

# The Bingara Advocate

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## Happy 75th Birthday Roxy



The guests of the Greek Gala Ball enjoyed the traditional Greek dancing

In what will go down in history as one of the Roxy's finest moments, the 75th anniversary of Roxy Cafe came alive with a grand Greek celebration on Bingara's very own main street.

The proceedings of April 9 and 10 included tours of the Roxy complex, documentaries and a presentation from Greek Historian Peter McCarthy but it is the Greek Gala Ball that has been dubbed a success with the Nationals Senator for New South Wales John Williams officially reopening the refurbished Roxy Cafe.

"Bingara is an example of how small Australian towns can develop a niche marketing plan and attract visitors from around the world," said Senator Williams.

"The original owners from Kythera, Greece, would be delighted to see their legacy living on and the Greek community's strong link with Bingara which has been nurtured over the years," he said.

The original Roxy Theatre opened in 1936 and in celebrating its 75th birthday drew a crowd of 380 guests from around the country including former Premier Bob Carr who provided the original funding for the refurbishment of the Roxy Theatre. Other special guests included Richard Torbay, George Poulos and the many Greek guests who made the trip to Bingara to join in on the celebration of the Roxy Greek Cafe.

The official launch of the cafe came with presentations from Mayor John Coulton, President of North West Theatre Company, John

Wearne, and finished with the official launching speech from Senator John Williams. Former television star John Wood chaired the presentations which including a small presentation to the architect and builders who refurbished the cafe.

"When it was first decided to restore the Roxy, no doubt there were plenty of critics of the then Bingara Shire Council for what they believed was a waste of money. But the Council's belief in the project, and that shown by Gwydir Shire Council, has resulted in a superb complex which is the envy of many larger towns and cities," said Senator Williams.

"The Howard coalition government started the ball rolling with funding of \$340,000 for the restoration and air-conditioning of the theatre. The theatre has been the venue for everything from cinema, conferences and weddings to live stage shows.

"The Roxy cafe dream started in 2008 when the former cafe premises were purchased and then restored at an overall cost of \$1.213 million. The next venture is a Roxy Museum.

"I congratulate the community for now embracing this concept and positioning Bingara as a 'must visit town'," Senator Williams said.

Senator Williams along with Mayor John Coulton opened the doors of the Cafe and invited guests inside to enjoy a milkshake. Bob Kirk and his wife Elva were the first to be served and enjoyed a milkshake on the original booth seats of the Cafe.

The Greek Gala ball which fea-

tured after the official launch included a three course meal, entertainment by Ha Va La and a performance of Greek dancers in traditional costume performing a range of Kytherian dances.

Guests enjoyed themselves by hitting the dancefloor early in the night to join the troupe of dancers in some traditional Greek dancing.

In traditional Greek style the smashing of plates was a enjoyed by the many guest with a blanket of smashed plaster plates covering the intersection of Maitland and Cunningham.

The 75th anniversary of the Roxy and the re-opening of the Roxy Cafe was celebrated in true Greek style and is only the beginning of many celebrations to come for this grand complex.



Bob Kirk and his wife Elva enjoyed the first milkshake of the evening

### Bingara's Economic Plan received with reservations

The Bingara and District Community Economic Plan was tabled at the March 31 meeting of Gwydir Shire Council.

The report, prepared by Rick Hutton, incorporated information gained from the "Our Place" - Country Town Living 2025 Forum held in February 2010, as well as ideas proposed at the drop in and public workshop held in August 2010 and interviews conducted with community members.

The report "provides a blueprint for further debate and research and some clear pathways towards a sustainable, thriving future." It makes a number of recommendations across a wide range

of issues including tourism, the Living Classroom project, fuel stations, young farmers and John Mongard's plans for Bingara.

The General Manager, Max Eastcott commented that the report needed to be evaluated. Councillors Rose and Tremain were concerned that the recommendations made in the document were not to be acted upon without Council's specific approval.

Mr Eastcott said that the report would be referred to the staff for evaluation, a report then being presented to the next meeting. Cr Rose said that he was not happy that the report's recommendations should be referred

to council staff for evaluation.

"I want to see the report received and before any action is taken, it should come back to the council meeting. If we want the staff to follow up on the recommendations, they need to be directed by Council. I don't want the staff working on plans that have not been supported by Council."

Cr Tremain concurred with Cr Rose, eventually voting against the motion that the report be received. "Once the report is received, then it starts to go through the system, regardless," Cr Tremain said.

**The Roxy Picture Show Man: John Wood (aka Yiannis Xylo)**

At the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Roxy Theatre, the renown Australian actor John Wood (Senior Sergeant Tom Croydon from *Blue Heelers*) acted as Master of Ceremonies during the Gala Ball and also presented a special screening of an episode of "As Australian As" on the Bio Channel that featured the restored Roxy Theatre in Bingara.

John's love affair with the Roxy goes back to when he appeared in the David Williamson play *The Club* five years ago in Bingara. For John, the Roxy Theatre and its magnificent Art deco architecture and ambience and its quaint rural setting is one of the stories that makes him appreciate what it means to be "as Australian as". In an interview given by John when he was in Bingara for the making of the documentary, he commented that what also really appealed to him was the human element behind the building of the *Roxy Cafe* in 1936 by the three Kytherian Greeks.

John Wood was sufficiently impressed by the efforts of Sandy McNaughton and the local community in the restoration project that he remarked at the time that he was looking forward to receiving his invitation to the opening.

Well John Wood did get an invite and he was a hit at the Ball. Affectionately renamed Yiannis Xylo, John took to his Greek persona with aplomb. As the night of the ball wore on and into Sunday the relative quiet of this country town was punctuated from time to time by calls of "yiassou Yianni". We even got to hear John Wood's Greek mafioso accent – imagine a cross between Robert De Niro and Con the Fruiterer.

Yiannis spoke eloquently at the opening and mingled with locals and Greek-Australian visitors to the town. He also revealed another passion of his, that of the campaign for the raising and restoration of Australia's first battleship, the Monitor-class HMAS Cerberus, which lies partially submerged in Half Moon Bay in Victoria.

But that's another story.

Our weekend at Bingara was truly enriched by making the acquaintance of John (Yiannis) Wood.

**George Vardas**



**President's Address at Bingara Ball, 9/4/2011:**

As President of the Kytherian Association of Australia, now in its 89<sup>th</sup> year, I would like to congratulate all those responsible in the Bingara Shire Council who had the vision in 1999 to buy the Roxy building and plan to restore it to its former glory. Also many thanks to the Gwydir Shire Council members and staff who raised the funding with the help of the Community of Bingara, the Federal Government, the NSW State Government and the Trustees of the Estate of the Late Nicholas Anthony Aroney, that included the Late Professor Manuel James Aroney AM OBE, the Late Peter Comino, Leo Comino, and Mr Angelo Crones who is with us today. The Greek Community and in particular the Kytherian Greeks, are truly indebted to all of you who have had a hand in preserving and bringing back to life this symbol of Greek settlement in Australia. Kythera is one of the small islands of Greece, 25 miles long and 12 miles wide that could not support its own population, so migration began in 1856 into the gold fields of NSW. When word would get back to Kythera that this was the 'land of milk and honey', fathers brought out their sons and uncles brought out their nephews, especially in the 1900's and 1920's.

So a familiar pattern emerged in many towns in country NSW and up to the sugar cane fields of Queensland, where the setting up of a Greek café serving breakfast, lunch and dinner at tables was a training ground for the immigrants. Many were like my father, who came out as a 15 yr old boy and not knowing any English, went to his older brother and uncle in Nowra where he would wash dishes and graduate to serving tables, slowly learning the language in sometimes slave-like conditions. Eventually they would buy the business or move to the next country town and set up their own café. Others were like

the partnerships of Peters & Co that included Emanuel Theo Aroney, George Psaltis and Peter Feros, whose grandson Peter Feros is here today and has written a book about the Great Idea of his grandfather making a success of oneself.

These men expanded the successful café concept to include this Roxy complex, in particular the cinema and having the café opening late for the patrons to have supper and get together.

