

## **Viral Sexualities, Viral Songs:**

### **Queer Musical Interventions in the AIDS Crisis in Turkey**

Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay

Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Performance and Politics

Department of Cultural and Environmental Heritage

University of Milan, Italy

**Abstract:** The AIDS crisis was a global phenomenon, but the ways individuals responded to the crisis reflected local histories and sociopolitical dynamics. This was particularly true for musical productions. Turkey's first high-profile HIV patient Murtaza Elgin's albums demonstrate how queer cultural producers and their allies used stigmatized popular music genres to intervene in the AIDS crisis. The albums show how such collaborative projects become a site for artists diagnosed with HIV to resist criminalization and abjection, build artistic, social, and economic solidarity, mobilize affect for sociopolitical change, and develop a broader critique of homophobia and transphobia.

**Keywords:** HIV, AIDS, music, queer, Turkey

Following a futuristic radio noise effect, a soft-spoken male voice utters a warm welcome and makes a sanguine promise: ‘Dear listeners, greetings from the show *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri* [Audience Requests from within the Night]. Your host, I, Murtaza Elgin and our orchestra Gecenin İçinden [From within the Night], we will have the best hours and all joys together.’<sup>i</sup> Elgin, also known as Murti, was a queer<sup>ii</sup> singer. He neither had his own call-in radio show, however, nor did an orchestra named Gecenin İçinden exist. This announcement was the opening of *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri* (1988), the last of the three various artists compilation albums Elgin created in response to the AIDS crisis.

Born in 1949, Murtaza Elgin studied business at Ege University in the coastal metropolitan city of Izmir. He worked as a porter at the luxurious Izmir Efes Hotel, frequented by celebrities, and as a sales consultant (*Hürriyet*, 1985). Elgin then embarked on establishing a career in Istanbul’s vibrant entertainment world as a personal assistant for the erotic movie star and singer Feri Cansel. Later, he worked for the influential talent agent and promoter Hasan Bora and the famous singer İbrahim Tatlıses’s record label, which provided him with a vast network in the entertainment industry. Elgin also had a brief career as a tavern singer, but he performed primarily as a backing vocalist for stars like Tatlıses, Ferdi Tayfur, and Gönül Yazar. It was after his diagnosis with HIV in 1985 that he became a household name. Forced by the media and various state institutions to confess the truth about his condition, Elgin became both hypervisible and socially (and at times physically) isolated. Nevertheless, there were also entertainers and producers who engaged in artistic collaborations with him. The most important outputs from these collaborations were the various artists compilation albums featuring Elgin as the host as well as a singer: *Allah Allah Taverna* [Good Heavens Tavern] (1987), *Zindan Taverna: Aşıksın* [Dungeon Tavern: You Are in Love] (1988) and *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri*. All three

albums were in controversial perceived low-brow genres associated with social and historical violence, displacement, and loss: *arabesk* and *taverna müziği* [tavern music]. The singer deployed the performative and affective possibilities these popular music genres offered to resist criminalization and abjection and work towards social and political change. Elgin's experiences with the AIDS crisis and the artistic responses he developed were grounded in Turkey's specific sociopolitical dynamics. Nevertheless, they also paralleled and expanded the global efforts to create music for HIV/AIDS activism.

When the AIDS crisis began to gain visibility in the early 1980's, individuals diagnosed with HIV and their allies engaged in critical cultural practices through which they enhanced the visibility of the epidemic, voiced their political demands, built alliances, processed trauma, and negotiated the politics of citizenship and belonging. An important element of the cultural world emerging around HIV was the reactivation of popular music archives. With their existing affective potentialities, popular songs responded to the practical need for people to express their feelings, most prominently grief and loss, while also facilitating solidarity through communal singing (Jones, 2018). The established cultural meanings of popular songs, often combined with the public images and styles of the performers, enabled their mainstream circulation in the HIV/AIDS context without intense stigmatization. These well-known songs thus contributed to the efforts to familiarize the broader public with the AIDS crisis without further aggravating the abjection experienced by those who were infected by the virus and their communities. Providing a soundtrack to people's real-life mourning, popular songs served ritualistic closure (Román, 1998). Conversely, among the survivors, these songs also fostered melancholia, which functions as 'a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names' (Muñoz, 1999: 74). Such critical

engagements with popular music archives nurtured alternative imaginations for the future, which inspired action in the present. The aesthetic and affective potentials of popular music archives inspired artists to record covers and create various artists compilation albums within the scope of projects directly addressing the AIDS crisis as well.

