

Betty George: The Greek Song Goddess

By Steve Frangos

Given the fame Betty George once commanded, it is nothing short of astonishing she has faded from the pages of Greek American history. A singer, comedian, and television personality, George was once the regular subject of celebrity news from coast-to-coast. As a performer, George was not only a much sought after club headliner but appeared on radio programs, Broadway shows, the very first moments of television and in her golden years as a local weather girl. George's beauty competed with her obvious musical and performing talents for the public's attention. Walter Winchell, then the most famous newspaper columnist in America, singled out George as

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718.784.5255

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"One of the 10 most beautiful women alive." Quickly christened Gorgeous George and The Greek Goddess of Song, George's annual appearances at the fabled Copacabana, the Latin Quarter and other upscale cabaret nightspots made her a media sensation, even if George's charisma and humor seemed to trump her beauty.

GREEK POETRY

The King Of Asine (Iliad)*

*All morning long we looked
around the citadel*
starting from the shaded side,
there where the sea,
green and without luster—
breast of a slain peacock—
received us like time without an
opening in it.
Veins of rock dropped down
from high above,
twisted vines, naked, many-
branched, coming alive
at the water's touch, while the
eye following them
struggled to escape the tiresome
rocking,
losing strength continually.*

*On the sunny side a long empty
beach
and the light striking diamonds
on the huge walls.
No living thing, the wild doves
gone
and the king of Asine, whom
we've been trying to find for
two years now,
unknown, forgotten by all, even
by Homer,
only one word in the Iliad and
that uncertain,
thrown here like the gold burial
mask.
You touched it, remember its
sound? Hollow in the light
like a dry jar in dug earth:
the same sound that our oars
make in the sea.
The king of Asine a void under
the mask
everywhere with us everywhere*

She was born Betty Mavrogeorge on April 11, 1926 in Manchester, New Hampshire to Greek immigrant parents Thomas and Angelia Mavrogeorge. The Mavrogeorge family lived at 293 Bell Street, well within the Greek neighborhood surrounding what is today Kalivas Park. Greek was the preferred language in the Mavrogeorge home. Betty Mavrogeorge graduated from Manchester Central High School on Jan. 29, 1943, where she was voted the best-looking girl in the class. In high school, she first took to the stage in an operetta with the Central High Maskers at the Practical Arts Auditorium. After graduation, Mavrogeorge enrolled in New England Conservatory of Music to study voice and violin.

But within 18 months of leaving high school, Betty Mavrogeorge was singing (as Betty George) with Glen Gray, a jazz saxophonist and leader of the Casa Loma Orchestra. By no later than late 1945, the young Greek vocalist was on the stage at venues such as the Chicago Theatre. After touring the nation, she was seen by Charles Taylor, President of the St. Moritz Hotel in New York City, who hired her to perform at the hotel's Club Continental. Through the winter months of the late 1940's George would perform nightly at the refined supper club, establishing a pattern she was to maintain throughout her career. George was essentially a soloist, who, in any given season, moved from one booking and performance venue to another. In this whirlwind of performance and unquestioned professional success, George never forgot her roots and returned to Manchester on an annual basis.

TOURING, TOURING

George toured the country singing in the finest clubs that at that point in history, dotted the American landscape but have long since vanished. Once, names like the Copacabana, Cotton Club or the Latin Quarter immediately evoked visions of lavish décor and the height of live entertainment. Whether called a nightclub, cabaret, or



Betty George was not just a st talents, but her looks.

engage in social dancing between these various shows. Since these were clubs opened in the mid-to-late evening, many of the shows didn't end until 2 a.m. or later. This was the entertainment world in which George moved every night. Critic Robert Dana's review of one of George's performances at the Latin Quarter is typical of the responses to her abilities as an entertainer: "When you hear Betty George sing Let There Be Love, you will agree that there couldn't be a more influential spokesman for a subject of such importance ... and I dare say every man in the quarter will relish the beautiful brunette's handling of I Wanna Get Married." Recalling the splendor of the lavish productions and life style of the Latin Quarter "Betty George ... has told of a da

with us, under a name:
"Asívnv te... Asívnv te..."
and his children statues
and his desires the fluttering of
birds, and the wind
in the gaps between his
thoughts, and his ships
anchored in a vanished port:
under the mask a void.

