

'Chairman' George and the Ministers

BIO

A rock bouzouki-playing Greek Canadian civil servant with a PhD in statistics who is a star in China – you can't get more incongruous than that. But then again there is nothing ordinary about George Sapounidis and his band *Chairman George and the Ministers*.

George is the driving force behind the band. It is he who personifies the band's uniqueness, and who defines its color and style. His bouzouki rocks. CBC icon, host Shelagh Rogers called him a troubadour savant. One concert organizer, remarking on his performing style swooned: "You look like an ecstatic Greek god."

What is it about this tall, lanky, multi-lingual singer/musician with the graying shoulder-length curls that so transforms an audience? For, wherever he goes in China, whether it's an impromptu jam session in a historic hutong or any of the countless folk/pop concerts and TV interviews he has given, he draws a crowd. Perhaps it's his gentle, almost child-like charisma and enthusiasm. He is like no one they have ever seen. A rare westerner who speaks Mandarin and who unselfconsciously reaches out to them.

From his early performances in Canada in 1977 George went on to take China by storm, going on tour, first solo, then with his band to play at international arts, rock and folk festivals across Canada and China.

But he had even bigger dreams. He wanted to perform before the world at the Olympic closing ceremonies in Athens when the torch would be passed to Beijing. George is of Greek heritage, but part of his soul is rooted in China. He's a rare individual who speaks and performs in both languages and possesses an understanding of both cultures. In other words, a natural for this task of a lifetime.

He caught the imagination of a documentary crew who chronicled every step of his daunting, often heart breaking journey. His irrepressible hope and enthusiasm despite the endless hurdles were captured in the award winning film, "Chairman George" which aired on CTV and the BBC. The Montreal Mirror called it "downright inspiring." And now a Chinese channel is producing a mini documentary series on their adopted favorite son.

The dream may have crashed and burned but George went on to become an Olympic torch bearer at both the Athens and Beijing games and a main stage performer at the Beijing Olympic Village.

He has made over 30 trips to perform in China since 2000.

His ethno cultural band came together in 2006, each member a seasoned musician in their own right. Stuart Watkins on electric bass brings a strong rock/jazz influence to the cross cultural events where he has played the world over. Fred Guignon, steeped in folk, rock, country and blues has brought his electric guitar artistry to theatre, film and TV soundtracks as well as many other Canadian artists' albums. Drummer Ross Murray, also a well known producer and recording engineer, has collaborated with bands, composers, choreographers and film makers worldwide. All have incorporated an eclectic array of cross cultural musical styles in their work.

Yet, despite his ongoing musical odyssey, George has never shed his Statistics Canada hat. One of the perks is the option to take three months of unpaid leave each year. He is a popular celebrity and resident "character" in this staid government department setting. And one they can be proud of. The Ottawa Folk Festival dubbed him "cultural ambassador and poster boy for Canadian multi-culturalism."

"George delivers an intoxicating musical cocktail of Greek exuberance and Chinese tranquility," wrote Robert Yip of the Chinese Canadian National Council. "He charms and delights his audiences with the best of both worlds and more."

George Sapounidis' worlds truly have no boundaries.