

Tradition for Mixed Voices



Great Powers, these Balkan statesmen realized that cultural forms often determined the geo-political boundaries agreed upon at Versailles. Consequently, these individuals demanded not simply political changes but cultural transformations.

The suppression of specific musical genres was rigorously enforced throughout the region. Commercial records produced or released in North America by traditional Balkan and Anatolian musicians, however, smashed all the political rhetoric and prison bars. In 1940, the Bureau of the Census tallied Greeks as 273,520, thereby ranking them as the thirteenth largest ethnic group in the country. Yet that same year 'Greek' records were the fifth largest in total sales! Why? Obviously, because not only Greeks were buying those records.

Cross-cutting Influences

Whatever the political restrictions in Greece, Turkey or any Balkan country, America was the land of musical opportunity. The commonalities of the Balkan and Anatolian people are clearly documented in recorded song. The newly formed Traditional Crossroads music label is actively re-issuing

only Greeks went to those clubs. Syrians, Armenians and Turks came to those clubs. In my company, I had to be careful to have an oud player to sing a little Turkish and then another fella to sing a little Arabic for the Syrian customers. See, that's the reason I had to have six, sometimes seven, musicians with me. You had to have them! I had to have a cymbalon player, a clarinetist, a violinist, me on guitar, and an oud player just to play for the different customers.

Such recollections (along with the existence of commercial records) illustrate that musicians were ever sensitive to the demands of their audience(s). In the Aegean and Adriatic seaports of the Balkans and Anatolia, the population



Victoria Hazan and Jack Meyesh are the two performers of traditional Sephardic music in North America most well known to music scholars. What these same music historians fail to hear are the pitched battles at folk dance camps or among Balkan musicians as to the 'real' cultural heritage of popular Greek vocalists Rosa Eskenazi, Rita Abatzi, and Andonis Diamandithis. All three were Sephardic Jews born in the Ottoman Empire.

Undoubtedly, the most serious problem with posing this question as simply who is 'really' Greek or who is 'really' a Sephardic Jew is that the complicated aesthetic and historical issues involved are completely lost on the general American public. Commercial records from the turn of the century only add fuel to this fire, which again, bewilders Americans as much as learning that it is even burning. That an old black scratchy seventy-eight rpm record, sung in an Oriental sounding way, retains political meanings simply baffles most Americans. With the resurgence in the re-recording of the original 78 rpm records onto CDs, a whole new era of evidence and debate is now in the making.

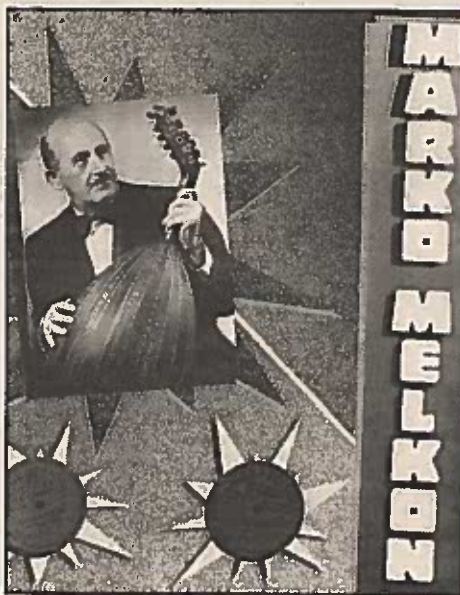
The mixture of cultures still to be found throughout the Balkans and Western Anatolia is just another forgotten region of the world to an American public that can not distinguish South America from Africa on a map. Yet the common musical heritage of this region continues to invoke heated controversy.

The Balkan Argument

As might be expected from a region of the world that has seen four great em-

pires from classical times to the First World War (the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman), the people of the Balkans and Levant share many musical traditions. Ironically, the pattern of publicly denying any common traditions is also a panregional phenomenon.

The gradual break-up of the Ottoman Empire between 1911 and 1922 was only the political aspect of the dissolution. After 1922, every Balkan state, including the newly formed country of



Turkey, sought to completely disavow any connection to the Ottoman past. Among the cultural manifestations this ideological position took was the eradication of architectural sites (including mosques and grave yards), language, place-names, written script, and music and dance traditions.

Balkan political and cultural leaders deemed these actions crucial to their very survival as distinct sovereign nations. Politically dependent on the

the best of this music. Drawing on the original metal master recordings, this company is re-issuing music recorded in Constantinople, Smyrna, and New York City. Releases such as *Turkish Cabaret: Women of Turkey* (CD 4280) feature Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish women singers. Performances by Muzeyyen Senar, Suzan Yakar, Rosa Eskenazi and many others are presented on this compilation.