The AIDS crisis was a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, the ways individuals experienced the epidemic and the responses they developed reflected local and national sociopolitical dynamics. This was particularly true for the musical production emerging from the crisis. Elgin's albums demonstrate how queer cultural producers and their allies used stigmatized popular music genres to intervene in the AIDS crisis in Turkey in the 1980's. The albums show how such collaborative projects become a site for artists diagnosed with HIV to resist criminalization and abjection, build artistic, social, and economic solidarity, mobilize affect for sociopolitical change, and develop a broader critique of homophobia and transphobia. The album covers and Elgin's announcements throughout the albums reimagine the temporal politics of the epidemic and suggest Elgin's desire to exercise his agency by making a claim over life as well as death. The involvement of controversial figures in this musical project challenges the romantic conceptions of solidarity and exposes how solidarity projects may depend on questionable alliances. Contemporary cultural producers' engagements with Elgin's albums and his memory reveal not only their lasting political significance but also how dominant conceptual paradigms, affective repertoires, and activism strategies define our interpretations of HIV/AIDS archives. Elgin's emergence as an icon of abjection who embodies a history of violence and stigmatization thus reveals the political potentials as well as limitations of iconification, especially how iconification may occlude solidarity efforts in and beyond HIV/AIDS activism.

## **Being HIV-Positive in Turkey's Age of Confession**

The cultural productions and activist strategies responding to the AIDS crisis reflected the broader sociopolitical dynamics and configurations of power in globally diverse contexts. Murtaza Elgin's experiences present an excellent example of this phenomenon. Turkey's entry into 1980's was marked by a coup d'état that violently suppressed the powerful leftist movements and labor unions to enable the country's integration into the global market economy with a shift from statist developmentalism to export-oriented market capitalism (Adak and Altınay, 2018). In 1983, Turgut Özal's center-right Anavatan Partisi [Motherland Party] or ANAP established the first civilian government after the coup and remained in power until 1991.

The ANAP period was characterized by neoliberal policies predicated on a seemingly paradoxical two-pronged strategy, which the cultural critic Nurdan Gürbilek, through a context-sensitive reading of Foucault's critique of the 'repressive hypothesis,' describes as 'the repression of speech' and 'the explosion of speech' (Foucault 1978; Gürbilek, 2011). On the one hand, the very restrictive constitution of 1982 was still in effect. It prevented ethnic minorities from forming political parties and criminalized broadcasting in minority languages—the primary target of these policies being the Kurds. The politicians who were banned under the junta regime were not permitted to resume their political activities until 1987. The ban on the stage work of trans performers, initially imposed by the junta government in 1981, continued until 1988. On the other hand, the discourse of personal freedoms, which was integral to the sustenance of neoliberalization, rendered confession a central disciplinary technology. As the regime aimed 'to encircle by speech rather than silence, transform rather than prohibit, internalize rather than destroy, tame rather than suppress,' the 1980's witnessed a proliferation of civilian experts in

fields such as psychology and psychiatry as well as journalists who encouraged individuals to publicize what was commonly conceptualized as their private lives, and offered scientific explanations (Gürbilek, 2011: 6). This discursive regime of confession, combined with the politics of censorship and the booming media corporations' sales concerns in the face of the competition among diverse press outlets and the high price of paper caused by the state monopoly, resulted in an upsurge in celebrity journalism and sensational stories.

As confession became not only a duty to be fulfilled but also a desire to be satisfied, a third discursive strategy built around the aestheticization of experience emerged (Gürbilek, 2011). It was through confessional performances, especially sexual ones, that individuals experienced a momentary intimate union with the public. While rendering diverse sexualities more visible than ever, the banalization of intimacy through confessional performances still reproduced the hegemonic social and cultural codes and secured heterosexual public culture, its prospects and promises (Berlant and Warner, 1998). This was also a time when identity-oriented politics were on the rise as leftist organizations and workers' unions were suppressed (Adak and Altınay, 2018). This shift fostered the development of the first significant organizations that actively addressed and involved LGBTIQ+ individuals, such as Radikal Demokratik Birlik [Radical Democratic Union]. In this context, queer subjects not only responded to the demands of state institutions and the provocations of journalists and scientific experts for them to practice confession. They also independently created texts and performances, where they both reproduced and challenged the hegemonic politics of confession.

The development of the AIDS crisis in Turkey reflected the complex operations of power in the age of confession. With the first publicly known case of HIV, a young German Turkish gay man visiting Istanbul in August 1985, AIDS and male homosexuality became criminalized

(Gürbilek, 2001; Andiç, 2023). State hospitals collaborated with the police force, serving carcerality more than treatment, while doctors emerged as medicolegal authority figures who also struggled to be publicly and professionally recognized as experts. It was in this context that Elgin's doctor, Professor Hüseyin Sipahioğlu, shared his diagnosis with the press in November 1985, together with personal information about his patient. Political Islam, which found a fertile ground in post-coup Turkey, shaped the media coverage of Elgin's story, where journalists often framed the virus as punishment for his sexual sins (Andiç, 2023). Newspapers published Elgin's photographs with his celebrity friends, implying that they might have had sex with him and therefore might also be at risk. At the center of these stories was the Kurdish arabesk star İbrahim Tatlıses, whom Elgin worked with as a backing vocalist and an office employee at his record label (Andiç, 2023). In response to the journalists demanding him to confess the truth about his sexuality and his health, Tatlıses rejected the rumors about him having had sexual affairs with Elgin while expressing solidarity with him. Elgin also gave interviews where he denied the claims about his HIV status and engaged in performances of piety before the cameras (Süsoy, 1985).

