

Café Aman Amerika: A Musical Tribute to

NEW YORK - "Ladies and gentlemen, the Greek hour is coming. Station WWWW, New York, Boston (Boston), Pitsivourgo (Pittsburgh), Clevela (Cleveland), Detroit, Sanfrantzisko (San Francisco). Ladies and gent-le-men, Mr. Tzanetos speaking. Today me produce to you important stuff. The tenor and the other bunch, they are going to sing the Greek song, his name is, "ΔΕ ΜΕ ΞΕΡΕΙΣ ΔΕ ΣΕ ΞΕΡΩ ΑΛΛΑ ΣΕ ΚΑΤΑΛΑΒΑΙΝΩ", rough translation is, "Me don't know you, you don't know me, but I love you just the same...et cetera, et cetera".

If you happened to be living in New York in the 1930's, you would have very likely heard the above clever satire, broadcast on one of the Greek radio programs. It is in fact a 1932 verbatim segment from Titos Demetriadis' radio show/satire, "Tzanetos on the radio".

Titos Demetriadis was a Greek immigrant producer, singer, actor and owner of the "Orthophonic Recording Company" in New York, responsible for most of the Greek American productions in America during the 1930s. This same segment was also used verbatim, as an original, authentic text introduction to the "Cafe Aman Amerika" CD, produced in 1995 in New York by "World Music", a Greek American-owned company, and a group of Greek and Greek American musicians.

The CD was meant as a tribute to the first Greek immigrants to America. I am thus truly honored to have been involved in this project, from its inception to its full completion, and I am no less pleased to write about it in this column. The story begins in 1993-94 when Michael Adam, a friend of mine, and producer of a radio show at

COSMOS FM in New York, met Dino Pappas (Konstantinos Papakonstantinou), a retired Greek American policeman from Detroit. Mr. Pappas was born in 1931 and since the age of 9, he was an avid collector of old and rare records and songs produced in America by the first Greek immigrants of the 1920s and 30s.

In 1994, his collection numbered nearly ten-thousand such recordings, and being keenly aware of their unique historical value, he was eager to find a way to keep and maintain them for the newer generations. He transferred several of these songs onto cassettes, gave them to Michael Adam and soon after, Michael and I were listening to the songs, truly moved by their obvi-

ous and undisputable historical value. The lyrics, the melodies, the stories, the themes, the self-satire and the "gringlish", English words turned into Greek by changing their ending, (i.e. strike=starki, club=klobi, cent=sentzi, chance=tsensi, roof=roofi, mistake=misteki, etc.), were all a true reflection of the life and hardships the first Greek immigrants had to cope with.

Moved and amazed, listening to these songs, our immediate and



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The passion and commitment of the musicians who created the Cafe Aman America CD are apparent in this photo of a recording session.

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the First Greek Immigrants in America



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Our next step was to search for musicians. Within a month or so, we had brought together a group of 10 individuals, an appropriate and necessary mix of first generation Greeks living in America, and several U.S.-born Greek Americans as well. I was designated the male vocalist of the group and my long time friend Anna Paidousi, the female vocalist. The band was named "Cafe Aman America" and everyone in it was thrilled and totally enthused about the project. We started rehearsing in November 1994, spent hundreds of hours in recording studios, in New York City, New Jersey and Staten Island, often until the early morning hours, made several promotional video clips, and finally in May of 1995 the "Cafe Aman America" CD became a reality and was formally released in New York. It contained fourteen carefully selected songs from the thousands in Dino Pappas' collection.

The most important criterion in selecting the songs was the lyrics, and more specifically the gringlish words in each song. Here are three

spontaneous reaction was: "They must be revived through a CD production." On the spot, we even came up with the title of such a CD. "Cafe Aman America" we said, "with a strong accent on the word "aman", as the pure sentiment of the word was most certainly felt and shared by Greek immigrants to America, for all the difficult times they faced during the first half of the 20th Century.

of the most characteristic ones included in the CD, in terms of their theme and gringlish content: "Giati Glyko Mou Sweet Heart": The love struck, singer laments over a girl who apparently does not reciprocate his amorous sentiments as he says: "...na vgenis date every night sto xanaleo black and white na sou zitao ena filaki kai na mou les pos ehis straki. Aaahh! Giati gliko mou sweetheart na me pligonis toso hard."

"To Misteki" (The Mistake), is a humorous gringlish song in which the singer imparts advice to young Greek American girls not to make the misteki (mistake) as Anna did, while taking a ride in the "parki"(park): "...ta cocktails kai i "bara" (bar) kai ta fluid-drive kara (cars) kai mia volta mes' to 'parki' ki'ena kleftiko filaki. Epi telous ena ride mes' ton kipo einai all right ma min prohori pareki na min pesis sto misteki...etc. "O Koumartzis (The gambler) is another very characteristic song commenting on a gambler's attempt to cheat, and yet still lose, playing "poka"(poker) at the "klobi" (club), a very familiar scene for Greek Americans. Other common gringlish words used in the song are: "tzokari" (Joker), "aseous bek-te-bek" (Aces back to back), "douses" (Deuces), "pati" (pot) and a few others.

Surprisingly, however, and despite its content, the Cafe Aman America CD never became widely known in the U.S. mainly because the producers hardly promoted it to Greek Americans. The group gave but one concert at the Hellenic Cultural Center of the Archdiocese in Astoria and just one concert in Toronto after an invitation by a local agent. On the other hand, it was enthusiastically accepted in Greece, where some of its songs

were adopted and sung by some well known Greek singers, perhaps because of their original theme and their fresh and unusual musical content. As a result, our Cafe Aman group was invited to Greece in 1997, where we gave several concerts, in Salonika as well as at the Herodion and Lekabettus theatres in Athens, with rave reviews by the media. During the same year, we were invited by the ministries of culture of Holland and Belgium and gave concerts in the symphony halls of Utrecht and Brussels. For our readers, I have provided a link to a performance of the song "To Misteki", as performed by the group at the Lekabettus theatre in Athens in 1997 (you might even recognize some of the performers: view it on our new website at: www.thenationalherald.com)

The front cover of the "Cafe Aman America" CD says: "Old songs of the Greeks of America as seen by their descendants". In my opinion, it is indeed a historically unique and well-deserved musical tribute to the first Greek Immigrants to America.

Be well and don't hesitate to contact us!

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