

Dancers of the Early 20th Century

By Steve Frangos ^{1/19/08}
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PART ONE

During the 1960s and 1970s, whenever friends or relatives came from out of town, my parents would take them to Chicago's New Greektown. In that era, a new Greektown reappeared almost overnight with stylist nightclubs and restaurants lining the intersections of Lawrence, Broadway and Lincoln Avenues. Today, not even one Greek-owned night club remains in the area.

With the favorable changes in American immigration laws after 1964, this neighborhood blossomed, for a brief period, into a recognized center of Greek performance. Newly arrived Greek immigrants flooded into the area, making the nearby St. Demetrius Greek Orthodox Church, for a time the largest parish in Illinois, some claimed even the nation.

Unquestionably a significant part of the mystique and appeal of these new clubs was the dancing, particularly the belly dancing. Accompanied by bouzouki-playing

TERRACE CASINO Montrose Hotel — Chicago	DANCE RECITAL Lida Alma and Yianni Fleury	Sunday, September 19, 1948 at 8:00 P. M.
ORCHESTRA \$5.00		
Est. Price	4.00	
Tax	.25	
TOTAL	\$5.00	

Ticket from a dance recital starring Yianni Fleury and Lida Alma.

faster than a laser beam, these young (and not so young) women were somehow both exotic and not offensive for family entertainment. The main evening shows in these clubs began to take on an international flavor, with singers performing in a host of languages. Then two dancers would be introduced and for ten minutes or more present an incredibly elaborate choreographed dance routine. As far as I could discern these teams drew upon elements and movements of ballroom, tango, apache, and other popular dance styles. With the flashy finish of the dance duo the belly dancers would appear and the rest of the evening was developed to their interactions with the audience and the bouzouki orchestra.

At the time, it struck me as incredibly out of place to see this, for lack of better phrase, Hollywood-style of dancing at these decidedly Greek clubs. But that was before I began to look deeper into the back issues of Greek American newspaper and magazines.

Since nearly the very first mo-

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ment Greeks see description in American news accounts dancing is reported. What has yet to be identified is the news report of the first professional Greek dancer. Clearly there was some extended interaction between ethnic Greek dancers and those American or European dancers who followed the Isadora Duncan style of Greek dance. Unlike any other ethnic group arriving in North America between 1870 and 1924 Greeks faced this prior understand of Greek culture and history held and very often created by native-born Americans. Popular culture studies then, offer us insights into the exchanges between Greek immigrants and native-born Americans no other ethnic group has ever encountered.

For the moment from the 1920s onwards it is easy to locate Greek American dance teams in clubs, vaudeville theatres, and concert halls all across the nation. As published sources report professional dancing was especially popular during the 1930s among the American born children of Greek immigrants. Aspiring Greek-American brother and sister acts were frequently featured at Greek sponsored performances around the country. The emphasis Greek immigrant parents placed on the advancement of their American born children through the arts is seen in fictional accounts written by Greek Americans such as Harry Mark Petrakis but never in standard historical accounts. Struggling, mute immigrants with their self-conscious children working to be more American than Americans is the only scenario offered by these consensus academics. Does this sound how you grew up?

As we shall see even in this all too brief survey more than enough examples exist for a serious reconsideration of how Greek immigrant notions of the arts influenced the community we live in today.

The popular dance teams were undoubtedly inspired by the array of solo dancers, and in fact, many of these team members started out as solo performers. No less a figure than Hermes Pan is said to have begun his career with his sister as a team dancer.

A surprising number of Greek dancers and teams performed at New York City's Radio Music Hall. Located in New York City's Rockefeller Center this hall derives its name from one of the complex's first tenants, the Radio Corporation of America. For those not aware of the historical significance of this

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PARIS MESTUSIS — JOAN VALERIE
Direct from World Tour Hollywood and Broadway
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A flyer for the notable dance team of Paris Mestusis and Joan Valerie. The two dancers were the center piece for elaborate stage-shows involving 40 performers, two orchestras and a huge supporting cast.

venue when the Radio Music Hall opened on December 27, 1932 its seating of 5,933 made it the largest theater in the world at the time. The Hall's Great Stage, alone, measures 66.5 feet deep and 144 feet wide. The goal of this theatre was to initiate a return to high class variety entertainment. Appearing at the Radio City Music Hall was seen as the very pinnacle of stage performance in North America well into the 1970s.

