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*Don Short took on a number of exciting assignments in Athens.*

## IN GREECE WITH ANTHONY QUINN AND CO

*Veteran Fleet Street journalist **Don Short** met many stars while reporting from Greece in the heyday of British journalism. He recounts his meetings with Anthony Quinn, Sammy Cahn and Zorba the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis, among others*

**A**s the showbusiness writer at the *Daily Mirror* in the 1960s and 1970s, I was regularly in Greece covering events for my column, from music festivals to news emerging from film sets. My stories and experiences have stayed with me ever since.

The Olympiad of Song festival started in 1968 and was originally conceived as a light-hearted festival. It ran for six years and was hugely popular. Stars performed to crowds of 50,000 people, but ultimately the event was cancelled owing to funding withdrawals.

Thirty-seven nations competed in the Olympiad of Song in Athens in 1970. But there was a notable absence from the list of composers

when I was there in July that year. Mikis Theodorakis' name was taboo. Theodorakis, famous for writing chamber music, ballets and the film scores of blockbusters such as *Zorba the Greek*, had become chairman of the Patriotic Front and been arrested. I learned that he had been freed by the Greek colonels a few months earlier and gone first to Paris and then to London, where he gave his first concert since his release. But in Greece, I discovered, the new regime had branded him a Communist. His music was banned across radio, bistros and discos. As I noted in my column at the time, Zorba the Greek was now officially Zorba the Commie.

The UK's hopes for the festival that year were pinned on 16-year-old

Gaynor Jones from Wales. The locals called her the Pixie Goddess. Her innocent sound captured the hearts of a land which, although tightly ruled by a military junta, could still know romance as the strings of the bouzouki plucked out the nation's ancient history. Even passers-by around the giant Athens arena where the contest took place stopped in their tracks to listen to the talented singer during rehearsals. *With Everything* was the name of her song, and with everything she sang it. Appearing in front of tens of thousands was a daunting experience even for the festivals' guest stars like Adamo from Italy and our own Sandie Shaw. But Gaynor handled it with aplomb.

She came from the Swansea Valley and remembered singing songs as a toddler in amateur village shows put on by her father. She was offered a place at a well-known stage school and later found herself in the West End production of *The Sound of Music*. Then came television programmes with Sir Ralph Richardson, Derek Nimmo and Charlie Drake. But, when I met her, she had just veered closer to her ambition of becoming a singer.

Things were not easy, as top composers dispensed their best material to established artists, and Gaynor found it difficult to find a song. Her father, an accomplished pianist, came to the rescue. He penned her first patter, *Peaches and Pears*. It wasn't a hit, but hopes were high for the next one.

She told me her only regret about showbusiness was that there were not many people her own age. 'Why, there's only me and Jack Wild', she said jokingly. Those words rang in my ears when I later learned that she had married Wild, who had played the Artful Dodger in the hit production of *Oliver*.

While I was back in Athens the following year, I heard the sad news that Louis Armstrong had died. I met the American lyricist Sammy Cahn who had written many of Satchmo's hits. He reminisced about his friend's one big failing – his refusal to learn the words of his songs. Lucille, Armstrong's wife, used to plaster them up everywhere. If he went into the bathroom to have a shave, they would be pasted upon the mirror. When he climbed into bed at night, they would be lying on the pillow. And he still couldn't learn them.

Said Sammy fondly: 'He would blur his words, and always end up with baby'. Sammy, 58, four times Hollywood Academy award winner, had notched up hundreds of the world's best-loved songs and was sitting on the song festival jury. My lunch with Sammy and his wife was filled with thoughts of Satchmo. Sammy said: 'A year ago I tried to organise a tribute night to him. But Satchmo just felt too unwell to face it. As he said himself, when you're dead, everything's wrong.' My sentiments too.

Years later, I found myself in Corfu on the film set of Anthony Quinn's latest movie *The Greek Tycoon*. Controversy surrounded the film as, remarkably, it resembled the life story of Aristotle Onassis. I flew out to see what was happening.