As Turkey's first high-profile HIV-positive person and as a queer subject, Elgin occupied a position of 'national abjection,' which refers to the process in which minorities play a crucial role in the processes of national subject formation and the production of a national consciousness through their cultural, symbolic, and at times legal exclusion (Shimakawa, 2000). The abject's production of 'fear and fascination' (Kristeva, 1982: 45) manifested in the HIV/AIDS context in Elgin's emergence as both a threat to national health and immunity that had to be eliminated and a major media sensation. While journalists forced Elgin to confess the truth about his sexuality and his HIV status, the police were on a hunt to confine him to a makeshift 'AIDS Ward' at the

Haydarpaşa Numune Hospital in Istanbul. At a time when Turkish hospitals did not even possess the testing infrastructure, the ward, converted from a room used by nurses' aides in two days, was a space of confinement rather than treatment (Andiç, 2023). Soon released for confinement at home, Elgin left the hospital on the shoulders of his employer, the renowned talent agent and promoter Hasan Bora. Such expressions of solidarity by powerful figures like Tatlıses and Bora would soon culminate in three albums, which form some of the most important yet entirely ignored and largely forgotten musical interventions in the AIDS crisis in Turkey.

### **Genres of Abjection, Sounds of Resistance**

The three various artists compilation albums Elgin created were critical projects that deployed sophisticated aesthetic strategies by building on the affective and performative potentials of controversial popular music genres associated with abjection and loss. *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri* is an *arabesk* album, featuring hit songs by the greatest stars of the genre, including İbrahim Tatlıses and the trans diva Bülent Ersoy, as well as a poem and a song performed by Elgin himself. Perhaps the most controversial genre in the history of Turkish music, arabesk is associated with labor migration and urban poverty. The genre began to gain popularity in the late 1960's, achieved mass sales in the 1970's, and dominated the music industry in the 1980's.

As a hybrid genre, arabesk incorporates elements from various genres 'including folk, art, pop, western, middle eastern, and even jazz, rock and world music' (Şener, Oğul, and Reigle, 2022: 170). Instrumental arabesk songs are rare. The prominent themes in the lyrics include longing, desire, suffering, and victimhood. In mainstream arabesk, the potential for social

critique is often suppressed by fatalism. Many stars of the genre were members of ethnic minorities, including Kurds (Tatlises), Arabs (Müslüm Gürses, Selami Şahin), Armenians (Mine Koşan), and Roma (Kibariye, Sibel Can, Tüdanya); of religious minority backgrounds, especially Alevi (Müslüm Gürses); queer subjects (Ersoy, Zeki Müren); or women dealing with domestic violence (Bergen). Most of them came from economic precarity or migrant backgrounds, which was part of their public image and made them objects of identification for many of their audiences. At the same time, the popularity of the genre provided them with opportunities for class mobility. Since the public broadcasting company TRT did not broadcast arabesk, and the first professional private television and radio channels would not enter Turkey's media sphere until 1990 and 1992, respectively, many stars of the genre reached audiences with cinema and later video films alongside their albums. With the golden age of Turkish pop music in the 1990's, arabesk lost its hegemonic power as a distinct genre. Nevertheless, it continued to influence diverse musical genres, from rap to pop music to R&B.

During the period of rapid sociopolitical transformation brought on by post-coup neoliberalization in the long 1980's, arabesk became a topic of heated public debate. At a time when political rights were reduced to 'personal freedoms' that could be exercised through consumerism, also with the increasing influence of an emergent conservative capitalist class of provincial backgrounds, arabesk became a legitimate taste. The genre was still banned from the public broadcasting venues, but the prime minister Özal could be seen performing a duet with Tatlises at a nightclub. The critics of arabesk were also more vocal than ever. Especially for the social democrats who were dissatisfied with the sociopolitical dynamics in neoliberalizing Turkey, the word 'arabesk' came to represent everything that they perceived to be wrong with the country—including the rights violations and lack of responsible policymaking in response to the

AIDS crisis (e.g., Öymen, 1985). At the same time, some journalists and public intellectuals explicitly likened arabesk to a virus, and they defined Tatlıses and other stars of the genre as its vectors (Ada, 1992). In Turkish, the virus metaphor was far from a neutral term describing the rapid circulation of a cultural product. Directly referring to an infectious agent, the term had strong negative connotations. With the virus metaphor, while describing the rapid spread of arabesk, cultural critics framed it as a threat to the national body. As contemporary intellectuals, who are less critical of the genre, have continued to use the virus metaphor in their efforts to explain the transformations of arabesk from the 1960's until the 1990's, they have further consolidated the viral image of the genre (e.g., Ergur, 2022).

