

Dispelling our Notions about Who Is Greek And Who Isn't

By Steve Frangos

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All my life, I have heard one famous person after another identified as someone who is "really a Greek." Every few years, the names change, but the underlying idea remains the same: Someone famous is also a Greek.

Few of these persons were or are, in fact, of Greek ethnic origin. As a public service, and to remove these names from the records of "Greek Celebrities" all across the World Wide Web, I will offer my own alphabetical listing of a select few of these mythical Greeks.

It necessary to point out that, simply because Euro-American sources can not distinguish between Greeks of different time periods, this does not automatically mean we have to maintain this cockeyed custom. Okay, Plato is famous, but is he famous in the same sense as George Tenet? Perhaps what all these lists of famous people are suggesting is the modern notion of celebrity status.

Taking this to be the actual meaning of all the "Most Famous" lists, I am restricting the names here, with an occasion exception, to those born after 1900.

So, let the naming begin.

Jim Backus. Jim Backus was born on February 25, 1913 in Cleveland, Ohio. He was a radio, television, movie and voice actor. Among his most famous roles are those of the voice of Mr. Magoo and the millionaire, Thurston Howell III on the fabulously popular "Gilligan's Island." Perhaps because of his Greek sounding last name Backus was, for many years, said to be of Greek lineage. This

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has never been proven.

Jimmy Durante. Another performer of the old school, James Francis Durante (1893-1980), the popular comedian, composer, actor, singer and songwriter ("Inka Dinka Doo"), was actually of Italian descent.

George Halas. George Stanley Halas (1895-1983), nicknamed "Papa Bear," was born in Chicago, Illinois to a family of Czech immigrants. Halas had an incredibly varied career in American sports as a player, coach, owner and pioneer of professional football, having led many of the great Chicago bears teams of old to multiple (pre-Super Bowl) National Football League championships.

Teri Hatcher. This noted American actress who was born on December 8, 1964 in Sunnyvale, California. She first gained attention for her role as Lois Lane in the television series "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman." I wish someone could prove she is Greek. Currently, Teri Lynn Hatcher has renewed her fame, and some would say surpassed all previous work, by starring in the smash hit series, "Desperate Housewives." Hatcher's father was a nuclear physicist, and her mother was a computer scientist. Both her parents are reported to be of English descent.

George Lucas. George Walton Lucas, Jr. (born 1944), the producer of the epic "Star Wars" science fiction films, also known on Greek Internet chat groups as "Georgios Lukakis," has nothing linking him to Greeks except the briefest of citations in John Brademas' book, "Washington, D.C. to Washington Square" (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, New York: 1986). There, on page 214, we find "the filmmaker George Lucas" listed along with other Greek American notables. In a book otherwise jammed to the rafters with names, dates, recollections of conversations and all the rest, this is all Dr. Brademas, the first American born Greek elected to the United States Congress, says concerning Lucas. The deeply involved Greek American reasoning about why George Lucas "must be Greek" is far too complex to be dealt with here. One example should stand for all the rest: Chewbacca ("Chewie"), the seven-and-a-half-foot tall Wookiee and co-pilot of Han Solo's ship, the Millennium Falcon. In Chicago Gringlish (combination of Greek and English), the term for a low-class loser is "chewtobakis (i.e., tobacco-chewing person)." The Greek American logic here is that Lucas knows this term and so named a large hairy ape-like creature to

caricature low-class Americans. That Chewie is actually a hero-figure somehow escapes Gringlish name-association, so unless more can be found linking him to Greeks in North America, then George Lucas is just another individual some would like to think is Greek when he most probably isn't.

Mickey Mantle. For many years, I was assured that Mickey Charles Mantle (1931-1995) was, in fact, born Michalis



Is supermodel Cindy Margolis Greek? Steve Frangos says none of her official or unofficial websites make any reference to her ethnic background.

Maniates. This is not at all the case, of course. The Mick, one of Major League Baseball's all-time greats, was born in Spavinaw, Oklahoma. While Mickey may be Bob Costas' (and Billy Crystal's) all-time favorite baseball player, there is no indication whatsoever that this fabled Yankee star is of Greek ancestry.

Cindy Margolis. Like Teri Hatcher, I really wish someone could prove Cynthia D. Margolis (born on October 1, 1965) is Greek. The supermodel was named Yahoo! Internet Life Magazine's "Queen of the Internet" from 1996 to 1999. She also

found her way into the 2000 Guinness Book of World Records as a result of being the "most downloaded" person in 1999. The record was 70,000 times in a span of 24 hours (wikipedia.com). There are said to be 120,000 unofficial and illegal Cindy Margolis websites supported and viewed solely by fans. But with all that electronic traffic circling this individual, I could not find any consistent reference to her being of Greek descent.

