

## Setting the Record Straight

By Steve Frangos

There is much more to the history of modern Greek music than the bouzouki. Greek records, when examined as historical documents, offer us an almost day-by-day outline of the lives of Greek immigrants in North America. Further, and here completely unsuspected, we can also hear what Greeks in Greece thought of Greek Americans. The history uncovered from these extremely popular commercial records often does not agree with academic accounts.

Greek immigrants have at times been presented as passive, pawns in the face of a monolith dominant culture, where this has not been the case. Greeks that have come with the various waves of immigration have directly influenced American society. In point of fact, in terms of popular American entertainment, Greeks, both as performers and promoters, have played a significant role in the nation's history.

In an effort to set the record straight on a number of musical issues, this survey will offer a selection from the broader field of Greek music produced in North America.

### Recorded Social History

The perils of immigrant life in North America were dealt with in song after song. So large are the collections of songs based on certain ills befalling the immigrants, that they comprise entire albums, as in the case of the



American Progressive Association (GAPA). Both organizations, as well as other fraternal and regional associations, had their own songs. For AHEPA and GAPA we find Ahepa Emvatirion (Ahepa March) by the Loukianos Cavadias Orchestra and Hymnos eis tin Gapa with Tetos Demetriades as principle vocalist and co-composer.

Unexpectedly, commercial records also document the tensions between the Greek American fraternal organizations and Greeks back in Greece. We need only cite three imported songs. In Den ton Thelo ton Ahepa, a hasapiko, Korinas Thessalonikias and K. Roukounas sing about the Ahepans who came to visit Greece on one of their periodic excursions in the 1930s. As the title conveys, the two lambast the visiting Ahepans, they do not praise them!

Mas Elthan e Ahepedes, with a male vocalist only identified as Koulouriotis, does, however, speak well of the visiting Greeks-Americans. On the B-side we hear yet another Greek American song, Ellinoamerikanides stin Ellada, with vocals this time by Angelopoulou and Koulouriotis.

### Unheard History

Topics, instruments and ideas not now attributed to Greeks anywhere in the world are found on these records beginning in 1896 and continuing right up to the present. Readily available Greek American records report on an amazing number of pressing social questions of the day. The tensions between not just Americans and Greeks but within the Greek community can also be heard. And the

certain ills betwelling the immigrants, that they comprise entire albums, as in the case of the compilation of songs on tuberculosis. An especially fine example from this genre is Yorgos Katsaros's *Mana Mou Eimai Fhisikos*, first recorded in 1935 (Columbia).

*Mana mou eimai fhisikos, mana mou exo ftisi*  
*Mother, I am consumptive, mother I've got consumption*

*Fila ton allo mou adelfo mana mou na mi kolisi*  
*Take care of my brother Mother so he doesn't catch it*

*S' aralimasmeno spilato tha'pa'na katoikiso*  
*In a cobwebbed cave I will go and live*

*Osotou na'lthei e stigmi mana na xepsihso*  
*Until the moment comes, Mother, to die*

*Poles manades klapsame as klapsei k'e diki mou*  
*Many mothers have cried let mine cry too*

*Sis Arizonas ta vouma as thapsei to kormi mou*  
*In the mountains of Arizona let her bury my body*

### Oriental Greeks

The first instance of bouzouki music ever recorded in New York City was in 1932 and 1933. The mysterious Yiannis Halikias, aka Jack Gregory on the label, recorded only four songs. Both records became not only immediate hits but enduring favorites as well: *To Mysterio* and *Minore tou Deke* both with Sophocles Mikelies on guitar in January 1932 and then *Raste ton Deke* and *Mourmoriko* in

### Yorgos Katsaros

1933. The famed Greek musician Yannis Papaioannou asserted that upon hearing Halikias's two records, he gave up the guitar and took up the bouzouki.

Greek immigrants also influenced local musicians. One of the many early American genres of dance music during the early decades of this century was the Oriental Fox Trot.

Rumors abound that this genre came about from American musicians listening to Greek immigrant music. While the origins of this dance craze are for the moment lost, researchers into Greek American recorded music need only listen to Efthimios Keros and his Hawaiian Orchestra, *Ellinika-Ellinikon Fox Trot*, with the flipside the tango *Modistroula (Dressmaker)*, were two of this orchestra's most popular releases.

Greek records *a la franka*, or European music as performed by Greek musicians, exist from the moment field agents for the major international record companies arrived in the port cities of the Greece and Asia Minor. Many genres such as *kantades*, tangos, and others were extremely popular. This is highly significant for the history of Greek American music, because the assumption that Greeks were merely playing these musical genres as another example of their assimilation into the dominant American culture is clearly incorrect. Not only did the Greek musicians have a long established tradition of playing and interpreting *a la franka* music, as the Oriental

fox trot and other examples illustrate, but Greek immigrant musicians were actually influencing American music.

### Fraternal Song

The significance of Greek fraternal organizations in North America is fundamental to any historical account, yet their anthems have remained obscure. Between 1900 to 1940 the two largest national organizations were the American Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (AHEPA) and the Greek

tions of the day. The tensions between not just Americans and Greeks but within the Greek community can also be heard. And the use of recorded music as a means of judging not assimilation but the continuance of Greek musical creativity in an American environment can be assessed.

From our point in history, the Greek immigrants living in North America between 1880 and 1920 can be understood, among other things, as constituting a major consumer market for Greek culture. Even from this brief survey, a treasure trove of records can be found reporting on how the music industry responded to the demands of this very influential market, and the impact it had in terms of cultural trends.

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