



## Reaching for the brass ring

International star makes another bid in U.S.

By Verena Dobnik, Associated Press writer

NEW YORK -- Every night, the movie screen came to life under the Greek stars. From rickety chairs, hundreds of people met Judy Garland on celluloid, singing up Hollywood's yellow brick road.

In a house just behind the big screen, a shy 7-year-old would peek out of her bedroom window. She saw "The Wizard of Oz" over and over, fuzzy and in reverse from the wrong side of the screen. After the audience left, she would sneak out and stand on the small stage, facing the empty seats.



"I dreamed of the heroes I saw in the movies, and I pretended I was singing," says Nana Mouskouri.

Since those nights growing up in Greece in the 1930s, the singer with the trademark square glasses and soaring voice has appeared in the world's top concert halls. Over four decades, album after album has gone gold and platinum, offering love songs in styles ranging from gospel, pop and jazz to folk and classical.

But when Miss Mouskouri's name is mentioned, most Americans still say, "Who?"

And so, at 64, the chanteuse is taking on the United States again, with a new CD of songs from her "Concert for Peace," televised on PBS last year from Manhattan's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. On that evening, she switched musical gears from a Mahalia Jackson gospel song to Greek songs to Schubert's "Ave Maria" to Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Love Changes Everything."

The music may not be hip, but Nana has become a hip name in some cutting-edge places.

Like Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli and Maria Callas, Miss Mouskouri is a trendy diva to drag queens who impersonate her in clubs from Brussels to Los Angeles. And wearing square specs is considered cool for hot Generation X singer Lisa Loeb.

It's a challenge to seek fresh success in a country where Miss Mouskouri made her recording debut in 1962, with an album produced by Quincy Jones; a year later, she toured with Harry Belafonte. Bob Dylan wrote "Every Grain of Sand" especially for her.

But for decades, her tours took her to other countries, accompanied by her husband, guitarist George Petsilas. In recent years, divorced and with her two children grown, she was drawn once again to the United States. A 1993 tour was capped by a Carnegie Hall recital, and she returned in a 1997 tour

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accompanied by a new album, "Return to Love."

Not being a superstar is a novelty for her.

"This is very tough. And in my position, at this age, after all the successes, it's even harder," she said with a wry smile in an interview during a recent visit to New York. "But if you want to keep what you have done already, you have to go a little bit further. If you don't, then you go backwards."

Miss Mouskouri's artistry is rooted in childhood memories of the Greek civil war.

"I was so traumatized by this hate that it made me very insecure in life, searching always for love, tenderness, understanding," she says. Her concern for children now also extends to being a UNICEF goodwill ambassador.

Her father was the projectionist at the outdoors theater in Athens. And on those nights, watching old movies of the Ziegfeld Follies, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, she first understood that art could change people.

Sometimes she would run to the street and peer at the audience arriving, then leaving.

"I always watched the faces. I was trying to find if they were the same coming in and out, after seeing the movie. Are they happy, are they sad?" she said. "And they were never the same. When they were coming out they shared something -- they had watched the same film."

So this was what art could do. She was hooked.

While studying classical singing at the Athens Conservatory, she dabbled in popular music. "I was a rebel, and my teacher was very angry at me," she said. "At the end, I was chased away from the conservatory."

She debuted in a nightclub and went on to record hit music for movies such as "Never on Sunday" and "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg."

Although she calls herself "the shyest person in the world," she shunned trends and insisted on singing the music she really felt. Of her varied repertoire, which includes songs by Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Bette Midler and Nat "King" Cole, she says, "I'm a musical chameleon."

She has won tens of millions of fans with more than 1,000 songs delivered in a dozen languages and a voice packed with Mediterranean emotion.

"You know, for me and for all Greeks, everything is a tragedy, a psychological drama. I'm very emotional," she says. And a concert career "can be very lonely. I can cry all by myself on my bed, many times. ... But then, I'll go on stage and a big laugh comes and I start all over."

For that, she's been dubbed "Medea without the tragedy."

Being on stage for her is "like walking on a tightrope, crossing from dream to reality. And if you make it, it means the audience has come with you."

She calls the stage "my space. The audience and me. My most wonderful love story of all."

Although she lives in France and Switzerland, she feels that Greece is home and she has represented it as a member of the European Parliament since 1994.

"If you have your country, you feel those ties. And you feel better anywhere you go if you know that you have a home," she said.

Last summer, Miss Mouskouri returned to Athens for a three-hour solo recital near the Acropolis. Her son, Nicholas, and daughter, Helen, told her it was the best performance of her life.


As for success in the United States, she says, "If it happens, it happens; if it doesn't, it doesn't."

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*Photo by The Associated Press*

Nana Mouskouri is almost lost among her gold and platinum albums in this publicity photo. At 64, the Greek chanteuse is taking on the United States market with a new CD of songs from her "Concert for Peace," televised last

year on PBS.

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