

WIZA

crossing the border

The drummer clicks his drumsticks together and shouts, “One, two, three, four!” The bass and guitars surge in. The vocalist resonates his poetic lines, as the duduk and oud begin to sound. Suddenly, a Middle Eastern vibe is infused with classical music elements in time with the rhythmic dmbek and the synthesis of the keyboards. This is the international and unique sound of Viza.

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As the crowds at Viza concerts and the number of fans continue to grow, these lyrics from the song “Viktor” from their latest and fifth album, *Made in Chernobyl* come to life: “Viktor, my friend, look out! There’s a million fingers pointing at you.”

Viza’s live performances are energetic – the mob of music lovers at the concerts not only points their fingers towards their idols, they truly immerse themselves in their inimitable music.

The instruments normally associated with a rock band – guitar, drums, keys and bass – are the backbone to Viza’s music. In the forefront, however, are where the more unusual instruments come to life. “The oud was played by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and originated in the Middle East centuries ago,” said Andrew Kzirian, the oud player of the band. “My goal is to reintroduce the instrument in an interesting and innovative way.”

Though the oud is well known to Armenian culture and music, the duduk is possibly the most commonly referred to as the traditional

Armenian instrument. The ancient flute is carefully carved from the wood of an apricot tree. It became well known in America, especially in the soundtracks to films that require its plaintive and mournful drone, because of duduk musician and expert, Djivan Gasparian. His grandson, Jivan Gasparian Jr. has followed his grandfather’s footsteps. “Whenever my grandfather visited, he taught me something new, and assigned new pieces to master. Sometimes we even practiced over the phone – I in Los Angeles, and he in Yerevan. He was the reason that I fell in love with this musical instrument,” said Jivan.

Chris Daniel, the youngest member of the band, plays the instrument familiar to many who come from the Middle East – the dmbek. The rhythms he creates with the instrument provoke the audience to dance. “On stage, I’ll initiate the fun. I’ll dance and act wildly to show the audience that it is okay to have fun and dance,” he said.

An instrument that was first patented in Austria, the accordion is played by Japanese-born



Suguru Onaka. Suguru creates the classical portion of Viza’s music. He also plays the keyboard. “The style of Viza – a fusion of Middle Eastern motifs with rock – is very different. But sometimes these motives remind me of melodies my father used to sing back in Japan,” said Suguru. The face of the band is undoubtedly its singer. K’noup is not only Viza’s lead vocalist, he is also the main composer and producer of the band. As a kid, he hadn’t fully embraced his Greek roots. Yet, while he began developing as an artist, he came to the understanding that as long as he was true to himself, he would be successful. “Being me, meant being Greek,” he said. K’noup began collaborating with Serj Tankian, the former lead singer of System of a Down. Serj is the co-producer of their latest album and is the band’s manager. Along with the many roles K’noup plays for the band, he is also the main lyricist for Viza. No matter what, a rock band is never complete without a great guitarist. Without guitarists such as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jimmy Hendrix, Frank

Zappa and Jeff Beck, rock music would not be where it is today. Viza’s guitarist, Orbel Babayan has been mastering his instrument from an early age. Orbel’s talent has transformed Viza’s sound. “I like our recent transformation very much,” he said. We are incorporating a heavier rock sound and it is generally more recognized. More people will be able to relate to it.” Shant Bismejian who also plays guitar, has collaborated with K’noup and Orbel on songwriting. “The process of writing new songs usually takes place the following way: an idea comes to one of us, we record it, and after three or four hours of work, and we have a new song.” The bass guitar provides the melodic and percussive underpinning to rock music. Viza’s bassist Alex Khatcherian melds the music together with his deep chords. “The bass guitar guides and at times adds new dynamics to the band,” said Alex. The drummer is often the least recognized. Though they are positioned towards the

back of the stage, they are a crucial part of any band. Aside from hearing the beats of Viza’s drummer, Hiram Rosario, you can see his long, curly hair flying in all directions as he is consumed by the rhythm he creates. He said, “Everyone on stage has his own role in the band, being a drummer means not only keeping the beat, but also being a backbone, keeping everyone together.” The Puerto Rican-American also added, “My role in the band is also solidifying the music we play, and my personal goal is to be seen.” Aside from introducing and incorporating distinctive and international instruments, the band members are also socially active. “From the artistic perspective, the theme of “Made in Chernobyl” intends to express through our music the irony of how poorly some human disasters are handled,” said Viza’s oudist, Andrew. “Our musical style is both frantic and fast-paced. It’s a great way to bring together music and social awareness.”