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# The squire in the helicopter

## On parody in Romanian popular music

Victor Alexandru Stoichiță<sup>1</sup>

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When I was poor  
I was praying to become rich  
To humiliate my enemies  
As they were humiliating me  
But the wheel of life turned  
I no longer see life from underneath  
I see life from above  
For God is on my side.

Gicuță din Apărători (my translation)<sup>2</sup>

### Music of the new times

In Romania, *manele* have been a popular genre in the past twenty years, especially amongst the younger generation.<sup>3</sup> *Manele* are performed live at events such as weddings, christenings, or village fairs, and also daily (or better said nightly) in some pubs. One may also hear *manele* on TV, and buy recorded media on many popular markets, along with fruit and vegetables.

One may perform *manele* with all kinds of instruments, but the most emblematic songs are always played with amplification and synthetic sounds. The musicians who perform *manele* are usually ethnic *Roma*. They are called *lăutari* or *maneliști*. *Lăutari* is the general name for professional musicians playing on demand.<sup>4</sup> *Maneliști* refers to a specialization in *manele*, which some *lăutari* may acquire. Broadly speaking, the *manele* tradition is deeply rooted in *Roma* professional music making. It should be stressed however that according to *manele* performers, there are far more Romanian than *Roma* clients for the genre (Rădules-

cu 2004). It seems unlikely indeed that the *Roma* minority (who represent only 2,5 % of the population according to the 2002 national survey<sup>5</sup>) could account for such a large phenomenon.

*Manele* are often criticised for their alleged immorality and low aesthetic value.<sup>6</sup> Their lyrics touch upon sensuality, quick money making, pride and violence. They often use slang words and turns of regional or popular grammar (commented as non-grammatical in the “learned” world). “Learned” people tend to think that *manele* songs voice the opinions and thoughts of the “underworld” (*lumea interlopă*). They note the revengeful tone of some songs, of which the epigraph of the present paper may be an example. Once peripheral, the underworld is said to have taken control of the whole society since 1989.

Noting the pronounced oriental style of many songs, some academics have argued that *manele* were rooted in Ottoman music (Oișteanu 2001; Beissinger 2007). According to this theory, *manele* were performed by *Roma* musicians for the boyard landlords up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The genre is said to have gone out of fashion during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surviving however in *Roma* communities. *Manele* supposedly emerged again in new political conditions after 1989. This theory emphasizes historical continuities and the role of the *Roma* minority in present day culture. But it also raises a serious methodological problem: there is no guarantee that the historical uses of the word *manea* (which besides are remarkably scarce) actually referred to musics related in any significant manner to the current phenomenon.

*Manele* share many characteristics with other popular musics in nearby countries such as Serbian *turbo-folk*, Bulgarian *calga*, and Albanian *muzika popullore* (see the works assembled in Buchanan 2007). *Manele* listeners in Romania do not usually seek recordings in these genres. But on the other hand, Romanian *lăutari* have listened intensively to these and other popular musics of the Balkans during the last twenty years. This allowed them to grasp new ways of playing, most notably the “oriental” style of singing and performing instrumental choruses. Some Romanian *manele* are precise copies of Turkish or Greek models, with only the lyrics changed (even the electronic tones of the keyboard are the same). In this respect, and whatever their older influences, *manele* are new music. After 1989, the

*lăutari* did not turn towards a domestic tradition of *manele* playing. If the latter existed, it was obviously of little interest to them. Television networks and internet have proved most important in the creation (or recreation) of this musical style.

In this paper I deal with the reception of *manele* songs by fans and casual listeners. My analysis is based on three kinds of data: observation of live events; interviews and discussions with listeners and musicians; analysis of textual and musical features of the songs. In the first section, I describe ways in which *manele* embody ideas of power. I argue that the semiotic framework in which the songs are usually commented (*manele* as messages) cannot account for the many possible ways in which their public engages with them. Shifting paradigms, I propose to see *manele* as sonic and textual “techniques of enchantment” (Gell 1988; Gell 1992). The second section of the paper focuses on the parodic and ironic aspects of the listeners' engagement with these songs. In conclusion I discuss the links between the musical phenomenon and the European tradition of violent feasts, most notably the carnival.

## Emotions of power

According to the *lăutari*, a *manea* is a song and a dance, based on one of these rhythms:



or



Depending on the context, the word *manele* may refer to this specific dance genre, or to a wider universe, comprising non-danceable tunes as well. The latter are called *bluzuri* or *rame* by the connoisseurs. In this paper, I will adopt the narrow definition of *manele*, and circumscribe the phenomenon to its epicentre: those tunes performed to either one or the other of the rhythms mentioned above. This focus corresponds not only to the actual

rhythm, but also to the most “orientalist” style of performance, and to the widest emotional array.

As a rough typology, and judging by their sole lyrics, *manele* open way to four types of emotions.

- In all its possible shades, love is a favourite: “clean” (*curat*) love for the wife, sexual lust for the “girl” or the “chick” (*fetița, gagică*), respectful and devoted attachment for the parents, promises of self-sacrifice for the children.
- Nostalgia, longing and exile are also important topics, with some songs bearing specific allusions to economic emigration and others (scarce but much discussed) to the carceral universe.
- The “enemies” (*dușmani*) and their envy form another favourite theme.
- Last but not least, boasting about victory, cleverness, and different kinds of achievement (economic, political, physical, sexual) is most common.

Hereafter, I will narrow once again the focus to the last of these four dimensions.

A feature on which most listeners and musicians agree, whether they like *manele* or not, is that the genre fosters sentiments of power, in its many hypostasis. Their most frequent argument is the number of songs which show very explicit ambition and pride. Commentators also cite the ways in which listeners “tip” the musicians during the performance, with sometimes considerable amounts of money. Music is also an important element for building the enchanted universe in which the lyrics and the tipping make sense. It is however more difficult to elucidate. It takes a specific vocabulary to access its structural features, and only few connoisseurs comment upon them. I will start by analysing the first two aspects, then propose a description of the sonic embodiments of power in *manele*.

