

Don't Forget the Baklava

Gastronomic traditions are still a "must" at most Greek weddings. John Marcopulos describes the delights: "An egg soup, called avgolemono, must be served and the salad must contain feta cheese and Kalamata olives and sardines...the biggest tradition at Greek weddings is the dessert table. It is always piled high with traditional Greek sweets such as baklava, galaktobouriko, melomakarona, kourambiethes, koulourakia, diples, and much, much more."

"Big Fat Greek Wedding" Success for Chicago DJ

By Chuck Shriver



Winning Combinations

John Marcopulos and George Samiotakis are the principals in DJ's Inc./Alpha Tunes. "Our strength is that we are of Greek heritage and have grown up immersed in Greek culture, but we are able to take a Greek wedding celebration and weave in things that are traditionally American in a sensitive way that makes the most traditional of Greeks happy and still provides an enjoyable evening for second and third generation Greek-Americans," explains Marcopulos.

Marcopulos, who is also national sales manager for Bag End Loudspeaker Systems, began working as a DJ while interning at a radio station in Tampa, Florida. "A woman at the radio station asked me if I did weddings," he recalls. "I said, 'Yes,' and from that got referrals and I was on the way." When he was offered a job at a Chicago area radio station, Marcopulos moved back to the area where he grew up and continued DJing for weddings as well. While looking for turntable needles in a music store, he was introduced to George Samiotakis of Alpha Tunes,

"Nice Greek girls are expected to do three things: Marry Greek boys, make Greek babies and feed everyone until the day we die."

— Toula Portokalos, from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

The surprise smash comedy film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a fictional story about the trials and tribulations of a girl from a very traditional Greek family falling in love with—and marrying—someone who is not of Greek heritage. Written by Nia Vardalos, a woman of Greek ancestry (who also stars in the film as Toula Portokalos), the plot depicts the struggles of a Greek woman who tries to get her family to accept her non-Greek fiancé, while at the same time coming to terms with her own cultural identity. Her story provides lots of laughs while at the same time painting a poignant portrait of her battle to meld old and new.

The traditional Greek wedding that takes place in the story may be fictional, but it is very much based on fact. Like many ethnic groups, the Greeks love their traditions and try hard to maintain them in today's homogenized world.

That *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is set in Chicago is not coincidental. The third largest Greek population in the world—an estimated 400,000—resides in the Chicago area. So maybe it's not surprising that one of the busiest DJ companies in the Chicago area is comprised of DJs with Greek ancestry who speak both Greek and English fluently and are well versed in Greek culture.



who provided entertainment at Greek wedding receptions. "We started talking," Marcopulos remembers, "and decided we should pool our talents."

The ability to combine Greek and American wedding traditions into wedding reception entertainment has made their company one of the busiest in the area. As if to underscore the point, Marcopulos and Samiotakis were hired by Sam Vardalos, the uncle of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* star Nia Vardalos, to perform their magic at two of Nia's cousins' weddings, one in November 2004 and another coming

up in September of 2005. "We feel honored to be asked to be the main entertainment at both functions," Marcopulos reported.

High-quality sound is important to the success of each DJ's Inc./Alpha Tunes gig. In fact, Marcopulos's dedication to excellent audio brought about his position with leading speaker manufacturer, Bag End. "I wanted to add some more speakers to our inventory and visited the factory in Barrington," he says. "I spoke with Jim Wischmeyer (president of Bag End) and I guess my enthusiasm for the product and my sales experience impressed him—a short time later he offered me the position of sales manager for the company. I jumped at the chance to combine my two great passions."

Opa! The Greek Way of Celebrating

Marcopulos describes what sets Greek weddings apart from American weddings:

"In an American wedding, typically after the ceremony at the church, the wedding party and guests move to the reception site. After the cocktail hour, we do the formalities: introductions, prayers, speeches—and then dinner is served. After dinner, the bride and groom share their first dance together, followed by the father of the bride and his daughter, the mother of the groom and her son, and finally a slow song for the entire bridal party. Once those dances are completed, then the floor opens for everyone to dance.



"At Greek weddings, the bridal party is typically twice the size of an American one. Instead of five to seven couples, a Greek wedding party can consist of 10 or more couples. In addition to the usual best man, there is a Koumbaro, a Koumbara, or both. The Koumbaro is a male spiritual sponsor; the Koumbara a female spiritual sponsor.

"At the reception, introductions and speeches are made, in both Greek and English, before dinner. The first song that is played at the start of the wedding dinner is a traditional Greek song called 'Simera Gamos Ginete' ('Today a Wedding Is Happening'). During dinner, Greek instrumental and American music is played.

"After dinner, the bride and groom share their first dance together as husband and wife, and then the bride and her father share a dance, followed by the groom's mother and her son—just like at an American wedding. At this point, a very traditional Greek song is played called: 'Orea Pouna E Niphee Mas' ('How Beautiful Our Bride Is'). As it is played, the entire bridal party forms a large half circle on the dance floor and the bride leads the dance. We ask the guests, in both Greek

and English, for a round of applause to honor the bride on her wedding day. As she is dancing around the floor, relatives and friends of the family come up to the bride with hands full of dollar bills—sometimes 10s, 20s and occasionally even 50s—and toss the bills high in the air so they shower down on the bride. There can be many hundreds of dollars on the floor at the end of the song, depending on the size of the wedding. After the bride makes a full turn around the dance floor, the groom dances a full turn around the floor and more money is thrown. After the Koumbaro, Koumbaro, parents and bridal party dances, even more money is showered on the new couple."

Maintaining Musical Traditions

After all the described festivities, dancing continues, to traditional styles of Greek music called Syrto, Kalamatiyana or Tsamiko. "The style of Greek music chosen by the newlyweds is usually determined by the ancestral region of the families involved," Marcopulos explains. Greek dance music is usually played for up to an hour and then American music is played, although once in a while they are asked to play all Greek music for the entire evening. "It's the choice of the bride and groom. And, of course, today there are a lot of mixed weddings: Greek-American, Greek-Polish, Greek-Italian, Greek-Irish, etc., so we try to be very creative in our selection." Because of their success in mixing ethnic traditions and music with American traditions, Marcopulos and Samiotakis, along with their other DJs, now do all types of ethnic weddings: Portuguese, Russian, Hungarian, and Puerto Rican to name a few. "We are booked almost every weekend," he said proudly, "And have been for 12 years now."

So, are wedding scenes in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* really accurate? "Pretty much, in my experience," Marcopulos laughs. "But I've never seen a garage door painted with a Greek flag." •

For more information on John Marcopulos and George Samiotakis and DJ's Inc./Alpha Tunes, check out www.dj-s.net.

Big Fat Hellenic Sound

DJ's Inc./Alpha Tunes partial equipment list:

- 10 Bag End S21-E subwoofers
- 8 Bag End S18-E subwoofers
- 2 Bag End Quartz-R quad-18 subwoofers
- 8 Bag End Opal-R full-range loudspeakers
- 4 Bag End Crystal-R full-range loudspeakers
- 2 MTX 500 Pro club mixers
- 10 Denon DN9000 dual CD players
- 2 beyerdynamic microphones
- 14 Martin intelligent lighting fixtures
- 2 Abstract intelligent lighting fixtures
- 10 Crown Macro Tech 2400 series
- 2 Crown K2 power amplifiers
- 2 Powersoft Digam Q-Series amplifiers
- 2 Furman AR 1220 voltage regulators
- 4 Furman AR 1215 voltage regulators
- 10 Ultimate Support speaker stands