Quinn was not worried about the difficulties that had heated up with potential lawsuits. He was quite comfortable in the title role because he would be able to say: 'Onassis asked me to play his double.'

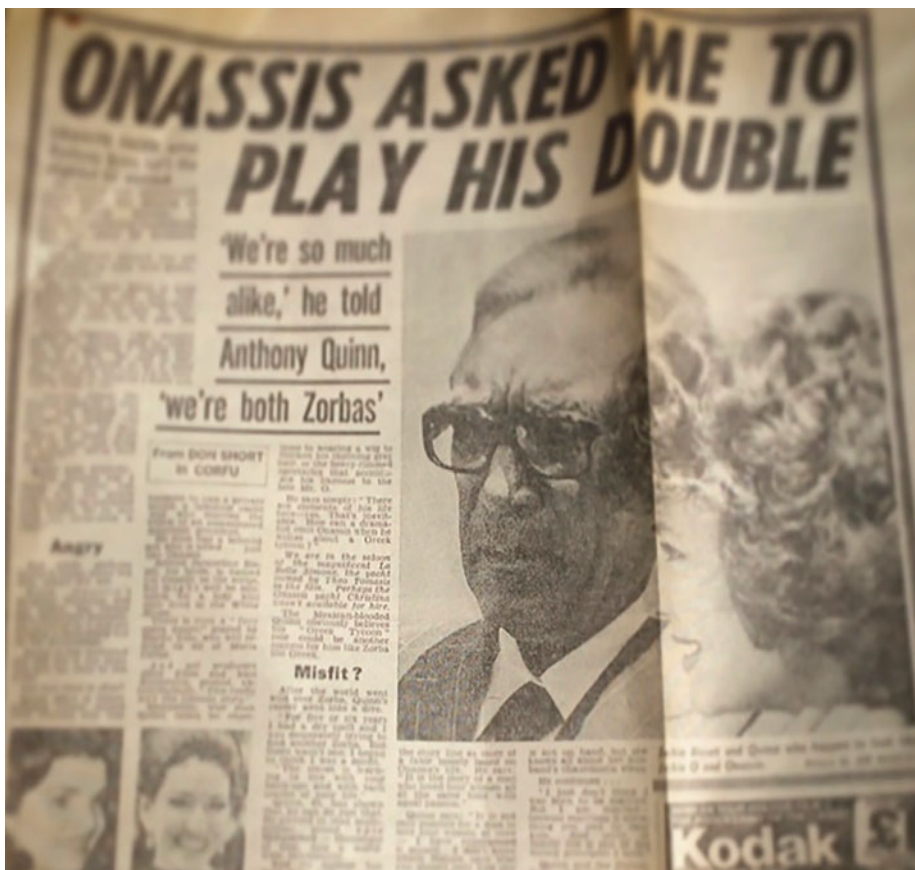
Quinn explained: 'Six months before Mr Onassis died, he called me and suggested I should play him in a film. He said to me: "Somebody is going to do it some day, Tony, why not you? I'd be very happy about it – because I know you will be kind to me." Another reason Mr Onassis asked me to play him was because he thought I looked like him. "Tony," he said, "We're so much alike and we have one thing in common. We're both Zorbas."'

Quinn nodded wistfully. 'Yes, Onassis was a Zorba. He never lost touch with his people even though he possessed such wealth. So on this issue my conscience is clear.'

There were certainly strong parallels between the film and Onassis: Quinn's character Theo Tomasis owns a private island and a yacht and marries the widow of an assassinated American president. He even has a beloved son who is killed ... just like Onassis. But the producers Allen Klein and Nico Mastorakis protested and insisted, 'This really isn't the Onassis story.' Meanwhile, wise man Quinn raised no objections to wearing a wig to thicken his thinning hair, or to wearing the heavy-rimmed spectacles that accentuated his likeness to the late Mr O.

The director, Lee Thompson, added: 'Quinn is just magnificent. He was tailor cut for the role.'

So it proved. No writs were served.



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The original press cutting of the author's article on Anthony Quinn.

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