## Who's the boss?

Consider the following lyrics, by Little Sorin the Kid (*Sorinel Puștiu*).<sup>7</sup>

*Cine-i mare barosan*

Who is the big boss

<i>Barosan de barosan</i>	The boss amongst the bosses
<i>Barosanul number one,</i>	The boss number one
<i>His pockets are full of money</i>	His pockets are full of cash
<i>Are bani, da are bani, da are bani și are femei</i>	He has cash, he has cash, he has cash and women
<i>Da am și bani, da am și bani, da să moară dușmanii mei.</i>	Yes, I have cash, I have cash, and let my enemies die !
<i>Da, da, da, sunt mare barosan</i>	Yes, yes, yes, I'm a big boss <sup>8</sup>
<i>Da da da, sunt șmecher number one</i>	Yes, yes, yes, I'm the clever <sup>9</sup> “number one”
<i>Da, da, da, sunt șmecher bogat</i>	Yes, yes, yes, I'm clever and rich
<i>Am multă putere, ca un împărat</i>	I have a lot of power, like an emperor.

Not only do the lyrics enhance economic power. The words *barosan* and *șmecher* are idiomatic slang words, which most Romanian speakers are likely to attribute to *Roma* and/or the Mafia underworld.

The lyrics are made of clear statements such as “I am the big boss” or “I am clever and rich”. The most straightforward interpretation would attribute the “I” pronoun to the singer. This is hardly possible in the case of *manele* however. They are deeply rooted in the *lăutari* tradition, and the latter are not supposed to “express themselves”. They are generally perceived as “emotion makers”, rather than actual senders of the feelings which their music arouses (Stoichita 2008). This is true of “traditional” *lăutari* in the countryside, but also of modern *maneliști* from the capital. The following is an excerpt of a conversation with a *manele* performer.

[We are talking about a *manea* with lyrics : “I'm Clever Number One / And when I hit with my fist, two of them fall” (*Sunt șmecher numărul unu / Cad doi când dau cu pumnul*).]

These are to big up the wise guys (*șmecheri*). They are usually drunk and they are pleased to hear such things about them. They really inflate like roosters. The *lăutari* are the craftiest, slyest, falsest

people. All they want is to please. Because these guys are also dangerous. There have also been unpleasant situations in which musicians have been hit by guys like these. Then you may even say that the guy is stronger than God ! Just to please him, to... “Ok, that's enough ! Bravo ! You are free now, you may go !” There are many *lăutari*, maybe most of them, and I would even say that there is no *lăutar* which has never experienced a « terror » in his carrier. Specially here, in the capital. You will have occasions to see such « terrors ». If you want, you will. He he [laughs] !

The idea of building an enchanted world for the listener (maybe a world where he would be stronger even than God) is very clear for most musicians. It is also clear that such songs are not only for tough guys. Listeners may also command them to “pretend”, or for more subtle effects, as we shall see later.

Whether the singer believes or not that he is rich and powerful does not matter when he sings the *manea*. It would actually be inappropriate for him to boast publicly about his own well being during a live performance. But in the usual paradigm of *lăutari* performance, when Little Sorin the Kid sings “I'm the boss” listeners do not even suspect that he could actually mean it for himself. The disconnection is enforced by the practice of “tipping” the musicians with significant amounts of money during the performance.

## Tips and agencies

Paying the musicians as they play is not new in Central and Eastern Europe (Noll 1991; Pettan 1996; Pettan 2002, 245). In Romania, the practice attains however an unprecedented level with the *manele*. In an event where the *lăutari* may play different genres, such as a wedding, it is while they play *manele* that listeners are most likely to interrupt them to offer money.

The amount may range from ten to several hundreds of RON (2,5 to 200 €, which is the biggest amount I witnessed). The money is called a “tip” (*baçşiş*) but sometimes also a “bribe” (*şpagă*). For maximum impact, it can be given in several steps : 50 € now, 50 € some seconds later, then another 50 €. Alternatively, the giver may have prepared a wad of smaller banknotes, and let it pour slowly on the singer's head or at his feet.

This is a clear sign of economic power. Even a simple 100 RON *bacșiș*, which is not uncommon, is a significant amount of money compared to the legal minimum wage of 600 RON a month. Some listeners are said to use *manele* in this way to gain renown in public spaces.

Felix (professional keyboard player): So there are people who really correspond to what the *manea* says. There are others who do not really correspond, but who want to pretend that they are what they are not. So if they have maybe 100 or 150 in their pocket<sup>10</sup>, and they are in a restaurant, and at the table nearby sits someone who... Let's say it is a clever guy (*șmecher*), a guy from the underworld (*interlop*), then, they may want to show up, to assert themselves, and this is how they do it. They give money to the *lăutari*: « My name is So and So » ; « From Popescu, 50 » ; « A greeting of 50 lei » ; « From Popescu again »... And so on. They want to assert their name, to make themselves a name. This is why the *șmecheri* and the underworld guys have used *manele* to such a great extent. If it was not for the *manele*, I doubt that they would have become so famous.

Victor: And why would they want to become famous ?

Felix: Power ! They want to dominate !

In October 2009, the magazine *Forbes* published a special issue presenting the 500 richest people in Romania. We peered through the booklet with some musicians and their families, trying to identify those millionaires who appear somehow in the *manele* universe: either in the lyrics, in acknowledgements on recorded media, as a sponsor... We were only able to find one such person (Gigi Becali). A logic conclusion could be that those who boast publicly with their *bacșiș* are not so rich after all. But my musician friends rejected this interpretation, with the following argument: the magazine had surveyed only the richest businessmen in the formal economy. In Romania, informal economy (be it criminal or simply unofficial) is said to be at least as important, and *manele* are usually linked with the latter. According to my friends, some rich fans would also have qualified for the top 500, but they earn their money in illegal ways, and even when “clean”, they do not declare it to avoid paying taxes.<sup>11</sup> Along with high end cars, palaces and golden chains, giving huge *bacșiș* to the musicians is their obvious way to prestige.



On the other hand, *lăutari* know well that not only rich people give *bacșiș*. Under the influence of alcohol, good music and collective emulation, Mafioso “wannabes” also follow the trend at live parties.

[Felix, continuing the discussion quoted previously:]

And then, gradually, even those who did not have the pride or cleverness disease — or they may have had it but not so much — they started to borrow these things from the clever guys (*șmecheri*). Everyone wants to be clever. Everyone. Specially those 17-18 years old kids. They started to do the same. And this is how, slowly slowly...

The giving of a *bacșiș* is always announced on the microphone by the singer. If the amount is small, it may be omitted, but at least the name of the giver is announced: “from Puiu, thank you very much!” (*din partea lui Puiu, mulțumim frumos!*). Puiu's name thus enters the universe of the song alongside with Little Sorin the Kid, adding to the possible understandings of the first pronoun in the lyrics (the “I” in “I'm the boss”).

Quite often, the listener who gives a *bacșiș* does not ask for a significant change in the music played. It is rather a way to mark his or her appreciation, to ask for a small attention (a specific verse, an instrumental chorus), or to pass a “dedication” (*dedicație*). In the latter case, the singer announces on the microphone the names of the giver and the addressee, with words such as “this one is specially from Puiu, for Konrad, let everyone know it!” (*și special de la Puiu, pentru Knorad, se știe !*). Occasionally, dedications may be given without a precise destinatary, “for everyone” (*pentru toată lumea*).

With the dedication, the person behind the “I” in the lyrics becomes even more difficult to identify. In the above example, it could be Puiu meaning to say something like “I'm the boss” to Konrad. But the lyrics may also be understood as representing the latter, either accurately (Konrad is known as a “boss”), or with parodic intent (he is not so rich, or just pretends to be, etc.). Neither Puiu nor Konrad actually utter the word “I”. The dedication simply associates both their names with the song.<sup>12</sup>

The dedications are often used by guests at live events for complex interactional effects. Through them, many things may be suggested or stated publicly, without being clearly assumed by anyone. Several dedications, from various individuals, may follow each other in

close succession during the same song. Each of them adds to the intricacy of any attempt to analyse the performance using standard communication schemes.

## Sonic power

Power is manifested in a very literal sense through the loudness which characterizes live *manele* performances. It is now most common that the *lăutari* play with loud amplification, whatever the musical style, but during a *manele* session the “gain” buttons on the mixer are generally pushed even further.

*Manele* are also performed with characteristically “thick” instrumental and voice textures. For melodic instruments, thickening may be achieved with electronic sound effects such as the “chorus” or the “octave voice”. When several melodic instruments play together, they try to synchronize in parallel thirds. This altogether fills and enlarges the spectral range of the melodic line. The practice contrasts with the usual synchronization mode of much traditional music in Romania, where musicians would rather play in unison or heterophony.

The treatment of the voice shows a similar preference for “thick” sounds. Typical *manele* singers have a rich and “full” (*plin*) texture. The most famous of them perform in company of another singer, whose role is to keep the ambiance going while the lead singer rests, and to double the latter's voice when he sings the chorus. As for the instruments, this doubling is also performed in parallel thirds.

Not only are the voice and the melodic instruments amplified and thickened. They are also multiplied. An electronic “echo” effect is applied to them, adding a train of reverberations to any of their sounds. In live performances, the combination of large echo and strong amplification enhances the disconnection between the physical space in which the party takes place, and the musical space in which the music develops.

Reverberation is one of the basic acoustic clues for guessing the depth of an environment. Playing with electronic echo and pushing the volume high annihilates the natural reverberation of the place, replacing it with the musical one. The listeners are confronted to the paradoxical situation of being immersed in an inaudible space (the walls of the room no longer

seem to react to their actual dimensions), or a sonic but invisible one (in which the sounds reverberate and echo). Thanks to the wireless microphones, the musicians may be in one place, and the speakers which actually produce the sound in another. At very high volumes, in confined spaces, even the speakers' location leaves few acoustical clues in the sound. The sonic and textual universe constructed by music thus permeates the whole place and enters through the whole body. The effect is enforced by the continuity and length of the performances (sometimes more than one hour of uninterrupted play).

The harmonic and rhythmic section relies on a synthesizer named “organ” (*orgă*). It does not play melodies.<sup>13</sup> The left hand performs the bass line, the right hand the chords, and the device is also the source of the basic drum rhythm.<sup>14</sup> The *orgă* stores several pre-programmed patterns, which may run at metronomic pulse through the whole performance. There is a large rotary knob to adjust the tempo, but it is rarely used more than once or twice every half an hour. Many melodies can be chained meanwhile, in perfect continuity to one another. The sonic construction of the *manele* performance is thus sustained by the precise and relentless patterns emanating from the *orgă*.

## Commenting power

There are moments in a party when an observer may think that the dancers are blasé, impassive, or unreceptive of what is played. Their movements for example seem narrow and quiet, compared to the roaring and dazzling virtuosity of what is played. Their faces may not show any visible emotion but rather a quiet placidity. They may actually be bored, indeed. But quite often, their comments on the performance say the contrary. In their words, good music is a violent encounter which “tames” (*răcorește*, literally “refreshes”) the listener.

When *lăutari* discuss their colleagues' abilities, they frequently use terms related to power. Good ones are “strong” (*tari*), bad ones are “weak” (*slabi*). Hearing a good performance, one may feel “torn/broke apart” (*rupt/spart*), “destroyed” (*distrus*), “terminated” (*terminat*), or “chopped like cabbage” (*făcut varză*). The term *taraf*, which was traditionally used to refer to a small group of *lăutari*, is now replaced by “troupe” (*trupă*). To ask a violinist to

perform an improvised solo, the singer may call him “to attack position” (*trece la atac*), meaning both the musical and the physical front-line of the band (the attack is implicitly directed upon the dancers). Furthermore, the singers frequently enhance the instrumental choruses with shouts, cries, and sound effects reminding of explosions or gun machines.

A good illustration of this musical warfare is the song “Bomb of all bombs” (*Bomba Bombelor*), as performed by Little Sorin the Kid (*Sorinel Puștiu*) in a live event and released on the album “A snake near your house” (*Șarpe lângă casa ta*). The reader is invited to listen to this and most other musical documents discussed in this paper, online at [www.s-victor.net/nec](http://www.s-victor.net/nec).

In the introduction, one may hear the singer address the band's violonist (nicknamed Rooster, *Cocoș*) with two rimed verses: “Come on, Rooster, start the engine / To blast away those speakers !” (*Hai Cocoș, pornești motorul / Ca să crape difuzorul !*). This engine is what the *lăutari* typically call a “trick” (*șmecherie*, see (Stoichita 2008)). Playing on two strings at once, and starting at their lower ends, the violinist shifts his fingers on the neck towards the bridge, thus performing a slow ascending glissando. Played acoustically, this would not have been very impressive. But with the amplified, compressed and reverberated sound of his violin, the effect strongly reminds the starting of a plane engine.<sup>15</sup>

At its climax, the glissando breaks into the chorus sung by Sorinel (S1) and his unidentified accompaniment voice (S2):

- (x3) S1: Bomba bombelor / S1: You're the bomb of all bombs/  
 S2: Ești bombă! [Or variant] S2: You're a bomb! [Or variant]
- S1: Tu ești bosul boșilor S1: You're the boss of all bosses
- (x3) S1: Bomba bombelor / S1: You're the bomb of all bombs/  
 S2: Ești bombă ! [Or variant] S2: You're a bomb! [Or variant]
- S2 : Iei cheful dușmanilor. S2: You keep down your enemies.