As a queer person living with HIV, Elgin fit in the musical milieu of arabesk quite smoothly. Arabesk enabled Elgin to artistically embrace and critically exercise the affective and subversive power that came with abjection. The association of AIDS with arabesk, however, predates Elgin's diagnosis. In 1985, the year when the press reported three HIV cases, including Elgin's, director Eser Zorlu and his scriptwriter wife Yasemen Zorlu completed the first known film in Turkish cinema to deal with the pandemic, albeit in a rather problematic way. *Dünyayı Dehşete Düşüren Olay: AIDS* [*The Event That Horrified the World: AIDS*] is the story of Selahattin, an arabesk singer played by the real-life arabesk singer Selahattin Cesur. When Selahattin gets stabbed, he receives a blood transfusion from his childhood friend Can. Little does he know that Can is a trans woman who has sex with men. When Selahattin learns about Can's sex life, Can commits suicide. The singer is infected with HIV and his story becomes a media sensation. Confined to a hospital room, Selahattin receives a heartwarming visit from his fans who gather outside his window. The fans hold banners expressing their love for Selahattin and, in a way reminiscent of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) protests, demand a

cure for AIDS. The film ends with the singer escaping from the hospital and dying alone.<sup>iii</sup> Given the limited audience of the film and the fact that Elgin's doctor shared his personal information with journalists in November 1985, it is difficult to argue that life imitated art or vice versa. The Zorlus probably knew Turkey well enough to successfully predict how the AIDS crisis would unfold in the country. In this melodrama, arabesk's themes of pain and victimization gave voice to the experience of AIDS while the abjection and the terminal temporality associated with AIDS presented a powerful narrative frame for arabesk's musical repertoire of suffering.

Among the genres that developed under the 'viral' influence of arabesk, of particular significance was *taverna müziği* [tavern music]—the genre that Elgin's albums *Allah Allah Taverna* and *Zindan Taverna: Aşıksın*, belong to. Tavern music is a genre closely connected to the performance space, the tavern, as well as the histories of displacement and loss that define this space and its musical cultures. In the Turkish context, the taverns have their roots in the *café aman*, one of the various types of modern musical restaurants serving alcohol that proliferated in the context of Ottoman Europeanization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tohumcu, 2013). The *café amans* were run by the Rum minority, the Greek Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. These venues underwent a significant transformation after the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923, which involved the forced migration of Muslims from Greece and Greek Orthodox people from Turkey, totaling more than 1.5 million individuals (Motta, 2013). The displaced Greek populations in Greece's harbor cities contributed to the development and broader popularization of *rebetiko*, a subcultural musical genre that had been the subject of criticism 'for its association with marginal social enclaves of allegedly dubious morality, its drug culture and the supposedly dangerous affective worlds of melancholy, sadness and social alienation' (Tragaki, 2019: 5-6). The popularity of *rebetiko* also shaped the *café aman* culture in Istanbul, still home to a Rum

population of over 100,000 (Tohumcu, 2013). By the 1940's, these venues were called Greek taverns or Rum taverns (Tohumcu, 2005). With the Istanbul Pogroms of 1955 and the following 'soft expulsions' of Turkey's remaining Greek population that continued until the 1980's, Muslim Turkish owners dominated the tavern world.

The Turkish invasion of Cyprus, following the Greek Cypriot coup d'état in 1974, changed the musical culture of the taverns. With the ban on Greek songs, the rebetiko bands at the taverns were replaced by solo performers who played the piano and sang a hybrid genre of music that combined elements from Turkish classical music, folk music, tango, blues, Western pop music, and most notably arabesk (Tohumcu, 2005). The influence of rebetiko did not completely disappear either. These diverse genres influenced songs to different extents, resulting in a broad repertoire that was connected primarily by the performance space and the delivery by the pianist singer. Overall, tavern music is distinguished from mainstream arabesk with its more joyful affective repertoire, focus on the various aspects of love and romance, and simpler orchestrations. As the genre gained popularity, the piano was replaced by the keyboard and the synthesizer, decreasing the costs and increasing the mobility of performers. Another important feature of tavern music is its suitability for dance. Closely interacting with audiences in the intimate space of the tavern, performers often verbally encouraged them to dance. They also welcomed audiences whom they knew by the name and dedicated songs to them. Ferdi Özbeğen, a queer singer of Cretan Turkish migrant and Armenian origin, is generally recognized as the founder of the genre in its modern form. Other pioneering figures included Rum performers like Yorgo Vapuridis as well as Armenians like Hayko. Having gained nationwide popularity long after the decimation of Turkey's Greek population and shaped by a history of displacement and violence, the genre has been intrinsically associated with loss.

Elgin combined the mass popularity and rich affective repertoires of arabesk and tavern music with album formats that enhance the performance possibilities offered by these genres. *Allah Allah Taverna* and *Zindan Taverna: Aşıksın* imitate the format of a specific genre of tavern music albums, best represented by the work of Arif Susam.<sup>iv</sup> In these studio albums, the performers work to create the tavern atmosphere for the audience. They open the albums by welcoming the audience as they do at their tavern shows. Throughout the songs, they address real-life individuals who are supposedly at the tavern by their names, including their producers, fellow musicians, or friends. In some cases, performers even mention the name of a specific tavern. In his album *Kader Utansın [Fate Should be Ashamed]* (1988), for instance, Susam welcomes audiences to ‘Köşem Tavern, the pearl of Emirgan,’ an Istanbul district on the Bosphorus. While promoting the tavern where Susam worked for fourteen years, the album thus also offers listeners a more realistic experience of a tavern night that they may or may not otherwise access—albeit in a monosensory way. Even though it is not very common, some tavern albums feature an emcee who enhances the theatrical potential of the album. In Susam’s *Kara Kara [Dark Eyes]* (1986), for instance, the emcee introduces the performer and promises the audience a night where they can enjoy themselves without any constraints. Elgin’s tavern albums adopt this format and introduce critical elements.

