

Greek Island Music Lives On With Grecophon Record's Legacy 2/5/05

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

I learned of Skevos (Steve) Zembellas' death nearly a month ago in an e-mail. No date, no cause of death was reported to me. I had not heard or spoken to Skevos in well over 20 years.

Skevos Zembellas was owner/producer of the Grecophon Record Company of Gary, Indiana. Grecophon was so popular a name for Greek-owned record companies, at least two companies would, in time, use this name.

Zembellas' record label was unique, however, because it released traditional Greek island music. There were a few notable exceptions to this general rule, but not many. One aspect of the Grecophon label which never changed was that all musicians who appeared on this company's records were Greek immigrants living in the United States.

I met Skevos in 1984, while working on a grant from the Indiana Humanities Council. My research

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partner was Tina Bucuvalas, and we were both graduate students at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana then.

It was Tina who first learned of Zembellas' career in the record business. I managed to get the two of us into the only Greek cafenio in Gary, Indiana. The doors were locked and gated and I had to do some considerable talking in Greek, through the door, before we got in. It was there where we met Zembellas.

With the music blaring in the cafenio, Tina leaned over and nearly shouted into my ear as she identified Skevos Zembellas at our table.

"I was crazy for that music," Zembellas said, describing his response to the Greek musicians in the cafenia of Tarpon Springs upon his arrival there in 1937.

Zembellas was born on the island of Kalymnos and arrived in Florida via Cuba. He told us that, in the 1930's, the majority of Greeks living in Tarpon Springs hailed from the Dodecanese islands.

Sponging was the main industry in Tarpon at the time, and when Zembellas first saw the fleet of Greek-owned boats, he said they numbered some 1,500 strong. The intrepid Greek divers worked the rich sponge beds throughout the Gulf of Mexico down into the Florida Keys, and sometimes venture far into the Caribbean. Those were the glory days.

Within ten years, a red tide of microorganisms swept through the waters, killing the fish and sponges and destroying the Greeks' livelihood. Throughout the late 1940's, hundreds of Greeks from Tarpon Springs moved from Florida to enclaves in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. There, various groups of Greeks from specific Dodecanese islands came to live.

Zembellas reported that a significant number of Kalymnians eventually chain-migrated in this fashion to northwest Indiana.

The Grecophon Record Company history reflects this wider background of events.

In early 1946, Zembellas' love for Greek music led him to buy a Wil-

cox-Gay portable phonograph recorder. This machine was designed to record one 78 rpm LP at a time. You sang or played your instrument into the microphone, and it was recorded in real time. Technically, they weren't 78 rpm LP's. They were celluloid discs (physically thinner than a factory-produced vinyl record, and thus far more rare an item to find now than a standard record).

Over the next six months, Zembellas recorded the local Greek musicians. Taking individual requests for specific songs, he would pay the musicians one dollar per session and charge three dollars per record. Local Greeks placed their requests at Zembellas small storefront record shop. As the list of requests grew, Zembellas realized there was a market for Greek island music, since the larger Greek labels, for whatever reasons, were not then releasing records with traditional island music.

Zembellas then recorded what he always believed was the best music he ever recorded on his Wilcox-Gay machine. With Elias Peronis of Tarpon Springs (among the finest violinists), a local backup laouto player and Zembellas as vocalist, the trio recorded such traditional island songs as Panayoti and Perivolla. Late that summer, Zembellas traveled to New York City with eight original celluloid discs with the aim of convincing Tetos Demetriades, the largest manufacturer of Greek records in the country, to release these songs on RCA Victor's Standard Phonograph Record label. At this time Demetriades, a Greek immigrant from Constantinople, was the vice president for RCA Victor's foreign music division.

NEVER RELEASED

Demetriades listened to the recordings and agreed to sign Zembellas and his fellow musicians. Demetriades filled out the contracts, allowing the standard five cents per record per musician for royalties. The Tarpon Springs musicians, who had expected to receive thousands of dollars, would not sign the contracts, and the eight songs they had recorded together were never released.

While Zembellas always expressed regret about his failure to release those initial recordings, the experience served as a catalyst for the formation of Grecophon Records.

In 1947, Zembellas traveled to Chicago and entered a recording studio near Ontario and Ohio Streets. Accompanied by an array of fellow Dodecanesian musicians Zembellas recorded the first 18 records which would be the beginning of the Grecophon Record label.

Expenses were considerable: \$100 an hour for the studio, with an average of three hours needed for the production of four records. Realizing the smallness of the business, the musicians charged Zembellas only \$100 dollars per record, \$50 below union scale. The manufacturing cost averaged 15 cents per record. The records wholesaled at 40 cents and retailed for 75 cents to \$1. For a press run of just under 2,000 records, Zembellas' total production cost for a single ten-inch 78 rpm record averaged a little more than \$2,000.