My 87 yr old mother and her 6 brothers and sisters were all born not far from here in Werris Creek and still talks about their café with billiard rooms above, and her travels to Quirindi and Tamworth. This story is repeated from Swan Hill in south-west NSW to Mackay in Queensland. However, here in Bingara stands one of the best examples of those entrepreneurial ventures.

Again, full credit to all of you involved in reviving the original meeting place for the townfolk to get together, have a yarn, food and some entertainment.

But just as significant is the concept of the Roxy Museum and Educational Centre focusing on Greek (Kytherian) settlement in country NSW and Queensland. This is because Kytherian Greeks were among the first Greeks to settle here and their cafes and picture theatres changed the course of Australia's cultural and culinary landscape. So I very much look forward to stepping 50 yrs back in time, where the efforts of people like my parents and the parents and grandparents of many of you

here today, can be acknowledged and put on show for us and future generations to have an appreciation of the struggles, hardships and sacrifices they endured for us, their families here and back in Greece and Kythera.

Thank you very much.  
**Victor Kepreotis**



(Above photo courtesy of Peter Prineas)



**Bingara's Roxy will honour Greek contribution to Australian life and culture:**

On 9 April 2011, hundreds of people, many of them of Greek background, came to the little town of Bingara in North western New South Wales to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Roxy Theatre and the launch of the restored Roxy Cafe and the new Museum of Greek Settlement in Country Australia.

The Roxy Cinema-cafe complex was completed in 1936 by the partners of Peters and Co. Emanuel Aroney, Peter Feros and George Psaltis.

In his welcome the Mayor of the local

ncil, John Coulton, spoke of the "amazing foresight" of the council in taking the first step in purchasing the Roxy Theatre and restoring it. He reminded his audience that the Bingara Roxy was built by three Greek immigrants from the island of Kythera and that today it is a symbol commemorating the Greek migration experience, one that has made an outstanding contribution to the development of Australia.

"Greek cafés changed the course of Australia's cultural history and left a significant legacy on our culinary and cultural landscape" Mayor Coulton said. The Mayor noted that the late Kevin Cork in his PhD thesis made a strong argument for maintaining Greek-Australian cultural and historical sites:

*If we are to remember these Greeks for their contributions to Australia's social, architectural and technological advancement, then it is imperative that there be Greek landmarks which are acknowledged at local and state level - ones that point to the achievements of the Greek-Australian cinema exhibitors... We cannot allow their histories to be forgotten, not when they provided services that positively affected*



*millions of people, firstly, through their refreshment rooms and, secondly, through their picture theatres.*

Mayor Coulton said Kevin Cork's vision would be realised in Bingara. "The Roxy will become a place of national significance that conserves and protects the important cultural associations between people and place. It will provide opportunities for the celebration of Greek traditions that became embedded in Australia" he said.

**Peter Prineas**



### ROXY THEATRE: ART DECO SPLENDOUR IN BINGARA

I have always had a love affair with Art Deco. So it was with a sense of excitement and anticipation that I looked forward to visiting Bingara for the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Roxy Theatre and Peters Café complex. I was not disappointed. The Roxy is a beautiful theatre, lovingly restored with a façade based on what is known as the Skyscraper style. It incorporates a distinctive zigurat or stepped skyline design and motifs which enliven the composition of the whole design and create a distinctive streetscape:

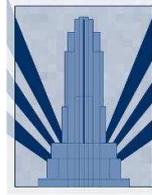
You have to admire the determination and drive of those behind the Roxy restoration. Here are some before and after photos:



Roxy Theatre in the course of construction



Roxy Theatre in 2011



Bingara local Bob Kirk and one of the tables salvaged from Peter's Café



Restored café table (note the inverted zigurat motif)



Theatre used as a storage room



Restored theatre



Peter's Café neon sign in a paddock



Under awning neon sign on opening night



According to the *Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, one of the features of the Inter War Art deco movement was that during the 1930s the cinema and milk bar each drew heavily on the style and did much to make it popular with the use of eye-catching materials and finishes. In the case of the Roxy, the authors of *Cultural Heritage of Movie Theatres in New South Wales 1896-1996* have described the theatre as an "excellent example of Australian 'angular' Art Deco with the interior being profusely decorated".

