

BIOGRAPHY

There are times when it does not take much to become a world-famous superstar: square glasses and long, straight hair have made Nana Mouskouri instantly recognisable worldwide, from Peking to Paris, via Tokyo and, of course, Athens. No irony intended: the singer's enormous talent has also contributed to her international stardom. Though the Greek singer, who also held a seat in the Parliament in Strasbourg, has been somewhat forgotten in Europe, Nana Mouskouri is still tremendously successful in Asia and America, making her still the best-selling female singer in the world.

Joanna Mouskouri (or Ioanna when retranscribed from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet) was born on 13 October 1934 on the banks of the Aegean Sea in Crete. Enrolled in the Hellenic Conservatory of Athens at a fairly young age, she initially studied mainly classical music. While learning to play the piano, the young Ioanna also became a remarkable vocalist, thanks in particular to being endowed with an important asset: asymmetrical vocal chords that allow her voice to reach high notes and produce crystal-clear tones with ease. Nonetheless, her early singing experiences did not involve classical music. The 1950s saw young Greeks abandon traditional Hellenic songs and dances in favour of dancing the Jerk to pop music in dance halls across Athens and Salonica.

Trip to Piraeus for OSS 117

Ioanna, nicknamed "Nana" by her friends, started out in a jazz quartet with the rather unoriginal name of "The Athenians". The quartet honed their act by performing in front of (sometimes rowdy) audiences in bars across Athens. It was during one such performance that the young female with the unusual voice was spotted by the producer and composer, Manos Hadjidakis. Taking Nana Mouskouri under his wing, Hadjidakis became the mentor of the astigmatic and myopic singer, introducing his discovery to intellectual circles across the Greek capital. It was during the parties organised by the composer that Mouskouri would meet her quasi-homonym, the actress and singer, Melina Mercouri, wife of the director Julius Dassin, and step-mother of the future Joe Dassin. 1959 saw the release of Nana Mouskouri's first single, "Kapou Yparhi i Agapi Mou".

Guided by Hadjidakis and Dassin, Nana contributed to writing the song, "The Children of Piraeus" for Melina Mercouri, which would become the hit single on the soundtrack for the film "Never on Sunday" produced by the American director. Winning a talent show a few months later enabled the Athenians to break out of their enclave in the capital and become known as a group throughout Greece. The calendar began to fill up with events, concerts and galas. By this time, Nana Mouskouri's thick-rimmed glasses and her sensible (if not to say serious) appearance had already made a huge contribution to the group's image. Thanks to skilful coaching from Manos Hadjidakis, Nana Mouskouri very quickly became a hit throughout Greece. On leaving Athens in 1960 to follow her own path, she was asked to attend numerous official ceremonies by the prime minister of the time, Constantin Caramanlis, a fan of hers from the very beginning.

So it was that she performed during the official visits of a lucky few that included Robert Kennedy, Juan Carlos, the future King of Spain, and Aristote Onassis. With Caramanlis' backing, Nana Mouskouri became a source of national pride, accounting alone for a significant proportion of Greek exports at the time. Her success at a range of international song contests turned her into

a quasi-official, high-profile ambassador for her country abroad. Her appearances on European and American stages represented an opportunity to remind people that Greek culture still existed and had never been stronger. Indeed, it was not uncommon for Mouskouri to impress audiences with her performances of works from the famous Greek poet, Nikos Gastos. Maria Callas would also prove to be a source of good advice for Nana on her future career.

Paris-New York

In 1960, Nana decided to leave her native country for a while and move to France to take up a golden opportunity to join the fold of the record company Philips. With her living expenses covered by Philippe Weill, Philips' Artistic Director, Nana proceeded to live the high life in the Parisian capital. She discovered French music including Edith Piaf, who had a profound impact on her, and Jacques Brel, with whom she became very good friends - to the point where she would move heaven and earth to introduce him to the Greek public.

