

CHAPTER 3

Dino Pappas – A Biographical Note

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My sincere thanks to Steve and Fonda Pappas, Dino's sons in Detroit, and to Zora Tammer in Oakland, California, for their kind help in assembling this very brief description of a remarkable man. His collection of recordings has greatly increased our knowledge of the extent and details of rebetika music.

Dino's father came to America from Thessaly as a villager, without much education. His mother was a mail-order bride, leaving Constantinople for America shortly after the 1914-1918 war. She was more cosmopolitan, and was the spirit of the restaurant that they established in the mid-1920s.

That restaurant was a success, and had for entertainment a 1925 Brunswick phonograph and a pile of Greek, Turkish and Armenian records. His father's records were demotic, but his mother's horizons were wider, encompassing several different languages and styles of music which graced the old culture of Constantinople. The restaurant flourished and the family prospered until after the financial crash of 1929. Dino, born 1931, had an early interest in music, and at age seven was already attempting to build a record player with his Erector set. But the depression persisted until the end of the 1930s, business declined, and the restaurant assets were sold off, furniture, restaurant, all except the records and that Brunswick phonograph. The record collection suffered during those unhappy years, save for some hidden under Dino's bed. His father died in 1941, leaving Dino at the age of ten.

At 19 he was drafted for the Army, but the Marines spotted him tall and slim at the train station, and off he went with them instead. In 1954 he entered the Detroit police academy and was on the force about 25 years which included the riots of 1966. There he met his future wife Ann, and they married although Dino's mother and Ann's parents apparently did not fully approve of the match. Dino and Ann did well together despite the adversities they faced, and the kids came, but after some years Ann contracted multiple sclerosis and began requiring increasingly close support in her daily life. Dino then retired early from the police and took charge at home of caring for Ann and the kids.

These burdens weighed on Dino, who retreated in his free hours to the basement with his increasing collection of records, built on the sixty he had saved as a boy. As a policeman in the Greek districts of Detroit, he developed a wide circle of acquaintances, and expanded the collection as older generations died off and their offspring disposed of unfamiliar or unpopular old music. His sons Steve and Fonda lived at home through the early 1980s, sympathetic with Dino's music but naturally diverging in taste.

He became acquainted with others who shared his musical interests, among them Joe Graziosi, Jim Stoyanoff, Sandra Layman, Zora Tammer, Martin Schwartz and many other collectors. He eagerly acquired records of all sorts and traded constantly, swapping Puerto Rican or Serbian records for Greek or Turkish ones, duplicate copies for rare singles. His mother remained a ready resource for explaining the cultural background of the music, and survived into the 1980s. With regular expenses for postage and telephone calls, the collection grew well into the 1990s, and he was able to visit Greece itself to visit and trade with collectors there. He learned by constant discussion the history and personnel of the recording sessions, and would expound long anecdotes of the players and singers, in a blunt and salty style refreshingly unlike the reverent tones employed by the fine-arts crowd. A phone call with Dino was simultaneously a sparring match and

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creative insult contest, combined with warm sociability and the excitement of new discoveries. This style was not uncommon among the generations of the 1940s and 50s.

We west coasters discovered him via Martin Schwartz, and found him open and generous with time and shared recordings. More than generous – despite serious arthritis in his hands, his pages of hand-written descriptive notes, accompanying tapes in response to questions about Iovan Tsaous or legions of other artists, increased over the years to a significant archive. In this way he became, to a number of grateful friends, a one-man university of early twentieth-century laika and dimotika music of Greece and Asia Minor.

His friendship with Zora Tammer, and her enthusiasm for the music, brought him to California a few times to talk of it and to preside over gatherings of folks, almost none Greek, to whom rebetiko meant great inspirations. A visit to him in 1995 gave us, in addition to a reverent visit to that awesome basement, a tour of downtown Detroit and the sad ruins of his old Greek neighborhood, practically obliterated following the unrest and arson of the late 1960s. We reciprocated when possible, snuffling through junk stores for old 78s in unfamiliar languages and scales, learning from Dino that piles of fragile 78s were practically indestructible when close-packed into shipping boxes. His relations with others were sometimes prickly, particularly if he felt exploited or deprived of proper credit for archival generosity. But without the help and enthusiasm of Dino Pappas, and the breathtaking resources of his collection of recordings, we who play music described as rebetiko would suffer a far greater share of ignorance and oblivion.

Paper presented at the Hydra Rebetiko Gathering 2003.