



Stranded * in the USA “Early songs of emigration”

compiled and annotated by Christoph Wagner / Trikont US-0326

Note: for convenience all titles in this review are translated versions from the tracklisting, not necessarily the originals.

In the wake of a UK general election in which the question of immigration featured prominently in some campaigning, here is a release that offers food for thought. Between the verses of “When Midnight Comes” recorded by the Kapudji Brothers’ Tamburitza Orchestra in Chicago in 1942, a song rich in old world melody and harmony, we can enjoy some wonderful jazz-influenced solos by the excellent fiddler Bela Balog. Larry Alpert’s “Galiziana Ball”, recorded a decade later, takes it a stage further, integrating both English and Yiddish lyrics into a wild klezmer arrangement, clearly based on “The Darktown Strutters Ball”. These are just two examples of how this disc illustrates the USA’s unparalleled role as musical melting pot. The way in which men and women from so many countries contributed richly to the development of American music, while at the same time drawing deeply on it, stands as a useful metaphor for the impact of immigration on a host culture. At the same time, the lyrics throughout this anthology reflect immigrants’ experiences – both positive and negative – of encountering their new home for the first time; the songs may be historical, but the experience is no doubt still familiar to many.

There is, of course, no immigration without emigration, no departure without a leaving behind, and the songs included look at the question from a variety of angles. One is that represented by songs such as “A Norwegian emigrant arrives in the USA” (Little Oscar’s Gang, 1952), “The Immigrant’s First Difficulties” (Arthur Arkadias Kylander, 1928) and “A Puerto-Rican peasant in New York” (Conjunto Tipico Ladi, 1947). These are largely light-hearted in treatment, unlike Gaytan y Cantu’s “La Discrimination”, or Alfredo Bascetti’s passionate song of Sacco and Vanzetti, who were sentenced to death with little or no evidence, in a climate that demonised them for being immigrant aliens, almost as much as for being anarchists. There are also songs that tell of the misery of departure, such as “Fado Do Emigrante” (Antonio Menano, 1935) and there is a heartbreaking tale “O gero Amerikanos” (Dimitris Perdicopoulos, mid-1930s) of a young man in Greece who loses his bride-to-be to an elderly man who has made his fortune in America. Musically, all this offers almost bewildering diversity, and while inevitably some tracks are more readily appealing than others, that scarcely seems to be the point in considering a compilation that offers so much of historical and cultural interest, and that has been so effectively illustrated and annotated.

28 years ago there was an issue of Tony Russell’s *Old Time Music* magazine devoted to Ethnic Music in America. Articles included covered Polish, Ukrainian and Irish musicians, as well as Cajun (which *OTM* had tended to cover anyway), while the reviews section added Tex-Mex, Texas polkas and Hawaiian guitar. In the ensuing years, a lot more has been published, including discographical works – reminding us that much of the archaeology of ethnic music in the USA is visible through the output of the recording industry – and many hugely valuable, and highly enjoyable, record releases. Even so, while the Cajun and Tex-Mex fields have been fairly comprehensively researched, and some other areas such as Greek and Jewish musics have benefited from significant attention, many of the myriad other cultures which added their ingredients to the pot remain comparatively obscure. This compilation offers some remedy, with its songs representing Irish, Finnish, Serbo-Croat, Greek, Trinidadian, Portuguese, Polish, Jewish, Mexican, Italian, Norwegian, Puerto Rican, Ukrainian, Swiss, Austrian and Anglo-Saxon traditions. In many respects, the culture shock must have been fairly similar, regardless of your ethnic background, and an expanding community of fellow-countrymen would have provided a cushion, both protecting new immigrants from the full glare of the new culture, and helping them to deal with it. These communities inevitably had their music, and in due course they provided both a source and a market for commercial recordings, from which most of what is here has been drawn.

Compiler Christoph Wagner draws an interesting conclusion to his work: ‘The sounds of the diaspora – European folk traditions mixed with the music of the African slaves – became the source of the popular music which emerged from America in the 1950s.... That’s why every ethnic group on the planet can relate to [American pop music] in some way: they hear the distant echo of their own music in there somewhere’. Perhaps, although the accounts of people in this country encountering American styles such as jazz, rock’n’roll or blues, when they were first introduced to the UK, have tended to emphasise that their appeal lay in how unfamiliar they were. Nevertheless, the influence of many cultures is readily traced in the development of American music, even if those echoes are indeed increasingly distant.

Ray Templeton