

# review music

this week's essential reading

'Shoplifting and the teen girl' by E J Dickson, [www.racked.com](http://www.racked.com)

'I didn't particularly want the items I stole and I could have easily afforded them. For whatever reason, it just seemed like the right thing for a white, middle-class teenage girl like me to do'

# Rewind: Turkey on tapes

Hundreds of thousands of Turkish workers moved to Germany in the 1960s to help rebuild the country. Kornelia Binicewicz dives into the history of Uzelli, a company that provided the soundtracks to these homesick lives

In the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Turkish people moved to Germany to help rebuild the country. Turkish workers, or *gastarbeiters* as they were called, made the journey after a recruitment drive by German authorities to fill the gap in the labour system. Turkish communities sprang up in towns and cities across the country, and soon there was a thriving market for goods, and especially music, from the homeland.

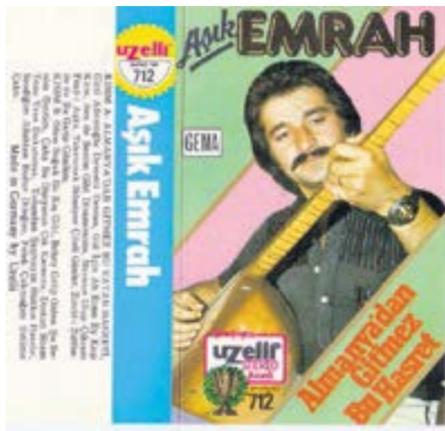
Enter Uzelli Kaset. Its history is not only an interesting case study of a music label but also a journey into the 20th century history of Turkish people, many of whom led two lives between their home country and Germany. The label has its origins in a shop established in Frankfurt by Muammer Uzelli in 1974 that sold Turkish goods for the workers. Decades later, I met Metin Uzelli, Muammer's son, to learn about the Uzelli story.

Muammer Uzelli was born in 1939 in a village in central Anatolia. For many years, he worked for a Greek-Armenian family of tailors, until he and his brother decided to travel around the world working on ships. Finally they stopped in Germany in 1968.

At this time, the country was offering good opportunities for Turkish citizens due to the 1961 labour recruitment agreement. The two Uzelli brothers, Muammer and Yavuz, settled in Frankfurt and, in 1971, opened a business in the best commercial area of the city, close to the main train station (Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof), at Münchener Straße 47. Not long after, the shop started to become a centre of Turkish life in Frankfurt. Uzelli sold things which Turkish workers missed the most – decorative wall carpets with an Atatürk portrait or the Bosphorus Bridge, tea glasses, meat mincer machines for making *kofte*, and Turkish music. They also started to sell the latest electronic equipment – radios, televisions, turntables and tape recorders. Many of these Turkish workers, instead of returning to their homeland, brought their families to Germany and changed their status from guest workers into immigrants. Muammer Uzelli watched them and tried to cater to their needs. In the 1970s, the demand for Turkish music in Germany was growing. Many cassette companies started to produce music there. But only three of them became influential – *Türküola* in Cologne, *Minareci* in Munich and Uzelli in Frankfurt.

Uzelli entered the music business through the sale of vinyl, cartridge cassettes and finally, regular cassettes, all featuring Turkish music. At this time, the Turkish music labels were located in the *Dogubank Ishani* in Istanbul. Muammer Uzelli obtained licences for all the labels' catalogues to be distributed in Germany and outside of Turkey. Then, in 1974, he created his own label – Uzelli Kaset.

These cassettes were to become the soundtracks of the everyday lives of *gastarbeiter*. Social and family celebrations such as weddings and birthdays did not take place without Turkish music on cassettes, from folk to *çiftetelli* (belly dancing), to the stars of *aranjman* (Turkish covers of western music). Genres such as *Oyun Havalari* and *Kina Gecesi* were hugely popular during the 1970s and 1980s and made for dancing. The most popular was Mustafa Kandirali with his belly dance music. With this party mood, *gastarbeiters* were reaching back to their villages and cities deep in Anatolia.



Clockwise from top left, Uzelli cassette covers from albums by Asik Emrah; Zeynep Karaca; Karisik Asiklar; and Zeki Muren. Main, Muammer Uzelli, left, founder of Uzelli, at the company's first shop, in Frankfurt during the 1970s. Courtesy Metin Uzelli

Cassette covers were designed by Armagan Konrat – whose style came to be seen as a type of Turkish pop art

The music was also an important part of going home. Travelling up to 3,000 kilometres by car was much easier to endure with a soundtrack of Turkish music played loudly on cassette. When they were returning to Germany, it was mostly deep and dark arabesque music of Ferdi Tayfur or Muslum Gurses that was healing their wounds of leaving their homeland.

