



SONGS WITH REFUGEES

JOURNAL AT SKARAMAGAS REFUGEE CAMP



Flight to Athens, Greece

8/1/17

I flew across the Atlantic this AM. I'm on my way to Skaramagas Refugee Camp. It's one of about 40 camps in Greece. The Greek borders are closed, so roughly 60,000 refugees are in a very long holding pattern of trying to get an appointment to ask for asylum - for a chance to start again in Europe. Or they are sent back to the dangerous, destroyed lives they gave up everything to flee. Many of these are children. I want understand our country's part in the big picture, and our personal power to help others - in tiny or big ways. Helping/understanding can be in the context of our local areas too! Thinking about my 'why' this AM. I'm as likely as anyone to get tunnel vision about working, saving, making music, trying to just enjoy and FEEL something in this life. And I'm aware that my helping (by joining my EAR teammates, and teaching music and English and whatever else we can help with) could be me helping mostly myself. But ALSO there's something extraordinary about meeting people in these situations where they are down to the core of their wits, hope, their utter need for perspective - it's where I learn what's UNDER all our love and our



constant grasping. And if I can give a little something back...hell yes!! I've been given so much in this life. It's also a punch in my gut that fears all uncomfortable things. #expressiveartsrefuge #ear #music #elsistema #refugee #giving #exist #skaramagas

8/2/17

There is one woman in Greece answering Skype calls for these 60,000 refugees. How does that happen? Refugees structure their entire lives in the camps around trying this Skype # hundreds of times to get pre-registered - put in line for an appointment to ask for asylum.

8/3/17

Athens is windy and warm, and we're cooking music and movement for refugee kids. The wonderful #betsyblakeslee leads us, the 5-person EAR team in a playful song and #bodypercussion we'll start with tomorrow at Skaramagas refugee camp #skaramagas #refugees #athens #greece #earefuge



8/4/17

We piled into our little white car this morning. Supplies included banjo, egyptian tambourines & kaxixi, cleaning stuff for the classroom floor, colored buckets and notecards, lyric sheets, sunblock, hard-boiled eggs, frozen water bottles, international drivers licenses, candy...and other things carefully packed in backpacks. We drove through oil & gas refineries and out to a port area with the giant cranes that look like mechanical horses standing over the rows of white 'iso-boxes' - each with a solar panel. We walked to the Hope-School Skaramagas Refugees Camp and were soon joined by a couple dozen little kids in our own teaching iso-box classroom. The other four EAR teammates have been doing this already for 4 days, so I'm listening & watching carefully. Quick, physical songs to focus them, a beautiful old Arabic song that I'm still learning... Everybody in the team passes the leadership around, and Judy Kranzler takes a couple of the rowdy boys out for a run on the nearby astro turf so



EAR team's Tami Halaby tries Milad's saz after our dinner.

they can come back with more focus. Tami Halaby has a magic way of soothing a distracted child, and putting him at ease. The little ones are wild and most are so affectionate. Some are withdrawn or scattered. We walk to a much bigger space, and continue with a music class that has been run by El Sistema Greece. The kids carefully learn harmonies and percussion parts. Tawfic Nabil Halaby translates to Arabic... the kids speak Dari, and Arabic... We go get falafel sandwiches at a tiny make-shift restaurant by the edge of the water. Betsy Blakeslee amazes me as she gracefully takes me with her to speak to some of the NGOs servicing the camp - Ελληνικός Ερυθρός Σταυρός - Hellenic Red Cross, Danish Refugee Council, A Drop In The Ocean - about our upcoming concert with the kids...and our medical supply donation. The last part of the day was hanging at another little cafe in the camp, and asking the owner if there was an oud player, or another traditional musician in the camp that we might meet. And 10 minutes later...yes!! A Syrian oud player and his friend came and had a long discussion with Tawfic (and us, through Tawfic). We heard a little of Hussam's agonizing story - stuck in the camp for nearly 2 years. We'll meet up with them tomorrow to make some music, and share a meal. My toes got a sunburn - ice helps!

8/5/17

The children burst into our little iso-box classroom. They are dressed in lots of color. They want to play! At odd intervals two boys may start fighting or two girls will talk over us teaching. There are also many deeply satisfying moments where we are all somehow tuned as one - singing a simple, playful song or learning something with gestures that easily cross language barriers. Afghani pop singer, Mustafa joins us - he's tall, handsome and attentive. He has several instagram and Facebook accounts - all with winsome, suave, pretty pictures of himself. He wants to learn vocal exercises from me - so tonight I'll send him some YouTube links of warmups I think are good.

Hussam and Milad came to our 'El Sistema' class, and some chaos ensued. El Sistema is an incredible orchestral training program for kids coming from places that wouldn't usually have access to





learning these instruments, discipline and music. We took over their class at Skaramagas.

