

Greek Music Industry Steeped In Cultural Tradition

Next week, music industry leaders from around the world will gather in Athens for Billboard's 1982 International Music Industry Conference. The magazine's correspondent in Greece, John Carr, here provides some background on the event's locale.

ATHENS—Basking in the sunny southeastern corner of Europe, Greece has recently returned to its cultural "family," becoming the 10th member of the European Economic Community (EEC) about 12 months ago. But the country still has many economic resources untapped, particularly in the music industry.

For the past 10 years or so, successive governments have been looking to make Greece an economic and cultural link between the Middle East and Europe. The country's pressing plants supply the Arab marketplace with almost all its legitimately traded cassettes, while more and more of Greek artists have been gaining popularity in the West (among those with some longevity in this respect are Maria Callas, Demis Roussos and Nana Mouskouri).

It was in Greece that what was arguably the first song contest in history took place, on the Aegean island of Delos in the Seventh Century BC, when a guitarist named Terpandros won first prize.

Now, a mere 27 centuries later, the country's top-selling music is still flavored with a unique Greekness that is the vital element of domestic and international hits by local singers and musicians.

The late Maria Callas, for example, exemplified some of the ancient Greek dramatic traditions. More recently, the distinctiveness of Demis Roussos cannot properly be duplicated north or west of the Balkans. And Nana Mouskouri has been said to embody the "clearness of Greece's landscape" in a voice that is sharp and yet smooth at the same time.

Handling and projecting Greek talent today are seven major recording companies and an indeterminate number of independents. Four of the seven major companies are branches of multinationals EMI, PolyGram, CBS and WEA. The remaining three are purely Greek: Minos Matsas, Music Box and Lyra.

It was EMI which got the record manufacturing industry under way in Greece, in 1930, after a cooperation agreement was signed between the British Columbia Gramophone Co. and the Gramophone Co., both

of which merged to form EMI in Britain a year or so later. Soon the company offices and pressing plant were completed and within the first year of operation the first locally made disk came off the presses.

At that time, the tiny Greek marketplace justified a working week of only two days, at most three. Recordings were made in the halls of the larger Athens-sited hotels.

Greece's first recording studio was built at the EMI works in 1936. It operated almost continuously until its closure in August, 1981. And during that time it helped make history, for it was there that Sophia Vembo, one of the first Greek vocalists to achieve nationwide fame, used her undeniably sultry voice to record a series of emotion-stirring hits that spurred Greek forces to victory when Mussolini's Italians invaded the country in 1940.

EMI stayed in the forefront of Greek developments after World War II, using magnetic tape for the first time in the country in 1954 and pressing the first 45 r.p.m. single the following year. The first LP was pressed in Greece in 1961, featuring a collection of Greek folk songs that in later years would prove to be a viable and potent source of export material.

At present, EMI Greece claims 23% of the market. This share is split into 65% domestic and 35% international repertoire. The company also accounts for 95% of the "legitimate" Arab cassette market, but this in itself is only a tiny proportion of the total, for the bulk is pirated product. EMI executives have found that recordings by Egyptian and Lebanese artists have the greatest appeal all over the Arab world, and they're convinced that future business prospects are highly promising.

In the '60s, Helladisc emerged to challenge EMI, especially in the field of international repertoire. After the wave of Beatlemania swept through Greece, Helladisc, which later became Phonogram and later still PolyGram Greece, jumped on the band wagon with the Philips and Polydor labels, promoting mainly European rock and MOR material.

And at the same time, an enterprising little company called Music Box was successfully distributing U.S. rock labels in Greece.

Helladisc, too, was developing rock talent, but basically of the local variety. One of its staffers, Yannis Petridis, devoted his career to local and international rock'n'roll. Now

the international repertoire manager of PolyGram Greece, Petridis has hosted Greece's most upbeat radio program, "Pop Club," for seven years.

CBS set up shop in Greece in 1976, and WEA followed four years later. Both specialize in marketing sophisticated international repertoire and CBS has been venturing into the local talent scene, having signed some prestigious Greek names. Both companies are essentially run on U.S. management lines.

A mainstay of the Greek recording industry is Minos Matsas & Son, the oldest wholly Greek company. The Minos label has consistently dominated local repertoire, chalking up hit after hit and holding a prestigious record for sales in this territory—more than 250,000 units of an album, according to company executives.

The company's history goes back to 1925 when its founder, Minos Matsas, started working for the local branch of the German-owned Odeon label. At that time, there were no recording studios and German engineers and technicians were called in to cut the master disks in the halls of the plusher hotels.

Matsas's big breakthrough came in the mid-1930s, when a gravelly-voiced fellow from the island of Syros walked into his offices and started singing a selection of the underground, cynically-flavored songs known as "rembetika," accompanying himself on a quaint little stringed instrument, the "baglamas."

To the surprise of the basically staid and unadventurous musical establishment in Greece, Matsas signed the newcomer, Markos Vamvakaris, now in the pantheon of Greek musical heroes, at once. And this new sound became the distinguishing feature of the Minos Matsas company, which still concentrates principally on the best local repertoire.

Company executives have a keen ear, even now, for the essential "Greekness" that thrust artists like Vamvakaris into nationwide fame and recognition.

The company's present manager, Makis Matsas, son of the founder, now heads up a team whose job is to keep the "Greekness" in business as a money-spinner, by carefully seeking out fresh and upcoming talent and rewarding established names.

Greek superstar George Dalaras is a case in point. He was discovered

by Matsas Jr. about a decade ago, in an Athens nightclub. Today, there's no Greek music fan who doesn't know the Dalaras voice, and it would be hard to find one who doesn't like his style.

