

# CRITICAL DISTANCE

This album is the result of years of loving labor. Every note, rest, and chord arose from a place of careful reflection. Some of these melodies, like the main theme of “El Molino Viejo,” I began composing two decades ago. Most of the music, though, emerged in the last six years. I did not approach this project with a specific stylistic agenda. I simply tried to honor the music as it wanted to be expressed.

The album is called “Critical Distance” for several reasons. First, the diversity of styles that emerged in this music reflects the many places my family, in the last three generations, has called home. Despite the tragic circumstances of my family’s migration due to the Armenian Genocide and the Lebanese Civil War, we benefited from a preservation of our indigenous Armenian culture while interacting with the diverse musical styles prevalent in Armenia, Lebanon, Turkey, and the US. The “critical distance” our family travelled constitutes the stylistic DNA of this project.

Second, I composed this music during periods of personal searching and uncertainty. The music reflects those notes of longing, hope, and more. I feel immensely grateful for the opportunity to reflect an authentic aspect of my soul that transcends words. Critical distance between my self and this music is necessary to fully let go of and share these creations. Critical distance from these challenging moments in life allowed me, as well, to fully harness music as a tool to understand, express, and transcend the self.

-Raffi Joe Wartanian

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## APPALACHIATOLIA

A combination of the words *Appalachia*, the epicenter of bluegrass music, and *Anatolia*, a.k.a. the indigenous Armenian lands where my family lived for generations before the Armenian Genocide. With odd-time signatures and a flurry of interlocking styles, this piece combines the finger-pinking sensibilities often heard on a banjo with pivots into odd-meter flourishes heard in the Balkans and Black Sea Coast. Notably, this is one of the album’s two pieces in which the lowest string is tuned down to a B note (rather than the traditional E).

## BLUES IN O

For the album’s only composition on the oud — an ancient pear-shaped lute considered the “king of instruments” in the Middle East — I wanted to try performing in an unexpected style for the instrument. Growing up around Baltimore, the blues represented a comfort zone, and there’s something about the fretless oud that reminds me of blues slide guitar immortalized by the likes of Son House and Ry Cooder. This piece expresses that instruments, like people, can transcend the cultural stereotypes to which they’re often ascribed.

## DEPARTURE

This piece in “drop D” tuning starts with an homage to the taksim, an improvised opening often heard on the oud. The piece then evolves towards the Southern Hemisphere for a climactic passage before returning to the opening movement. The shifting styles evoke a sense of perpetual departure.

## A WHISTLE IN THE DESERT

I lived in Los Angeles while composing much of *Critical Distance*. The abundance of nature — mountains, deserts, water systems — was an endless source of inspiration. Visiting the nearby deserts in places like Joshua Tree provided a reminder of the inspiring feelings I’ve experienced in these spaces. *A Whistle in the Desert* is my desert song.

## NEVER FOREVER

A meditation on impermanence.

## MARINA

Dedicated to Marina Diza, an Argentinian family friend who migrated to Baltimore at the same time as my parents. Our families became close friends, and Marina helped raise me and introduced me to the richness of South American culture: tango, dulce de leche, and the romantic timbres of the Spanish language. Towards the end of her life, Marina was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer that prevented her from attending a surprise wedding anniversary I organized for my parents. When I called her to wish her well, she said she would soon stop taking chemotherapy in order to improve the quality of her life. She said she would feel better and want to visit with us and wish my parents a happy anniversary. Marina kept her word, and I was fortunate to be present during her visit and perform for her this composition, which at the time was untitled. She loved it so much that I told her I would name it in her honor. A few weeks after Marina’s visit, God called her home.

## SAN GABRIEL

I’m not a mandolin player, but I couldn’t resist picking up the instrument during a visit to a quaint cabin in Wrightwood, a small town in the San Gabriel Mountains overlooking Los Angeles. I tuned the strings until I could play something that sounded like music. Then I sat on the porch, looked at the surrounding ponderosa pines, and began to play. This composition is the result of what Wrightwood gifted my spirit.

## EL MOLINO VIEJO

This piece is dedicated to El Molino Viejo (The Old Mill), site of the oldest grain mill in the state of California. In 2015, I spent a few months living here with an incredibly generous friend. In the mornings, I would slip into the Spanish-style courtyard surrounded by pomegranate trees and compose. I began with something familiar, a little riff I explored when I first started to write songs in high school. This was the first of the ten compositions I created for *Critical Distance*. Back then, I was just trying to make something that sounded dynamic.

## SINGLE STEPS

After grading college, I walked across Spain, volunteered on a farm in Portugal, bicycled across the United States, and completed a fellowship in Paris. To track this journey, I started a blog called “Single Steps” based on the Confucian adage, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” As I began discovering this piece, I found that its engine became arpeggiated chords (plucking individual notes of a chord), which mirrored the process of stepping (with fingers). I have found that creating and living often happen with great effectiveness and joy when undertaken one step at a time.

## ESCAPE

While composing this piece, I frequently felt a deep sense of uncertainty. The opening melody, optimistic in character, was a reminder to my self to not lose hope, but to also not fear looking within that sense of disquiet. The middle sections emote that sensibility, before turning towards more odd-metered melodies as a hopeful cultural anchor (Armenians often played odd-meter) in the storm. This is the album’s second (of two) pieces in drop B, book-ending *Critical Distance* with a darker aural color that engages the depths of human experience.

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### **Track List**

1. Appalachiatria
2. Blues in O
3. Departure
4. A Whistle in the Desert
5. Never Forever
6. Marina
7. San Gabriel
8. El Molino Viejo
9. Single Steps
10. Escape

### **EQUIPMENT:**

Guitar - Esteve 5F

Oud - Najarian 1985

Mandolin - Eastman MD515CS

Recorded July 2019 at Riot Drum Studios in Tarzana, California

### **CREDITS:**

Compositions, Guitar, Oud, Mandolin, Producer - Raffi Joe Wartanian

Producer, Mixing Engineer, Bass - Jake K. Leckie

Percussion - MB Gordy

Textural Percussion - Jeremy Smith

Recording Engineer - Lucas Fehring

Mastering Engineer - Kevin Blackler

Album Art - Minás Konsolas  
Producers - Siran & Melkon Hajinazarian, Ani & Shant Kenderian  
Photograph - Anastasia Italyanskaya

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