

Greek-Am. Jazzists of Twentieth Century

By Steve Frangos

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CHICAGO- In any search for contemporary Greek-American jazz musicians one can find literally dozens of individuals. Without exaggeration, Greek Jazz musicians are scattered all across the planet. What we are missing is a chronological history of these individuals and their careers. Given the available documentation Ellis Stratakos (b 1903) seems to be the first professional musician of Greek descent to play jazz in this country. As a teenager Stratakos, living in Gulfport MI, played the snare drum in the self-styled Gulfport Band. Sometime before 1920, Stratakos returned to New Orleans where he frequented black jazz clubs to listen and learn. By 1921, Stratakos formed his first band with himself as leader the New Orleans Louisiana Jazzers.

By at least 1924, and perhaps earlier, Stratakos was playing trombone in the Johnny DeDroit and his New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. On March 15, 1924, Stratakos appears as trombone player on "Nobody Knows Blues" a popular release of the Johnny DeDroit and his New Orleans Jazz Orchestra on Okeh Records (40150). On October 29, 1924, this same orchestra had entered New York City studios to record but available documentation is unclear whether or not these recordings were issued. Without question the late 1920s, was a time of change and musical exploration for Ellis Stratakos.

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A Look at Greek-American Jazz Music

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On January 29, 1927, news accounts report the success of Stratakos and his Pine Hills Orchestra. By June 1, 1927, Ellis Stratakos and his New Orleans Orchestra were playing at the American Legion at Ocean Springs. While the line-up for the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra changed over time and even at times job-by-job the regular personnel included Ellis Stratakos, as director and trombonist; John Hyman and Howard Reed, on clarinets; John Reininger and Joe Loyacano, on alto saxophones; Eddie Powers, on tenor saxophone; Joe Wolf, on piano; Fred Loyacano, on guitar, banjo and vocals; Dave Fridge, bass saxophone and Von Gammon, on drums. It is this line-up of musicians who, by sometime in the late-1920s, were showcased as the Ellis Stratakos and his Orchestra at the Jung Hotel in New Orleans. It is this essential line-up of musicians that Stratakos headed playing not only at the Jung Hotel but also on annual tours back and forth along the Gulf States from Louisiana to Florida.

Stratakos is especially remembered, within the inner circles of jazz musicians and historians, as one of the earliest proponents of "sweet" and so (as the jazz musician's lingo has it) "hot" jazz. Contemporary Jazz revival groups such as the New Orleans-based New Leviathan Oriental Fox Trot Orchestra proudly credit Stratakos and his Orchestra for a number of their recordings.

Yet curiously, the references to Stratakos and his orchestra also involve as dispute as to how long of a professional career this collective of musicians actually experienced. No one challenges the fact that the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra in the late 1920s through the early 1930s was the house orchestra at the luxurious New Orleans' Jung Hotel's roof-top dance lounge. In Samuel Charters' book, *A Trumpet Around the Corner: The Story of New Orleans Jazz*, Stratakos is credited after 1925 as contin-



Above: The WOWL New Orleans Broadcast band at their first live performance. (L-R) Frank Mutz, Ed McCarthy, Pinky Gerbrecht, Eddie Powers, Ellis Stratakos, and Ray Bauduc. Right: Ellis Stratakos Orchestra aboard the S.S. Mexique on Mardi Gras Night 1936.



uing "to be an important local jazz artist, with a group that included several important younger musicians among them cornetist Johnny Wiggs, trumpeter Louis Prima, clarinetist Irving Fazola, saxophonist Joe Loyacano, pianist Freddie Neuman and drummer Augie Schelland." Other names such as Frank Federico (b 1912) and saxophonist Dave Winstein could be added to this list of younger musicians Stratakos hired. What can be drawn out of the available literature are two stories: one suggests that Prima, Fazola, and Winstein were fired by Stratakos and the other (claimed principally by Prima) that the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra was an inherently inferior musical group and simply disbanded in 1929.