Elgin’s albums seemingly refer to specific taverns, *Allah Allah* and *Zindan*. Unlike Susam’s *Köşem*, however, they were not real-life spaces where Elgin performed during his brief career as a tavern singer. The albums referred to and performatively constituted utopian spaces where Elgin could be a star. ‘The here and now is a prison house,’ as José Esteban Muñoz argues, and ‘[we] must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel *a then and there*’ (Muñoz, 2009: 1, emphasis in original). Elgin experienced this

spatiotemporal confinement in intensely embodied ways. He was trapped at the intersection of violent sociopolitical regimes and ‘scenarios,’ the predictable, formulaic, portable, and repeatable acts through which memory is transferred and social knowledge is structured (Taylor, 2003). The HIV scenario as it was imagined and often unfolded in the 1980’s confined Elgin to a terminal temporality of gradual physical decline. Moreover, Elgin’s experiences developed in the context of neoliberalization in post-coup Turkey, where the absence of adequate healthcare services and research infrastructure were aggravated by the criminalization as well as religious condemnation of HIV and queer sexualities—especially those of cismen and trans women. In his own words, Elgin was forced to ‘live the life of a fugitive’ because of his HIV status (Süsoy, 1985). The fictive taverns and the radio station were spaces Elgin dreamed of and, to an extent, brought to life to experience ‘other ways of being in the world’ (Muñoz, 2009: 1). The starry night background in the cover art for both *Allah Allah Taverna* and *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri* allude to this dreamy nature of the albums as well as Elgin’s longing for stardom.

The utopian enactment that defined Elgin’s albums could best (if not only) be realized through solidarity. Hence, he named the taverns and the albums after the producer Tatlıses’s hit songs, *Allah Allah* and *Aşıksın*, the covers of which were also the opening songs. Moreover, Tatlıses contributed to *Gecenin İçinden Dinleyici İstekleri* with two songs that he performed. Elgin also toured in Turkey and internationally as an opening act for Tatlıses. Nevertheless, at the time, Tatlıses was a rather controversial figure. His wife Perihan Savaş, a notable actor, had divorced him in 1985 following years of domestic violence. Over the years, Tatlıses would be accused of sexual assault by several women in the entertainment industry and of being the instigator of the shootings of his partners Derya Tuna and Asena. Elgin’s case thus poses a

challenge to the romantic conceptions of solidarity in and beyond HIV/AIDS activism and related cultural production, revealing the tensions and ambivalences inherent in such projects.

Tatlises was not the only figure supporting Elgin's musical project. In addition to Elgin, each album features six to ten singers. The various artists format allowed Elgin, a rather insignificant figure in the music industry before his diagnosis, to make a claim for the status of an accomplished performer. The performance of intimacy in the announcements where he addresses the audience and their cheers for him also serve this claim. By presenting himself as a beloved performer who is also recognized as such by his peers, Elgin challenged the media stories about his relationships with his celebrity friends, which hypersexualized him and reduced him to a potential disease vector. The solidarity that characterized Elgin's albums was far from unidirectional. As he transformed the notoriety brought on by his diagnosis into an artistic project, Elgin collaborated not only with some of Turkey's greatest stars—who mostly permitted him to rerelease their popular songs rather than producing new recordings—but also lesser-known figures whose careers could benefit from the visibility he could provide, including the aspiring queer singer Yılmaz Morgül. What is most striking however, is Elgin's subtle support for the trans diva Bülent Ersoy. One of Turkey's most successful singers, Ersoy's career had been interrupted by the ban on the stage work of trans performers that was in effect from 1981 to 1988 (Altınay, 2008). By introducing Ersoy as 'the great singer who has been away from our stages for a long time,' Elgin both celebrates her talent and accomplishments and acknowledges the transphobic state violence she is subjected to. Connecting Ersoy's experiences of discrimination and isolation and those of Elgin, the project lends itself to a broader critique of homophobia and transphobia, exposing the truth about the neoliberal age of 'personal freedoms.'

Unlike Susam and other tavern stars, Elgin does not strive to create a realistic tavern atmosphere in his albums. *Allah Allah Taverna* opens with sound effects that seemingly imitate the tavern atmosphere: the clinking of silverware, the rehearsing musicians, and the laughing audience. The effects, however, are far from convincing. Both the sound of the silverware and the laughing and applauding audiences are too singular and distinct; they do not reflect the chaotic noise before (and often during) a tavern performance. The recordings, featuring a much richer orchestration than a single keyboard as well as strong backing vocals, also defy the norms of tavern music. Even more strikingly, the same distinguishable audience effects are used in multiple songs in the same album. Similarly, the sound effects in the opening of Elgin's make-believe radio show resemble futuristic effects connoting science fiction rather than radio static—which also supports the project's utopian politics.

