

# Remembering Stratakos, Early Jazz Musician

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CHICAGO- Ellis Stratakos was one of the earliest musicians to play the American created form of music now known as jazz. Starting as little more than a teenager Stratakos played as a trombonist in various bands and orchestras throughout his career. In time Stratakos headed his own orchestra touring back and forth throughout the Gulf States from Louisiana to Florida. A well accepted fact of Jazz history is that the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra in the late 1920s-early 30s was the house orchestra at the luxurious New Orleans' roof-top dance lounge the Jung Hotel. Stratakos is espe-

cially remembered, within the inner circles of jazz musicians and historians, as one of the earliest proponents of "sweet" and so (as the jazz musician's in-group slang has it) "hot" jazz. Jazz revival groups such as the New Orleans-based New Leviathan Oriental Fox Trot Orchestra proudly credit Stratakos and his Orchestra for a number of their recordings. Yet for all of this attention by musicians and jazz aficionados there is only scattered information about this musician in print and on surviving 78rpm records; we know next to nothing about the man. For the moment then all we can offer here is working biography of this notable musician based on this eclectic array of docu-

ments.

Greek-American historical studies also seem to inevitably involve of in questions related to family. Unexpectedly, for our survey here, during the time-period under review, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas were all states that Greek immigrants with the surname of Stratakos lived and worked. Given the broad array of news articles we must also assume that the residents of small towns and cities along the Gulf of New Mexico shore knew this wider cast of characters quite well. Teasing out Ellis Stratakos and his family of origin from this wider group requires a tight focus. Given the full arch of Ellis Stratakos' life we must also pre-

sent details of his life that will gain in importance as this account progresses.

On December 1, 1903, Ellis Stratakos was born in New Orleans, LA to Greek immigrant Louis George Stratakos (b. abt 1870) and Ernestine Enoul Livaudias (b. abt 1876). According to available records Louis Stratakos and Ernestine Livaudias were married in New Orleans on September 23, 1896. Louis Stratakos was born in a small village near Sparta. At some point in the early years of the last century young Stratakos inspired by enthusiastic letters from cousins in America left Greece for Galveston, TX. It was

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# Recalling Ellis Stratakos – Early Jazz Musician

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in Galveston that Stratakos learned the candy maker's trade. Always on the lookout for better prospects Stratakos moved to New Orleans where he married and where his three children were all born.

By 1909, the Louis Stratakos family moved to Gulfport, MS where his brother Nick was already well-established with a bustling fruit stand. Within three years Louis bought out his brother's interest in the business and began operating a combination fruit stand and confectionery store at 13th and 27th Avenues. Located right across the street from the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad (GSIR) building the Stratakos Candy Emporium thrived.

As a matter of course Louis Stratakos became friends with Captain Joseph T. Jones (1842-1916) the entrepreneur who not only owned the GSIR but was also the co-founder of the City of Gulfport and developer of its



lems with tracing Ellis Stratakos' musical career is that he had absolutely no problem with changing either his name, the name of his orchestra, and even share or give credit to someone else as the orchestra director. This flexibility is most certainly confirmed by news accounts of Stratakos' appearances up and down the Gulf shore coast. By 1925, Stratakos and his orchestra are appearing at the Riviera Pavilion as the Original Gulf Coast Jazzers.

How and why jazz developed in New Orleans are questions still being studied and debated. A point that is never disputed is that during the Roaring Twenties and well into the Great Depression the Gulf shore coastline hosted some of the most impressive resorts, hotels, night clubs and high-end restaurants in the nation. The climate favored these kinds of establishments and tourism helped support their existence. Consequently, musicians who could provide the latest in popular entertain-

seaport. A great friend and admirer of Captain Jones...[h]e rented part of Captain Jones' ice plant to use as cold storage for his fruit, and remembers how he packed around 25 big baskets of fruit every Christmas for Captain Jones, his wife and his daughter, which they personally distributed to needy Gulfport families (Gulfport News November 8, 1958)."