How long exact the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra played at the Jung Hotel remains uncertain. But the fact that the Stratakos Orchestra played at this venue for a number of years at least speaks to its professionalism to say nothing of its pop-

ularity. In fact given that the Stratakos Orchestra played not simply at the Jung Hotel but all along the Gulf Shore well into the 1940s argues strongly against any claims that this jazz orchestra was anything but at the very top of their field.

The Jung Hotel roof-top dance lounge has been described as "eighteen stories above ground level. A marvelous Terrazzo dance floor. Just like dancing on a hill. All the windows on four sides open and disappear into the roof, which itself opens wide. Air from all sides and the top, "Like dancing in the open air, with immense blower fans aiding the natural ventilation. No chance for a headache from confined air."



Musicians throughout the 20th Century



days at the Jung Hotel: "Ellis was such a stickler for perfection... not only with music, but how we looked: tuxedos with spats even...His favorite song was "Sweetheart on Parade"—we'd play it over and over whether we got requests or not."

The talk of requests brought up a memory of an especially notable fan: "You know which one [request] we'd get the most for: "Every Man A King"...Huey Long would give each one of the band members \$20 every time we would play it...Remember how he'd come up all the time, dressed to the nines, straw hat, walking cane and bodyguards. He always punched the elevator button with the tip of his cane...

ual songs seemed to have been recorded at the February 1929 recording session but for the moment it does not seem they were pressed into records. Why this popular orchestra would only record and release one commercial record is difficult to understand.

Some accounts claim that Stratakos performed and recorded under a variety of names. Whatever the case may one day prove to be Stratakos as a solo performer, band member and orchestra leader was popular with dancers along the Gulf Coast resorts. So the release of one and only one record makes no sense whatsoever. Especially given the enduring interest of jazz musicians and historians alike for this man and his orchestra.

For his own part Ellis Stratakos, sometime in the 1940s, returned to Gulfport and took up the family confectionary business. While this may seem anticlimactic we must recall this choice came after more than twenty years of Ellis Stratakos performing as a highly successful professional musician. Clearly the full story of Ellis Stratakos Orchestra has yet to be told. I first came to hear of Ellis Stratakos and his Orchestra at a party in Bloomington Indiana from Professor Thomas W. Jacobsen of the Classics Department. It was Dr. Jacobsen who told me of the New Leviathan Oriental Fox Trot Orchestra out of New Orleans and their praise for Stratakos. As a dedicated jazz fan Jacobsen was in contact with the band and asked me if I ever heard of the Greek Foxtrot. I went on to tell him of Tetos Demetriades and other who had released 78rpm records of such music. Today, Thomas Jacobsen, is a retired professor emeritus and author of the book, The New Orleans Jazz Scene, 1970-2000 A Personal Retrospective.

As with so much in Greek American history and culture we need to learn more about the extraordinary jazz trombonist Ellis Stratakos.

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Even after the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra left the Jung Hotel, which seems to have been after 1935, they continued to perform all along the Gulf shore from Louisiana to Florida at only the largest and most well-appointed resorts, hotels, night-spots, and even on cruise ships touring the Gulf. In addition the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra also appeared on radio station WOWL out of New Orleans. How a flash-in-the-pan orchestra could have done all this and in very short order as is stated in Prima and companies claims is impossible.

In late 1980, the four surviving members of the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra Al Hessemer, Don Peterson, John Reininger, and Howard Reed recalled their

He was a cut up, literally: they all recalled the time when the piano wouldn't fit into a certain space..."So Huey just took a saw and cut off the legs."

There is an enduring mystery related to the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra. As far as can now be determined this popular group only recorded one single disc while performing in New Orleans. Documents at the Brunswick Record company's Vocalion label attest to the fact that sometime in February 1929 the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra recorded two songs "A Little Thing Called Love (No. 132-15792)" and "Weary River (No. 133-15792)" both of which can be heard on the Internet Youtube.com site. Other individ-