The Art Deco decorative flourishes and stunning interior decor are evident throughout the Roxy at Bingara and the adjoining Peters Cafe. Vertical lines, stepped awning, chrome plated and framed mirrors, decorative plaster-work grills in geometric patterns, a ceiling featuring stepped recess pattern, floral and ornamental motifs, an impressive entrance vestibule, highly stylized patterns, ornamental motifs, wall-mounted sconces, and vitrolite glass and metal on the frontage- all contributing to the sleek aesthetic of Art Deco.

You really have to admire the aesthetic tastes of the original founders of the Roxy and their architect and builders in combining to create such a modern building in 1936 in a small rural town in outback NSW.



The township of Bingara is described in the tourist literature as the Gem of the Gwydir. The restored Roxy Theatre and Peters Café have just added a new sparkle to that jewel.

## «Katsehamos and the Great Idea»

\*Κατσεχαμος και το Μεγαλο Ιδεα.

Κατσεχαμος - παρατσουκλι του Πίτερ Φέρος



Το Roxy Theatre μετατράπηκε σ' έναν από τους μεγαλοπρεπέστερους κινηματογράφους της Αυστραλίας, άνοιξε δε τις πόρτες του στο κοινό το 2004.

Το Bingara είναι ένα μικρό χωριουδάκι στα βορειοδυτικά της Ν.Ν.Ουαλίας με πληθυσμό 1.300 κατοίκους. Απέχει επτά ώρες με το αυτοκίνητο από το Σίδνεϊ και τρεις περίπου από το Μπρίσμبان.

Το 1936 τρεις Ελληνοαυστραλοί από τα Κύθηρα, ο Πίτερ Φέρος, ο Τζορτζ Ψάλτης και ο Εμμανουήλ Αρώνης, είχαν τη μεγάλη ιδέα να χτίσουν ένα μεγαλοπρεπή κινηματογράφο το Roxy Theatre. Δίπλα πρόσθεσαν ένα πολυτελέστατο εστιατόριο, το Roxy Cafe, ενώ πίσω από τα δύο κτίρια υψώθηκε ένα εντυπωσιακό ξενοδοχείο.

Η λεπτομερής εξιστόρηση του πώς χτίστηκε το παραπάνω σύμπλεγμα γίνεται με αξιοθαύμαστο τρόπο από τον εγγονό του Πίτερ Φέρου, τον Πίτερ Πρινέα, στο βιβλίο του «Katsehamos and the Great Idea».

Όσοι έχουν διαβάσει το βιβλίο, γνωρίζουν ότι τα υπερβολικά μεγάλα χρηματικά ποσά που χρειάστηκαν για τη δημιουργία του εντυπωσιακού αυτού κτιριακού συμπλέγματος σ' έναν τόπο που αριθμούσε μόνο 1.300 κατοίκους, σε συνδυασμό με τον σκληρό ανταγωνισμό του ιδιοκτήτη του Regent Theatre είχε ως αποτέλεσμα να κηρύξουν πτώχευση οι τρεις συνέταιροι.

Το Roxy Theatre πέρασε από διάφορα χέρια και χρήσεις μέχρι το 1958 που έκλεισε. Το 1999 αγοράστηκε από το Δήμο.

Το Roxy Cafe διαχειρίστηκαν διάφοροι επιχειρηματίες μέχρι τα μέσα του 1960, οπότε μετατράπηκε σε κατάστημα πώλησης διαφόρων σουβενίρ, ενώ αργότερα έγινε κινεζικό εστιατόριο μέχρι το 2008 που κι αυτό, με τη σειρά του, αγοράστηκε από το Δήμο.

Με μεγάλη επιχορήγηση που δόθηκε από την τοπική, πολιτειακή και ομοσπονδιακή κυβέρνηση, το Roxy Theatre μετατράπηκε σ' έναν από τους μεγαλοπρεπέστερους κινηματογράφους της Αυστραλίας, άνοιξε δε τις πόρτες του στο κοινό το 2004.

Ακολούθησε η αναπαλαίωση του Roxy Cafe και η επαναφορά του στην αρχική του αίγλη, η δημιουργία αίθουσας συνεδριάσεων πάνω από αυτό, ένα μουσείο που 'καταγράφει' την ιστορία της μετανάστευσης και αναγνωρίζει τη σπουδαιότητα των ελληνικών cafe, καθώς επίσης και η στέγαση του Γραφείου Τουρισμού στο κτιριακό σύμπλεγμα του Roxy.

