

Emperor of Nowheristan spreads

his wings to Belgrade and Istanbul

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BEIRUT: With his fashionable Beirut club throbbing again to the popular Music Hall fusion of sounds after being closed by the war in Lebanon this summer, the self-styled "Emperor Michel I of Nowheristan" is now ready to expand his kingdom.



Elefteriades with posters of himself at Music Hall in Beirut.

In his sights are the East-West cultural melting pots of Belgrade and Istanbul.

The Lebanese businessman – real name Michel Elefteriades – dashed to Belgrade in 1999 on one of the last flights so that he could live like a Serb through the NATO bombing.

"The Serbs are an interesting, crazy people, a lot like the

Lebanese," says the 36-year-old entrepreneur, painter, poet, music producer and would-be founder of a new member of the United Nations.

"As for Istanbul, what I love is the mix of minorities. For me, it is a kind of lost golden era of the East that has vanished in places like Alexandria," Egypt's once cosmopolitan city on the Mediterranean.

"You have this blessed mix of minorities, switching from one language to another. They understand the East and the West," says the polyglot of Greek origin whose own family fled Turkey in the 1920s.

Elefteriades plans to open Music Hall in Belgrade and Istanbul within the next 12 months. "People have been begging me to bring the concept to Dubai but I'm not interested. That place just has no soul, but I hope it will one day, and then I may go there," he says.

His hugely successful Music Hall in central Beirut is an 800-

seat theater fitted with lounge sofas and low tables – converted from an old cinema – featuring an array of talent from Europe, Cuba and the Middle East.

This summer's war kept the club closed for two months, during which the eclectic mix of Cuban, Lebanese, Palestinian, Swiss and gypsy artists evacuated to Jordan, on full pay.

In one of his many incarnations, apart from having also lived in Cuba and France, Elefteriades himself is an honorary gypsy and is often invited as a guest speaker to European seminars on their culture.

On top of making money and promoting culture, he is passionate about politics and his utopian country, complete with a constitution and embassies, the first of which is located outside the club. He plans to issue passports.

"Being from nowhere makes me at home everywhere," Elefteriades explains.

Nowheristan would "create a new culture that takes the best

from all cultures, arts, archaeology ... without any religious barriers. The official religion is atheism but you can adore whatever you like," he says.

Elefteriades' 250 employees address him as *altesse* ("highness") and he regularly reviews the troops in a lineup, with military salutes exchanged.

For him, "The East does not have discipline. It has spirituality and imagination, but needs the West's discipline. This is what Hizbullah does so well," he says, not hiding his admiration for the group.

"Look at this club. I have alcohol and sexily clad guests, just a kilometer or so from the edge of the southern suburbs, but they are tolerant. Even with my heavy atheism."

Ever the bohemian in appearance, Elefteriades wears his hair long in a pony tail, flowing and brightly colored silk scarves, baggy black pants like the Druze, silver bracelets and his beloved canes, which he

twirls like a master.

Married to a Russian former rhythmic gymnastics champion, Ludmila Batalova, they have two sons.

Surprisingly, he is a teetotaler. "I am a very excessive person. So I would have smoked five packs a day and been an alcoholic," admits a man who receives dozens of SMS texts each day from fans around the Arab world and beyond.

He has a no-holds-barred approach to politics that he says has almost cost him his life, having escaped assassination bids and been forced to seek asylum in the footsteps of his favored politician Michel Aoun.

The former warlords from the 1975-1990 Civil War, many of whom now hold high posts, "can play the innocent but they cannot make us forget," he says, bemoaning the lack of a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation commission in Lebanon.

He signed up as a volunteer to fight in General Aoun's failed

"war of liberation" against Syrian troops in the late 1980s, fled to Paris and returned in 1992 to lead a militant "resistance" against the Syrians.

For some, Elefteriades is an eccentric megalomaniac who lives in a fantasy world. For others, he is a genius and Che Guevara-like icon.

"I see things big. If that is a megalomaniac, fine, as long as I am not harming people," he says. "My greatest work is my life. Nothing is ever enough. I need to live an extraordinary life."

Elefteriades says he pretends to be an emperor "because it's fun" and creative, just like the elaborate ceremonial costumes he orders from India. "I'm a successful businessman and artist. I guess I'm a schizophrenic."

In the field which he co-pioneered during the 1990s, however, he is no longer enamored with the commercialized version of world music. "It's become like Campbell Soup, they serve it in cans. I hate that."