From a phonetical point of view, *bomba bombelor* is a rather juicy line.

Voice

Bom ba bom be lor Ești bom bă

Drums

Its repetition emphasizes the iconicity of the word *bomba*, with its two /b/ plosives (which become four in the syntagm *bomba bombelor*). These words are set to a pattern of alternating crotchets and quavers, which adds to the asymmetrical tension of the underlying drum rhythm. The second singer replies with variants of “You’re a bomb”, shouted without definite pitch nor precise rhythmic values. In one of his interventions, he also shouts “Hiroshima”. These sonic and textual elements are combined to evoke blasting power, and contrast with the stability of the instrumental theme which follows:

Melody

Drums

It is entirely composed of even crotchets, contained in a narrow ambitus, and symmetrically structured in two small motives which only differ by their first note. Whereas the line of *bomba bombelor* was “moulded” into the drum pattern, this metronomic instrumental theme seems to merely “float” above it. If one was to imagine iconic representations, the sung chorus would probably figure the blasting, and the subsequent tune the methodical and inescapable advance of the “boss of all bosses”. The whole idea of singing that someone is a “bomb” may be interpreted in relation to the physical shape of many “bosses” and wise guys, who tend to proudly assert their round bellies and massive necks.<sup>16</sup>

Many other *manele* relate to power through both their lyrics and their sonic features. But even when the songs concern other topics, the textures and performance styles convey an impression of both might and freedom. In this respect, power is like a kind of background on which other emotional shades may occasionally appear.

## Technologies of enchantment

Until now, I deliberately avoided a set of basic questions which are often asked (and answered) in daily conversations, newspapers and on the internet: Where do *manele* come from? What do the songs say? Whom do they address? Such questions and their frequency are interesting ethnographic data, but cannot be answered through ethnography itself. Taken to their ends, they need a sender, a meaning, a receptor and possibly a shared code. These prove surprisingly difficult to find in a live performance context. The problem may not be ethnographic but theoretical : why should we assume that *manele* are messages in the first place ?

Semiotic paradigms have been most influential in ethnomusicology during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They have proved interesting in many respects. But whatever their merit, they are limited by the fact that they are grounded in small scale interactions. These typically involve individuals (performer, listener, maybe composer...), and are supposed to hold by generalization for larger scale interactions. But in dealing with networks of agencies, such as those in which professional musicians are typically enmeshed, semiotic paradigms may lead to needless complications and/or unlikely hypothesis. Basic concepts of semiotic thought (sender/creator and receiver/interpreter) melt down in only a few minutes during a live *manele* event. This is why, instead of treating *manele* as means to communicate, I propose to view them as “technologies of enchantment” (Gell 1988; Gell 1992; Gell 1996).

While some techniques seek to modify the outside world, techniques of enchantment aim the ways in which the world is perceived. The first ones typically use physical tools. The second ones rely on a set of artefacts which may also be considered as “tools”, but in a more psychological sense. Gell's examples comprise many kinds of “magical” and/or “art” objects. I take musical artefacts to be part of them, even though they are instantiated only during ephemeral performances.

Saying that music is a technique of enchantment refers to the fact that musical experience is populated with agencies which cannot be reduced to those of the humans surrounding it (Stoichita 2010). For instance the sentiment of power traced above, does not necessarily reflect inner states of mind of the musicians. Listeners on the other hand describe it as com-

ing from the outside, and quite violently so. On both sides, music is experienced as having an agency of its own. Apart from a “modern constitution” (Latour 2005) which restricts *a priori* social agency to human beings, little prevents this basic intuition from entering the analytical realm. A technology of enchantment goes past this limit. I refer to musical experience as a form of enchantment, because it infringes the “constitutional” monopoly of humans on social agency.

Dealing with alternative notions of space and time, music in general is something of an immersion technique. *Manele* live performances enforce this characteristic through loud amplification and large reverberation. In their enchanted worlds, sound and text relate furthermore to create “social others”, distinct from both musicians and listeners. The latter can engage in different ways with the musical artefacts.

There is no need to suppose that someone is “represented” by the music. The “I” in the lyrics for example needs not be traced to any definite “sender”. Anyone can relate to it by letting the music flow in the body and dancing to the tune. What the *bacșiș* gives pay for is first and foremost a right to switch sides. By giving money, orders, dedications, they associate their own agencies to the pleasure and emotions emanating from the sound realm.

No price is fixed, and it is not quite a trade. Tipping the musicians is rather a way to meet musical power with financial ability. This association is targeted at the outside world, and may be interpreted as a kind of self-advertising (as explained by Felix previously). But the connoisseurs (Felix included) also say that the only “right moment” to give a *bacșiș* is an outburst of one's inner enthusiasm (*chef*). In this respect, *bacșiș* giving is not necessarily a way to “say” something. It is rather a matter of channelling agencies in the sound realm. Powerful people meet powerful music in an enchanted world of might.

The encounter may be lived in different ways. Whereas most *manele* embody power, they also put forward strong hooks for parodic or ironic interpretations. Discussions with the listeners demonstrate indeed flexible receptions, to which I turn now.

## Parody and irony

For the fun (*la mișto*)

Below is an excerpt of an interview with Ileana and Magdalena, two students at a faculty in Bucharest. They both devote much time to their studies, but they like to have some fun on Saturday nights. They listen to many kinds of music, amongst which *manele*.

Ileana : I like the ironical ones (*la mișto*), those with lyrics... Not so sentimental [laughs]. For example, there is a tune, well, it's called "Come for a ride, girl" (*Hai gatico la plimbare*). It is sung by Florin Fish (*Florin Pește*) I think. It's very funny. If you listen to it, you die of laughter.

Here are the first lyrics of the *manea*, which is sung by Florin Fish featuring Claudia and the band Play Aj (Mr Juve and Susanu):

**Florin Fish:**

<i>Hai gatico la plimbare</i>	Come for a ride, girl
<i>Nu te mai da așa mare</i>	Stop being so proud
<i>Îți dau bani, îți dau orice</i>	I'll give you money, I'll give you all you want
<i>Ca să facem dragoste</i>	To make love with you

**Claudia:**

<i>N-am încredere în tine</i>	I don't trust you
<i>Că nu te cunosc prea bine</i>	Because I don't really know you
<i>Dar aș face dragoste cu tine</i>	But I'd make love to you
<i>Șu apoi să văd dacă te ține</i>	And then I'll see if you're still up for it.