After only a few years operation a tremendous fire destroyed not only Stratakos' 27th Avenue store but several other nearby buildings. Undaunted Stratakos, raised nearly \$7,000 and established yet another candy store this time located at the corner of 27th Avenue and 14th Street. Around 1923, Stratakos moved, once again, this time to 2503 Fourteen Street a downtown Gulfport location where he remained for the next 35 years. As Greek-Americans are today recognized all across North America as owner/operators of restaurants back in the 1890s up until WWI, at least, they were known as confectioners. So embedded were these Greek candy and ice cream men in the average American's consciousness that when Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) published his 1920 award winning novel, "Main Street" of small town life the last business described as being on the square of every Main Street square in the nation was a Greek confectionery.

For nearly fifty years Stratakos arrived at his store at 5AM remaining often until 7:30PM. Here is how one local report recalls his presence: "There are old-timers in Gulf-

**Gulfport MI's fabled Markham Hotel, where Louis Stratakos was Grand Patriarch of the Grand Lodge of the Mississippi Odd Fellows' 100th annual meeting.**

port who will recollect how they used to stand fascinated as they watched Louis pulling 60 pounds of taffy at one time and skillfully and artistically blending the soft sweet smelling red and white strands (Gulfport News November 8, 1958)." Sometime in the mid-1930s, Stratakos discontinued the fruit business and concentrated on his candy business. For well over 25 years Stratakos' candies and especially his pecan pralines became much sought after by the local tourist trade.

We know from other kinds of reports that Louis Stratakos was socially also a person of consequence in Gulfport. On June 19, 1940, he was Grand Patriarch of the 100th annual meeting of the Grand Lodge of the Mississippi Odd Fellows (IOOF) hosted in Gulfport at the fabled Markham Hotel. As we know from reading Thomas Burgess' 1913 volume, *Greeks In America An Account Of Their Coming Progress Customs Living And Aspirations*, that many of the very early Greek arrivals gained prominence in their local communities by joining such fraternal organizations. In point of fact, if one visits the gravesites of this senior generation of Greek immigrants many are adorned with emblems and other markers noting their membership in such local and national organizations. Far from being a despised foreigner was

a much respected member of his community as his rank within the Gulfport IOOF illustrates. Again, just to note the obvious, this social standing extended itself to the enter Stratakos family. Louis Stratakos passed away in Gulfport in 1963 and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

Being from a notable Gulfport family various news accounts report on Ellis Stratakos' early life. In 1919, we hear that Ellis Stratakos is attending Jesuits College in New Orleans. In keeping with later fragmentary reports Ellis Stratakos had some musical background that with his college years led him to the new music of the times jazz. On April 20, 1919, we find that Stratakos is not only a member of the Gulfport Band but that he is playing the snare drum with this group at the local Elks Club. Murella Powell, a local historian for the Gulf shore region, reports that Stratakos on his return to New Orleans joins other aspiring white jazz musicians frequenting black jazz clubs to listen and learn this new genre of music. Ms. Powell, goes on to state that by 1921 Ellis Stratakos has formed his first band, the New Orleans Jazzers.

By late August 1922, Stratakos is back in Gulfport playing again at the Elks Club but this time the band is called Ellis Stratakos and his Dixieland Roamers of New Orleans. Unquestionably one of the prob-

ment were much sought after. Here is a 1926, news account of Ellis Stratakos and his orchestra just at the moment their careers are beginning. It offers some sense of the professional musicians' lifestyle and seasonal schedule of performances: "Ellis Stratakos and his Gulf Coast orchestra, under the direction of Bob Rice, are leaving Thursday for a tour of the mid-west states where they will play a series of concerts at various theaters and some dances. They will return to Gulfport for the series of coastal Christmas dances and then return to the road until the summer season opens on the Coast...The party plans to travel by car, three autos to be used by the orchestra. This group of Coast musicians, all of them professionals, have made a name for themselves as unusually fine jazz artists. They have just completed a successful season playing at the Buena Vista Hotel, Biloxi...The personnel of the Gulf Coast Orchestra (includes): Ellis Stratakos, son of Louis Stratakos of Gulfport, who plays the violin and trombone and directs the orchestra; Joe Fallo, piano; Tony Fallo, banjo; "Sock" Kahn, saxophone; Emanuel Nickelson, saxophone; Joe Sharkey, trumpet; Ben Dableu, drums...Mr. Stratakos is one of the most popular Coast musicians. He grew up here in Gulfport studying as a boy, latter going to Germany to study, and his playing adds greatly to the success of the orchestra (Biloxi Daily Herald November 18, 1926)."

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