What appears to be a failure to create an effect of naturalness in Elgin's albums is in fact a quite productive instance of a *misfire*. As 'the act of failing to achieve the act,' the misfire 'opens up the space of referentiality—or of impossible reality—not because *something is missing*, but because *something else is done*, or because something else is said: the term 'misfire' does not refer to an absence, but the enactment of a difference' (Felman, 2003: 57). By exposing the artificiality of performance, Elgin demonstrates how the utopian worlds in his albums, with their promises and pleasures, have gained a fleeting materiality thanks to his labor. He is neither a threatening vector nor a perishing body but an artist who can dream of and enact alternative worlds, for himself and others. As he exposes how he imagined and performatively constituted a public, Elgin both acknowledges and rejects the violent hegemonic public he has to deal with in everyday life. Elgin's laborious investment in utopian performance thus amounts to a refusal of confinement in the present without sacrificing the desire to transform material reality. In any

case, however, ‘every utopia is...at the same time dystopia, since it cannot help reminding us how we are bound fast by history in the very act of trying to set us free from that bondage’ (Eagleton, 2000: 31). The utopian world in Elgin’s albums thus also reminds audiences of everyday reality and his painful negotiations as a figure of national abjection.

The format of the albums enables Elgin to transform the virality associated with him from his body and sexuality to his art. As he introduces the songs, recites the lyrics, compliments the singers, responds to audience requests or addresses the supposed live audience, Elgin infiltrates every song like a virus, and reproduces it in a way that makes it his own. This strategy, combined with the songs he performs, also allows him the longest recording time. Elgin thus mobilizes the affective powers of these songs for the public performance of an abjected subjectivity. With Elgin’s viral transformations, the albums gain the quality of self-indulgence, which ‘allows and encourages persistence in the face of the accumulating discouragements of everyday life’ and can be vital ‘for those of us who are encouraged to understand ourselves to be throw-aways’ (DeLeon, 2016: xxiii). This power of self-indulgence was exceptional for a subject like Elgin, who experienced abjection, criminalization, and social and physical isolation in the name of the protection of others, the common good.

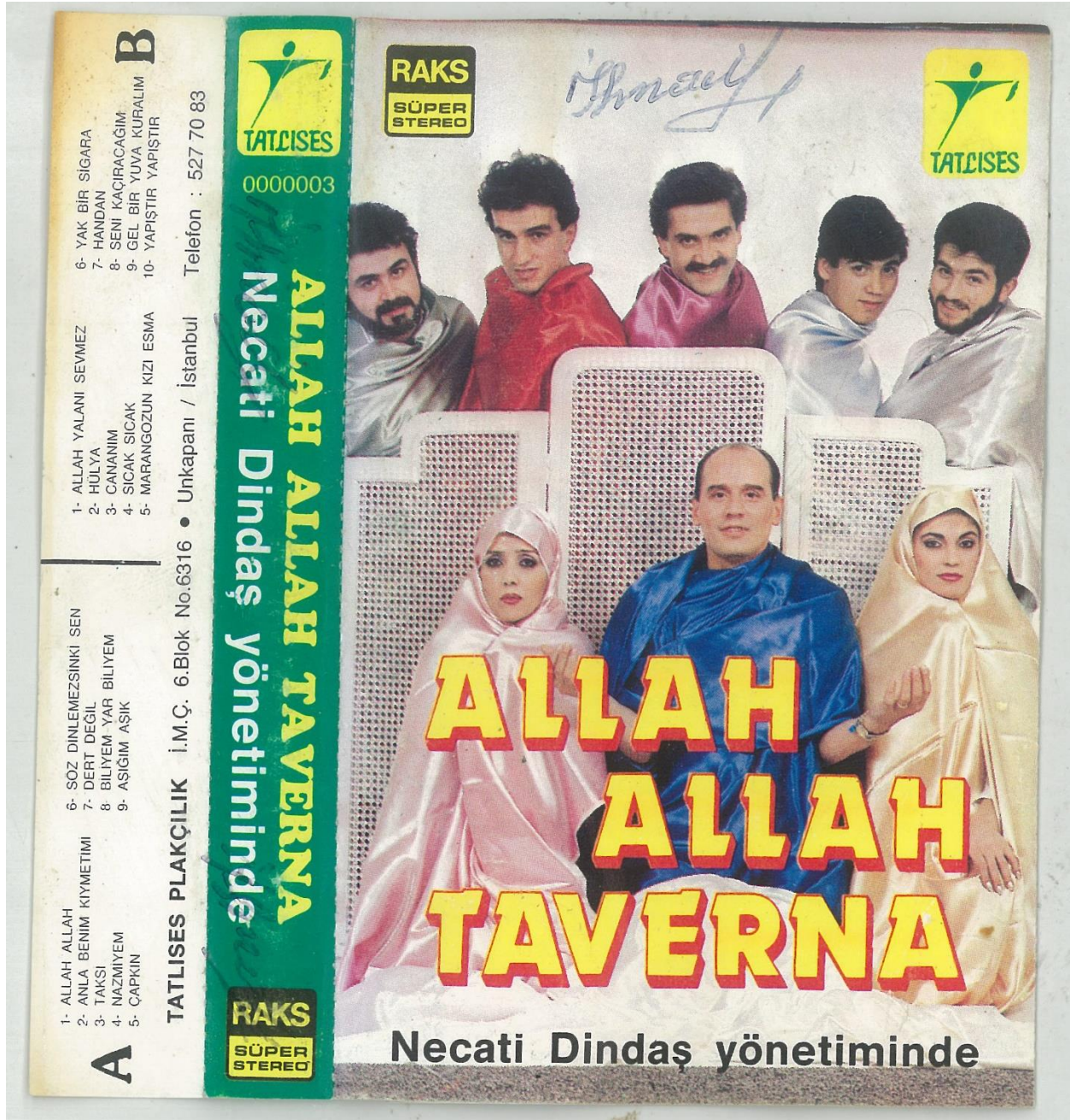
Elgin’s self-positioning as a host and a singer enables diverse performances of desire. In his announcements before the songs, Elgin sometimes subtly flirts with the singers, as best seen in his introduction of Basri Altıntaş as ‘the handsome flirt.’ The announcement serves to legitimize queer desire while encouraging audiences to imagine a fleeting moment of queer intimacy even though Elgin and Altıntaş probably do not even share the same physical space. Elgin expresses and mediates desire even more powerfully with the songs he performs, as in the closing song for *Allah Allah Taverna, Yapıştır* [Tip Them]. *Yapıştır* is an example of a subgenre