They objected to the way 'El Sistema' had taught this very old song, 'Lamma Bada', which is in the 'samai' rhythm of 10/8. Hussam, who felt unfairly shut out by 'El Sistema' insisted that this was not the feel of the song. I've seen these arguments and misunderstandings go down between traditional and classical musicians before. Mostly it's about trusting that they are respected. Hussam and Milad established a 4/4 rhythm on a synth, and tried to teach the song in this rhythm...with not much success. The kids had learned the 10/8 rhythm of the song pretty deeply. They'd performed it at the Acropolis!

8/8/17



AUGUST 7TH, 2017: Skaramagas Camp, Athens, Greece. I just tonight got to hear some of the interview I did with the wonderful Omar Crook, for his Living With A Genius Show - <http://livingwithagenius.com> ...I so enjoyed talking with Omar about music, dreamers, babies, music biz, and the creative life. I love that he left in a fragment of our conversation in the beginning about the power we have at our fingertips to manipulate sound & image - most of us rarely stopping to realize how deeply unsettling this continues to become.

I'm a day late posting this cuz days are soooo full!

*** MUSICAL EXCHANGE ***



We hosted 3 musicians who are living in the refugee camp. They are each from different areas, and are proud to collaborate. They are Syrian and Kurdish...from 3 different cities. For our un-plugged exchange, Hussam plays oud and sings, Milad plays saz or bouzou (or makes my banjo sound like an oud!), and Salman plays darbuka and sings. They sing Kurdish songs, and Syrian songs. I pipe up with a western Bulgarian song, and they join in - finding the 7/8 time quirky to follow. Hussam's singing is raw and husky with emotion. Salman's singing is tender and sad. When Hussam sings lead, Salman playfully sings little responses. They are love songs, songs for God...highly ornamented, soulful and emotional. The singing demands your emotional engagement. Milad, a gifted

instrumentalist/arranger has put together a mini studio in his iso-box home at Skaramagas. Music is life force for these three men.



8/9/17

This little one stole my heart on the dance floor yesterday. It was a hot hot hot day on the concrete slab, and the shade made you cry with joy!!! We were invited by Salman to have lunch with his family in their caravan. 26 year old Salman is so bright he has learned to speak beautiful English in 8 months - mostly while he was in the more chaotic island camp, Moria Refugee Camp. He shares this small caravan with his Aunt, his teenage cousins and occasionally others. Salman was excited to make us pizza, but 2 of us can't eat bread, so he took the meal in another directions, with the help of his aunt. Salman's family made a bounty of exquisite food - vegetables, different home-made hummus, naan flatbread. spiced chicken. #skaramagas #refugees #song #voiceisatraveler



8/11/17

Young Yussef - building bridges between Arabic and English with his smile, clear, witty gestures and humor. He carefully watched and listened to us all. His journey began in Homs, Syria. I hope he gets to join his brother in Germany soon. His family hosted us for an incredible lunch in their caravan. Just beautiful food and lots of laughter. Tawfic is such a graceful translator.

8/12/17



Tawfic + young Ayham in his new yellow 'performance' scarf - looking so adorable in my sun hat!!! A rare moment of stillness for this little monkey. This was minutes before we gathered to sing our 8 songs for the kids' families and other Skaramagas camp residents. We have later pictures at the concert where Ayham has scrambled up high above everyone on the scaffolding of the building - you sense that his movement is his safety. He slowed and came in closer more and more across our 2 weeks of teaching. Tawfic, who is an engineer in the SFBay, served as The EAR team's dear Arabic-English translator, bass/tenor singer, laid-back and knowledgeable



brother to us all in the EAR team. He was a role model for many of the refugee boys. #refugees #skaramagas #athens #earefuge

8/13/17

Concert Day: A beautiful moment today during our 12noon music class in the El Sistema classroom is that many of the kids want to make sure we leave enough time for them to go back to their caravan to wash, do their hair, and change into their fancy clothes for the concert.

8/16/17



Yesterday, re: Charlottesville I felt an anger and trapped-ness that many must experience more regularly. Yelling into a pillow and walking and writing for hours was the only way I could find hope, agency, and positive will. I couldn't look at anybody for almost a day. Tonight, I want to honor this team which was 5 EAR (Expressive Arts Refuge) Americans, Salman (Kurdish) and Hussam (Syrian). (Missing Milad). We sang and played with 50+ refugee children and exchanged songs and meals with each other across our time at Skaramagas Refugee Camp. This weekend's events / fall out seem to mock a basic contract of humanity I thought most of us were - at least begrudgingly - agreeing to. But I'm proud that this team threw our whole selves into bringing love, humor and beautiful things (mostly music) to our time in Skaramagas.