This period saw Nana record numerous songs in both Greek and French (having learnt the words phonetically), as well as English and Italian. Her early records met with critical acclaim, despite their modest success. Critics were unanimous in praising the performances of the young Greek singer in a virginal white dress, and prophets in the record industry were already predicting a bright future for her.

“La montagne de l'amour”, “Le petit tramway”, “Ton adieu” and “Retour à Napoli” are just some of the songs that Nana performed in a foreign language in her bid to appeal to French and European audiences. However, Philippe Weill, judging Europe to be too small to absorb all of Nana Mouskouri's potential, had clearly set his sights on an English-speaking audience. Like many other artists in search of international fame, the young singer set off for New York in 1962 in a bid to win over the American public with the help of her mentors, Irving Green and Quincy Jones - two of the greatest makers of US stars of their time. The jazz-loving Nana was able to rub shoulders with big names like Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong and Shelby Singleton, with whom she went on to record as a duet. Her first English album, “The Girl From Greece Sings” (the title could not be any more self-evident!), met with modest success but nonetheless meant that the young and slightly chubby Greek would no longer be totally unknown to the American public.

From one Olympia to another

Back to France. Nana Mouskouri performed on the “greatest” stages such as the Olympia. Although her debuts were a bit chaotic (the singer was not very used to the rather rowdy Parisian audiences), Nana got the hang of it in time and those who initially viewed her as nothing more than a shy young woman quickly realised that she was perfectly capable of mesmerising a full house after just a few months' experience. Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, Guy Béart, Gilbert Bécaud, and Mouloudji were just a few of the artists for whom she would provide the support act and who would invite her on stage during their song recitals. Refusing to give in to the whims of her new manager, who wanted to give her a “sexier” look, Nana Mouskouri agreed to go on a strict diet, but put her foot down when it came to being asked to wear contact lenses instead of her trademark glasses. Audiences had not seen a “specy-four-eyed” singer since Buddy Holly and this detail made the public warm to her even more. Nana accepted Luxembourg's request to represent the Grand Duchy in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1963, but only achieved eighth place, though this did not prevent the song, “A force de prier” co-written with Pierre Delanoë, from working well as a single, regardless of whether it

was recorded in French, Italian, German or English. However, this relative snub of her artistic work persuaded Nana to turn her attention partly away from the French public and the French-language repertoire. She went on to develop a career in Great Britain, hosting a BBC programme created especially for her: Nana with Guests. The demands of shooting did not stop her from going back to Paris on a regular basis with her husband at the time, Georges Petsilas, singer in the band “the Athenians”, which had carried on performing without her.

In 1963, Nana Mouskouri - who by this time was constantly either on stage or on screen - won the Grand Prix du Disque award for her album “Mes Plus Belles Chansons Grecques” (My Most Beautiful Greek Songs). That same year, she was one of a group of artists assembled by UNESCO to produce a record for charity called “Ximeroni”, which she performed alongside Maurice Chevalier, Bing Crosby, Edith Piaf and Louis Armstrong. With this, Mouskouri undeniably entered the league of great singers and would henceforth be on the same level as the greatest voices of our time. Such a status would allow her to brush aside some of her manager’s crazy ideas such as singing Yé-yé to fit in with the music that was all the rage at the time.,,

When she sings, when she sings ... when she sings Nana

Game for anything, Nana Mouskouri agreed to perform all the concerts offered to her, from major tours of Canada and the United States with Harry Belafonte to the “Marathon de la Chanson” (Song Marathon) in the company of Charles Aznavour and the “Fête de l'Humanité” festival at la Courneuve.

Nana Mouskouri was particularly active during the second half of the 1960s, performing all over the world and adapting to her diverse audiences: while, for her American audiences, she remained the Greek who sang about her native country to jazz music, you would struggle to find someone more French when in France, more Italian when in Italy or more British when in the United Kingdom.

