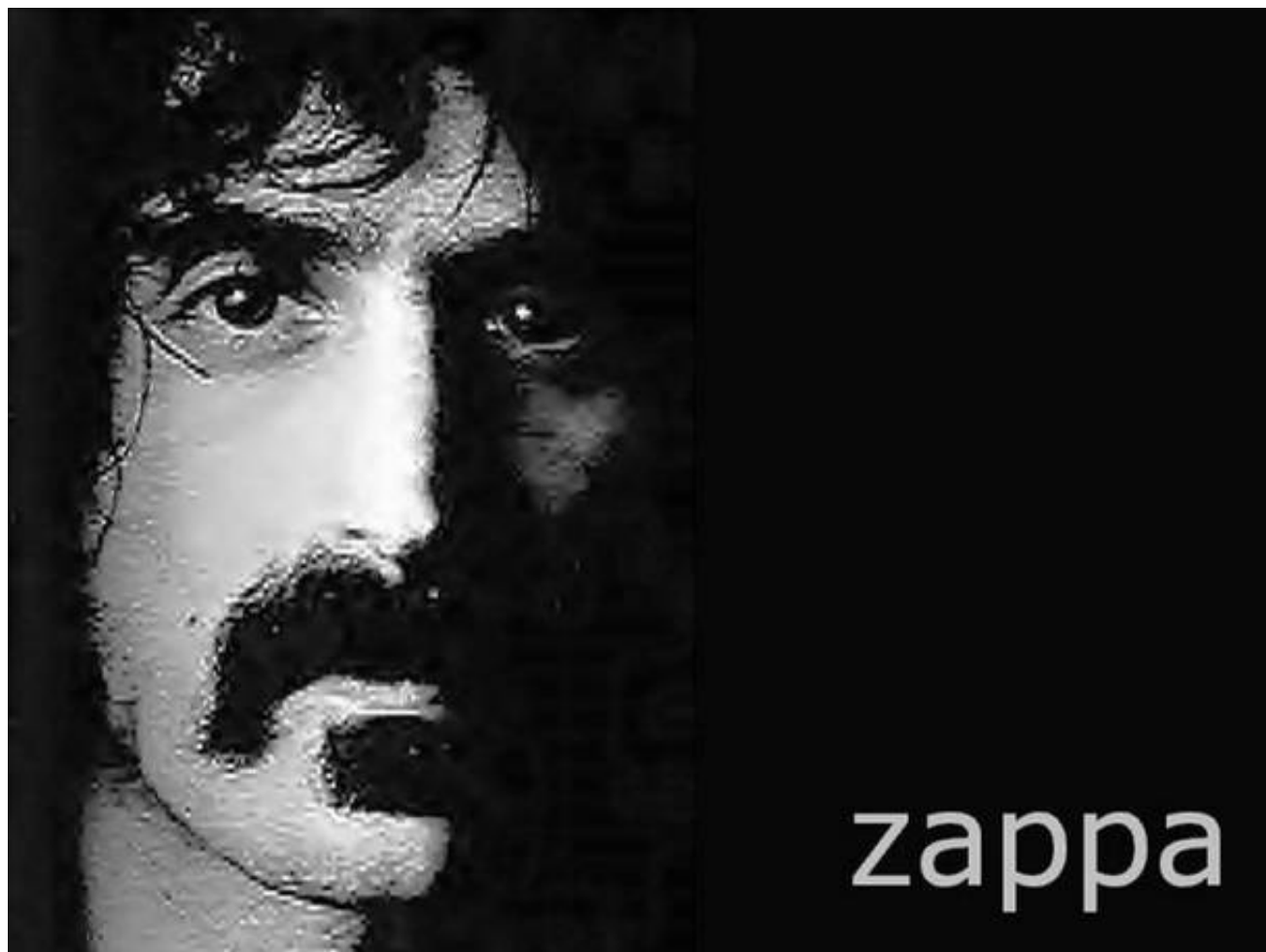


Do Italian-American Artists Make Italian-American Music?

Benny Profane (September 28, 2009)



It's a weighty question, one that Anthony Tamburri or Bob Viscusi could answer with much greater knowledge and awareness than this humble reporter. We will then have to limit our discussion by taking a look at some of these artists while reflecting on their respective musical influences....

