

Interview

'Make war against fascists!' Gaye Su Akyol, Turkey's psychpop powerhouse

Robin Denselow

She gets called 'the most courageous artist in Turkey' and has been questioned by the police about her lyrics. The singing sensation takes us on a tour of Istanbul to explain how political turmoil feeds her work



'We should dream together' ... Gaye Su Akyol, right, in the video for *İstikrarlı Hayal Hakikattir*. Photograph: Dunganga Records

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This is the hub of pop culture in Istanbul," says Gaye Su Akyol. "This is where I was raised and where I live. This where my friends and memories are. And when politics made things difficult for musicians, this is where they ran to."

Turkey's most intriguing psych-folk-rock singer and songwriter is providing a musical history lesson as she shows me around her neighbourhood, Kadıköy, an area of narrow streets, coffee shops, bars and clubs on the Asian side of Istanbul, across the Bosphorus from the main tourist attractions. She explains how the city's music scene used to be centred over the water on the European side, in the Taksim area and the venues along İstiklal Street. "People came to meet and drink," she says. "It was a cultural centre. But the religious government was not happy about the situation."

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted the area transformed, and for a mosque to be built in Gezi Park – a space, Akyol says, "where people could come together". In 2013, those plans led to demonstrations, in which she took part, and to a violent police response that led to injuries and deaths, which led in turn to further anti-Erdoğan protests, regularly met with tear gas. It became impossible for musicians to work in Taksim. Some left the country while others moved to Kadıköy, a cosmopolitan area far more supportive of the music scene.

But this summer, the mood in Istanbul has changed. We pass an old election poster for Ekrem İmamoğlu, the new mayor, from the opposition party CHP, who in June won a rerun of the previously annulled election, this time with a massively increased majority. It was a major blow for Erdoğan that was greeted with celebration. "People went crazy," says Akyol. "This is very big. This is the start of things. Erdoğan said that if you lose Istanbul, you lose Turkey."

Tonight, Akyol is playing on home ground – in Kadıköy, at Moda Sahnesi, a large basement hall painted in black, with beer sellers stationed along the sides. Her four-piece band, led by her partner and guitarist Ali Güçlü Şimşek, are sporting dark glasses and dressed in black, priest-like robes, while Akyol comes on like an exotic butterfly, wearing boots and black shorts, with a bare midriff and transparent white wings attached to her wrists.

The image may be pop but the music is anything but, veering from dark, brooding rock balladry, sometimes dressed up with twanging surf guitar, through to Turkish folk influences and tributes to her Turkish musical heroes. There's a reference to the folk-rock singer Selda Bağcan, who was imprisoned in the 1980s, and songs by Erkin Koray, "the father of Turkish psychedelic rock", and by the late rock singer and TV host Barış Manço.



Brooding balladry ... Akyol. Photograph: Aylin Güngör

Her compositions include the opening *İstikrarlı Hayal Hakikattir* (Consistent Fantasy Is Reality), the title track of her latest album. Then there's the singalong *Develerle Yaşıyorum* (I'm Living With Camels) and the angry *Nargile*, which includes the line: "Dig your grave deeper, your body is worthless." She says: "The police once questioned me about the lyrics and I said it was general, not specific." (A girl in the crowd tells me Akyol is "the most courageous artist in Turkey right now".)

It's a musical fusion that, she says, reflects her upbringing. The daughter of the artist Muzaffer Akyol, she's a social anthropology graduate and a painter (she sometimes exhibits her work alongside that of her father) who grew up surrounded by music. "My mum was a classical singer, while my dad listened to Turkish pop and jazz, and my uncle was a fan of Anatolian psychedelia and Led Zeppelin. Then when I was 10 my brother played me Nirvana – and that's exactly what I was looking for at that age."

So how important was it to keep a strong Turkish element in her songs? The aim, she said, was to be "authentic and original. Music should reflect the pain and happiness of your culture." She regarded herself as a political artist, but used metaphors in her lyrics "because if you use slogans, that doesn't affect people. You should find your own way of thinking and using language." And was this also a way of escaping the censors? "There may be a small percentage of fear in it. But it's about finding a unique artistic way of saying things."

When asked to explain *Constant Fantasy Is Reality*, she answers: "It may sound cheesy, like new wave shit, but it's not escapism. It's going against escapism. We should dream together to make war against the evil, the fascists, the crazy guys around the world who are spreading like cancer."

Her concert was part of Vitrin, the Istanbul jazz festival showcase for contemporary Turkish music, which also included jazz-rock, folk and electronica. Festival director Harun Izer thinks the effect of the political climate on the city's musical scene has been "positive because political turmoil and argument help young people to be more creative". Akyol thinks of it rather differently. "If you put pressure on people, they'll find a way to express their feelings."

● Gaye Su Akyol plays Jazz Cafe, London on 29 November, and Earth, London, on 30 November