In 1965, "L'enfant au tambour" (The Little Drummer Boy) was the song that finally earned her the popular recognition she had so longed for in France. This success was soon followed by “Le tournesol” (The Sunflower), “Quand tu chantes” (When you sing) and the more gospel-sounding, “Alléluia” over the course of the following years. Once again, these songs were immediately brought out in German, English, Italian and Japanese, prompting audiences in the Far East to begin to take an interest in Nana Mouskouri. In the 1970s, Nana Mouskouri was less visible in the media as she spent this decade touring the globe non-stop giving concerts and picking up countless awards along the way. Like the singers Ella Fitzgerald and Maria Callas whom she herself admired, Nana Mouskouri had gained recognition as an international diva.

In 1980, Nana brought out another smash hit “Je chante avec toi liberté” (an adaptation of the “Hebrews' Chorus” from Verdi's opera “Nabucco”), which would earn her numerous prizes and awards. It was not until 1984 that Nana would return to her native Greece after an absence of more than twenty years to give a recital at the foot of the Acropolis steps before a vast audience that had come to pay tribute to the country’s daughter and best ambassador.

Hellène, she’s called Hellène

Nana would go against the tide once again towards the end of the 1980s by returning to her opera roots. Handel, Albinoni and Bellini were just some of the composers whose legacy Nana Mouskouri would carefully adapt for her classical compilation album in 1988. Though the album was well received by the general public, opera-lovers proved somewhat sceptical, some of them

even kicking up a fuss about this “variety” singer who dared to turn her hand to “full scores”. Unexpectedly, Nana also explored the world of gospel music, a genre she had already dipped into with Alléluia back in 1977. Her voice lent itself perfectly to the task and, yet again, Nana Mouskouri gave a virtuoso performance, along with the choir of gospel singers who accompanied her on stage on the tours following the release of her album, “Gospel Colour”, in 1990.

Nana took up her appointment as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in 1993 during the war in the former Yugoslavia. She held a number of galas and went on several tours to raise funds for the refugees. In yet another twist in her story, in 1994 Nana succeeded in getting elected on the list of a right-wing coalition in Greece and entered the European Parliament to sit among the ranks of the European People’s Party (conservative Christian right). This appointment raised a few eyebrows and drew some sniggers at the start, but the singer proved to be a more diligent and exemplary MEP than some other Brussels Eurocrats.

That same year saw the release of "Dix Mille Ans Encore", an album containing numerous duos (ranging from Graeme Allwright to Roch Voisine). Nana’s political activities did not seem to prevent her from continuing to sing, though, understandably, her artistic career had to slow down, or from taking advantage of the breaks between sessions of the European Parliament to get back on the circuit of galas and international tours. North America, Latin America, Asia and Europe: Nana Mouskouri continued to draw full houses and move her audiences.

Never-ending farewells

While Nana did not renew her mandate, the singer did relive her initial jazz experiences performing a series of classics of the genre in 2002. A tribute to the artists she had discovered in her early days, from Dizzy Gillespie to Ella Fitzgerald, this revival based on “boogie made in New Orleans” surprised fans who were not expecting her to do this type of music. In 2003, Nana remarried, to her new producer André Chappelle, and once again responded positively to UNICEF’s repeat request for her to act as a Goodwill Ambassador.

World tour after world tour, song after song, album after album, Nana Mouskouri did not seem to age or to want to call it a day on a career that had flourished continuously since 1959. Nonetheless, her global farewell tour in 2007 seemed to suggest that the singer had finally decided to take a well deserved retirement. Her loyal fans were waiting and, in keeping with any diva on her farewell tour, Nana Mouskouri performed on all the stages that had represented key moments in her career. However, it seems that this tour was not quite moving enough for the singer herself, as 2008 saw her pack her suitcases again and head off on yet another world tour. While there are some farewells we prefer to get over and done with quickly, this was clearly not the case with Nana Mouskouri who seemed to put hers off for as long as possible.

Nana Mouskouri appears in the list of the twenty-five best-selling artists in the world, ahead of Madonna and Céline Dion, with an estimated 400 million records sold.