

Santis is Super Greek on Stage, but Sweet Greek at Home in Astoria

By Constantine S. Sirigos
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NEW YORK – Back in 1979 an energetic Greek American musician with a sense of humor named Jimmy Santis started a band that had a nice run on the circuit in New York's Greenwich Village. Thirty years later, the energy still abounds, the songwriting continues, but the man now has a new gig: Comedian at large, and a new persona - Super Greek. "The idea of Super Greek is based on the Greek immigrant who comes to the U.S. He's got a lust for money, he thinks he's God's gift to women and knows it all, but nothing could be further from the truth. He is actually a lovable guy, but he's in total denial of all his shortcomings."

Super Greek's character has developed through Santis' lyrics. "The most popular song is *I Won't Survive* which is about Super Greek's proxenia, his efforts to find a bride. It's a parody of *I Will Survive*. The song begins: "At first I was afraid, now I'm petrified, I didn't know this proxenia was going to ruin my life - Perimena mia nifi me hares kai omorfia kai mou brikan mia katsika me elies kai dio tiria" - I was looking for a bride with charm and beauty and they found me a goat who brought me olives and two pieces of cheese. Such is the life of Super Greek.

Santis has lived in Astoria most of his life, so he knows from olives and cheese. One sunny afternoon we took a walk through the old neighborhood, meeting on the typical Astoria block where he grew up: Nice homes with trees and nice yards. Santis remembered his childhood friends like Chris, Charlie and Nick Neokles. "Another wonderful friend of mine was Andy Pappas," he said, "who was the leader of a band called Alpha Entertainment. They did a lot of weddings and

christenings."

A pattern begins to emerge as Greeks and music dominate our conversation, but there was no Greek element in his early career. Santis' band played New Age music at historic New York venues like CBGB's. They also performed rock and roll on venerable station WNEW and for a time were part of the regular musical programming for its amateur hour programs. A born musician, Santis became fascinated with the technical side of the music industry, working



Comedian Jimmy Santis

with icons such as Frank Sinatra on his *L.A. is My Lady* album. "The technical side was quite a lure for me. The first time I was in the recording studio, I was like a kid in playland. It was fascinating to me to see what a recording engineer does, and being exposed to a lot of talent inspired me to write songs and to also be on the other side of the glass and become a recording artist." Santis said his career evolved continuously through

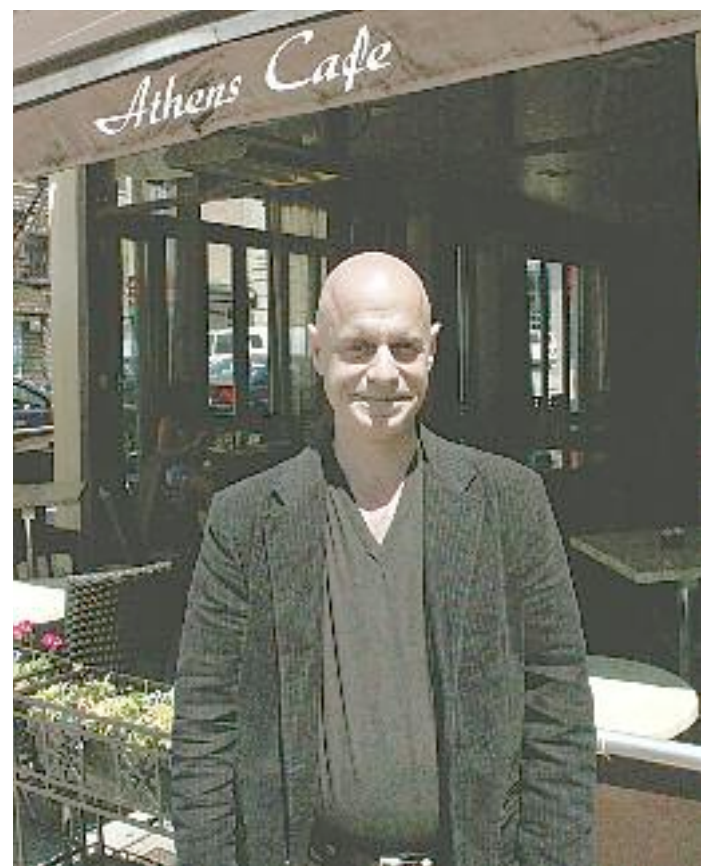
songwriting and singing, "and then it took a turn towards comedy in my later years," he said as we turned onto 30th Avenue.

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD
Astoria is widely dispersed and it can be argued there is no one center. There is the romantic-sounding Ditmars Boulevard, and Broadway, but for most Greek and Greek Cypriot Americans "The Strip" on 30th Avenue is the heart of Astoria. Flow Cafe, Grand Avenue Cafe, Avenue Cafe, Athens Cafe mixed in with places purveying all kinds of ethnic cuisine: Indian, Italian and great new sushi places, said Santis. At night the cafes spillover into the streets, guys with motorcycles racing up and down the street.

He said it's a lot like Athens. "That's what people love about it, and there a sense of community, people hanging out, sipping their frappedes, solving the world's problems. It makes you want to take a break from the day to sit back, chill out and relax." Santis said, "It's a great place to be, especially now. It's a great melting pot of all different cultures, but it's still predominantly Greek."

