

Ioannis Halikias aka Jack Gregory (1898-1957)¹

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Introduction

Before 1932, the bouzouki had only been recorded a handful of times commercially, but these songs were in no real ways influential. The bouzouki still had a bad name and with the exception of the recordings of Manetas in 1931, had not been recorded in Greece.

In 1932, Ioannis “Jack” Halikias (1898-1957), a Greek-American recorded “*Minore tou teke*,” the first bouzouki solo, and probably the most influential bouzouki recording ever made.² It was this record that was responsible for the decision to start openly recording the bouzouki in Greece. It also provided the opportunity for the rise of players like Markos Vamvakaris, Anestis “Artemis” Delias, Giannis Papaioannou, and Vassilis Tsitsanis. It was “*Minore*” that inspired Papaioannou to pick up the bouzouki:

Listen then, how I got a bouzouki and became Papaioannou: One day I was sitting in the *taverna*, eating. I was wearing work clothes. I heard a record that Halikias made in America. It was a great hit from America, on one side there was a solo minore and on the other a solo *zeimbekiko*. Once I heard it, I went crazy. I got up to read the label and saw Halkias' name. It said "Giannis Halikias." It was the "*Minore tou teke*." I went crazy! A song like that will never be produced again in nature. No one else made a song like that. That is a symbol, which is untouchable by the whole world. (Papaioannou)³

For all the influence Halikias had in Greece, he spent remarkably little time there. After arriving in the U.S. in 1909, he never returned to Greece. Halikias was born in the village of Logastra in Lakonia in 1898. His family gradually emigrated to New York, where Halikias and his brothers were carters, selling items such as candies and fruits. Although Halikias’s father, Dimitri, was a well-to-do merchant who contributed \$10,000 towards the purchase of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in New York City, Halikias had a different calling. His uncle was a *mangas* who taught Halikias the bouzouki and the code of the *manges* when he was a boy. Halikias’s father did not approve of his son's interests in the bouzouki, so Halikias would sneak out of the house to learn on the streets and rooftops from his uncle. [The conditions were such that at times his twin sister Antonia had to hold an umbrella to protect him from the rain while he practiced.](#)

A Life of Crime

Along with his interest in the bouzouki, Halikias drifted into a life of crime that he continued for most of his life. In his youth he stole wallets in picture shows, and as an adult he ran the numbers in Harlem. In the words of his friend, musician and luthier Thanasis “Peiraiotis”

¹ For all the information in this essay, I owe debts especially to Jack Halikias Jr. and Halikias’s friend and guitarist, Alex Panos, the autobiography of Papaioannou, and the autobiography of Thanasis Athanasiou “Peiraiotis,” as well as private correspondence with Gail Holst-Warhaft and Stavros Kourousis, both of whom knew Athanasiou.

² The flip side was “*To Mistirio*.” It was also a popular recording and is performed today, but the “*Minore*” was the main attraction.

³ I accessed this from an online excerpt from Papaioannou’s autobiography on the website of the Spoudastirio Neou Ellinismou at http://www.snhell.gr/testimonies/content.asp?id=123&author_id=88. See Papaioannou (1996) for the original publication information.

Athanasiou, the *rebetis* of Aegina, Halikias was the “gentlemanly thief” (Athanasiou, 75). He was sentenced in 1927 for attempted grand larceny, his crime attributed to “easy money.” For this, he served 15 days in Sing Sing.⁴

After his sentencing, Halikias was able to avoid further police trouble, and with his business partner and *koumbaros*, oudi and violinist Tom “Laxanaras”⁵ Kokotos, got into bigger business. They started with the black market—typically paying truck drivers to drop their goods off into their warehouses and then dump the trucks by the docks and report that they’d been stolen. Later, probably in the mid-1930s, after setting up black market and racketeering operations, they realized that they could buy the grocery stores themselves. This remained a profitable venture, and Athanasiou reported that Halikias and Laxanaras made around \$3000 per day (Athanasiou, 72), a huge sum for the time equivalent to around \$900,000 monthly today.