Minos handles the most popular Greek singer, Yannis Parios, who has four times passed the 250,000 album sales mark (the Greek record industry awards gold disks for sales of 50,000; platinum for 100,000).

Running close behind Parios are George Dalaras, Haris Alexiou, Tolis Voskopoulos, Litsa Diamandi, Stratos Dionysiou and Yannis Pouloupoulos. These artists, and this is to name but a few from the roster, have rarely failed with any new releases.

Many of the Minos-label artists continue the popular tradition started decades ago by Vamvakaris. This kind of music, accentuated by the distinctive tinkling sound of the bouzouki, has always touched a sensitive spot in the Greek psyche.

field, as its success with Abba and Boney M attests.

Martin Gesar, managing director, already had 15 years of experience in the music business in Istanbul, Turkey, before setting up a retail outlet in central Athens in 1958. This outlet soon burgeoned into a recording and distributing company that is probably the most cosmopolitan in Greece today.

For the past two years, Gesar and his wife, Marika Gesar, have signed the most distribution deals by any local company for international repertoire. From Japanese folk music to new wave and punk, Music Box is involved in all kinds of marketing, and there's always been a generous dosage of local artists featuring a quasi-international flavor.

Music Box remains very much a family-type firm. The staff is small, its work force close-knit. Its headquarters, on the road to the port of Piraeus, is conveniently close to truck and rail transport centers, and



AWARD WINNER—Yannis Parios, Greece's top-selling singer, left, gives a speech of thanks after receiving a special award for breaking all national sales records by selling 250,000 units of his last album. Looking on are Makis Matsas, managing director of Minos Matsas Records, right, and the singer's young son.

Certainly it is this style that earns the bulk of the gold and platinum awards in Greece. Minos Matsas has handed out 12 of the former and four of the latter in the past seven years.

Minos Matsas works closely with its countrywide distributors, staffing an extensive distribution facility in Thessaloniki, from which product goes out to all northern Greece sales centers.

The company distributes RCA, the biggest of its international partners. The label has always been assured of a firm place in the Greek marketplace, mainly thanks to promotion efforts learned through the experience of handling local repertoire. Last year, Minos Matsas compiled and aggressively marketed, through television advertising, a 40-song, two-album Elvis Presley package, outselling a simultaneous Presley compilation from K-tel.

Now on the threshold of the video era, Minos executives have carefully detailed plans to push videocassettes as soon as the potential Greek marketplace grows sufficiently to justify a full campaign. The nation's top artists on video could well prove to be the next industry leap in Greece but here, too, piracy will be a major hazard.

Music Box Records is a 22-year-old independent that keeps a low industry profile but maintains a high prestige rating. It specializes in local repertoire from an export angle, but is not inactive in the international

also to the freight offices of Olympic Airways, Greece's national airline. This helps explain why Music Box has the edge in exports in this country.

The third purely Greek company that has made its distinctive mark in the record business is Lyra, headed up by Alexander Patsifas, whose ear for the delicacy of much traditional Greek repertoire has helped him build a specialized but very respectable following.

If the Greek record industry knows where it is going and what it wants, the same cannot be said for the country's radio and television establishment.

Until last year, the recording companies were paying the equivalent of about \$2 million into the coffers of the two state-run radio/television networks, ERT and YENED, for the privilege of producing several half-hour repertoire slots each week. Then, last fall, ERT halted this practice, not only depriving itself of revenue, but also slashing a vital nerve connecting the industry's promotional efforts with the listeners' impulse to buy.

In fact, both networks have radically changed their programming contents since the socialist government, restaffed all the top executive positions. There has been a marked decrease not only in rock repertoire but also, it seems to many, in popular domestic material which is said to be deduced intellectually "inferior"

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DISK RENTAL, HOME TAPING ARE MAJOR TOPICS

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and chief operating officer of the CBS Records Group, will be the keynote speaker on opening day at the Astir Palace Hotel, Athens, when he'll address the conference on "The Record Industry: Forecast of the Miraculous Recovery."

He'll be followed by the day's second keynoter, Jan Timmer, executive vice president of the PolyGram Group, whose talk will deal with the fueling of the growing home entertainment industry by the new technology.

The rest of the Tuesday morning session will be devoted to a panel entitled "Audio Strikes Back," chaired by Bob Summer, president of RCA Records. Participating will be Bert Gall, product manager of Philips' Compact Disc; Robert Huber, manager of Compact Disc operations;

Bruce Lundvall, senior vice president of Elektra/Asylum Records and president of Elektra/Musician Records; Jerry Moss, chairman of A&M Records; and Michael Schulhof, member of the board of directors, Sony Corp.

Among other major sessions are a presidents' panel (records) chaired by Chrysalis co-chairman Chris Wright, and a presidents' panel (publishing) moderated by Mike Stewart, president of CBS Songs. This is set for Thursday (29).

Another highlight on this final day will be an address by H. Colin Overbury, principal administrator of the competition section of the directorate-general, European Economic Community. Overbury will be speaking on the impact of 25 years of the Common Market on the entertainment industry.

Second day of the conference (28) will include a report on the anti-piracy fight in the Mediterranean and Middle East by David Attard, legal advisor to IFPI, and a session chaired by Michael Karnstedt, managing director of Peer Musikverlage, Hamburg, on the changing role of the music publisher today.

Wednesday's program will also include a number of roundtable discussions examining a variety of problems presently confronting the home entertainment industry.

On the eve of the opening day of the conference there will be a welcoming cocktail reception in the Astir Palace Hotel at 7 p.m., and on Wednesday evening (28), Billboard 1981 Trendsetter awards will be presented at a banquet in the Aithion restaurant of the Astir Palace Hotel.