

# The Image of Greek Music in America

by STEVE FRANGOS

**A**cross America the most pervasive stereotype of Greeks is one that centers around music and dance. The blazing bouzouke player on his knees as the sensuous young belly-dancer drapes her veil over the head of a man in the audience are as much a part of the consciousness of contemporary America as any other popular image one could name. How did all these images become associated with Greeks in America?

From the early 1870s to the early 1890s a host of performers were influencing how Americans perceived all Greeks. It was Little Egypt and her fellow dancers - males as well as females - at the Chicago World's Fair who forever changed the popular American stereotypes formed during the 1821 War of Independence from the noble Grecians into the sensuous and mysterious Oriental Greeks.

The appearance of Greek "gypsy brass bands" in Boston soon after the Fair only helped establish these images all the more strongly. Quick to sense a new popular entertainment form carnivals, vaudeville acts, and a few successful silent films fixed these images forever into the subconscious of American popular culture.

Fascinating as these exotic stereotypes may be they do not really tell us much about Greek popular entertainment in the late 1890s and early 1900s. To learn more about what Greeks sought as entertain-



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In late 1916 or early 1917 Coula Antonopoulos entered the New York City studios of Columbia Records and conquered the Greek recording scene. Singing through a megaphone Mme. Coula recorded thirty-four songs. While we do not always know which instrumentalist played on each song we do know Athanacios Makedonas played the violi, Stelios Melas was the santouri player and Andreas Patrinos accompanied on lauto. Mme. Coula's first

female vocalist to have a marked rivalry with another popular singer, Marika Pagika. This was itself the first instance, anywhere, of a competition between top-selling Greek recording artists. For all these reasons and many others Madame Coula is most often referred to as the "first" and at other times "the best of the early" Greek female vocalists. In 1927, with the unexpected death of her beloved husband Andreas, Mme. Coula out of grief retired for a few years. Sometime in the late Depression she returned not to commercial recording but to a popular live performance career. In the late 1940s, Mme. Coula began a second recording career for a new record company she started called Panhellenic Records. No Greek musician, from the senior generation of musicians, ever started two independent record companies. While it is known that Mme. Coula recorded in Greek and Turkish how many songs she ultimately released and how many total records Panhellenic Record issued is not documented.

## May Her Memory Be Eternal

Madame Coula's phenomenal career poses a number of problems for the history of modern Greek music. First, how did this one singer in less than 25 years help propel Greek and Turkish record sales from essentially zero to at least 5th (and more likely 4th) in total record sales when the Greek immigrant population was no more than 13th? And secondly, why after all this unprecedented success did this singer vanish

prominent presence of a man in the refrains eventually earned these songs the genre name of amanes and the locations where they were performed cafe-amans. What one normally reads is that these cafe-amans emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century in the sea ports of Western Asia and the Aegean. What is not often discussed, in standard histories of modern Greek music, is that the overwhelming majority of the commercial recordings of the cafe aman style songs from approximately 1916 to 1926 came

reer of Madame Coula, known to her fans the world over as the Canary of Ameriki.

### The Canarini of Ameriki

Kyriaki Yiortzi Antonopoulos (circa 1880-1954) was the first internationally successful Greek female vocalist who made America her permanent home. Known simply as Madame Coula (Coula being the diminutive for Kyriaki) this one woman proved so popular that between 1916-17 and 1927 she recorded at least 199 individual songs. No other Greek female vocalist

song was Elenaki karsilamas (Columbia E3324). The unexpected and totally unprecedented success, in terms of overall sales, of just these records prompted all the major American record companies to immediately begin releasing Greek music.

### Cafe-Aman In Ameriki

The type of music Madame Coula and her compania recorded are the Greek Cafe Music or cafe-aman style songs. Aman is the Turkish word for mercy as in calling out for one's life to be spared or alas! The

from America. In Greece, after World War II, these same songs progressively became known by the term rebetika.

### First Diva of Greek Song

While Mme. Coula was not the first Greek female vocalist to record in America she was the first to be an unquestionable top-selling performer. Coula Antonopoulos is also the first female vocalist to record in Turkish. Mme. Coula's first vastly popular Turkish song was Kioutsouk Glastan Hiouzom a canto (Columbia E3388). That Mme. Coula was simultaneously the first top-selling female vocalist in both traditional Greek and Turkish music only adds to her lasting fame.

Far from a naive immigrant pawn in the hands of sophisticated American record company executives this First Diva of Greek song is also the first musician to own and perform for her own record company label, the Panhellenion Record Company of New York. Established sometime in the early 1920s Panhellenion was itself the first independent record label in America to exclusively issue traditional Greek and Turkish music.

Among Mme. Coula's many pioneering credits is the first mother and daughter duet in the history of modern Greek music. In June 1919 along with her daughter Paraskevi, Coula recorded Kamariera (Panhellenion 7000). For the eighteen year old Paraskevi this is also the very first documented occasion that a child of a Greek immigrant musician recorded on a family owned label.

Madame Coula was also the first Greek

from the collective memories of Greeks in America?

The first question is easily answered. From 1891 to 1900 only an estimated 15,979 Greeks immigrated to America. By 1910 the number had increased to a total of 183,498. By 1916-1917 these men certainly would have been ready for anything that would remind them of home. So when Madame Coula recorded her Greek and Turkish songs there were more than enough potential listeners in virtually every big city in America.

Greek and Turkish musicians and lovers of these musical genres have never truly forgotten Mme. Coula's music. But it is equally true that, today, the majority of Greeks do not know a great deal about the role of Greek musicians in America in the history of modern Greek music and dance.

Re-discovering Madame Coula's career is critical to any future understanding of the history of Greek and Balkan musical traditions in the United States. American popular culture in urban areas since the 1880s can be said to be that of exchange between indigenous American society and the traditional artforms immigrants brought with them to the new world. Mme. Coula 1916 to 1917 records proved so successful they began an unprecedented chain-reaction in the recording of traditional and popular Greek music in America that not only helped to launch the careers of many musicians but also preserved whole genres of traditional music from the Balkans and Anatolia. Her legacy is long and impressive. We can only hope that this brief essay draws more attention to the career and music of the First Diva of Greek song.

ΔΙΣΚΟΙ ΦΩΝΟΓΡΑΦΩΝ

Η Κα Κουλα

ΠΑΝΗΛΛΗΝΙΩΝ  
TRADE MARK  
RECORDS  
REGISTERED U.S. PATENT OFFICE

ΠΡΟΤΙΜΑΤΕ ΠΑΝΤΟΤΕ ΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΝ ΕΤΑΙΡΙΑΝ