

## Youth Masses, Black Skin, and Italian Beat Music

Laura E. Ruberto (July 31, 2008)



A look at the Italian youth masses of the 1960s, beat music, and una ragazza from New Orleans.

A few years ago, Duck Records released on CD [“La messa dei giovani”](#) [2] (“The Youth Mass”), a recording from 1966. Youth masses, or le messe dei giovani, were driven by the Second Vatican Council, which led the way for, among other things, a decreased use of Latin and an increased use of electric guitars inside church walls.

It’s unclear how many teens were drawn to the Catholic Church because of the masses, but the distinctly 1960s events mark a curious cultural moment. They offer an unexpected occasion to

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consider some of the relationships between Italy and the United States and the way race sometimes gets constructed by and against popular culture.

With the popular and the official mixing in a sanctified space, le messe dei giovani turned into hardcore beat concerts. On April 27, 1966, three bands—I Barrantas, the Bumpers, and Angel and the Brains—performed in the chapel of San Filippo Neri in Rome, turning out one of the most memorable live performances of the Italian beat era.

After the San Filippo Neri concert, the LP *La Messa dei Giovani* (Ariel Records) was released; in 1969, an English version came out as *The Mass for Peace* (Avant Garde Records, a New York-based Catholic folk rock label). At the time of the Italian release, [Time Magazine](#) [3] gave it this capsule review:

The Mass of the Young is about as far out as an LP can get. Three big-beat groups sing an entire Mass accompanied by electric guitars. The Latins call it the *Messa Ye Ye*, and it had its world premiere April 27 in a Rome church while youngsters frugged in the aisles and priests clapped hands. (July 6, 1966)



The Bumpers and Angel and the Brains were both Roman bands; they were later featured on other messe dei giovani LPs, many written by the soundtrack composer Marcello Giombini. At the time, I Barrittas had a stronger following, especially in their native Sardinia, where they played various musical styles—from more traditional folk music sung in Sardinian, to straight garage rock and the spiritually-inspired beat sound heard in La Messa.

#### HERE'S ONE OF I BARRITTAS'S SARDINIAN-INSPIRED BEATS

I was first turned on to I Barrittas by their signature anti-violence number, dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr., called “Non uccidere” (“Don’t Kill”)—[listen here](#). [4] I discovered it more than a decade ago on the compilation [60's Beat Italiano](#) [5]([Get Hip Records](#), [6] an independent label out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania).





Another track on the album, “Balbettando,” was released in 1967 by I Cinque Monelli (The Five Rascals—could they be alluding to their Italian American paesani, [The Rascals](#) [7]?).

There’s not much out there about I Cinque Monelli, but I recently came across a contemporary cover of “Balbettando” by a group out of Florence called I Ganzi, part of the neo neo-beat movement. For me its double-neo status is made most obvious by the presence of a female vocalist. Italian beat groups, as with much of the rest of the world’s garage rock, were definitely dominated by young men.

HERE ARE I GANZI COVERING I CINQUE MONELLI'S "BALBETTANDO"

The track “Balbettando” is a straightforward romantic tune about a guy who can’t talk, and balbetta (stammers) in front of a girl who clearly has a thing for him. What interests me about the song isn’t the beat so much as that the girl is from New Orleans. It’s a lyric I always found a bit unexpected; on reflection, the reference to New Orleans, a city with such a rich musical and cultural history, makes perfect sense.

And then the former college radio DJ in me kicks in and I think: New Orleans + music = an opportunity to talk about race in America. And with that I get to Nino Ferrer’s hit “Vorrei la pelle nera” (“I’d like black skin”) first released in France as “Je voudrais être noir” in 1966--[listen here](#) [8]. Nino Ferrer (1934-1998) was born Agostino Ferrari in Genoa to an Italian father and a French mother. He grew up mainly between France and the French territory, New Caledonia, and was turned on to American Jazz and R&B early on.

His ode to some of the great American musicians of all times—James Brown, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett—attacks racist practices while it plays into long-standing ideas connecting dark skin to entertainment. With lines like “I do all I can to sing like you guys, but nothing can be done, I’ll never be able to and I think it’s only because my color’s not right,” the song makes an all-too-common essentialist argument about singing abilities and race.

And yet it goes on to critique the violent racism against black people (with an outdated/derogatory word, “negretto”) that are “burned now and then with utmost serenity,” asking for a response from “Signor Faubus” (six-term Democratic Governor of Arkansas known for turning the National Guard on nine African American students entering Little Rock Central High School in 1957).