Η αρχιτεκτονική εταιρία που ανέλαβε και διεκπεραίωσε με εντυπωσιακή επιτυχία το γιγαντιαίο αυτό έργο, είναι η Magoffin and Deakin με έδρα το Armidale.

Το Roxy αυτή τη στιγμή ελκύει από 12.000 επισκέπτες το χρόνο στις διάφορες εκδηλώσεις που γίνονται εκεί, πράγμα που συντείνει στην περαιτέρω οικονομική ανάπτυξη της περιοχής, με την αύξηση του τουρισμού και τη δημιουργία θέσεων εργασίας.

Αξίζει να σημειωθεί ότι τα περισσότερα από τα έπιπλα του cafe έχουν εντοπιστεί και πολλοί είναι εκείνοι οι οποίοι τα έχουν δωρίσει στο μουσείο.

## THE GREEKS RETURN TO BINGARA: 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF THE ROXY

By now most readers are familiar with the Roxy story. How in 1936 three intrepid Kytherian-born entrepreneurs, Peter Feros, George Psaltis and Emmanuel Aroney built a fabulous Art Deco theatre, three independent retail premises, a café and guest house - their "Palace of Dreams" - in the small rural township of Bingara in the New England area of New South Wales.

In his delightful book, *Katsehamos and the Great Idea*, in which he chronicles the history of the Roxy, Peter Prineas recalls the efforts by a local businessman, Victor Peacocke who operated the rival Regent Theatre, to try and influence local authorities in opposing the plans for the Roxy. At one point, in a letter to his local MP in September 1934, Peacocke warned of the "Greek invasion into our little burg".

Well, that 'prophecy' finally came true on the weekend of 9-10 April 2011 when Bingara celebrated in grand style the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Roxy Theatre and the adjoining Peters Café. The Greeks descended upon Bingara *en masse*, and showed the locals how to party.

The town of Bingara (pronounced 'bin-gara') is situated on the banks of the beautiful Gwydir River. Seven hours by road from Sydney along the New England Highway and at the end of the Fossickers Way, Bingara - derived from an Aboriginal word meaning "shallow water" - is a quaint and picturesque country town.

I had been looking forward to this for weeks and drove up with George Cassim and Chris Tsolakis. The long drive was made more enjoyable by us listening to an eclectic though slightly incongruous mix of music by the likes of Mikis Theodorakis, the Jersey Boys, Cabaret Balkan, Roy Orbison, Vicky Moscholiou, Nikos Xylouris and Blondie. But it did not stop there. We wanted to make an entrance. And sure enough just as dusk had set in bemused locals were confronted by three rowdy Greeks driving up and down the main street several times to the strains of Theodorakis' *Zorba the Greek* blaring out. The Greek 'invasion' was well and truly on.

There was also a special dimension to my first trip to Bingara. My father, John Vardas, came to Australia when he was 19. Like many who came before him, and after, John followed the well-travelled route through country New South Wales to work in established cafes and restaurants, mostly operated by Kytherians, before making enough to return to Sydney to open his own business. The Greek café and milk bar culture had a strong presence in rural and regional NSW in those years. John recalls that during the war years he passed through Bingara and may have even stayed the night.

This was the essential Greek migration experience and we were about to relive one of its more interesting chapters.

The Roxy first opened to the public on Saturday 28 March 1936. It was a landmark building. According to the *Bingara Advocate* at the time, "no event in the history of Bingara had caused more interest or excitement" as the opening night horde took over the street such that "long before opening time, it was impossible to wind one's way through the crowd in front of the main entrance."

75 years later and the clock was turned back with the celebrations and the official re-launch of the refurbished Peters Café, together with a preview of the site of the Roxy Museum that will be integrated into the venue. Then followed the Black Tie Gala Ball to recall the glamour of the 1930s.