Young women laughing at these lyrics probably do not take them literally. Ileana says that she understands them *la mișto*, a familiar expression meaning something like "funny", "ironical" or "parodic". This does not mean that the *manea* is only good for laughing at it. Ileana really likes the song, and she and her friends dance to it at parties.



The video-clip of “Come for a ride, girl” allows indeed several understandings (see excerpt on [www.svictor.net/nec/](http://www.svictor.net/nec/)). For its most, it shows Florin Fish, with a nice haircut, driving a beautiful open-top Mercedes. One may also see him offering money to a giggling young woman (Claudia), in something like a modern living room. Other images show Mr Juve or Susanu on the rear seat of a car with another woman. In a “rap” flow of lyrics, they explain straightforwardly to the listener how he will make love to her once she accepts his money.

Along with these images, the video-clip also features some parodic sequences. An old and visibly defective car is being pulled with great difficulty by a donkey, through a muddy village back street. A plate number hangs on one of the animal's flanks. The driver is Mr Juve. He is nervous and seems to curse the donkey for not moving faster. Other images in the same setting show two musicians emerging from the roof of the same car (this time at rest). Both look like peasants on a typical working day. One plays an old guitar and the other an old accordion. Interestingly, these parodic images are strictly limited to the instrumental introduction and chorus. They feature the only apparitions of instrumental performers, who on the other hand are obviously not the source of the electronic sounds heard at that moment.

Broadly considered, the video-clip confirms the possibility of a parodic understanding of the song. On the other hand, most of it is spent in high end cars or with lightly dressed women, which is just the usual iconography of *manele*. Ileana did not mention the video-clip during our discussion. She maybe had not even seen it. The possibility of taking this song ironically is self-understood anyway. As Ileana's remark implies, there is a whole class of *manele* which can be appreciated *la mișto*.

[Same discussion, continued]

I : And I also like “I'm *barosan*”, from Little Sorin the Kid (*Sorinel Puștiu*). Do you know it ?

V : No, I don't

I : Well, it's funny too. It's got funny lyrics.

This is the first song discussed in this paper. Here again, Ileana does not simply find the song funny, but actually likes it and dances with her friends to it. According to her, it also has a nice melodic line.

## Who thinks it's funny?

The “funny” aspects of *manele* songs appeared as an obvious feature in many discussions. But quite often too, the listeners I talked to imagined the existence of other listeners, who supposedly appreciated *manele* in a straightforward non-comical manner. On the Romanian “educated” side, these would be either “the Gypsies” (*Țigarii*), “the clever guys” (*șmecherii*), and/or the uneducated dwellers of the suburbs (*mahalaua*).

However, talking with *Roma*, with suburbs dwellers and even with “clever guys” from the underworld did not bring any closer a “core” of humourless listeners. Quite the contrary: some of my *Roma* interlocutors voiced the opinion that songs like “Come for a ride, girl” were made specifically for Romanians. They were less sure about “I’m the big boss”, or “The bomb of all bombs”, but they described these as being for the “smart” or “clever” guys (*de șmecheri*), meaning, once again, someone else. Of course, this did not prevent them from enjoying the songs.

Interestingly, the “cleverness” (*șmecherie*) they were alluding to is closely linked to irony. For example, doing things or speaking *la mișto* (the word for irony used by Ileana previously) is a typically *șmecher* thing to do. Saying that someone is “clever” (*șmecher*) may qualify his whole being or just a transitory state. Thus a song “for the clever guys” may be for some definite people, but also for anyone in those moments when one may feel “clever” and powerful.

Many people who enjoy themselves with a musical “I’m the boss”, would not assume this utterance in straightforward linguistic conversations. It is arguably easier to order it to the *lăutari*, or to listen to it loudly on a car-radio, than to simply say it (and mean it). In the musical world, the utterance does not necessarily “represent” those who enjoy the music. All clues considered, whether “they” who take *manele* without any distance or humour really exist remains open to doubt. Most listeners seem to use irony and self-derision as “bridges” to enter and exit the enchanted world of power. In the latter, their own experience of might may turn majestic, but also — and nonetheless — parodic.

## Accounts of irony and parody

Literary critiques define parody as a form of intertextuality. It is one of the multiple ways in which a text can relate to another. There are divergences regarding the precision to apply in its definition. Some authors favour a narrow approach, where parody is to be distinguished from figures such as pastiche, forgery, satire or travesty (Genette 1982, Rose 1993). Others prefer to see it as a broad category of practices, arching over these distinctions. What is most important then is to identify a common set of effects. This is the approach favoured by (Dentith 2000), whose definition I adopt here:

“Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice. (...)

[“Polemical” refers to the] contentious or 'attacking' mode in which the parody can be written, though it is 'relatively' polemical because the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody. [p. 9]"

Dentith is mainly concerned with written text, but his definition is rooted in figures of speech. Thus a typical example of parody would be :

Speaker 1 : *'I don't like this cold weather.'*

Speaker 2 (in exaggeratedly feeble and whining tones) : *'I don't like this cold weather.'*

The basic movement is to echo something in a context where it gains a different interpretation. Here, the effect relies on the same words, framed in a different intonation. Parody may be applied to virtually anything: isolated utterances, texts, styles (like Cervante's *Don Quichotte* echoing chivalry writings), but also all kinds of cultural habits as illustrated for example in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (see the tea party or the Queen's croquet).

The account of parody by Dentith (2000) is similar to the account of irony by (Sperber and Wilson 1981). The authors refute the semantic and pragmatic accounts of the phenomenon, which hold that the speaker means to convey the opposite meaning of what he/she literally says. In these classic analysis, uttering for example “what lovely weather” when caught in a downpour would be a way of meaning “what awful weather”.

According to Sperber and Wilson the speaker rather expresses an attitude towards the utterance itself. Under this light, uttering “what lovely weather” merely echoes the proposition, in a context (the downpour) where it appears ludicrously inappropriate. The theory can account for a wide range of utterances. It can explain for example how a question such as “did you remember to water the flowers?” may convey equally well a sense of irony in the same weather circumstances, although it does not have an “opposite” meaning.

According to Sperber and Wilson, two steps are necessary to arise an ironical effect: first, the utterance must be seen as a case of echoic mention (rather than used for its actual reference); then, the speaker's attitude to it must be interpreted. Both steps rely on general skills. There is no need to posit an ability to recognise irony as such, nor a deliberate intention of being ironical. This departs from classical accounts of irony, in which an utterance either is ironical or it is not.