of taverna songs that explicitly encourage dancing with their lyrics. Since Turkish is a gender-neutral language, I used ‘them’ to translate the third person singular, but the lyrics most likely refer to a woman, a belly dancer. The literal translation of the title would be ‘Stick It on Her,’ referring to a specific repertoire of tipping where the audience sticks the money on the dancer with the sweat on her body. The song, on the one hand, is a recognition of the labor behind performance, which is a central element of Elgin’s broader performance. On the other hand, as a subject whose sexuality was stigmatized, hypermedicalized, and criminalized, with this song Elgin used music to become a mediator of erotic pleasure; providing audiences with what he had been denied. This mediation was a strategy of self-empowerment, claiming an authority position regulating embodiment and enabling desire.

Elgin’s excessively energetic delivery of *Yapıştır* differentiated the cover from the previous versions, most notably the best-known Ertan Eren recording from 1986. In the context of HIV/AIDS in the 1980’s, this delivery was a challenge to the terminal temporality and physical decline associated with the virus. Elgin’s announcement in this song, where he bids farewell to the audience until they meet again in the album *Allah Allah Taverna 2*, also serves the purpose of making a claim over life. In *Zindan Taverna: Aşıksın*, which was the title of his second album, Elgin is audibly excited to have fulfilled his promise as he reassures the audience: ‘We are all comfortable, we are all happy.’

Elgin uses the albums to make a claim over death as well as life. The second cover art for *Allah Allah Taverna* presents a playful engagement with the title (Figure 1). The cover features a photograph of Elgin with the singers who contributed to the album. Elgin is in the front between two women. Behind them is a folding screen, over which the five male singers look at the camera. Everyone in the image is wrapped in a satin cloth. The women wear it like a *çarşaf*, a

simple, loose, robe-like garment worn by some conservative Muslim women in Turkey. Elgin's hands are in prayer position, directed upwards in the air. This is not his only image in prayer. During an interview in 1985, when he heard the call to prayer, the singer started praying to thank Allah that he was perfectly healthy while being photographed (Süsoy, 1985). With such spectacular performances of piety, Elgin struggled to negotiate the religious politics of belonging and to convince readers that he was not HIV-positive. By the time Elgin released *Allah Allah Taverna*, however, his HIV status had been confirmed and his negotiations with the conservative public had failed. As he resorted to creating utopian sonic worlds instead of engaging in mediatized performances of confession, Elgin's engagement with religion gained a parodic dimension. Parodic repetition of the original is nothing other than 'a parody of the idea of the natural and the original' (Butler, 2006: 41). At a time when political Islam began to gain power, Elgin's parody questioned the proliferating public spectacles and embodiments of piety. What is striking in the image is how Elgin and the other male singers wrap the satin fabrics around their bodies in a way that is reminiscent of a *kafan*, the burial shroud in Islamic funerals. The shiny satin is in stark contrast with the simple white cotton kafan that is commonly used in Turkey. With this visual, Elgin embraces the death associated with his body. Yet he is determined to shine as bright as he can until his time comes and this is precisely what he does with the albums. Even more importantly, the image extends the spectacle of terminality to cover the bodies of others as well, reminding viewers that they are not any less mortal than Elgin.



**Figure 1.** The cover of *Allah Allah Taverna*

Unfortunately, Elgin's funeral in 1992 was less glamorous than he had prepared for.

Towards the end of his life, most of his celebrity friends terminated all contact with him. There

were only ten people at his funeral (Andiç, 2023). Elgin's body was washed with bleach and put in a thick plastic bag before it was placed in a zinc coffin and buried in a grave filled with quicklime (Andiç, 2023). After being abandoned for historical amnesia for a long time, Elgin has recently been revived as an icon of abjection in the context of contemporary HIV/AIDS activism.