The scene of the *panayiri* at the intersection of Cunningham and Maitland Streets could have been easily mistaken for the plateia of Mitata or any other village on Kythera. Alright, perhaps the black ties and long gowns were a slight give-away, but the *kefi* was certainly there as was the brilliant music of the Kytherian band "Havana" entertained the crowd.

The locals were fantastic. On the first day, local businessman Rick Hutton introduced the various speakers inside the Roxy and gained loud applause for his equally loud suits and bow ties. He made the point that country towns are dying and in the Roxy the locals have placed high hopes for a renaissance in tourism and the performing arts as people travel to Bingara to be part of the Roxy phenomenon. The vivacious and energetic Roxy Manager, Sandy McNaughton, spoke with passion about the effort to restore the Roxy and described how she had been overwhelmed by the response of the Greek community.

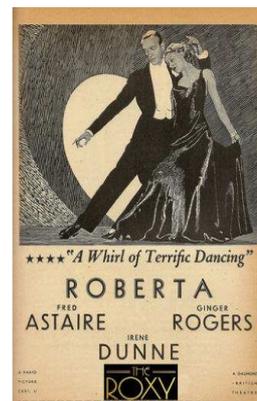
As Sandy explained, the Roxy is a story about big ideas which had its humble beginnings in Kythera. Bingara was a sort of frontier town in the 1930s and yet it was witness to the creation of a Greek landmark which symbolized the Greek-Australian migration experience.

The restoration efforts that went into the re-birth of Peters Café as a café and refreshment room were nothing short of miraculous. Sandy noted in particular the efforts of locals Bob and Elva Kirk who had the foresight, after selling the freehold land upon which the café was operated to a Chinese restaurateur in 1989, to retain much of the interior of the café which otherwise would have been stripped and thrown out. To the restorers' delight, the Kirks had managed to hang on to original wood panelling, a section of booths or cubicles including the original table tops, marble shelving, a glass window panel and decorative etched glass panes. They even had the original neon sign.

The Greek café is a quintessential Australian phenomenon that changed the cultural and culinary landscape forever and was in fact described by some as the "Trojan Horse" for the Americanization of Australian food tastes. Peters Café is a vivid, living reminder of that part of our collective history.

Visitors were then treated to a newsreel from 1936 entitled "A Year to Remember" that presented an overview of the events in the year the Roxy was opened. A highlight was the showing of the first film ever screened at The Roxy, *Roberta*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as well as cartoons from the period. As Roxy manager Sandy McNaughton had previously commented, the screenings would be like a "step back in time when going to the cinema was an event in itself".

**Editor's Note: Found this on the net as a 'thought for the day'.... "Remember, Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did. But backwards & in high heels."**



In the afternoon, the street in front of the Roxy was converted into an open dining room with white table-clothed tables, a special menu, olive branches and tea lights to create that special Mediterranean ambience in a rural outback setting.

After the official speeches, the ribbon was cut and patrons were able to enter the café and enjoy a milk shake. Not a thick shake or some latter day milky abomination. But a real milk shake with country milk, dollops of ice cream and rich flavor, made by experts such as Con Fardouleys, Peter Makarthis and even our own George Poulos. A milk shake to die for.



And then came the food and the dancing. Roast lamb, goat, spanakopita,

zorba the greek, zembekika, plate smashing, olive branches, kefi and an Australian acting icon Yiannis Xylo (aka John Wood) all came together under a starry-lit night in a fantastic celebration of a dream come true. A troupe of Greek dancers in traditional costume performed a range of Greek dances. The Roxy complex, a palace of dreams from a bygone age, had come alive.

Greek dancing also took over the square, followed by the inevitable smashing of plates. This was possibly the most un-Kytherian thing of the night: paying money to buy plates only to send them hurtling into the ground. But it made for good vision as the film crew from ABC's *Landline* program captured the celebrations and the dancing and the kefi. It was as though Bingara meets Mitata.

It was truly a memorable and great weekend. 75 years ago three young men from Kythera had a dream. Although their initial venture ended in bankruptcy, their dreams were realised even more than they could have imagined with the re-birth of the Roxy complex in Bingara in all its Art Deco glory.

Kythera now has a new adopted town. Although not on the island, the township of Bingara will remain in our hearts and minds forever.



The writer in an Art Deco moment

George Vardas