There is a story of Halikias which has been mistold many times and which relates to the incredible wealth held by him and Laxanaras. The story typically goes says that after Halikias’s death, the police found a closet full of wallets. This has no basis in truth; Halikias was a pickpocket only for a brief time in his youth. The story is really that the penthouse owned by Laxanara and Halikias was robbed and the thieves found a closet packed with cash, which they stole. What they did not notice, though, was that there was another closet filled in the same way. Such was the wealth of these two, especially Laxanara, that Athanasiou referred to him as “like a pasha” (Athanasiou, 73).⁶

The racketeering business was incredibly profitable, but in the late 1940’s Halikias and Laxanara left it due to increased FBI attention. Laxanara relied on his restaurants, hotels, and other businesses, while Halikias relied on his *kafeneia*, which also served as *tekedes* and gambling dens. As a professional gambler who specialized in sleight of hand tricks, this served him well. In addition to gambling, Halikias also prepared the *nargiles*, played bouzouki, and cooked at his *tekedes*. During this time, he paid about \$1000 a month to an informer in the New York Police Department who told him when the cops were expected to raid his *teke*. In the event that he was caught, he told the cops that the hashish was Turkish tobacco. Despite being a wealthy man, Halikias lived his life a *mangas*, lending out money freely to his friends and those in need. Like most *manges*, he was a scofflaw—and one anecdote described how he collected a bunch of parking tickets, went down to court, paid a large sum, and walked out. In another instance, on his 1927 arrest record, as a sarcastic gesture towards the police, he gave his alias as “Jack Hercules.”

Music

⁴ I posted an image of the Sing Sing receiving blotter at <https://www.facebook.com/133891123347459/photos/pb.133891123347459.-2207520000.1457910269./926023640800866/?type=3&theater>

⁵ In the *mangika* lexicon, *laxanara* means wallet. In everyday Greek it means cabbage.

⁶ While Halikias was also affluent, he lived humbly, driving a Buick (compared to Lahanaras customized Cadillac, which had the automatic windows switched to manual), and dressed plainly but elegantly. When Hope asked him about his talent, he said “It’s easy to be a big fish in a small pond”.

Regarding the name of Jack Gregory, Jack was the nickname that Halikias was known by, while Gregory was an Anglicization of his mother's maiden name, Grigoriou.⁷ He did this mainly to appeal to American and Greek American audiences, with one of his dreams being to make the bouzouki known in the world of American music—especially jazz.

Living in the United States afforded Halikias exposure to many musical styles he may not have had in Greece. He was a fan of jazz, and went with his wife Hope to see Dizzy Gillespie, whom he greatly admired, at the Apollo Theater (Hope found Dizzy's playing unappealing, though). Musically, Halikias's primary influences were not from other bouzouki players, but rather from violinists, *santouri* players, *klarino* players, jazz musicians, and the like. That is in part why his sound was unlike that of any other bouzouki player.

It is unknown how Halikias became involved with Columbia Record Company, though soon after recording "*Minore tou Teke*" he became disillusioned with his status. *Initially, it was because a clause in the fine print did not allow him to earn anything from Greek sales. In anger, he tried to record with other companies, when Columbia revealed an additional clause that stipulated the contract was in effect for 30 years. Aside from these issues, Columbia also made Halikias tour for a year, something he hated.* In 1933 Halikias recorded "*Rast tou Teke*" and "*Mourmouriko Zeibekiko*" without a guitar, merely so that he could satisfy his four song contractual minimum. Around this time he also met for the first time the woman that would later become his second wife, and the father of his son, Hope Xenos. She first saw him at a picnic in New York in around 1934, with her family. Other than these facts, little is known of Halikias's activities during this era.

Postwar Years

After the death of his first wife Mabel from cancer, Halikias married Hope Xenos in around 1950. She adored Halikias' playing and would sing to accompany him. Her admiration dated back to her childhood, when she and her sister would secretly dance to their families copy of the "*Minore*" that they were forbidden to listen to.

As always, Halikias continued playing the bouzouki. According to Halikias's guitarist and friend Alex Panos, in the prewar era Halikias was mainly playing a Grachis bouzouki. At some point he sold the Grachis, or used it in his kafenios and around 1947 he bought a 1940 Zozef bouzouki from Athanasiou, who also served as Halikias's bouzouki repair man. This bouzouki became his favorite.

Around 1947 or 1948, in violation of his contract with Columbia, Halikias released five records on Athena Records, his own label.⁸ However, the company was not commercially successful, and very few of the acetates that Halikias and his friends made were pressed for release. Of those released, very few were made or sold. Because of this, Halikias abandoned

⁷ Interestingly, for copies of the "*Minore*" made in the U.S., Jack's name appears as Jack Grigoriou in Greek and Jack Gregory in English. For Greek copies, it appears as I. Halikias. For the "*Raste tou Teke*," which was only released in the U.S. (Kourousis) his name appears as Jack Halikias.

