

# The Kanarini Of Ameriki: Madame Koula

**By Steve Frangos**

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Kyriaki Yiortzi Antonopoulos was the first internationally successful Greek female vocalist who made North America her permanent home. Known simply as Madame Koula (Koula being the diminutive of Kyriaki), this woman proved to be so popular that between 1916-17 and 1927, she recorded at least 199 individual songs. No other female vocalist of Greek heritage in North America made or sold as many records during this same period.

In late 1916 or early 1917, Koula Antonopoulos (circa, 1880-1954) entered the New York City studios of Columbia Records and conquered the Greek music scene in North America. Singing through a megaphone, Madame Koula recorded 34 songs. While we do not always know which instrumentalist played on each song, we do know Athanasios Makedonas played the

# Madame Koula: The Kanarini of Ameriki

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violin; Andreas Patrinos was on laouto (a type of lute); and Stelios Melas played the santouri (a string instrument which looks like a keyboard).

Although the santouri is not present on all the Columbia recordings. Xenophon Mitchell, Koula Antonopoulos' grandson, contends that Koula's husband, his maternal grandfather Andreas Antonopoulos also played the laouto on some of these Columbia songs. Madame Koula's first song was Eleni Karsilamas (Columbia E3324).

Unexpectedly, it is only when one actually listens to Madame Koula's first Columbia records that you learn she is not singing alone. Many of these early songs are more choral rather than individual renditions. As it was explained to me, the recording was meant to mimic the club conditions in which Koula performed. Unlike other Greek records available during this early period, Madame Koula's records showcased the singing of audience mem-

and the displacement of millions of people, the recordings first made and distributed throughout the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean are now rare items. Curiously, the recordings made in the United States by traditional performers or imported from abroad often offer a clearer picture a whole variety of rare recordings than anywhere else in the world. The failure of academics to publicly acknowledge this fact rests squarely with the uncomfortable reality that Greek Americans would have such cultural artifacts which can not now be found in the nation state of Greece.

While Madame Koula was not the first Greek female vocalist to record in North America, she was the first to become an unquestionable top-selling performer. Koula Antonopoulos is also the first female vocalist to record in Turkish. Madame Koula's first vastly popular Turkish song was Kioutsouk Glastan Hiouzom, a canto (Columbia E3388).

That Madame Koula was simul-

**ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΙ ΔΙΣΚΟΙ ΦΩΝΟΓΡΑΦΩΝ**

ΠΡΟΤΙΜΑΤΕ ΠΑΝΤΟΤΕ ΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΝ ΕΤΑΙΡΙΑΝ

Θα εδρετα υδουνη κλωστων ελλησων ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΩΝ ανθρωπων. Κλωστων, Ζελεστων, Νεφωστων, χρωσ, και κωδω τραγωδιων της Ανωκευαυνησ Ανωκευησ μας παστωσ και της νεωτερωσ Ελλωστικωσ σφωρεσ.

Τωστωσ ανωκευησ Εθνωστικωσ Σωρεσ και Ένωκευηστικωσ κω σωφωγισ.

Ενς κωστωσ υδωσ Στωστωσ μας θ' ανωκευησ υδωσ κωλλωστωσ μας εν Αμερικη ε εθνωστωσ υδωσ κωστωσ ε εδρεστωσ των Εθνωστων μας εθρωστωσ εν ελλησ.

**ZHTEATE TON TIMOKATALOΓON MAΣ**  
**Panhellenion Phonograph Record Co., Inc.**  
 MAIN OFFICES  
**653-8th Avenue, New York**  
 Phone Longacre 788

Madame Koula was the first internationally successful Greek female vocalist who made North America her permanent home.

brief conversation, the stranger

ing artists. For all these reasons (and many others), Madame Koula is most often referred to as the "first," and at other times, "the best of the early" Greek female vocalist in North America.

In 1927, with the unexpected death of her beloved husband Madame Koula, out of grief, retired for several years. Sometime during the late Depression, Madame Koula returned not to commercial recordings, but to touring the country giving live performances.

In the late 1940's, Koula Antonopoulos began a second recording career for her second record label, the Panhellenion Record Company. Once again, no Greek musician from the senior generation of musicians ever started two independent record companies in North America. While it is known that Madame Koula recorded in Greek and Turkish for her new label, how many songs she ultimately recorded and how many total records were released by Panhellenic Records is not known.

Unaccountably, academics

available during this early period, Madame Koula's records showcased the singing of audience members as they accompanied her performance.

The unexpected and totally unprecedented success – in terms of overall sales – of just these 34 songs prompted all the major American record companies to immediately begin releasing Greek music with an eye to capture part of this new market.

**FIRST DIVA OF GREEK SONG IN NORTH AMERICA**

Madame Koula and her company recorded songs of virtually every traditional and popular Greek genre. To-

Glastan Hiouzom, a canto (Columbia E3388).

That Madame Koula was simultaneously the first top-selling female vocalist in both traditional Greek and Turkish music only adds to her lasting fame.

