



Take away the Glories
and the Honours
The granite palaces
of this vain world
And only give me
the smile of Pain,
The tear of Joy and I will
erect
a thousand palaces in me
in which to live.

MELISSINOS

[ATHENIAN RUBIYAT]

MELISSINOS

THE POET-SANDALMAKER OF ATHENS

Born in 1929 and to-day known as the Poet Sandalmaker of Athens, Stavros Melissinos named "philoshofer that his spirit precedes fifty years ahead of our times". It is certainly so for those who study the long line of his books. Expresses indisputably, the epigramatical words of the Member of Academy of Athens (and Prime Minister of Greece, years ago) the late Panayiotis Kanellopoulos, for Melissinos; "The variety of meanings and ideas that he expresses in philosophical mood in his verces impresses the reader"...

In the next pages, a prophetic article published eleven years ago in the New York Times and hundreds of other news papers.

MELISSINOS

A MINOR LEGEND IN GREEK CITY OF LEGENDS

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By Jason Schoonover

ATHENS—It's not often that an individual becomes a tourist attraction but that is the case with the poet-sandalmaker of Athen's fleamarket, Stavros Melissinos, to describe him as a modest legend would be closer to the truth.

An internationally acclaimed poet in his own right, he is also the sandalmaker to the likes of Sophia Loren who has been wearing his product since she filed **Boy on a Dolphin** in local waters so long ago nobody wants to remember, the Beatles, Rudolph Nureyev, Margo Fontain, Jacqueline Onassis, Antony (Zorba the Greek, Tycoon) Quinn, George Peppard, Ursula Andress and the late Joseph Cotten and Gary Cooper. With a clientele like that, he must be doing something right.

Melissinos tiny, unpretentious shop lies in the shadow of the Acropolis, adjacent to Monastiraki Square. There you can see the colorful, confused congestion of stalls, carts and chops making up the large fleamarket, where such touristoria as pounded brass pots and pans, imitation statues of Athena and postcards are bartered for and sold. In an area where the drachma isn't what it used to be, and where it's often best to beware of Greeks bearing gifts for sale, Melissinos stands out as a soft-sell merchant and true craftsman offering for sale at a reasonable price a quality product he produced with his own honest labor.

He is situated at 89 Pandrossou, that narrow street lined with narrower shops that is largely dependent on the vacationing foreigner attracted to the Greek lifestyle. There, among the clutter and the smell of leather, Greece's best known poet/playright and literary translator mellowly plys his trade.

The subject of all the attention is a balding, middle-aged man softening a bit around the middle, but with the happy, uncluttered eyes of a child and a face as soft as the calve's leather he tools with deft sureness.

Since he began writing poetry in 1953 Melissinos has pu-

blished 10 books of poetry, many of which have been translated abroad. His works are in the Harvard and Oxford University Libraries. He has been the subject of attention on the B.B.C., the three American networks and, recently, in conjunction with a visit by Miss Canada, on our own CTV. As well, he has written a number of plays; and has translated the works of many literary greats into Greek.

"Greek is richer than other languages and often the translations are better", he says.

His best known work, the 1959 *Melissinos Rubaiyat*, of which all 127 stanzas celebrate a subject close to the lips of many Greeks —wine— is on the curriculum of a number of major American universities.

His poetry is lyrical, tends toward an Omar Khayyam romanticism and is at once philosophical and simple. He even applies his early army days study in radio repair to his art.

"There is a similarity between mathematics and poetry. They are very close."

He has even reached the level where one of his works, the play *Chastity Belt*, is banned in Greece for political reasons—a fact of which he is quite proud.

Why does a man of such renown continue to work at a regular job?

"A writer who does nothing but write," he replies, "is like the moon which gives off some light, but it's borrowed, taken from the sun. A writer needs first-hand experience which only working in another field can give him. Otherwise he is rewriting what he has read in other books."

How did he begin?

"I started writing poetry in the army. A friend wrote a poem to his little girl and he had trouble with it and brought it to me. It was very bad," he laughs. "I wrote it for him and he showed it to his friends. They all liked it very much and ask me to write poems for them. Everyone thinks I am very good and so I continue. Much of it then was love poetry."

The designs of his sandals, much like his poetry which is often influenced by Greek mythology and history, are based on the footwear of such notables as Plato, Pericles and Helen, sometimes with a little adaptation by Melissinos.

"My father sold rubbed-bottom sandals when he started

the shop in 1927 and so did I when I took over in 1954. Then one day a lady brought in a nice pair, like these, and asks "Can I make another?" For practise I make two and hang the other on the door outside. It was sold in half an hour I took that as a sign," he laughs. "I made two, four, six, eight. They all sold very fast. So I started to make only this type and then others sandalmakers started to open shops here and make my sandals. They saw a sign too!" And he laughs that constant, quiet, happy laugh again.

He tells of the first of many meetings with the Beatles. It was in 1968. "First of all one of them comes, the intellectual one... Lennon. He told me he found my works somewhere. Then they all came here, like the Seven Dwarfs, he chuckles, imitating them lining into the cramped shop. There were bodyguards but we had to close the door because their followers would have wrecked everything. They all bought many pairs."

"My kids asked me later why I didn't ask for their autographs, I say they should ask for mine! I will be around long after the Bee-tles I say!" He laughs again.

The poetry books, unlike the sandals that line the walls, are not on display. But they are for sale. Just make an enquiry and a appears — and he will be only too happy to autograph it.

Travellers keep returning every few years to trade in their old sandals for new from the approximately 32 styles available. They also come for a visit. To some it's a pilgrimage of sorts — for Stavros Melissinos, the poet - sandalmaker's shop is one of those rare delightful finds. Even the most jaded traveller concurs.

And anyway, where else can you find sandals created like a poem that make you feel like Apollo?

STAVROS MELISSINOS

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✓ MELISSINOS' BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE HERE
IN ENGLISH, GERMAN, ITALIAN AND FRENCH