⁸ The majority of these have yet to be reissued and will be included in a project that I am working on. In the later 1950s there was another label called Athena, but it was under different ownership and had a yellow label, whereas Halikias's company had a red label.

the venture and began to record on a reel-to-reel recorder at his home, rather than on the record lathe he had been using.

Aside from the previously mentioned commercial recordings, in either 1953 or 1956 Halikias performed on at least one other record. He appeared on the songs “*To Megalo Psari*” and “*Den Eisai Besalou*” with Papaioannou and Rena Dalia on Liberty 156, though he is uncredited.

On top of making so few records, Halikias did not like to play publicly. In 1949, at the urging of Laxanara, he gave his last public performances at the Kismet club with Marko Melkon and Andreas Poggis. Booked for a period of six months, an account of one of his performances is found in *The Metropolitan Host's Weekly Guide to New York* on July 23, 1949. Instead, Halikias preferred to play at home with his circle of friends, many of whom are, aside from their appearance on home recordings with him, discographically unknown.

Although he eschewed performing, he regularly visited the clubs in New York and played with many musicians [based in the U.S.](#), such as his friend Kostas Kalivas (best known for his work on the Grecophon label), Marko Melkon, Giorgos Katsaros, Andreas Poggis, Athanasios Zervas, Harilaos Piperakis, Kanuni Garbis, Amalia Vaka, Thanasis Athanasiou, Theodoros Kappas, Nick Yortamas, and Kostas Doussas (whom he played with in Chicago) as well as visiting musicians like Giannis Papaioannou, Roza Eskenazi, Agapios Tomboulis, Manolis Hiotis, Rena Dalia, Poly Panou, and Giannis Tatasopoulos, and Udi Hrant (Lahanaras was the one who payed for Hrant to come to the U.S. and for his failed eye surgery). Of these, he was especially close to Athanasiou, Melkon, Papaioannou, and Tatasopoulos (for whom he was a mentor). In addition to being known among musicians, Halikias also knew many mafiosos, and celebrities. It's said that he knew Einstein from a coffee shop in Schenectady, where most of his family lived. They'd sit and talk about life, music and scientific concepts.

There is an interesting anecdote pertaining to the visit of Manolis Hiotis, the bouzouki virtuoso most widely known for popularizing the 4-string bouzouki. When Hiotis visited his house, Halikias asked him to play, but Hiotis replied, “I came to hear you play.” Commenting on Halikias' virtuosity, Athanasiou said “Even Hiotis could only play as Hiotis” (Athanasiou, 76).

Despite having recorded so few records, with only one (“*Minore*” and “*Mistirio*”) being released in Greece, Halikias's work remains a foundation in the history of the bouzouki. His playing remains a standard that countless players have tried and failed to emulate. Today, there is a good degree of ignorance about just how much Halikias shaped the history and playing technique of the bouzouki. Were it not for his issues with Columbia and his death in 1957, just five years short of the end of his 30-year contract, it is certain that he would have exerted a much greater influence on the development of bouzouki playing than he already had. Although currently very few recordings of Halikias are available to the public, his son, Jack Halikias Jr., possesses ten hours of home recordings by his father, a large collection of photographs, two of his father's *bouzoukia*, and his guitar. It is hopeful that in the future the public might have access to the full extent of Halikias's virtuosity.

References

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Photo caption



Halikias playing his Arzoumian bouzouki, which he did not like because it did not “play true.” Oddly enough, there are no photos of him playing his favorite bouzouki, the Zozef, only one of him holding it with Marko Melkon and other friends. The reason that this bouzouki is seen in the photograph is likely because the cosmetic condition of the Zozef was not good. After his death, Hope gave the Arzoumian and Halikias’s baglamas to Gloria Golds, who was the girlfriend of Thanasaki and an admirer and friend of Jack.



Jack Halikias and Hope Xenos on their wedding day in Central Park in 1953.

Additional Information: I'm going to visit Jack Halikias this Christmas and am going to post videos of his Zozef. I've also found the family of Kostas Kalivas, although Hope called him a cousin they weren't related by blood. The nephew of Kalivas knew Jack and I hope to visit him soon, and there should be more to add to this story. f

