

# Greeks and Popular American Song

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For nearly two hundred years Americans have raised their voices in song and danced the night away to popular music whose central theme and only subject is none other than the Modern Greeks. Since no one expects Americans to sing of Greeks, let alone to dance in their honor, the array of popular songs composed with Modern Greeks in mind have never been systematically studied and compared.

I offer here a selection of those songs, undoubtedly there are many many more.

When news of the Greek War of Independence reached American shores, the subsequent public outcry known as 'the Grecian Fever' caused not only hundreds of Americans to join the Greeks in battle but literally thousands more to sing and dance to Greek Liberty. 'Greek Aires' as a distinct genre became popular not only in North America but Great Britain.

Long before Greek immigrants came ashore native-born Americans were singing around the piano and making the floor boards bounce to these tunes.

Scholars have long recognized that American poets sought to champion the Greek Cause. Poets such as William Cullen Bryant, composed "The Massacre of Chios", "The Song of the Greek Amazons", "The Grecian Partisan", "The Conjunction of Jupiter and Venus", and "The Greek Boy." These were not momentary verses, soon forgotten. Fitz-Greene Halleck's, poem "Marco Bozzaris", so captured the American Imagination that schoolboys learned it and recited it by heart. Professors Raizis and Papas have recorded the majority of these American poems in a fine book, "American Poets and the Greek Revolution, A Study in Byronic Philhellenism."

But what of the songs and dances? Have we no one to write of them?

As one might expect with the ar-

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# Popular American Songs with Admirati

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rival of some 500,000 Greeks to the United States between 1870 and 1920 a number of popular songs noted their presence. Certainly many will know that, in 1923, Tin Pan Alley songwriters Irving Cohn and Frank Silver composed "Yes! We Have No Bananas." It is said that, Cohn and Silver heard Jimmy Costas a grocer in Lynbrook Long Island, first use the phrase: 'YES! We have no bananas.' But have you heard the equally popular "The Argentinians, the Portuguese, and the Greeks" by Arthur M. Swanscroft and Carey Morgan in 1920? The song, a best-seller as a 78rpm record, is a humorous song with a curious mix of envy and admiration for the new immigrants.

Columbus discovered America in 1492.

Then came the English and the Dutch

The Frenchman and the Jew  
Then came the Swede and the Irishman

Who helped the country grow  
Still they kept a coming and now  
Everywhere you go

There's the Argentinians and the Portuguese,

The Armenians and the Greeks  
One sells you papers, one shines  
your shoes,

Another shaves the whiskers off  
your cheeks

When you ride again in a sub-  
way

Notice who have all the seats  
And you'll find they are held by  
The Argentine and the Por-  
tuguese and the Greek

There's the Ritz Hotel and the  
Commodore and

The Vanderbilt and the rest  
All of them are classy, up to date  
hotels

They boast accommodations of  
the best

When you ask the clerk for a  
room and bath

He looks at you sarcastically and  
speaks

Why we're all filled up with the  
Argentine

And the Portuguese and the  
Greek

There's the Oldsmobile and the  
Huntmobile

And the Cadillac and the Ford

There are the motors you and I  
can own

The kind most anybody can af-  
ford

But the Cunningham and the  
Mercury

And the Rolls Royce racing free  
Ah they all belong to the Argen-  
tine and

The Portuguese and the Greek  
There are pretty girls, there are  
witty girls

There is every kind of a girl  
Some you like a little, some a lit-  
tle more

But none of them will set your  
heart a whirl

When you really feel you've met  
your ideal

A girl with smart and chic  
You will find she belongs to an  
Argentine or

A Portuguese or a Greek  
They don't know the language  
They don't know the law

But they live in the country of  
the free

And the funny thing when we  
start to sing

My Country 'Tis of Thee  
None of us know the words  
But the Argentine, the Por-  
tuguese, and the Greek

In stark contrast to these two  
light-hearted songs is "Louis Tikas"  
a song by Frank Manning which  
honors this Greek's actions during  
the Ludlow Massacre. "Louis  
Tikas," is but the latest in a long  
line of Labor Songs testifying to  
Greek involvement in the American  
Labor Movement. I recall how sur-  
prised I was when reading an arti-  
cle by Dan Georgakas. During the  
Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912 as  
a contingent of Greek immigrants  
joined the other strikers, those al-  
ready picketing raised their voices  
in song praising the Greeks by  
name.