“The picture we are suggesting is different: Although an utterance either is or is not a mention, a mention may be more or less ironical, with many intermediary and complex shades between stereotypical cases of irony and other kinds of echoic mention.”

(Sperber and Wilson 1981)

As nearby effects, Sperber and Wilson cite parody. Indeed, considering a large and speech-based definition such as the one proposed by Dentith, the main difference is one of size. Parody usually applies to bigger cultural forms, and irony to simple utterances. Another difference is that irony's intertextuality is not conspicuous (it takes Sperber and Wilson to demonstrate it), whereas it is obvious in most parodies. Apart from these differences, the mechanisms are the same. In *manele*, comic features cover a seamless range between precisely located contrasts, akin to irony, and broader features, which infuse the whole universe of the song with parodic potential. The next section illustrates some ways of building these parodic/ironic echoes.

### The squire in the helicopter

The following stanza is a condensed example, sung by Florin Salami (*Florin Salam*):

*Tatăl meu este boier*

My father is a boyar [≈ squire]

<i>Și o să-mi ia elicopter</i>	And he'll buy me a helicopter
<i>Și o să-mi ia elicopter</i>	And he'll buy me a helicopter
<i>Să-l plimb pe Salam cu el</i>	To give a ride on it to Salam

The helicopter is a modern western device, and the boyar a land-owner of the Ottoman times. One may bet that nowhere else in Romanian poetry, the two words were set to rhyme. They belong to completely different worlds, not only chronologically, but also geographically. Mixing references along these lines is a favourite practice in *manele* as in many popular musics of the Balkans (Buchanan 2007; Kurkela 2007; Rasmussen 2007; Sugarman 2007).

The last verse anchors the opposition in the actual performance context. It refers to Florin Salam, who is currently singing it, but who takes maximum distance from the “I” of the song, by using his own surname.

### Cindarella in the pub

A parodic/ironic effect may also be achieved by mixing the characters of the lyrics with the global character of the song. One day, I was asking Felix (previously cited keyboard player) when he had started to perform *manele*. He recalled the tapes of Azur de la Brăila, Odeon, and other similar bands, which were circulating before 1989 more or less under-the-counter. Their main characteristic was the use of amplification, synthesizers, and electric guitars for Romanian popular music. This was a rare sound at that time. The lyrics were not concerned with state politics but they could allude to political taboos such as theft.<sup>17</sup> According to Felix, many of them were *șmecheroase* anyway (with *șmecherie*, meaning here either cleverness or irony). This was enough to ban them from official production and distribution networks.

Felix was then in his twenties, lived in his parents village in the moldavian region, and was already performing intensively as a *lăutar*. For him and his friends, this was something new

and fascinating. He recalled specifically the effect produced by *Cindarella*, as performed by Odeon and Costel Geambașu:

“And when we heard that, we were fascinated. You can imagine. They had this song, Cindarella: “Oh, how much I loved you, Cindarella”... This was completely new for us, something extraordinary. We knew Cindarella from the fairy tales [pointing to his right] but now, she was appearing in a song like that [pointing to his left]...”

In the sonic and referential universe of the “clever guys”, Cindarella's behaviour becomes clearly parodic:

*Cu ce foc te-am mai iubit* / Oh, how much I loved you, Cindarella  
*Cenușareaso*

*Te-am iubit dar m-ai mințit* / I loved you but you lied to me / Cindarella  
*Cenușareaso*

(...)

*Te cunoști după sandale* / One picks you out by your sandals / Cindarella  
*Cenușareaso*

*Că ești fată de locale* / *Cenușăreaso* You are a girl from the pubs / Cindarella

The gesture of Felix pointing to his right and left illustrates his perception of two heterogeneous universes clashing in the song.

### If you get on my nerves

The reverse effect would be to take the familiar into the fairy tale. The following excerpt sung by Cristi Nut (*Cristi Nucă*) in a wedding in Iași may be an example.

*Nu te lăuda că ești bogat* Don't come boasting that you're rich  
*Știu că n-ai o chiflă să bagi în stomac* I know you ain't got a bun in your belly  
*Stai mai bine-n banca ta* Better keep quiet  
*Că ești vai de steaua ta* 'Cause you're just pathetic

[chorus :]

*Și dacă mă enervezi* And if you get on my nerves

<i>Mă faci ca să-ți dovedesc</i>	I'll have to prove you
<i>Că port la mine bani cash</i>	That I hold enough cash
<i>Cât un Mercedes</i>	To buy a Mercedes
<i>Tu știi că sunt special</i>	You know I'm special
<i>Tu știi că sunt number one</i>	You know I'm "number one"
<i>Dar nu sunt lăudăros</i>	But I'm not boastful
<i>Că nu-i frumos</i>	'Cause that ain't nice

The first mention of the word parody is to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where it refers to a “narrative poem, of moderate length, in the metre and vocabulary of epic poems, but treating a light, satirical, or mock-heroic subject” (Dentith 2000, 10). A known example is *Batrachomyomachia*, the battle of frogs and mice, narrated in homeric style (Rose 1993, 12-13). The words of the *manea* above could have been exchanged during an argument at the corner of the street. Their trivial origin is emphasized by the fact that they repeatedly break the octosyllabic meter. But they rhyme nicely, and Cristi Nut sings them to a richly ornamented tune, which fits perfectly the harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. In the enchanted world of *manele*, the argument becomes outrageously boasting and arrogant. A wink of self-derision comes in the last line which states, in a somewhat childish style, “But I'm not boastful / 'Cause that ain't nice”.

The performance took place in a wedding. It was orderered by Austrian, Suraj and The Hammer (*Ciocan*). They passed a 50 € dedication, for “Those who think that they have money but in fact they don't” (*pentru oamenii care cred că au bani dar de fapt nu au*). This may have targeted someone in particular. But whatever their intentions, asking for a corner of the street argument in a wedding, where people usually try to appear as “civilised” as possible (well dressed, well behaved, etc.) is a discrepant behaviour, which opens wide the possibility of an ironic understanding. Towards the middle of the song, Austrian gives another 50 € dedication “For all the rich guys” (*pentru toți bogații*). On the recording, one may hear the singer repressing his laughter as he repeats the announcement (excerpt on [www.svictor.net/nec/](http://www.svictor.net/nec/)).

## His love, his kidney

Listeners do certainly use the dedications to create comic effects. Here is another example, heard during a party at the club *Million Dollars*. Vali de la Giurgiu was singing close to a group of dancers. One of them was giving dedications “for Alina, his love”. At one point he gave the following one, as repeated on the microphone by the singer :

“For Alina... His love... His heart... His eyes... His liver... His spleen... His kidney...”