### **Resurrecting an Icon of Abjection**

With the advent of combination therapies and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the mortality rate associated with HIV has dramatically decreased while the quality of life among persons diagnosed with HIV has increased, especially in the Global North. These developments have also led to a decrease in cultural production around HIV/AIDS, particularly activist projects. Nevertheless, the impact of the advances in medicine have remained limited in many parts of the Global South, including Turkey. The universal public health insurance system in the country covers tests and treatment associated with HIV/AIDS. The growing undocumented migrant population, however, cannot access them. Moreover, public health insurance does not cover PrEP and the deepening economic crisis poses a major obstacle to accessing any prophylactics. Stigmatization and social pressure may also prevent individuals from seeking treatment. Under these circumstances, HIV/AIDS activism retains its relevance. Non-governmental organizations in the field receive support from international funders such as pharmaceutical companies, US Consulate General, and the European Union.

In the current public debates on HIV/AIDS in Turkey, Elgin has emerged as an 'icon of abjection.' I use the term to refer to individuals whose singular experiences come to represent an

entire history of abjection through which the cultural borders of a collectivity and its terms of belonging are defined. Translations from the singular to the universal that are at the core of iconification depend on omissions and erasures on both levels. In the case of Elgin's iconification, the process of abjection has been reduced to victimization. As journalists, activists, artists, and researchers have framed Elgin's story as one of isolation, they have ignored the perhaps short-lived yet powerful solidarity networks around him. Such selective engagements with the archives of abjection related to the AIDS crisis also paid little attention to the sophisticated responses Elgin developed, especially by producing music. A significant exception is a video art piece that queer archivist and cultural producer Serdar Soydan created for the World AIDS Day event organized by the Dramaqueer Arts Collective (Soydan, 2018). The video features Elgin's cover of *Yapıştır* together with his images from the press archives and the cover art for *Allah Allah Taverna*, including some photographs representing solidarity, such as those of Elgin's friends carrying him on their shoulders following his release from the hospital. Nevertheless, Soydan's decontextualizing reproduction of the song limits his project's engagement with the complex politics defining the albums.

While activists and cultural producers tend to emphasize Elgin's isolation and suffering at the expense of ignoring his strategies of resistance, the pharmaceutical industry and medical professionals whitewash the rights violations he experienced. *Türkiye'de HIV Belgeseli* [*HIV in Turkey Documentary*], produced by the American biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, Inc., narrates the basic facts about the HIV virus and the development of the epidemic in Turkey and internationally. Dr. Aygen Tümer from Hacettepe University's HIV/AIDS Treatment and Research Center defines Elgin's case as 'a very bad experience' caused by lack of knowledge and criticizes the mistreatment of Elgin's body during the burial. To avoid intimidating audiences,

Tümer then adds that she refers to Elgin by his full name only because he shared his status with the public himself and medical professionals would never publicize personal data of their patients. Neither Tümer nor anyone else in the documentary corrects this misrepresentation of facts. The documentary thus erases the historical injustice against Elgin to sustain the audience's trust in the medical industry.

The case of Murtaza Elgin demonstrates how the AIDS crisis unfolded in globally diverse ways, reflecting broader sociopolitical dynamics and operations of power. This diversity shaped how individuals experienced the crisis and the critical responses they developed. Elgin's albums reveal how existing cultural products gained new lives in the HIV/AIDS context, and how interventions by artists diagnosed with HIV expanded the affective and political potentials of such efforts. Elgin's controversial collaborators present an important opportunity to review and revise the romantic assumptions about solidarity in and beyond the context of HIV/AIDS. The contemporary engagements with the archives of abjection associated with the AIDS crisis and Elgin's emergence as an icon of abjection show how dominant conceptual paradigms, activism strategies, and medical as well as commercial concerns shape how we remember this history. It is with such fundamental tensions and critical erasures that Elgin's story continues to inform how HIV-positive individuals and their allies negotiate the politics of belonging and imagine alternative futures in and beyond Turkey.

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<sup>ii</sup> Several researchers have rightfully noted that Murtaza Elgin never publicly identified as gay, and he was married to a woman. They argue that the press presented him as gay because of ‘the stickiness between AIDS and queer sexualities’ (Bayramoğlu, 2021: 1596), ‘to create sensation’ (Andiç, 2023: 151), or ‘because it was deemed impossible that a married heterosexual man could have AIDS’ (Atuk, 2023: 33). Alongside the press coverage, it is also possible to find queer elements in Elgin’s albums and queer-coded language in interviews with his friends about him. Regardless of Elgin’s sexual orientation, however, the rumors about his sexuality performatively constituted his public identity as queer. Moreover, ‘violent representations, exposure to public scrutiny, and the shaming of his sexuality made his story a queer story’ (Bayramoğlu, 2021: 1596).

<sup>iii</sup> For a more comprehensive synopsis, please see Arslantepe (2022).

<sup>iv</sup> Arif Susam was born in the Eastern Anatolian city of Elazığ in 1956. Following his training in Western classical music at the prestigious Istanbul University State Conservatory, he played the piano, the clarinet, and the saxophone for Western music bands before he established his career as one of the most popular tavern singers (Tohumcu 2005).