Other releases such as *Marko Melkon* (CD 4281) and *Armenians on Eighth Ave* (CD 4279) showcase some of the most popular American immigrant musicians from New York City's fabled Eighth Avenue music scene of the 1950s. In the clubs along Eighth Avenue, such as the Britania, Port Said, Khyam, or the Egyptian Gardens, one could readily find mixed orchestras of Greeks, Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, Gypsies, Sephardic Jews, Syrians, and Turks all playing the same music called now by an array of names: cafe-aman, gazino (Turkish 'music hall'), klezmer, a la turka, rebetika, Middle Eastern and so on.

Yiorgios Katsaros (1888-1997), literally one of the last of the senior generation of Greek musicians, was always quite clear about the existence and need for such mixed companies:

By the time I came to the United States (1913) I found in every city, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Utah, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, over fifty, sixty bands...in every city!...During those early years there were eleven or twelve cabarets in every city. Greek musicians and dancers, Armenians, Turkish girls, Egyptians, all playing at the same clubs.

We'd play Turkish music. We'd play Armenian music. Greek music, everything. And those musicians they had to be experienced! Oh, yes, because not



was mixed and the musicians had to play to the ever-changing audience. In North America, given the relative demographics between Balkan and Anatolian immigrants and the general American population, having a mixed ensemble ensured that all the varying musical genres could be supplied regardless of the audience's ethnic composition.

The Traditional Crossroads re-releases celebrate these mixed ensembles rather than continue (as happens in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere) to deny that they ever existed.

Pan-Balkan Music

The musical exchanges were (and remain) virtually endless. Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman have produced a long series of articles on

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Judeo-Spanish traditions in the Balkans that include Greek lyrics and themes. Ruth Rubin has convincingly pointed to the exchanges between Slavic and Jewish folksong traditions. Benjamin Schwartz and Apostolos N. Apostolopoulos have provided close analysis of the Greek influences on the liturgical music documented from the synagogues of Ioannina in what is today northwest Greece.

The research of Dr. Pamela Dorn-Sezgin documents the practice of musical borrowing(s) between a wide array of groups. One such example is the extremely popular song "Her Yer Karanlik" (Every Place Is Dark). The Turkish original was composed by the Tanzimat poet, Adulhak Hamit Tarhan (1852-1937), and comes from his play, "Tarik, Yahut Endulus Fethi" (Tarik, or the Conquest of Andalusia). Victoria Hazan, sometime in the 1940s, recorded a Judeo-Spanish version called "Logrimas Verterei" (Flowing Tears) in New York City (Metropolitan 3004A). The Greek version 'Tis Kseniteias O Ponos,' (The Pain of the Foreign Land) features Andonis Diamandithis (1892-1945), (Orthophonic S-612).

While all Orthophonic Records featured music of Greece or Western Anatolia, all two-hundred records that make up this label were only released in North America. It is an accepted fact of history that international record companies regularly 'target-marketed' audiences around the world. And as Orthophonic demonstrates, Greek Americans were clearly one of these targeted groups.

Still, the full degree to which Greek, Turkish, and Balkan songs were recorded with a specific North American audience in mind is not yet known.

In "Her Yer Karanlik" the lyrics speak of a father singing at the grave of his young son. Diamandithis has changed the lyrics but kept the sense of family, separation, and introduced the Greek custom of lighting a candle at the death of a loved one:

*I am crying for you
My mother, sweet mother.
And I suffer in this foreign land.
Ah.....*

*I don't want you, mother
Ever to cry for your child,
Light a candle.*

It must be stressed that these American recorded and/or released 'cross-over' songs knew no limit. Jack Mayesh adapted both Turkish and Greek songs, including "Bekledim ve gelmedin" and "To Yelekaki Mou" into his Judeo-Spanish repertoire. Mayesh even released a version of that perennial favorite "Missirlu" (Balkan Records 1367)!

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American or Balkan Traditions?

After all this discussion of mixed lyrics and borrowing between ethnic groups, the logical question is "what about the mixture of English and Greek lyrics and music on records produced in America?" Do these records illustrate assimilation, a continuance of the pan-cultural traditions learned in the Balkans and Anatolian, or some complex series of entirely new combinations filtered

through an American setting?

Such questions prompt Greek American studies into whole new areas of research. Obviously, the true dimensions and transformations of Greek music in North America have yet to be fully understood.

For a free brochure, write Traditional Crossroads, PO Box 20320, Greeley Square Station, New York, NY 10001, or visit their website at <http://www.rootsworld.com/crossroads/>.

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LOANS MUSIC label is actively re-issuing