The dots represent pauses during which the giver told the singer what to repeat, sneaking a banknote in his hand at each step. The latter's tone of voice was rising gradually. At one point, he nearly burst into laughter, as did some other dancers. Of course, “heart” and “eyes” are common replacements for “love”, but the viscera set in line with them were turning the whole dedication into a parody.

## An Imperial wedding (not a Gypsy one)

At a wedding in Oltenița, Gicuță din Aparători was asked to sing a chorus to the following lyrics:

<i>Asta e nuntă împărătească</i>	This is an Imperial wedding
<i>Nu e nuntă țigănească...</i>	Not a Gypsy one

Judging by way they were dressed and spoke *romanes*, the participants were mostly *Roma*, of a proudly asserted “traditional” group. Singing “this is not a Gypsy wedding” in this context created an effect similar to the typical example of “what a lovely weather” uttered in a downpour (commented by Sperber and Wilson, see above). It could be understood as echoing an opposition, which many ethnic Romanians would indeed take for granted, between “Imperial” things and “Gypsy” ones.

There is another variant of this chorus, which is more common, but no less ironical: “this is an Imperial wedding, because it's a Gypsy one” (*Asta-i nuntă-mpărătească / că e nuntă țigănească*). I never heard either variant sung elsewhere than at *Roma* weddings, where the ironic potential could arise from the tension between the song and its performance context.



These examples illustrate ways in which *manele* songs reflect heterogenous and seemingly incompatible references in a unified musical universe. The play may be in the lyrics alone, between the lyrics and the music, or between the whole song and the performance context. The contrasted elements act upon each other as fun-house mirrors. Each of them is reflected in a distorted manner and re-appraised in the context of the others.

It should be stressed that the interpretations outlined above do not imply that the song is diverted from an “original intent”. As a technique of enchantment, its mere “intent” is to enchant the listener. Provided the song is listened to, remembered, paid for and maybe danced to, its goal (if one is to identify such a thing) is fulfilled. *Manele* are party music, and the *lăutari* do little to enforce serious understandings. After all, laughing *at* a manea is also laughing *with* it, which is enough to make it successful.

The opening to grotesque is doubly relevant in the context of popular Romanian feasts. At one level, it accompanies ritual moments in an individual's personal life. At another, *manele* songs play a particular role in the deep changes undergone by Romanian popular culture since the 1989 revolution.

## **Echoes of the carnival**

An old European *topos* associates merry making, violence and revolution. Bercé (1976) has shown how the cosmic and climatic cycle was linked to the annual upheaval of political institutions in Early Modern France. Peasant feasts (of which the carnival is emblematic) were only one step apart from peasant revolts until the Revolution. This model has influenced the reception of the Revolution itself by some of its contemporaries, especially in the light of the imminent turn of the century (Stoichita and Coderch 1999). Emblematic of the “post-revolution” times, *manele* remind this tradition in several ways.

They feature “kings”, “princesses”, “emperors”, and “squires” (*regi, prințese, împărați, boieri, jupâni*), but in contexts which are often parodic. Hearing a dedication to “the princess of the suburb” (*prințesa cartierului*) is a casual example. References to the “squires” (*boieri, jupâni*) need even not be contextualised in the music to be perceived as ironic: their

time is gone for centuries, and calling someone such names is also sending him way back in the past.

A second trait of carnivalesque is the parodic inversion which grounds the power of many *lăutari*. One of the most famous *manele* singers (*Adi Minune*, i. e. “Adi Wonder”) is also mocked occasionally for being a dwarf. Two other famous performers are children prodigies: Babi Wonder (*Babi Minune*) and Ionuț Earring (*Ionuț Cercel*). Both are shown behaving like grown ups in their video-clips. The father of Ionuț Earring is Petrică Earring, also famous in the genre. His name reminds of Petru Earring (*Petru Cercel*) famous in his own respect for having ruled Vallachia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Many interprets have nicknames alluding to either very “high” or very “low” references: Florin Fish (*Florin Pește*), Florin Salami (*Florin Salam*), Vasiliică Silt (*Vasilică Nămol*), Sandu Soup (*Sandu Ciorbă*), Little Sorin The Golden Kid (Sorinel Copilul de Aur), and Ruxandra the Princess of Ardeal (*Ruxandra Prințesa Ardealului*). The case of Florin Salami is most interesting: his civil name is Florin Stoian, he was known as Florin the Enchanter (*Florin Fermecătorul*) until 2002, when he simply switched to the extreme opposite<sup>18</sup>.

I have argued elsewhere that from Romanian perspective, leaving the collective feast in the hands of *Roma* musicians was already a kind of upheaval of the usual hierarchy (**Stoichita 2008, 84**). *Manele* carry this reversal one step further. They embody power to an extent unknown in other genres played by the *lăutari*. At the same time, their performers assume identities one step nearer from the carnival kings. In daily conversations, talking about *manele* songs constantly underlines this parodic effect. For example, in a discussion quoted above : “Do you know 'I'm the boss', by Little Sorin the Kid?”

Finally, abundant food (especially roasted meat) characterizes ritual feasts, such as weddings and christenings, but also *manele* clubs, where one can order large trays of popular food (sausages, ribs, potatoes, garlic seasoning) at all times during the night. Alcohol is of course no less abundant. Money seems to flow freely in the *bacșiș* offerings. Sexual lust is overtly expressed, and the dance may be unusually permissive. One of the most famous *manele* clubs (Million Dollars) also features a brothel on the first floor.

Playing on power and parody, *manele* songs fit nicely these ambiances of lust, abundance and suspension of daily constraints. Crude popular language, ludicrous imagination, and orgiastic power characterise their musical universes. They instantiate many traits of “grotesque realism”, as found by (Bakhtine 1990, 46) in Rabelaisian writing. They make deliberate use of popular and/or obscene vocabulary, treat trivial topics with elaborate detail, emphasize them in hyperbolic distortions, and project aberrant fantasies on real people, things or events. Their ironic/parodic potential is taken for granted by many listeners, and often clearly marked in the songs and/or their performance context.

The fact that the occasions to celebrate are typically associated to liminal events (weddings, christenings, birthdays, obtaining of school degrees or diving licenses, etc.) is most important here. Good music is supposed to provide a violent experience. It breaks down the listeners and projects them in a universe where many paradoxical experiences become possible. Mixing pride and self-derision is a typical one. Such ambiguous feelings, which can hardly be experienced in daily life, are a typical marker of ritual events (Houseman 2006).

