

“Music Time in Africa: Mauritania” (July 29, 1973)

Added to the National Registry: 2012

Essay by Kelly Askew and Paul Conway (guest post)*



Leo Sarkisian, at work

In 2012, the Library of Congress selected Leo Sarkisian’s “Music Time in Africa” broadcast of July 29, 1973 for its National Recording Registry. “Music Time in Africa” (MTiA) is the longest running English language program on the US government-run Voice of America (VOA) radio service. This particular MTiA episode--one of nearly a thousand catalogued, digitized and archived at the University of Michigan--features the music of Mauritania. It was one of 25 sound recordings added to the Registry that year, along with Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon,” “The Twist” by Chubby Checker, and Simon & Garfunkel’s “Sounds of Silence.”

To most of the world, Leo Sarkisian was the “Musicman”--creator of VOA’s popular “Music Time in Africa” weekly radio show featuring music of all varieties from all nations on the African continent. To his colleagues at the VOA, he was the one and only “Leo”--multi-talented broadcaster, producer and ethnomusicologist who was a fixture of the “English to Africa” service for five decades and whose multilingualism and irrepressible charm won him friends everywhere he went. To his family and friends, he was endearing “Uncle Leo,” always dancing and delighting audiences with his exquisite *qanun* (zither) playing, with his wife Mary accompanying him on the *daf* (frame drum), both proudly performing their shared Armenian-American heritage.

Leo was born on April 4, 1921 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to an Armenian family that had fled violence in Turkey. He grew up speaking Armenian, Turkish, and English, later picking up Farsi and Arabic. He trained in commercial and fine arts at the Vesper George School of Art in Boston and had just graduated when WWII broke out. Ready to defend the land that had offered his family safe haven, Leo joined the US Army and put his training to work drafting maps, engineer terrain studies, charts and scale drawings for military command. His labors supported campaigns across North Africa and Europe, including D-Day, earning him a Bronze Star Medal

and nine battle stars. After the war, Leo worked as an illustrator for a New York publisher. At an Armenian social event back home in Massachusetts, he met Mary Andonian, who had served in the Navy as a communications and decoding specialist, and they married in 1948. Strong though his talents and passions were in the visual arts, in 1949, Leo left his illustration job to pursue his other passion: music.

Leo had been recruited to work for Tempo Records in Hollywood, California. Tempo's label, which released records by numerous jazz and classical performing artists including Doc Evans and the Munich Philharmonic, sought to launch a "Tempo International" series. According to Leo, the aim was to collect high-quality recordings from around the world for use in Hollywood films set in exotic locales. Leo underwent two years of intensive training in sound recording technology, assisting with recordings of Columbia Symphony Orchestra and the soundtrack for "The African Queen," among other highlights. Then he moved to Washington, DC, to train as a technician, capable of fixing and rebuilding audio equipment for when it might fail while recording in remote locations. After all this training, Leo was named "Director of Ethnic Recordings and Representative Engineer" for Tempo Records and sent--with Mary and a Jeep specially outfitted for his recording equipment--to Karachi, Pakistan. For the next four years (1952-56), Leo traveled throughout Afghanistan, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), recording music in cooperation with Radio Kabul and Radio Pakistan. In 1958, Tempo reassigned Leo to West Africa where Ghana had just become the first Sub-Saharan African nation to secure its independence from colonial rule. For two years, he traveled the country collecting 100+ field recordings and producing LPs such as "New Sounds from a New Nation" showcasing Ghana's musical diversity. In 1960, Tempo relocated Leo to Guinea. It was while there, working with Radio Conakry, that famed broadcaster Edward R. Murrow recruited Leo to work for the VOA.

In the 1960s, the Cold War was in its ascendancy and newly independent nations in Africa were highly sought prizes by powers on both sides. The United States Information Agency (USIA) under Murrow's directorship deployed music and culture as tools of "soft diplomacy" to try and win over hearts, secure allies and amass goodwill towards the USA. Leo's work supporting the radio stations of these new nations with his technical expertise--Radio Ghana and Radio Conakry, initially, and later Radio Dahomey, Radio Tanzania, Radio Doula (to name but a few)--simultaneously advanced the causes of African independence and American political influence.

"Music Time in Africa" (MTiA) aired in May 1965 broadcasting from Monrovia, Liberia, to the entire African continent. Leo was based in Liberia for six years, from 1963-1969, and set up the VOA program office there. He conducted a systematic ethnomusicological study of the country, working closely with the Ministry of Information and Cultural Affairs. Leo and his radio program then relocated to VOA Headquarters in Washington, DC, where the show continues to be produced and broadcast today. No longer limited to reception in Africa, MTiA may be accessed by audiences everywhere in the world via the internet at <https://www.voanews.com/listen/music-time-africa>.

In this July 29, 1973 rebroadcast of the original March 12, 1972 show, Leo joins MTiA host Sue Moran in exploring the musical structures, instruments and social contexts of Mauritanian music. Mauritania derives its name from the predominant ethnic group known as the "Moors" or

Beydane (their preferred name). Their music is performed and preserved by griots, hereditary artisans whose repertoires are passed down orally from generation to generation. Gender determines the instrument one performs with: the four-string lute called *tidinit* is played by male griots while the ten- or eleven-string harp called *ardin* is played by female griottes. Music falls into three styles--black (*Lekhal*), white (*Lebiadh*) and spotted (*Zrag*)--and there are four modes that can be utilized within each of these styles: *Karr*, *Vagho*, *Seinina* and *Beigi*. Social contexts determine which combination of mode and style should be performed, with some associated, for example, with joy and gladness, others with courage or nostalgia. In the show, as Leo explains the complexity of Mauritanian musical theory, excerpts allow audiences to hear the difference in timbre of the *tidinit* versus the *ardin*, the vocal style of Mounnina, one of Mauritania's famed female stars, versus that of Sidi Ahmed El Bakay Ould Awa, a *tidinit* virtuoso. The careful attention in this show to gender parity, to history, to the intricacies of a distinctive musical system understood on its own terms are hallmarks of "Music Time in Africa" and the scholarly work of Leo Sarkisian.

Although Leo passed away peacefully in June 2018 at the age of 97 after a lifelong career of government service, his legacy of "Music Time in Africa" lives on in current broadcasts and in the Leo and Mary Sarkisian Collection at the University of Michigan. With generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, almost 900 "Music Time in Africa" radio programs and scripts are digitized and available for online streaming through the Music Time in Africa website with more still being added to the collection [<http://mtia.sites.uofmhosting.net/>]. Leo would be happy if you took a listen.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.