

Sept. 8, 2008

Stuart A. Brotman  
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National Endowment for the Arts  
Re: National Heritage Fellowship  
Nomination Committee

I am writing to nominate John Bilezikjian for a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. I am a long-time friend of John and his family, and am concerned that, without much-needed financial support, his poor health is threatening to severely limit his ability to continue a life of significant service and devotion to Armenian traditional music and the traditional music landscape in general.

My name is Stuart Brotman, and I am a klezmer musician from a line of Eastern European cantors and musicians. I have been a musician for 54 years, and have been involved for over 30 years in the resurgence of functional klezmer music in the American Jewish community and its development and emergence as a presence on the World Music stage. As such, I have had enlightening opportunities to be involved in exchanges with talented and thoughtful educators and theoreticians involved in analysis of issues of continuity and innovation in traditional musical culture. I hope this perspective will add to the picture I present of John, whom I deeply respect as a musical mentor and colleague.

John and I first met in our school days, when John was in high school and I was in college at UCLA, where I preceded him by a few years in the newly-emerging field of Ethnomusicology.

John was already a respected folk musician in the Los Angeles Armenian community, and I was active as a bass player specializing in accompaniment of ethnic music. We began performing for weddings and other social events in the Armenian community, and were subsequently brought together in a variety of musical settings, accompanying folk dance classes and performances, and Middle Eastern and Eastern European traditional singers and musicians at public and private events.

John taught me a wide range of Armenian musical traditions, and that education has been of lasting value to me as a free-lance musician. Many other Southern Californian musicians had their first opportunities to study and perform Armenian, Georgian, Greek, Egyptian, and Turkish musics under John's tutelage, including pianists, guitarists, and drummers who have become more versatile and valuable musicians because of this early experience.

John has also maintained an ongoing oud teaching schedule, and musicians who have studied with him in the last half-century have in their own rights become respected names in Armenian traditional music.

John's family has a long musical heritage, and he is heir to valuable Turkish-Armenian musical manuscripts of the Ottoman Period. I had the honor of visiting blind master teacher and oud virtuoso Oudi Hrant, a distant relative of John's, in Istanbul in 1970, to deliver a tape recorded message from John and the family, and to bring John a message of mutual affection and respect in return.

John's father, an Armenian violinist, insisted that his musical training emphasize not only technical excellence on oud and violin, but also a high level of Western Classical music literacy. This training enabled John to become a valuable asset in the film, television, and pop music recording industries, adding an authoritative voice to scores, and educating arrangers and composers in the use of

ethnic instruments. I believe him to have been influential in maintaining high standards for the use of ethnic instruments in the recording industry.

John has also been an active supporter of the most conscientious and committed elements of the traditional Middle-Eastern dance teaching community, always willing to provide affordable high quality live music for "belly-dance" classes and performances, thus helping promote high standards and ensure continuity of the need for traditional musicians. This is notable in a field where recorded music and superficial aesthetics are common.

In summation, I enthusiastically recommend that John Bilezikjian be awarded monetary support to continue his performing, teaching, documentation and research work, and to help him to develop new creative outlets insofar as his failing health allows.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Sincerely,

  
Stuart A. Brotman  
Berkeley, California