Not unexpectedly the Ku Klux  
Klan also included Greeks by name  
in hate lyrics sung at their public  
rally songs.

Still, other Greeks who have  
been honored in American popular  
song include Harry Agganis in, The  
Golden Greek, found on Phil Co-  
ley's album 'Baseball Songs Sports  
Heroes. Composed as a tribute "to  
a man who touched many hearts"  
the song reports upon "New Eng-  
land's greatest all around athlete  
Harry Agganis' life was golden on  
the sports field and pure gold in the  
way he lived his life. This college  
football All American and College



Many forgotten songs were written  
cans, especially after the immigrat

Hall of Famer and Boston Red Sox  
Star died at barely 26. His death  
stunned the nation's sports world."

The inspirational force of  
Greeks on the American Imagina-

# On and Envy of Greek Immigrants



tion about Greeks and Greek American boom between 1870 and 1920.

tion seems to have no time limit. "Hi Jolly the Camel Driver" composed by Randy Sparks, deals with Hi Jolly, a.k.a. Philip Tedro a Greek who came to the United States in

1857 to help the Army introduce camels as pack animals. This popular folk song was first recorded by The New Christy Minstrels in 1962 and then in succession The Travelers 3, again in, 1962 the Canadiana Folksingers in 1964, The Merryman in 1993 and finally (I think) the River City Ramblers in 2001.

"The Curse of the Billy Goat," composed by Chuck Brodsky, and found on his 'Tulips For Lunch,' album offers yet another unexpected song:

"Billy Goat" Bill Sianis  
Had box seats to game four  
Of the '45 World Series  
Cubs versus Detroit  
One seat he would sit in  
The other was for his kid  
A goat by the name of Murphy  
Who the Cubs had always admitted

That day an usher wouldn't let them

To their box at Wrigley Field  
So directly to the owner  
PK Wrigley he appealed  
The answer came from Wrigley  
It was final and succinct  
He said there'd been a few complaints

Some people didn't like the stink  
Sianis, he was livid  
His face was turning blue  
He went out past the turnstiles  
Onto Waveland Avenue  
The vendors on the sidewalk  
Say he raised his arms up first  
And with his hands above his head

They say he placed The Curse  
Just then a cloud passed over  
From the lake a chilly wind  
Anybody within earshot  
Woulda had goosebumps on their skin

The skeptics say baloney  
The poets make up verse  
60 some years later  
They still blame it on the curse  
Those two box seats bore witness

As the Tigers took the game  
Like they would games five & seven

The Cubbies came up lame  
O! Billy Goat Sianis  
Got the last word, Holy Cow  
He telegraphed Mr. Wrigley  
Asked him "Who smells now?"  
It stared at Leo Durocher  
Stared right at his lip  
And Leo stood there staring back

With his hands upon his hips  
On the top step of the dugout  
A cat the color of a hearse  
They blew a nine game lead in '69

People say it was The Curse  
They were playing for the pennant

In 1984  
Against the San Diego Padres  
They only had to win one more  
To advance to the World Series  
But they slipped into reverse  
And when Durham flubbed a grounder

People blamed it on the curse  
Most recently, 2003  
And just five outs away  
When a Cubs fan tried to catch a foul

While the ball was still in play  
The lockers had been plasticised  
But the bubble had just burst  
The Marlins drank the champagne

People blamed it on The Curse  
Just ask someone in Boston  
How long it took to break  
The Curse of the Bambino  
With its annual heartache  
And every time it happens  
It just feels that much worse  
They say there's always next year

And that might be the curse  
Given that not every song is positive we should not be surprised to learn that in 1983 Tom Carvel (1906-1990), Greek immigrant businessman almost sued the Beastie Boys over "Cookie Puss!" As Angus Batey describes in his book *Rhyming & Stealing: A History of the Beastie Boys*: "[It] doesn't have any lyrics, so to speak, but against its quite stark, hip-hop influenced beats, it sets samples from a prank telephone call the band made to an ice cream parlor. The Carvel ice cream company made a type of ice cream cake called a Cookie Puss, and the band had taped a phone call to their local store wherein they ask to speak to Cookie Puss as though it were a person. They then abuse the hapless telephonist when she, inevitably, fails to comply with their request."

Song and dance can transform the social worlds in which they are performed. As even these few selections reveal the changing notions of the Modern Greeks evident in the American Imagination frequently see expression in popular song.