At another level, upheaval of “normality” also characterizes a popular perception of Romanian politics in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution. Daily conversations and mass media often leave the impression that important aspects of the world are reversed since then: “clever guys” prosper, while honest people work hard and remain poor; cultural minorities have specific rights which the majority has not; “Gypsies” have become powerful, and live in palaces; the older generations struggle in this new world, while the younger ones taunt them; the climate itself has become chaotic, with many floods, droughts and extreme frosts. The writings of journalists both reflect and convey a powerful sense of irony. A study on this matter was published in the present Yearbook for 1997-1998 (Ghiță 2000), and the author's data still very much resembles the style of many contemporary media ten years later.

If it was just for the renewal of language and society, through the “parodic destruction of the ideological bonds, and of the outdated links between the things and the phenomena” (Bakhtine 1990, 458, my translation), there would be nothing to worry about. But many Romanian intellectuals fear that the *manele* world may become a model of behaviour. Their anxiety is possibly underlaid by the fact that there seems to be no “return to normality” in

sight after the carnival. Better said, the “normality” itself turns out to be problematic, since *manele* are rooted precisely in the long awaited free market and cultural democracy, which the 1989 turn provided at last. Other post-socialist countries have seen the rise of similar cultural movements, which also function as “lightning rods” for many debates around continuing class and regional tensions (Sugarman 2007).

Indeed, *manele* may be seen as emphasizing the chaos, if only for the way they mix heterogeneous echoes of the world. On the other hand, they do not seek to reflect the latter, neither to “say” something about it. In contrast with Western “dissenting” art forms, such as hip hop, *manele* can hardly be described as a protest. They carry no critique of social or political entities (nothing like “the State”, “the Police” or “the System”). Some songs do refer to “enemies” (*dușmani*), but these are always individuals. As social statements, *manele* are unquestioningly victorious. It is not a matter of how many people like them but rather of content.

I have argued in the introduction that it was difficult to understand this cultural movement as the “voice” of groups unheard before. Its link with political change goes beyond the new expression possibilities afforded by the 1989 revolution. *Manele* dissolve and re-imagine the world, in ways which remind the old European tradition of violent feasts. In live performances especially, where they are used as immersion techniques, they allow alternative agencies to be experienced, both between and “within” the listeners. Under this light, the song in our epigraph does not necessarily reflect a supposed revenge of the oppressed. In the end, nobody knows who the “emperors” (*împărați*) are, were or will be. The “wheel of life” (*roata vieții*), is there anyway, turning the world upside down.

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- 1 I am particularly indebted to Speranța Rădulescu (Peasant Museum, Bucharest), and to the “manele team” gathered by her (most notably Anca Giurchescu, Florin Iordan, Costin Moisil and Mirela Radu), for many enlightening discussions during my research in Bucharest. The team currently prepares a comprehensive and much awaited book on the *manele* phenomenon in Romania.
- 2 *Atunci când eram sărac / Mă rugam s-ajung bogat / Să umilesc dușmanii mei / Așa cum făceau și ei / Dar roata vieții s-a întors / Nu mai văd lumea de jos / Văd lumea de la-nălțime / C-a ținut Dumnezeu cu mine.* (CD *Singur pe lume*, Autentic Music).
- 3 Little statistical data has been published on the subject yet. The team of researchers led by Speranța Rădulescu found 27% listeners amongst the 15-34 years old for 2008 (personal communication and conference at the Peasant Museum, April 2010). According to a survey in 2005, *manele* the favourite music of 32% of the 11-14 years old and of 32,8 % of the 15-18 years old (see documents Cap1 and Cap2 on <http://www.cna.ro/Cercetare-privind-analiza.html>, consulted 10-07-2010). The core audience I could witness at live parties ranges between 18 and 40 years old.
- 4 For general descriptions of the *lăutari* in Romanian society, see Beissinger (2001), Rădulescu (1988; 2002), Stoichita (2008, 63-87).
- 5 See <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/vol4/cuvvol4.pdf> accessed 10/07/2010.
- 6 For an analysis of this reception, see (Voiculescu 2005; Rădulescu 2010).
- 7 All the examples discussed in this paper can be accessed online: [www.svictor.net/nec/](http://www.svictor.net/nec/)
- 8 *Barosan* is a slang word derived from *Roma: baro* (big) + *san* (you are). It may refer to physical dimensions and/or socio-economic power.
- 9 *Șmecher* is another slang word meaning “sly”, “cunning”, “crafty” or “elegant”. According to *Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române* it derives from the german *schmacker* : “who has refined tastes” ([www.dexonline.ro](http://www.dexonline.ro) accessed 10/07/2010).
- 10 In our conversation, Felix was counting in “old” Lei, as they were used before the 2005 currency reform. The numbers he gave had four zeros more than the ones I transcribed. The old system is still widely used, and during the musical performances, tips are usually announced in “millions“ and “hundreds of thousands”.
- 11 Some added another argument : the 500 richest people according to *Forbes* may also like *manele*, but they are more discreet about it.
- 12 As a way of returning to the lyrics after a dedication, the singer may announce: “listen to what he/she/it says!” (*i-auzi ce spune!*), a remarkably ambiguous expression, which could refer to either the giver, the addressee, or the song itself. The singer withdraws explicitly from the potential senders, but leaves all other interpretations open.
- 13 Smaller synthesizers are sometimes used for melody. They are played by different musicians and are called *chibord* (“keyboard”).
- 14 A *manele* band often features a pair of *bongos*, a *darbuka* or a *rototom* set, but the role of this drums is merely to enhance through ornaments the percussion pattern emanating from the synthesizer.
- 15 This effect became a favourite. I witnessed several live performances where listeners ordered the song specifically asking the musicians to include that trick. Their wording could be for example to play it “complete, with the engine” (*cu motor cu tot*).
- 16 In the manele universe, fatness can be praised explicitly, like in the song “I’m fat and beautiful” (*Sunt gras și frumos*) by Florin Salami (*Florin Salam*).
- 17 An example is “Wallet, you wallet” (*Portofele portofel*), by Dan Ciotoi & Generic. In the lyrics, the narrator recalls how one day he was starving, reached out to grab a wallet, and ended up in prison. The whole song is constructed as an address to the wallet. This kind of lyrics could not be sung or recorded legally under the communist regime.
- 18 Some connoisseurs hold that the name Salam refers to the typical salutation used throughout the Turkish and Arabic world. Most Romanians are however unaware of this possible reference, and use salam in daily talks to refer to the salami sausage.