

Robert
'Skip'
Chernov

Robert 'Skip' Chernov, promoter, dreamer, iconoclast, dies at 63

By Gerry Goldstein

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Robert A. "Skip" Chernov, the rock concert promoter and restaurant owner who parlayed his flamboyant personality and business sense into big money that he reveled in and then lost, died Dec. 23 at his home in Matunuck. He was 63.

A hardnosed entrepreneur, Mr. Chernov promoted concerts by the likes of Janis Joplin, Led Zeppelin and James Taylor. In 1971, he bought the lucrative closed-circuit television rights in New England for the Muhammed Ali-Joe Frazier heavyweight title fight.

At the height of his career — he boasted that he made a million dollars in 1971 alone — he also owned several bars and restaurants in Providence, including the popular Tortilla Flats and The Warehouse.

In those years, the outrageously uninhibited Mr. Chernov drove a Bentley and posed for the centerfold of an underground magazine wearing nothing but a top hat and a wristwatch. The photographer draped him across a couch, popped a cigar into his mouth, and folded a back issue of the magazine discreetly over his midriff.

Despite his self-description that "I am nasty and I look at the world through hard eyes," Mr. Chernov softened later in life, adopting a more contemplative demeanor and courageously battling years of debilitating illness. Despite three heart attacks, two open heart operations and a stroke, he continued working out at a South Kingstown athletic club.

He once told an interviewer, "I am very defiant of this stroke; I am not going to let it completely limit me."

Some wondered just how "nasty" he really was, especially in view of his strong support of the



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Jimmy Fund, the favorite charity of the Boston Red Sox that helps children with cancer. It was through the fund that Mr. Chernov struck up an enduring friendship with Red Sox great Ted Williams.

One of Mr. Chernov's most notorious concert promotions involved Sly and the Family Stone. The show, at the old Rhode Island Auditorium, provoked a riot and impelled then-Mayor Joseph A. Doorley to ban rock concerts.

Mr. Chernov's enjoyment of promotion, self-promotion, and controversy appeared early. As a student at Catholic-run Providence College — he graduated in 1963 — he ruffled sensibilities on- and off-campus by running for student body president under the slogan, "A Jew for You." He lost.

The financial rise and fall of Mr. Chernov, a graduate of Hope High School whose parents were Jewish immigrants Samuel and Irene Chernov, prompted one headline writer years ago to describe him as a boy wonder who went "from rags to rags."

Mr. Chernov's fall came after he turned state's evidence in 1973 against the head of the newly opened Providence Civic Center,

Harold Copeland, accusing Copeland of demanding a \$1,000 bribe in return for concert dates. Copeland denied the charges, but was found guilty and fined \$1,000.

Afterward, Mr. Chernov said he had been blackballed from concert promotion, and claimed as well that city officials hectoring his night spots out of business. Some said his troubles were indeed exacerbated by a vindictive city administration; others wondered whether it was Mr. Chernov's admittedly abrasive personality that undid him.

Subsequently, his health failed, beginning with a coronary when he was 38. His Bentley went; his house went; his marriage went. In 1984 he was remarried, to the former Mary Ward, who describes their life in South County as a quiet one by the sea.

Mr. Chernov, though, was still dreaming dreams. Just a few years ago he tried to capitalize on a uniquely Rhode Island product — coffee syrup — by concocting and marketing a coffee-based ale. It was a good try, says his wife, but few customers hankered for Silverback Gorilla No. 9 Original Black Coffee Ale.

Still, says Mary Ward Chernov of her late husband: "He was a special person who had the courage to act on his ideas."

Mr. Chernov was an Army veteran who served in the reserves from 1956-'64.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by two sons, Matthew Chernov of Los Angeles and Joseph Chernov of Boston; a daughter, Misha Chernov of Centreville, Va.; two stepchildren, Susan Santucci of Cambridge, Mass., and Lynne Traceski of West Warwick; two sisters, Linda Taylor of Newport and Brinda Cohen of Danvers, Mass.; a brother, Michael Samrena Chernov of Pasadena, Calif.; and five step-grandchildren.