



National Geographic Timeline

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Year: 1969

Title: "The Music of Greece" and the Society's Record Program

Summary: It is not until after the Second World War that the portable tape recorder comes into its own. Both journalists and musicologists quickly discover the many possibilities of the new technology. Among the latter, the noted Folkways Records (later to become a part of the Smithsonian) was founded in 1948 "to document the entire world of sound," especially traditional music from around the world. It will eventually release over 2,000 such recordings before the end of the century.



National Geographic staff members have also been quick to note the virtues of the tape recorder. Those who travel frequently on assignment have sometimes carried with them portable recorders to catch local songs, bits of language, or even animal sounds. Some of this material finds its way into Society-sponsored lectures, but some staff members foresee more ambitious possibilities: Luis Marden of the Foreign Editorial Staff has been recording Tongan music since the early 1960s; he is only one of several who play with the idea of producing records. After all, music may be as much a royal road into the soul of a culture as the more pictorially vivid aspects that are the staple of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC articles.

Two long-time members of the editorial staff, Thomas J. Abercrombie and Howard La Fay, set about turning these vague musings into an actual product. Although a few innovative recordings, such as bird songs or Churchill speeches, have accompanied books and magazines as supplements, the Society's first venture into the music recording business is sparked by this pair. They choose Greek music as their initial venture because its musical traditions are neither

conventionally "Western" nor "Eastern." The music is sufficiently exotic to warrant Geographic attention but not so foreign to American listeners that it would be incomprehensible. Or so they think...

Listen to the audio clip #1 entitled "Hassapiko":



(Note: You'll need [Real Audio](#) to listen to the audio clips)

Nevertheless, in the fervor of their musical appreciation, the duo convinces Society executives to wade into the stream of international folk music by issuing a record of their Greek recordings. In 1969 *The Music of Greece* is released, and the National Geographic embarks on a new educational endeavor. Priced at \$4.95 and only available directly from the Society, *The Music of Greece* has a cautious initial pressing of 25,000 copies. But it sells reasonably well, and 16,000 are bought by the end of the year. It receives favorable reviews from music critics, and members of the Greek community also applaud the effort. The response of many Society members, however, is less than enthusiastic, with the sentiment, "It wasn't what I was expecting," being especially typical. One member adds, "It's too 'authentic' for me. I guess I expected more of a 'Zorba' type music," referring to the foot-stomping soundtrack from the popular Anthony Quinn film, *Zorba the Greek*, released in 1964.

Indeed, the music is quite authentic. Abercrombie, La Fay, and sound engineer Jack Clink had gone to great lengths to ensure this authenticity. Nothing featured on the album was recorded in a sound studio. Instead, the crew recorded performances in churches, theaters, cafes, and even out in the fields. Consequently, the pieces do not have the polished sound that would result from a studio session. Working "in the field" had other drawbacks as well. Early one Sunday morning, the crew set up their equipment in order to record the service at the Church of St. Dimitrios. They then discovered that the main battery was dead--and so was the spare. Not knowing where they could buy a replacement quickly, they flagged down a passing taxicab. The engineer hooked up his equipment to the car's battery, and the recording proceeded without any further hitches. The driver shrugged, left the meter running so he could collect his fee, and headed inside to join the service. Listen to the result:

Listen to audio clip #3 Byzantine Church Liturgy:



(Note: You'll need [Real Audio](#) to listen to the audio clips)

Despite the mixed results of *The Music of Greece*, the idea of a kind of "Geographic folkways" world music collection will persist. Another eight titles will be released in a series appropriately called *Sounds of the World*, including Luis Marden's recordings of Tongan music and similar releases on the music of Trinidad, Spain, Scotland, Hawaii, and the sea. All will be released as both vinyl albums and tape cassettes with extensive liner notes. Sixteen more titles will comprise a similar music collection, *American Adventure*, with such evocative names as *Steamboat's A-Comin'* and *Westward Ho!* before the Society disbands its recording program in 1979.

Not quite 2,000 titles, but it was a brave attempt nonetheless.

Author: Cathy Hunter

Sources: Draft, Docs #18689 (edited version eventually published on nationalgeographic.com as Collectible of the Month feature.); Fang, Irving, A History of Mass Communication, Newton: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp. 112-114; <http://www.si.edu/folkways/coll.htm>; Archives & Records Library/Recordings/The Music of Greece/516-3.1 and 516-3-2.1; News Service General/The Music of Greece/Record Review/38-3.276.

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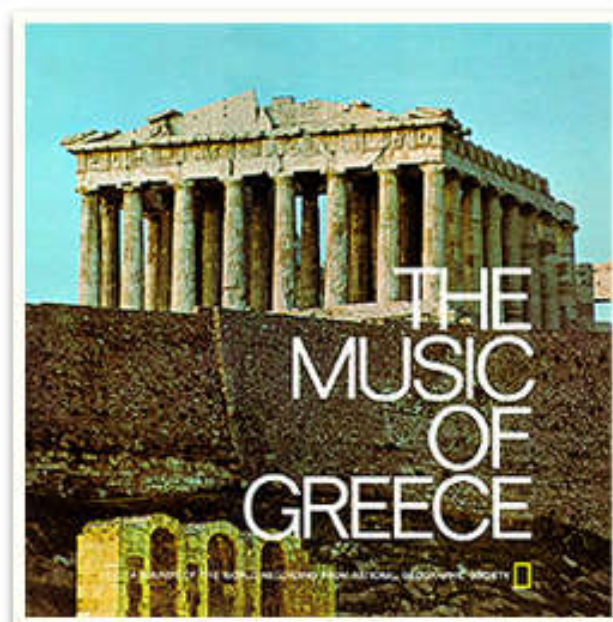
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