Julianna Margulies. Julianna Luisa Margulies, actress on the series, "ER," was born on June 8, 1966 in Spring Valley, New York. She is the daughter of a former dancer in American Ballet and her father was an advertising writer. As a child, Margulies lived in New York, France and England. Her parents were of Jewish origin, though Margulies' mother converted to Roman Catholicism at some point in her life and raised Julianna in the Catholic tradition also. Now there are certainly actors and actresses like Hank Azaria, Gabrielle Carteris, or even Neve Campbell who are of Sephardic descent. Perhaps Margulies falls into this group, but there is no readily available evidence confirming this connection.

Tom Mix. The world famous cowboy film star, Tom Mix (1880-1940) is yet another mythical Greek Americans. Mix was an American film actor and the star of many early Western movies. He made a reported 336 films between 1910 and 1935, all but nine of them silent features. In the process, he became Hollywood's first larger-than-life Western megastar, and defined the genre for all actors which followed (www.wikipedia.com). Then an article by Milt Hinkle, "Swashbuckler Tom Mix," appeared in The West magazine (July-August 1967). As writer Gene Bell observes, Hinkle's tall tale starts out with, "No man ever lived who more thoroughly defied psychoanalysis than Thomas Arthur Leventhau, later to be known as Tom Mix. His father was a mixer of Jewish, Italian and French Canadian extraction. Elizabeth, his mother, was of gypsy descent. Tom's birthplace was not far from Dubois, Pennsylvania; his birth date about 1878 or '79. Tom was about two years old when his father died. His mother then married Ed Mix, a Greek cab driver of horses who worked for John E. DuBois in 1889." Where Hinkle gathered his information has never been learned, but writers and Mix mythmakers repeated this legend for the next 20 years. Bell continues, "The truth is that Tom Mix was born January 6, 1880 at Mix Run near Driftwood, and not far from Dubois, Pennsylvania. His mother was Elizabeth

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Hiestand Mix, a small woman of Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry. Tom's father was Ed Mix, a tall, broad-shouldered man of Irish/English extraction." My source of information is the hardcover book, "Tom Mix," written by Paul E. Mix and published in 1995 by McFarland & Company. Paul Mix, a relative of Tom Mix, has done extensive research on the life and legend of Tom Mix and his family genealogy. Other sources of information include "Portrait of a Superstar" by Dr. Richard Seiverling, "The Tom Mix Book" by M.G. "Bud" Norris (www.classicimages.com/1996/april/tommix.shtml), and my own research.

George Romero. Individuals who I greatly respect have assured me that George Andrew Romero, born on February 4, 1940 in New York City, the acclaimed director, writer, editor, actor and composer is of Greek heritage. Romero is best known for his zombie-theme horror movies such as his 1968 classic, "Night of the Living Dead." His films are said to be a shaded commentary on contemporary society. There are any number of websites on Romero and his career. None of the sites I surveyed referred to this man's ethnic background.

Andy Serkis. Andy Serkis, the award-

winning actor who played the nefarious Gollum in Peter Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, is not of Greek background. He is of Turkish and Armenian extraction.

Karen Sillas. Karen Sillas is another high-profile actress who is frequently said to be of Greek descent. As one can find on the www.karensillas.com website, Sillas is an accomplished performer known for a variety of eclectic roles on stage, in films as well as on television. She was born on June 5, 1965 Brooklyn and is married to actor Peter Stormare. Again, with literally hundreds of websites providing information on this particular actress, none of those I surveyed offered any suggestion that she is of Greek ancestry.

Gwen Stefani. My cousin, Lynn Pappas, was absolutely convinced that Gwendolyn Renee Stefani is Greek. Stefani was born in Anaheim, California on October 3, 1969, to parents Dennis and Patti Stefani. Her father is Italian, and her mother is English/Scottish.

Johnny Unitas. John Constantine Unitas (1933-2002) was one of the greatest professional football players of all time. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he is considered by many to have been the best quarterback to ever play the game, having led the NFL's Baltimore Colts to several championships, to include the sudden death, overtime 1958 Championship, still considered by purists to be the "Greatest Game Ever Played." Johnny's father died when he was just five years old, and he was raised by his Lithuanian immigrant mother, who worked two jobs to support the family. With a career which traversed three decades (1950's, 1960's and 1970's), Unitas was NFL's most valuable player in 1957, 1959 and 1964, and led the Colts to a 16-13 victory against the Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl V.

Here, it should be noted that Lithuanians are commonly mistaken for Greeks. Two other Lithuanian-Americans often mistaken for a Greek are **Anthony Kiedis** of the Red Hot Chile Peppers and **Robert Lee Zemeckis**. Zemeckis was born on May 14, 1952 and is a movie director, producer and writer of considerable accomplishment.

As far as available documentation reports, none of the persons mentioned in this article have any degree of kinship to Greek families. The only connection these individuals have with Greek Americans is in the realm of urban legends.

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The late Johnny Unitas of the NFL's old Baltimore Colts, arguably the greatest quarterback ever to play professional football, was of Lithuanian origin.