Behind the large eyes the curved
lips the curls
carved in relief on the gold cover
of our existence
a dark spot that you see travel-
ing like a fish
in the dawn calm of the sea:
a void everywhere with us.
And the bird that flew away last
winter
with a broken wing:

supper club, these entertain-
ment venues featured the same
mixture of performance and
even physical layout. The shows
featured a judicious mix of com-
edy, song, dance, and theater
enacted upon a stage with the
audience sitting around the plat-
form at individual tables. A mas-
ter of ceremonies would intro-
duce each act as the audience
ate or (more likely) drank dur-
ing the performances. Elaborate
lighting and highly choreo-
graphed dance revues featuring
beautiful women dancers were
customary. Each cycle of perfor-
mances, termed shows, had an
intermission where it was not
uncommon for the audience to

when she had cocktails before
the first show with Tyrone
Power, dinner between shows
with Marlon Brando, drinks af-
ter the 2 A.M. show with the
Hollywood producer Robert
Evans and then the normal
night out chasing police calls
with Walter Winchell." As an-
other of the Latin Quarter show-
girls recalled, "When your time
off from work starts at 3 a.m.
your friends are playboys, busi-
nessmen away from home,
show business people and gang-
sters - a fun group," the New
York Times reported on Jan. 11,
1986. All this celebrity attention
did not go unnoticed by the pu-
blic or press. "Betty George, the

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singing beauty, has been linked in the columns with Marlon Brando, Tyrone Power, Franchot Tone and other famous gents. One fellow who writes a theatrical column was curious about this and asked Betty, 'Don't you ever date anyone but a celebrity?' 'Not in the columns,' said our girl," the Evening Herald reported in 1956.

WITH COMEDY'S KING

Aside from her career as a soloist, George worked for more than 16 years with Milton Berle's annual club revue, a significance maybe lost on contemporary readers, but not to Dana and his ilk. He wrote in his Tips on Tables column a period-understanding of the Berle-George teamup. "The country's greatest night club entertainer, Milton Berle, is filling a limited engagement at the Latin Quarter, which

ning in 1950 and off and on for several years. "Betty George, described by the management as "a gorgeous brunette who can sing will Julie Wilson on Kiss Me Kate," the Chicago Tribune reported on Dec. 19, 1949. The production opened at the Shubert Theatre. One way to judge George's stage success is to note this news report: "Betty George, the lovely singer ... in the cast of Kiss Me Kate, doesn't put much faith in the old saying, 'Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts.'" The small Greek colony of Chicago has turned itself inside out bringing her presents of food and flowers and other things - so proud are its members of the girl who was born in New Hampshire of Greek parentage," the Chicago Tribune reported on Feb. 7, 1950.

George's next musical theatre role was in Ankle Aweigh (April 18, 1955-September 17, 1955) where one critic reported: "Cole Porter must have had Betty George in mind when he wrote Why Can't You Behave, and Always True to You (in perfection,)" in the Long Beach Press on Feb. 1, 1951. You can still hear George's Heading For the Bottom Blues on the remastered compact disk of Ankle Aweigh. George would appear in the New York version of Salute to Cole Porter where her rendition of Love for Sale was especially noted by critics. George's overall presence in these productions must have been a cut above average since at least one source reports she was "a Tony Award nominee." Given that George first appeared on television in the late 1940's-early 1950's, what is today known as The Golden Age of Television, she is one of those performers whose record of participation is not always easy to track. George appeared on the March 24, 1949 episode of the Phil Silvers Arrow Show and on the Talk of the Town variety show that appeared on New York City stations Monday through Friday over WABC-TV. George then appeared on two episodes of the Cavalcade of Stars in 1952 and as an actress on the series Girl Talk on July 22, 1965. Other appearances in the new medium

counts I have found, George is always described with adjectives such as stunning, glamorous, show-stopping, and, as Winchell crowned her: The Greek Goddess of Song. As one eye-witness described her uncanny allure: "One late evening our ramble-around-Manhattan included Betty George in our party and the thing is that we couldn't take a step without everybody turning for a second or third or fourth look at her ... Betty is gorgeous at any time ... and Betty was at her most gorgeous there in Manhattan with us. Just back from a South American singing tour, her spectacular figure was most spectacularly draped in an authentic sari given her by the Indian wife of the finance minister in Surinam ... a stunning affair of sea-green gossamer silk banded in and studded with thread-of-gold embroidery, the last fold of which she wore now over one shoulder, then over the high-piled dark hair pulled back to emphasize the golden jewel placed between her eye-brows. The effect was instant WOW!" the Lowell, Mass. Sun reported on Oct. 6, 1965. Among her many photos are those in the 1947 issue of Down Beat Magazine, a noted music news publication of the postwar era, which noted that, "The singer's stay at the Copacabana here has been extended so many times that it looks like she's found a permanent home." The images were taken by noted celebrity photographer William P. Gottlieb and can be seen at the Library of Congress' website in their Golden Age of Jazz Collection.

By the 1970's, with what must have seemed to George the end of her career in entertainment, she moved to Albany to be near her sister Christine (Mavrogeorge) Niles. Then, a chance appearance by George on a local Albany New York television program resulted in her being hired by local WAST (now WNYT) Channel 13 as their so-called weather girl. George's engaging manner, singing and the occasional appearance of her small dog Moo (George would sing Any Weather, We're Together to Moo) resulted in her

with us, under a name:

