

Process to Americanize Karagiozis

By Steve Frangos
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CHICAGO- In the early 1900s, as Greek sojourners first began arriving in large numbers to North America they brought their sense of humor with them. The venerable Karagiozis (also spelled Karaghiozis) puppet tradition found its way, not only to the new world, but also to commercial records virtually the day Greek records were made available. For those unfamiliar with this comedic tradition it involves puppet characters seen on a back-lite screen. A long established set of characters constitute the cast. Most often a lone puppeteer employs a specific type of humorous voice or accent to signal and underscore which character is being portrayed. This stereotyping of each character by their voice, if you will, speaks to a time when Greeks were in daily contact with a whole host of different peoples. Karagiozis is the lead figure and is very much in the tradition of the fool who can also be a trickster.

In 1923, the first known American-produced Karagiozis sketches were recorded. Within five years Greek-American performers, building solidly on this traditional Punch and Judy style of puppetry, expanded the format of this time-honored folk-art to accommodate the altered conditions being experienced, daily, by the newly arrived Greek immigrants. Surprisingly, many Greek-Americans still own these comedy records. I offer this review with record identification for those interested in dating these skits and their performers.

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Again, for these records to be commercial successes they had to address broadly experienced situations. So with Erotas ton Karagiozis we find a Greek immigrant who speaks some English trying to help Karagiozis woo an American girl by serving as translator (Panhellenion 323 B). The effort fails humorously and is but one of the many skits that feature a Greek who barely understand English trying to help another who most assuredly knows none.

Aside from Karagiozis himself two other puppet characters from this tradition found their way to American recording studios, Barba Yorgios and Zanetos. Barba Yiorgos (Uncle George), represents a crude villager from the mountains most often depicted as a shepherd who is totally uncontaminated by modern life. Zanetos, I have been told

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In October 1923, To Taxiði tou Barba Giorgiou (Ok 28006) was recorded in Chicago, Illinois. Haris Patrinos played all the characters with Nick Xeros on clarinet and Gust Damalas on the laouto. The various record producers involved must have expected immediate success since Patrinos and company recorded six Karagiozis skits on Ok Records and then another eight for the Columbia studios in Chicago.

In O Karagiozis sto Telefono, Haris Patrinos offers the country bumpkin aspect of Karagiozis as he makes one mistake after another trying to use the telephone to locate his recently shipped trunk (Columbia 56219-F A). Since the conceited Karagiozis will not admit (or does not realize) how bad his English is he keeps getting the wrong number. In the early 1920s, when one picked up the telephone an operator came on the line and you gave that person the number you wished to call. The humor results from all of Karagiozis' conversations with unsuspecting people who have nothing to do with his missing trunk. The climax occurs when Karagiozis somehow calls the fire department to his house to put out a nonexistent fire! As with the majority of the other Chicago recordings the humorous situations presented showcase ignorance of English and the resulting chaos of misinformation.

In March 1928, a variation on this theme was recorded at the Columbia Studios in New York City. As we hear on To Telegraphima (Ellino-Anglikos Dialogos) (Columbia 56102-F A) Karagiozis is making the attempt to write an English language telegram for a friend to send to America. The two performers, cited only as X. Gavoularilis and G. Kourkouklis, provide an incredible array of verbal mistranslations and confusion Karagiozis' sustained efforts which in the end only succeed in making



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The crucial point to remember with any commercial records produced anywhere is that they were issued for the sole purpose of making a profit. Consequently we are then led to questions related to audience. If a record is issued and no one buys it then it is has failed to resonate with a buying audience. Logically, then, those records genres and performers that see continuous release are popular with a specific audience. It is at this point that we can begin to ask questions related to why such popularity existed.

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by Greek-Americans, is the same figure known most often as Dionysius. This character is a self-styled aristocratic gentleman from Zakynthos who speaks with a heavy Ionian Greek dialect.

On O Barba Yiorghios sto Kastengari (Columbia 7036 FA) we find the venerable shepherd upon his very arrival to Ameriki. "Kastengari," (also Kastongari) is the Greek-American slang term for the Castle Garden processing station for all immigrants at Ellis Island. With Makis Patinos playing all parts as well as the mandolin, we hear how Uncle George is met and immediately offered a job as a street vendor. While the old shepherd is perfectly willing to be a vendor since he has never seen a banana before he makes various humorous attempts to sell his wares as long lemons.

In 1932, on O Tzanetos sto Radio (Orthophonic S-614 B) the intrepid (if hopelessly half-witted) Zanetos is host of his own Greek-American radio show. With Tetos Demetriades (1897/1901-1971) playing the islander we hear a fine example of a consistent feature found in Karagiozis style comedies recorded in North America. The jokes found on this record cannot be fully understood unless the listener also knows English. The lightening quick verbal misunderstandings can only make "sense" when the audience knows what the performer should have said.

As these comedy records grew in popularity it was inevitable that new and distinctly Greek-American characters would appear. None other than Tetos Demetriades, famed Greek singer and record producer, formed a troupe known as the Victor Comedy Company which issued a number of Greek comedic sketches under the RCA Victor record label. This troupe, in its fullest complement included Demetriades, his wife Vera Demetriades, Nontas Kon- togeorge, Christos Demetra-

copoulos, George Maraveas and a man cited only as Manoliskis.

On August 25, 1927 O Kyrios Kondofardos Prodoros ton Hydroponon (Mr. Kondofardos President of the Watermelon Society) was released with troupe members Tetos and Vera Demetriades, and George Maraveas (Victor 38-3121 A). Mr. Kondofardos, e.g. Mister Short and Stout, becomes a reoccurring character for this troupe and their recordings. Kondofardos is the president of a Greek-American social organization known as the Watermelon Society. The humor here is once again lightening quick satire. Kondofardos' efforts to speak katharevousa

from 1923 to 1965 for Greek audiences in North America. Unquestionably future research will clearly use the recordings of this comedy troupe as illustrations of the inherent conflicts and criticisms found with Greek America during this era.

As we have seen the comedy settings and mixture of languages to express this humor on these early recordings are entirely Greek-American. The unsuccessful efforts to speak English on the telephone, the mistakes made while attempting to send a telegram, the madcap errors while trying to woo an American girl and the demented linguistic inventions of a Greek villager trying to speak what he believes to be purist Greek.

As one might imagine various Greek and American academic researchers have studied and written about the Karagiozis puppetry tradition as it was and continues to be presented before Greek audiences. I have yet to see any writer let alone an academic even discuss these numerous Greek-American comedy recordings.

I believe this is due to the fact that Greek researchers and their American counterparts are continuing to impose their own preconceptions on what it means to be Greek in North America commercial recordings such as those mentioned here are simply ignored. Yet, when the Greek-American immigrants first felt most lost in the harsh world of Ameriki Karagiozis and his troupe instantly appeared on commercial records to lighten their mood through the magic of humor. And if we listen closely to these specific kinds of records more can be heard. From our perspective in history when we listen to Karagiozis and his friends as immigrants themselves we do not simply hear an imported comedic tradition but also solid examples of ethnic comedy as American social history.



e.g. purist Greek tot the assembled members of his society proves to be nothing but nonsense. A petty tyrant Kondofardos demonstrates, as the dialog continues, to also be a witless fool. Inevitably a fight breaks out and the meeting concludes. Here Demetriades is poking fun at the endless number of Greek fraternal organizations, then, found all across North America. As the ongoing records of the Victor Comedy Troupe report Demetriades did not take Greek-American foolishness lightly. Space simply does not allow for even a partial listing of the comedy records Greek-American performers and producers issued