One suspects that growing up amid such diversity affected his musical inspiration. "I've been writing songs most of my life and I write in all different styles. I had a number one Christian album called *Heart of a Champion* and one of my most frequently recorded songs is one called *A Girl Can Dream* that was in a film called *Centerstage*. It's gone on to become a top 10 song in the Philippines, in Singapore and Denmark and charted pretty high here in the U.S. I continue to write songs for film and television and I've also had some Latino pop songs that were hits in Spain and Brazil."

Santis has one sister, younger than him, who has two boys, Georgie, age seven and Michael, age three. He is so proud of



TNH/ANGELIKE CONTIS

When he's not on stage, comedian Jimmy Santis likes to hold court at spots such as the Athens Cafe in Astoria, NY.

Georgie's Greek language ability: "He has no accent. He speaks Greek better than I do." Clearly these things are important to Santis, and he is passionate about them, notwithstanding his poking fun a little bit. He told *The National Herald* that "Perhaps it's a little cliché, but the Greek language is so rich in its meaning, every word, the way we can express ourselves, the depth of our passions and the depth of the emotions that the Greeks feel, it's all conveyed in the language. I have a great love for the language and culture and I'm proud that my oldest nephew is going to St. Katherine's and that he will continue the traditions."

With his Greek identity so

strong, it seems inevitable that he found an outlet through his creative side. Something was bubbling underneath the surface of a successful career, but Santis the comedian was born late. One might describe it as a miracle, or God must have a sense of humor: Super Greek was born through the midwifery of the Church of the Annunciation's Talent Show. "A group of us decided to do a talent show as a fundraiser for the Church," Santis explained. "We put together a variety of groups and individual performers and I decided to take a shot at writing song parodies. That's how this whole thing got started."

Santis incorporates family and Greek school experiences

into his songs and routine: "You know, the teachers and kids I grew up all play a role in my show, some of the stereotypes that you come across in Greek culture." Walking through the old neighborhood, the thought came whether Santis felt the temptation to get a little revenge on some of the people he encountered growing up there, maybe tweaking the names a little. "I wouldn't call it revenge. It's just having fun with the past," he said. "My dad owned a diner, surprise surprise. I used to work there and it was called Kellogg's diner. You go to Greek school, dad has a diner, family comes over from Greece - all the uncles and aunts and their colorful personalities - there's a lot of fodder there for comedy."

Santis continues with the story of Super Greek. "He goes on with his life, has a family. There's a song about his family called 'Thelo aspirina - I Want An Aspirin' - because they are all driving him crazy: I work like a dog, I need some relaxation, I come home to my lazy wife who says she needs vacation - pote den magerevi, pote then katharizi, kouventa sto tilefonio kai to spiti mas mirizi - she never cooks, she never cleans, she's always talking on the phone and the house smells. As much as he loves living in New York, Santis loves the fact that Super Greek has taken him to new places. He has performed at the prestigious Montreal International Comedy Festival and went to London two years ago. "We had sold out performances there three nights. There's a really large Cypriot community, and they were wonderful. They embraced the comedy."

FOOD'S FUNNY-FAMILY'S FUNNIER

The common denominator in all these states and countries he has visited is growing up Greek outside Greece or Cyprus. "I mostly stick to family [scenarios], you know, the dysfunctionality of the Greek family." He is asked, "What do you mean by that Jimmy?" and we all laugh. But food is also a dominant theme: "The obsession with food that we have. We all can relate to that. I have a song called *Bamies Today* about okra, which is a parody of the song *Y.M.C.A.* Super Greek's kids loathe it," but in fact it's Santis who actually hates the stuff. "But we all love horta, so there a song called *It's the Horta You Love*, based on the song *Addicted to Love* by Robert Palmer. *Koulouri Number 5* is also a crowd favorite, inspired by the song *Mambo Number 5*."

He said, "My songs touch upon the relationships and the food that Greeks all over the world can connect with, and the different themes which we grew up with, including *The Greek Restaurant*." Santis confessed, "I spent several summers working at my father's diner and I didn't like it at all. That was his biggest disappointment, that I didn't follow him in the family business. Even after 30 years he still says: 'When are you going to get a real job.' I keep trying to tell him it's not a phase that I'm going through, it's a lifetime of work I love, and I feel very fortunate that I have been blessed with enough success to keep it going because it's very difficult to sustain a career in the arts, no matter what you do. You must constantly re-invent yourself and find new ways to entertain people."

His father is from Mytilene and mother from Chios. "I think Chios has the most monasteries of any island in Greece and I visited a lot of them when I was 13 with my yiaia. Her idea of my having a good time was staying at the monastery for a week," he said. Santis has traveled all over the U.S. performing at fundraisers for churches. "That's really the main use for the Super Greek character. I've performed from California to Florida to Texas to the Midwest and I continue to do that. It's been a great vehicle for fundraisers for the churches. It's a night of entertainment, easy to do - a one-man show. It's something different." Santis said he is proud that his talent recruited in support of the continuation of the Greek culture and language in America. He has also performed for Philoptochos, Greek school PTOs, AHEPA and Leadership 100.

We sat down at a nice table at the Athens Cafe and before we knew it, Santis had donned glasses and a hat there he was, Super Greek. The manga himself, in the flesh, holding court at the kafenio, in his element, doing what he does best. He was super.

(You can see TNH's video interview with Jimmy Santis on thenationalherald.com/video/336 and a clip of *It's the Horta You Love* at his own Web site: supergreekmusic.com)

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