The design of Uzelli cassette tapes also set them apart. It was Armagan Konrat – a left-wing painter from Istanbul – who took Uzelli to another level. His unique style of graphic design is seen as a great example of Turkish pop art from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.

The brothers' next goal was to open a cassette factory in Turkey that would manufacture products for all the Turkish music labels. And from 1977, all these labels ordered clean cassettes from Uzelli Kaset. Then, another producer named RAKS opened a plant in Turkey. But Muammer foresaw the challenge and expanded the company into a music label. From then on, Uzelli Kaset created its cassettes from the initial stage to the final product – all manufactured, produced, recorded and sold as Uzelli music cassettes.

Uzelli began to increasingly dominate the music scene. Its main competitor RAKS started treading on its heels by entering music production, but again, Uzelli adapted to meet the challenge. Facing difficulties in finding local content for the Uzelli cassette factory, it signed a deal with CBS/Sony Music. As a result, Uzelli became the exclusive cassette distributor in Turkey for international artists such as Michael Jackson, Lambada, Miles Davis, Barbra Streisand and George Michael, at cheaper prices than ones manufactured in Europe. Metin Uzelli tells me that it was said that many tourists visiting Turkey travelled home with a suitcase packed with cassettes from CBS/Uzelli.

Since 1979, with the headquarters still in Frankfurt, Uzelli established the IMÇ warehouse in Unkapani, Istanbul. Through the 1980s, this large, modernistic complex of buildings became the most important centre

of music in Turkey. All the music labels moved in. And from 1986, Uzelli established its headquarters here. After its 1980s heyday of cassettes, however, the analogue music industry declined. Most of the Turkish labels did not notice this and found themselves sidelined.

It might have been the end of Uzelli Kaset as well but the business adapted once more. The new generation of the Uzelli family took a more prominent role. Metin, born almost to the day the company first opened up in Frankfurt, grew up in Germany and Turkey. When CDs started to replace cassettes, Uzelli learnt from the European and American industries and opened its first modern music shops in Turkey. When the world started to move into digital music, Metin invested in this and became the exclusive representative of The Orchard, a digital content distribution company, in Turkey.

Up until the late 1990s, Uzelli produced the biggest stars, as well as less well-known musicians and undiscovered talent in Turkey, such as Esengul, Ferdi Tayfur, Gulcan Opel, Erkin Koray, Gonul Akkor, Gulden Karabocak, Mustafa Kandirali and Muslum Gurses.

Today, more than 2.5 million people with a Turkish heritage live in Germany, while vintage Turkish music is undergoing something of a revival. Some of Uzelli's huge 1,330 album archive will soon be re-released on vinyl, while other songs are being streamed on websites such as Spotify and sold on iTunes.

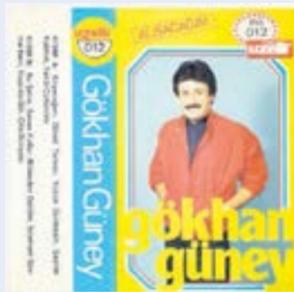
Original album cassettes from Uzelli, however, have yet to be re-released or undergo the same sort of revival as vinyl. These albums are still undiscovered by contemporary audiences, while there are many hidden or bonus tracks and can still be found on sale at some old record stores – a musical window on a period of social upheaval in Turkey's history.

Kornelia Binicewicz is a Polish DJ and record collector who works between Krakow and Istanbul. She is the founder of the Ladies on Records: 60s and 70s Female Music at [ladiesonrecords.strikingly.com](http://ladiesonrecords.strikingly.com).

## the playlist three songs from the Uzelli archive

**Sastim Kaldim**  
Gokhan Guney  
Aliscagim  
(Uzelli, 1982)

Guney was a hugely popular figure in Turkey's musical landscapes of the 1980s – beloved by truck drivers in particular. The music was mainly funk and psychedelic versions of arabesque.



**Manali Gozlerine**  
Esengul  
Beterin Beteri Var  
(Uzelli, 1975)

Esengul was a diva of gazinos (Turkish music halls) of the 1970s. *Manali Gozlerine* is a song with a latin, cha-cha vibe along with a classical Arabesque orchestral accompaniment.



**Darildim Darildim**  
Akbaba Ikilisi  
Darildim Darildim  
(Uzelli, 1979)

Akbaba Ikilisi were one of the most popular wedding bands for Turkish citizens living in Germany. This song encapsulates their groovy combination of electric guitar, percussion and vocals.