Distribution for Grecophon was divided between record stores and mail order. Standard orders on records from distributors were in units of 25. Despite the fact that Zembellas expected a small but steady trade with island Greek customers, he was happily surprised by the fact that Greek record stores in Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Youngstown, and San Francisco regularly sought out Grecophon's latest releases. With the national circulation of the New York City-based newspapers, the National Herald and the Atlantis Grecophon Record advertisements brought in a brisk mail order trade, as well.

Zembellas stated emphatically that, with a single popular record, there was "no problem selling 10 thousand records in those days. No problem." His problem was the unpopular records.

"I used to make money on one, then lose it on the next and have to start all over again," he told me.

An example of a best seller was the dance song, Auto to Vradi to Skotino (This Dark Evening), with Yiorgos Katsaros on vocals and

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Kosta Kalivas on the bouzouki (Grecophon 11A). Three thousand copies of this record were sold in the Boston area alone. Still, predicting musical hits was a tricky business. Zembellas had judged that Kalymnos essos, a Kalymnian dance, would be an extremely popular dance record, and only put Kalymnaki (Young Kalymnian) on the B-side as a novelty (Grecophon 10). But 500 copies of this record sold in Tarpon Springs alone because Kalymnaki proved so popular.

Using the Greek melody of the day, Zembellas rewrote the lyrics of Kalymnaki into a love song with the Tarpon Springs Greeks in mind.

Released just a few years after the 1947 red tide, this romantic song of lost love became associated with the loss of the Kalymnians' (and by extension, all the Greek sponge divers') way of life in the Florida bayou.

In 1954, Skevos Zembellas was 30 years of age and married with children, but Grecophon Records still had not won the recognition or achieved the financial success he had dreamed of, so he closed the company.

In the post-World War II era, a still unknown number of small Greek record companies appeared in North America. Record labels such as Alpha, Aristophone, Grecophon, Hermes, Kaliphon, Liberty, Nina and many others all appeared with the intent of marketing specific kinds of Greek music.

Various individuals and companies in Greece are re-releasing (on CD's) any number of the American-produced and recorded Greek music from 1900 to 1960. The most easily recognized trademark for those in search of Greek island music, however, remains an island with a bird in flight high above it: the label of the Grecophon Record Company.

As with the products of Greek record industry prior to 1940, few (if any) of these American-made Greek records ever made their way back to Greece.

Today, Greek and Euro-American musicologists are seeking out the Greek American labels, the few surviving performers, and the descendants of the original musical

performers to learn more about the Greek music industry in North America.

Historians and documentary film makers have joined the musicologists in search of the music and history of the Grecophon Record Company, since it is no secret that this label featured many key songs long favored by the Tarpon Springs sponge divers and their families.

In every conversation I had with Skevos, he eventually returned to the subject of the lost records he took and left with Tetos Demetriades.

They were his lost dreams, the music he always believed that Grecophon Records could have released with much greater success than he managed to do.

"At least the Kalymnians would have had something to be proud of today when it comes to their music," he once told me.

Little did he realize how right he was.

Today, Grecophon Records, and

the varied music traditions from the Dodecanese islands it documents, is among the most sought after Greek American labels. The musical heritage Skevos Zembellas so loved and sought to preserve can still be heard on Grecophon Records.

The last time I saw Skevos Zembellas was the summer of 1985. The Florida Folklife Bureau made a number of live recordings among the Greek musicians at a Tarpon Springs festival. I was there during Skevos' one performance. Skillful as ever, Skevos, during his brief appearance on stage, had various Greeks in the audience singing along, laughing at his puns, and calling out salutations. When he finished, the crowd gave him a standing ovation as he waved and bowed.

When I asked Tina Bucuvalas years later how she knew who Zembellas was that night in Gary, Indiana, she laughed and said, "He looked like a movie star."

He really did, and he really was.

Valentine's Day at Frankie & Johnnie's Steakhouse on 37th Street

By Aziza Johnson

Candlelight, a roaring fireplace and beautiful dark-wood paneling are just a few of the ingredients which make Frankie & Johnnie's Steakhouse in Manhattan (on 37th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues) the perfect place to spend Valentine's Day with your sweetheart.

Couples can celebrate this romantic holiday by dining in front of the fireplace and eating superb culinary creations from Chef Pedro Benitez, such as prime USDA-approved dry-aged steaks and chops, fresh seafood and the establishment's exquisite Chocolate & Strawberry Mousse-Filled Heart dessert, available only from February 11 through February 14.

Destined for tender romance, the 37th Street Frankie & Johnnie's, now owned by Van Panopoulos, was formerly the home of Hollywood heartbreaker John Drew Barrymore. Born on February 14, Barrymore had a flare for romance. Legend has it that, while kissing the love of his life, Dolores Costello, he caused her to faint. So powerful was Barrymore's kiss that, soon after, Dolores agreed to marry him.

While Barrymore has long passed away, his romantic spirit and touch continues to linger in the air at Frankie & Johnnie's. The ambience, coupled with excellent food and first-class service, make the restaurant the ideal location for sharing Valentine's Day dinners. For reservations, please call 212-947-8940.