Mario and Floria were a popular team who, in the very late-1930s, appeared regularly at New York City's St. Regis Hotel at 55th Street and 5th Avenue. Mario's real name was Demetrius Papadopoulos. Billboard described Mario and Floria as, "one of the greatest dance teams performing in this country." Aside from their performances at the Regis, Mario and Floria also frequently appeared at the Radio Music Hall.

This rise to prominence did not happen overnight. Mario began his professional career in 1930, in the face of great protests from his fa-

ther, who had other plans for his talented son. It was not until 1935 that Mario, with his new partner, Floria, became one of the busiest dance teams in the field. The team appeared frequently in high society social clubs, theatres, and hotel ballrooms both in the United States and abroad. The couple married in 1941. Mario whose parents hailed from Kefalonia was born in New York City. His father was the Reverend Papadopoulos, for many years pastor of New York City's St. Gerasimos Greek Orthodox Church.

George and Jalna (Toregas) were another top-notch dance team. Some indication of their performers at New York City's fabled Empire Room of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The grace and obvious talent of George and Jalna can be seen in DVD's of "Born to Dance" (1936) they dance to Virginia Bruce singing "I've Got You Under My Skin." The team only stopped dancing for the "silk hat and society damsel" set when their son George

he 1920s Through the 1960s

was born. Just around this time the Toregas family opened an elite night club in Washington DC named, aptly enough, the Jalna Club, at Vermont and K Streets.

Margaret James (Xenakis), a native of New York City, was a dancer and actress who appeared in a number of Broadway musical comedies, such as 'Panama Hatties.' In 1943, James married Teddy Powell, a popular orchestra leader and composer of the era. James went on to appear in two MGM productions, 'Two Sisters from Boston' (1946) and 'Holiday in Mexico' (1946). Following her initial work in film, James sang with the Xavier Cugat band.

Another of the fine dance teams were Pierre and Temple. Pierre Charish came from the extremely successful Charish family of 12 dancers who toured the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As just one example of how the American public responded to this family of dancers we need only note that officials of St. Louis once awarded the group the keys to the city.

Among other popular dancers worth noting are Pothoula

Canoutas, daughter of "the Father of Greek American history," Seraphim G. Canoutas (1874-1944), who in the 1940s is reported to have been "a concert dancer of repute" receiving a gold medal from the Chalif School of Dancing and Irene Zambellis, mentioned in the New York City Greek arts documents of the Works Projects Administration which report that she was an extremely popular dancer who appeared frequently at Radio City Music Hall, but reports little else.

These solo Greek dancers were not strictly from America. In 1947, "Loukia," who was "a versatile and electrifying Grecian dancer of the Royal Theater and Royal Opera of Athens" toured the country. She "was favorably received in her first appearance at the Carnegie Chamber Hall...This charming Athenian plans to appear in many communities and already has a full calendar for the next season."

Least anyone think that these teams were simply headliners at plush late-night supper clubs, the careers of Paris Mestusis and Joan Valerie should be mentioned. While certainly a noted dance team, they also managed a large-

scale traveling show. The two dancers were the center piece for elaborate stage-shows involving 40 performers, consisting of two orchestras and supporting cast dancers in their complex chorodramas. The team presented an array of dances and "choreographic creations with tempestuous moods," including "Spanish, Argentinean, Oriental, and Greek folk and Classic dances and songs."

How often these Greek dancers and dance teams performed exclusively for Greek audiences in American venues has yet to be determined. Living memory has it that noted solo dancers and dance teams were common entertainment. As a case in point Mestusis and Valerie headlined one of their choreographic extravaganzas in Chicago. On October 15, 1944 at the Eighth Street Theatre the couple hosted one of their high energy dance shows.

Many will say I have not mentioned the most prominent of the professional Greek dancers and dance teams of the 1920s through the 1960s. Others await our review and even then I cannot claim to have identified them all.

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