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Nana Mouskouri bows out in style

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On the eve of her New Zealand tour, the legend that is Nana Mouskouri tells Grant Smithies why it's time to say goodbye.

Surely it was a rhetorical question. Did I want to interview Nana Mouskouri about her upcoming Grand Farewell tour to New Zealand? Of course I did! I grew up listening to Nana. My mum was a huge fan when I was a kid, so it was Mouskouri's cool, clear tones that soundtracked the milestones of my childhood in Wanganui. I was breast-fed to Nana. I learned to crawl to Nana. I was potty-trained to Nana.

No wonder, then, that a little later in life I even temporarily was Nana. I dressed up as her for a fancy dress party. I thought I had her look completely nailed - the thick black-rimmed specs, the long dark wig with the severe centre parting, the flowing white dress. I even carried a huge tumbler of ouzo in my hand.

People had no freakin' idea who I was. I suspect the world wasn't quite ready for a short, fat, male Nana.

But the real Nana Mouskouri is no joke. Yes, her nickname recalls something long, curved and yellow that you might find in the fruit bowl, but Nana is merely the common Greek contraction of her given name Ioana (Joanna in English).

And yes, her perfectly parted dark hair has been unkindly compared to the ears of a black labrador, but to me it has always looked lovely - regal and glossy, innocent and girlish.

But that voice is a serious thing. Her voice is like a cool hand laid softly upon your feverish forehead. The tone is so clear and high that when people mention The Sopranos, I think of this slender Greek, rather than a bunch of sociopathic porky Italians. Even if she's singing a piece of total rubbish, her own sense of calm floods your system like an injection of strong sedatives.

Her speaking voice is similarly serene, but

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deeper, and freighted with a weariness that betrays her 70 years. Mouskouri, in her Athens kitchen, asks me politely in English to wait, then peels off several sentences in Greek to

other people in the room. It sounds deliciously alien, as if someone has stolen most of the vowels and the remaining consonants are arguing among themselves. The other people leave and Mouskouri speaks. And speaks. And speaks.

"Why have I decided to leave the stage for good? Because touring is exhausting. I still love singing, but I wanted to stop doing it before my voice started to let me down, while I am still conscious and well. You know, I have never been like those American singers who do a world tour then don't perform again for 10 years. I have always played at least two shows a week, for nearly 40 years! It has been constant. I see my friend Pavarotti is doing this too, having a farewell tour. The time has come for us to bow out from the scene."

It might surprise you to learn that Nana Mouskouri is the biggest-selling female singer of all time. In her 45-year career, she has sold about 300 million records, which means she is probably as rich as Donald Trump, but with far better hair.

People often call Mouskouri "Europe's Barbra Streisand", and it's easy to see why. Both singers have slightly iffy taste and a repertoire so varied, it borders on the ludicrous - pop tunes, jazz standards, smoothed-out rock songs, movie ballads, French cabaret, classical and operatic songs, hymns, folk songs - plus a much-caricatured personal look, a huge gay following and a knockout voice.

But Nana makes Barbra look lazy. Mouskouri is the hardest-working woman in show business. For the past 40 years, she has played close to 100 concerts, all over the world, and released at least a couple of albums - each year. Some years she has released four or five albums, all in different languages - Greek, French, English, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Hebrew. To get an idea of how many songs she has recorded in each language, consider this - a box set compiling the best of Mouskouri's French language songs was released in May last year. It contained 32 CDs and more than 600 songs.

One reason so many fans love Nana Mouskouri is that she has never felt the need to reinvent herself. She still looks and sounds pretty much as she always has. She has never flirted with a side-parting, dreadlocks or a curly perm. She remains a stranger to contact lenses.

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There have been no embarrassing drum'n'bass remixes of her early hits, or raunchy R'n'B duets with Justin Timberlake or Robbie Williams. She is what she is, take it or leave it. The middle of the road is her chosen domain, and she steams along it with power and purpose.

"People call what I do easy listening music. No! I have always sung songs that moved me deeply, and will hopefully move others. I grew up in the 60s, when people tried to be optimistic, to build a new world with peace, with wise words. Today the world is very aggressive and inhumane. It is very sad."

There have been two marriages along the way, the first to guitarist Georges Petsilas, with whom she had two children. This relationship came to grief after Petsilas requested that she flag the singing and live quietly as a housewife in Greece. She divorced him instead and went back on the road. The second marriage was just last year, to long-time companion and ex-sound engineer Andre Chappelle.

She owns houses in Paris, Athens and Geneva, and has a huge fan-base in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australia and here in New Zealand.

"I think people all over the world love my music because it is so peaceful.

That is because I was a war child. I grew up in Crete during the German occupation of Greece, surrounded by bombs and the dead."

Mouskouri's father worked for the resistance movement, and moved the family to Athens when she was three. She escaped with her parents and sister Jenny, but then faced a civil war in Greece for another four years.

"Again - disappointment and fear. Singing became my only way to stay hopeful. My father was a projectionist in an open-air theatre, and I saw a lot of films with American singers, so I started to sing to stop myself from being afraid."

Mouskouri has only one functioning vocal cord - a "birth defect" that led doctors to conclude that she could never be a professional singer. She ignored them, and was accepted into the Hellenic Conservatoire in Athens as a classical music student in 1950, only to be kicked out in 1957 when she was caught singing jazz in a local nightclub. She continued to sing in jazz bands, and struck up a friendship with emerging Greek songwriter Manos Hadjidakis, who became her mentor.

Who are her fans these days? They're mostly in their late 50s and early 60s, I imagine, like my mum, who also rates Roger Whittaker, Val Doonican and Engelbert Humperdink. But Mouskouri also gets love from a surprising number of major-league hipsters. Leonard Cohen is a big fan, as was Roy Orbison, who once tried to chat her up, "growling very sexily at me". Bob Dylan loved her live shows and wrote the song "Every Grain of Sand" for her in 1979, and legendary Bowie producer Tony Visconti made a record with her a decade later.

Asked what she has been most proud of in her long career, Mouskouri starts at her first big radio hit (1960's "The White

Rose of Athens") and then keeps reeling off the milestones until I eventually stop her. She talks of recording jazz ballads in New York with super-producer Quincy Jones, touring with Harry Belafonte, making records with jazz pianist Oscar Peterson, singing live with The Beatles and Donovan, having songs written for her by French composer Michel Legrand, selling out the Royal Albert Hall, kicking off a UK TV series called Nana And Friends (which showed here in New Zealand during the 70s), and topping the charts in Germany, England, France.

"I met so many wonderful people all along the way. Me, a very serious little girl from Greece! I became part of a larger family of singers - Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell. I wasn't a protest singer, or a rock singer, but all these people knew and appreciated my music."

Dismay at how the world was changing led Mouskouri to become directly involved in politics in the early 90s. She was elected a Greek member of the European Parliament between 1994 and 1999, before switching her focus to humanitarian work. Mouskouri's most recent task as a Unicef ambassador was assessing child health in Vietnam last year. Appalled by the lack of clean water in rural areas, she reached into her own pocket rather than wait for government action.

"The first victims of bad politics, selfishness and war are innocent children, as I know from my own life." Suddenly, her steady flow of words peters out. She sounds, for a second, as though she might cry. "I must go now. Thank you very much for your interest in my work. And give my best regards to your mum."

- Nana Mouskouri's Grand Farewell tour: Auckland, Aotea Centre, August 30, Wellington, Michael Fowler Centre, September 1, Christchurch, Town Hall, September 2. Tickets from Ticketek.

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