



Black rockin' beats

BLACK ROCK STUDIOS, IN SANTORINI, IS A MUSICAL HIDEAWAY FOR PLATINUM-SELLING ARTISTS TO RECORD THEIR BIGGEST HITS IN PEACE. VAS PANAGIOTOPOULOS VISITS

PHOTOGRAPHS LENA KONSTANTAKOU

“**T**he recording session with Madonna producer Peer Åström was supposed to start at 10am,” says Kostas Kalimeris, owner of the prestigious Black Rock Studios on the Greek isle of Santorini. “To the engineer’s horror, we realised at 8.30am that the computer’s RAM had completely broken down. Such a huge client and no operating computer. It just wasn’t an option.”

Locating the new computer memory was the easy bit for Kalimeris, who just happened to be in Athens that morning. However, getting the replacement part back to Santorini wasn’t quite so straightforward. “I had to ring a pilot friend,” he admits. “In the end, I was allowed onto the



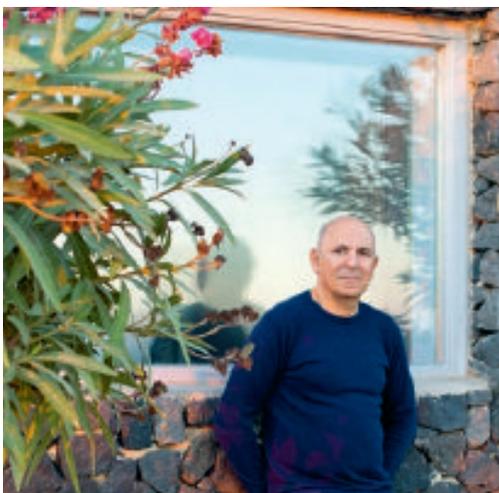
airport runway to hand deliver the new RAM personally to another pilot who was about to take off for Santorini.”

For all its remoteness, or perhaps because of it, in recent years Black Rock has become the studio of choice for a bevy of chart-topping international stars. The Bieber himself has visited for the past two years in a row and recorded parts of his 2015 album, Purpose, here. On the other end of the musical scale, Iron Maiden’s Steve Harris and British rockers Bring Me the Horizon are regular clients, while blues icon Joe Bonamassa even named one of his albums after the studio. One Republic also dropped by to record their album Native in 2012. “Just hearing them record their megahit Counting Stars, I knew it was going to be huge. The track has now clocked up almost two billion YouTube views,” enthuses Kalimeris proudly.

Setting foot inside Black Rock, you can sense it’s a special place. Built near the lighthouse on the south-west tip of the island, not far from Akrotiri village, the villa that houses the state-of-the-art studio is surrounded by sparkling turquoise Aegean Sea, with impressive views out over Santorini’s caldera and dramatic, plummeting black cliffs.

Inside, soundproofing means not a peep can be heard from the raging winds outside. “It’s easier for musicians to focus on their work here,” says Kalimeris, gesturing to the gleaming awards lining the walls, including one for One Republic’s eight million sales of Native.

Black Rock has all the intimidating gadgets you’d expect from a world-class recording facility. Squeezing in its gigantic, 80 channel SSL mixing desk proved a near-impossible task,



SOUND WAVES

Clockwise from far left: Writer’s block? A quick plunge into Black Rock’s lush swimming pool could inspire the sound of next summer; one of the studios where the magic happens; Justin Bieber recording his 2015 album here; Black Rock owner (and top pilot blogger) Kostas Kalimeris gives us his best ‘blue steel’

actually delaying the construction of one of the building’s main walls until it was safely in place. A medley of acoustic, electric and bass guitars rub shoulders with 13 microphone types and countless amps awaiting superstar clients.

Kalimeris, 51, has always lived and breathed music. “In school, I was in a rock band,” he says, taking a long sip from his coffee. “We did Deep Purple covers, but I wasn’t a very good guitarist, so I decided to become a sound engineer.” He began working in his first recording studio at 17, and since then has worked on over 300 albums and consulted on the Greek version of TV talent show The Voice. When Black Rock first opened its doors in 2009, it was Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith producer Kevin Shirley who >

was first to give it a shot. “At the time, the studio wasn’t finished. I didn’t even have images to send him, only the designs,” says Kalimeris. Luckily, Shirley booked Black Rock for a month. “Now, he jokes that he’d love to live here forever.”

In total, Justin Bieber has spent over two weeks at Black Rock, bringing along a relatively modest entourage of seven people – his manager and producer, plus security. Any paparazzi? “No, just some fans from Athens, who camped outside the whole time,” Kalimeris says wryly.

“Justin would jump on a quad bike every day and ride around the island,” he remembers. “I was actually impressed by how polite he was. He called me sir in the beginning!” Is working with such a big artist intimidating? “I definitely feel a responsibility and pressure knowing that the music recorded here will, in just a short while, explode around the globe.”

Bieber put Black Rock on the map, but thanks to professional songwriting camps held regularly here, the studio has morphed into the Mediterranean’s definitive hit factory. Los Angeles-based producer Wayne Wilkins, who has worked with Beyoncé, has already signed up for the next one. Each camp sees 25 carefully selected producers, singers, songwriters and lyricists from across the globe gather for a four-day intensive session. “By the end, they’ve come up with around 40 new songs,” says Kalimeris.

So what’s next for Black Rock? Kalimeris wishes that artists would give him slightly longer notice when wanting to visit. “We had to turn Rihanna down recently – we were fully booked,” he says regretfully. Still, it’s only a matter of time until the next superstar crosses his doorstep. 🙌



“The music recorded here will soon explode around the globe”



ROCK ISLE

Clockwise from above: the view from Black Rock’s terrace; A-List stars have scribbled thank you notes after platinum successes; Justin Bieber has twiddled these very knobs. You’re impressed aren’t you? Thought so



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