Far from a naïve immigrant pawn in the hands of sophisticated American record company executives, Madame Koula is also the first Greek immigrant musician to own and perform on her own record company label, the Panhellenion Record Company of New York. Established sometime after World War I, Panhellenion was itself the first independent record label in North America to exclusively issue traditional Greek and Turkish music.

America her permanent home.

brief conversation, the stranger handed Andreas his embossed card requesting that the couple visit him that same evening. The two accepted the invitation, which was to the fabled Shepherds Hotel. The stranger turned out to be the general manager. After a lavish dinner, Koula and Andreas were asked to go on stage. Koula sang to Andreas' accompaniment on the laouto. They were hired instantly. It was the general manager who, in his nightly introduction of Koula, first referred to her as a "kanarini (canary)."

Aside from a treasured family recollection, Xenophon Mitchell always stresses that it was his grandparent's accumulated savings, first made in Greece and Egypt, coupled with sales revenue from the first Columbia Records sales, which collectively funded their venture into Panhellenion Records. Andreas Antonopoulos commissioned a canary sitting on a record as Panhellenion Records' official trademark logo. In the late 1920's, the main offices of the Panhellenion Phonograph Record Company were located at 635 Eighth Avenue.

Among the many pioneering credits due Madame Koula and her

tal records were released by Panhellenion Records is not known.

Unaccountably, academic refuse to study the documented history of Modern Greek music. The writings one sees about "rebetika" have absolutely nothing to do with what Greeks and assorted other musicians were actually performing, releasing on commercial record or even where these records were being distributed. "Rebetika" is an invented category drawn from a 1984 article by Dr. Stathi Gauntlett. A largely arbitrary array of specific laika songs and assorted others, which were never a part of the rebetika or Smyrnaika (song from Smyrna) musical traditions, became lumped together as the new "rebetika."

**GREEKS IN AMERICA INFLUENCED GREEK MUSIC**

I contend that the reason for the altering of Modern Greek music is because Greeks in North America and not Greece would often have to be the very center of any factual history of Modern Greek music. A producers of music genres centered in Greece, and as consumers of imported commercial record from Greece, Turkey and other areas of the Balkans, Greeks in North America directly influenced music in the nation state of Greece.

Outside of Modern Greek Studies, numerous writers have documented that the popular music of North America was influenced and changed by the infusion of musical traditions brought by the massive waves of immigrants who arrived in this country between roughly 1880 and 1920. How Greek music



day, this First Diva of Greek song in North America is most remembered for her Greek café music or Café-Aman style records. Aman is the Turkish word for "mercy," as in calling out for one's life to be spared, which also conveys the notion of "alas." The prominent presence of aman in the refrains eventually earned these songs the genre name, "amanes," and so the locations where they were performed café-amans. These café-amans emerged during the second half of the 19th Century in the seaport towns of the Aegean and Western Anatolia.

Towards the end of the 19th Century, employees of record companies from Berlin and Paris first recorded traditional Greek, Armenian and Turkish music in Constantinople and Smyrna. Records of these musical traditions were then sent back and sold throughout Greece, the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern Mediterranean in general. As far as available public documents can now report the vast majority of the commercial recordings made between 1916-17 and 1926 were recorded in the United States.

Given the destruction of wars

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When discussing his grandparent's life and business ventures, Xenophon Mitchell is always careful to stress their early years together in Patras, Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. Mitchell recalls family stories which relate various experiences of the newly wed Antonopoulos couple. One such story involves when the couple was forced to elope to Cairo.

Not long after their arrival, Andreas Antonopoulos arrived home one day to find a horse-driven carriage parked outside his residence. The gentleman inside said he had heard beautiful singing from someone inside. Andreas knew immediately that the man had heard his wife singing. At the end of their

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Panhellenion Record Company is the first mother and daughter duet in the history of Modern Greek music in North America. In June 1919, along with her daughter Paraskevi, Koula recorded Kamariera (Panhellenion 7000). For the 18-year-old Paraskevi Antonopoulos, this is also the first documented occasion when a child of a Greek immigrant musician recorded on a family-owned label.

Madame Koula is also the first Greek female vocalist to have a marked rivalry with another popular singer in North America, Marika Papagika. This was itself the first instance anywhere of a competition between top-selling Greek record-

figures into this wider transformation has as yet to be determined.

Madame Koula Antonopoulos' career offers a number of insight into the largely unexplored history of Modern Greek music in North America. First, how did this on-singer, in less than 25 years, help propel Greek and Turkish record sales in North America from essentially zero to at least fifth (and more likely fourth) in total record sales when the Greek immigrant population was no more than thirteenth according to the 1930 United States Census report.

From 1891 to 1900, only an estimated 15,979 Greeks immigrated to North America. By 1910, the number had increased to 183,498. By 1922, over half a million Greek had arrived on American shores. That Greeks in North America influenced the production of commercial record production in Greece is undeniable, unless you are an academic who wants to impress his or her ivory-tower colleagues with the fantasy of rebetika.

Rediscovering Madame Koula's career is critical for any future understanding of the actual history of Greek, Balkan and Ottoman Music in the United States.

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