brothers. But, as we said, a few years ago, you would find many, many such groups. And most big families did the same thing whenever they got together. It was a magical time then, and we try to recreate that. These are songs that will never die." ■