Here are some of the song’s lyrics, in its Italian version:

Ehi, ehi, ehi dimmi Wilson Pickett  
Ehi, ehi, ehi dimmi tu James Brown

Questa voce dove la trovate?

Signor King, signor Charles, signor Brown

Io faccio tutto per poter cantar come voi

Ma non c’è niente da fare, non ci riuscirò mai

E penso che sia soltanto per il mio color che non va

Ecco perché io vorrei, vorrei la pelle nera

Vorrei la pelle nera



Ehi, ehi, ehi dimmi tu signor Faubus, dimmi come si può  
Arrostire un negretto ogni tanto con la massima serenità  
Io dico Nino tu non ci dovresti pensar  
Ma non c'è niente da fare per dimenticar  
Sto maledetto colore di pelle che mi brucia un po'

Ecco perché io vorrei, vorrei la pelle nera

Vorrei la pelle nera

Taken together, I Barrittas, I Cinque Monelli, and Nino Ferrer, suggest an intriguing cultural mash-up between Italy and the United States, one that raises questions about how popular culture gets disseminated and how ethnic identities get formed against, between, and within assumptions about skin color and gender roles.

A number of scholars who have dealt specifically with issues pertaining to music in Italy and the United States are already keenly aware of the connections I'm suggesting, and so I note some of their work here:

- John Gennari's analysis of the Italian American appropriation of African American culture and vice-a-versa in his essay "["Passing for Italian: Crooners and Gangsters in Crossover Culture"](#) [9] was a breath of fresh air when I first read it in 1997 and continues to be relevant to questions of cultural appropriation and race;
- Thomas J. Ferraro's [Feeling Italian](#) [10] suggests how a sense of Italianness gets connected to a particular set of race, class, and gender identities that in turn sustain the consumption of Italian American popular culture (be it Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, or Frank Sinatra);
- [Pasquale Verdicchio's](#) [11] [Bound by Distance](#) [12] uses the work of Antonio Gramsci to consider how Italian hip hop and other popular culture, developed out of and in dialogue with Italy's history of emigration, the Italian North-South (racialized) divide, Italian American's relationship to African American culture, and contemporary (non-western) immigrants to Italy;
- Joseph Sciorra's posts on this site, as Joey Skee, or at [italianrap.com](#) [13] has furthered the critical discussion of music and performance by linking the Italian diaspora, contemporary (non-western) immigration to Italy, folk culture, and various (hybrid) ethnic/racial identities, most recently in his consideration of [Italian American hip hop](#) [14].

To wrap things up here, it's not so much that the Italian messe dei giovani have anything explicitly to do with the construction of race but rather that perhaps more than other performance arts, music can really stay with us, well after we've experienced it, swaying beyond its original intent. As such, music can be seen, as Theodor Adorno talked about, an example of the "aesthetic relations of productions," that is, art as "both an autonomous entity and a social fact" (from [Aesthetic Theory](#) [15], 245), continuing to reflect on and live within the world.

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### Links

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/i-barritas-gloria-al-signore>  
[2] [http://www.amazon.com/La-Messa-Dei-Giovani/dp/B000QZXVR8/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/La-Messa-Dei-Giovani/dp/B000QZXVR8/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&sr=8-1)  
[3] <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835918-2,00.html>  
[4] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/file/26%20Non%20Uccidere.m4a>  
[5] <http://paradiseofgaragecomps.blogspot.com/2008/03/60s-beat-italiano-lp-direct-hit-1989.html?showComment=1205121480000#c2436928722961126324>  
[6] <http://www.gethip.com/cgi-bin/ghRedirect.cgi?id=10%7C0%7C0%7C0%7Cindex%7C>  
[7] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/1045/cost-freedom-rascals-struggle-change>  
[8] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/file/2-06%20La%20Pelle%20Nera.m4a>  
[9] <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2935359>  
[10] [http://books.google.com/books?id=1SKgf\\_iXGiwC&dq=feeling+italian+ferraro&pg=PP1&ots=kaSbjVwRvJ&sig=\\_sLYMtS4uolCOzde4PoShho8EtA&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=1&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=1SKgf_iXGiwC&dq=feeling+italian+ferraro&pg=PP1&ots=kaSbjVwRvJ&sig=_sLYMtS4uolCOzde4PoShho8EtA&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result)  
[11] <http://www.blogger.com/profile/14802117969081350803>  
[12] <http://www.amazon.com/Bound-Distance-Rethinking-Nationalism-Diaspora/dp/0838636837>  
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[14] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/2921/linking-diaspora-musically>  
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