Dear readers, today we'll talk about Frank Zappa, Laura Nyro (Laura Nigro), Tony Bennett (Anthony Dominick Benedetto), Frank Sinatra, Lennie Tristano, Joe Lovano, Nick La Rocca, Madonna (Madonna Louise Ciccone), Maria Muldaur (Maria Grazia Rosa Domenica D'Amato), Terry Bozzio, Eddie Brigati, Angelo Badalamenti, Felix Cavaliere, Jon Bon Jovi (John Francis Bongiovi, Jr.), Charlie Calello, Bruce Springsteen (mothers' maiden name: Adele Ann Zerilli), Vinnie Colaiuta, Felix Pappalardi, Johnny Rivers (John Henry Ramistella), Dion Di Mucci, Dean Martin (Dino Paul Crocetti), Jeff Porcaro, John Frusciante, Ronnie James Dio, and many others.



What do these individuals have in common? I would say very little except that all are completely or partially of Italian descent. Some of them have changed their last names and sometimes even their first names, while others have “Anglicized” their first names and kept their last names.

At this point the question instinctively arises: do these Italian-American artists make Italian-American music? Or have they been influenced to some extent by Italian music? It’s a weighty question, one that Bob Viscusi or Anthony Tamburri could answer with much greater knowledge and awareness than this humble reporter. We will then have to limit our discussion by taking a look at some of these artists while reflecting on their respective musical influences....

Let’s take a closer look at one, perhaps my favorite in this group: Laura Nyro. For me, Laura was the greatest American songwriter, even better than my beloved Joni Mitchell and Rickie Lee Jones. Laura was born in the Bronx, New York and her father was an Italian musician. Since she was a child, Laura played the piano and wrote poetry. Very early on she started listening to the albums she found at home: Debussy, Ravel, Billie Holiday, and then she discovered the great ‘45s by Phil Spector, the soul of Motown and Stax, and rock ‘n’ roll. Caruso?

Zilch. Domenico Modugno? Niet! In terms of Italian musical influences, as far as we know, there’s nothing to report. Laura began composing songs (successfully recorded by rock bands since the late ‘60s) and finally debuted as a solo artist, distinguished by a song always about to break and a series of magical compositions poised between soul, pop, jazz and rock ‘n’ roll. A bit in the style of Carole King, but with so much more emotion and class! Well, listen to anything by Laura and tell me if you can feel even a trace of anything Italian. I may have ears lined with prosciutto, but it’s rare to find an artist more influenced by the stylistic features of American music than my beloved Laura (RIP). In truth, her only Italian musical connection was through the arrangement of some of her best albums by the great Charlie Calello.

Cut to Frank Zappa, born to Italian parents. Zappa was a voracious listener of the most diverse musical genres. Without a formal music education, Zappa boldly mixed rock ‘n’ roll and Stravinsky, doo wop and Edgar Varese, free jazz and the teen pop of the early ‘60s, rhythm ‘n’ blues and psychedelia in his very first musical experiments. He was a true sponge capable of absorbing the most disparate influences to produce, at his best, the masterful synthesis of pure American music. Is there some Italian influence, albeit negligible, I ask softly?

Niet! Actually, now that I think about it, there is something Italian in his music but it would be better if there wasn’t. In what sense? Let me explain. On the album *Uncle Meat*, one of his best notwithstanding, the song *Tengo Na Minchia Tanta* appears. Yes, you read that right. This is a trivial hard rock song sung in “Italian” (the voice is not Frank’s, who I don’t think spoke Italian) in which the protagonist, a caricature of a macho Latin, is proud of his sexual attribute. It was later recorded with a lot more class by the legendary Squallor (you have to hear it to believe it). Except for this funny sketch of “Italian pride” and for the next album dedicated to the eighteenth-century composer Francesco Zappa (no relation) I don’t think there is much more “Italian” in his music. I could be wrong because the guy has released over 60 albums and I haven’t heard them all (don’t gripe! Zappa CDs are full-price and I can’t go broke just to write my articles, right??.....) but I would be happy to be contradicted by the numerous Zappa fans on the web. Sure, we could talk at length about his genius and his legendary irreverence, like when he angered the Anti-Defamation League with the song *Jewish Princess* and then Catholic organizations with the piece *Catholic Girls*...but we are veering off topic, so let’s move on to other artists.

Nick La Rocca, born in New Orleans in 1889 to Sicilian parents. Who was he? Well, according to Renzo Arbore he was the first jazz musician in history. Incredible, right? An Italian-American invented jazz and swing. Would you have ever thought so? Not me, but if Arbore said so.... In truth, the issue is still fiercely debated by jazz historians, but I find it astonishing nevertheless that an Italian would be considered by some as the originator of one of the most extraordinary American music genres.



Getting back to our topic, I ask again, softly, is there even a little bit of Italian in his music? No way.

Moving on to Tony Bennett. (I saw him on TV the other night, still in great shape, attending the U.S. Tennis Open with his wife/girlfriend who is his about 35-40 years his junior). Anthony Dominick Benedetto was born in Astoria, Queens to Calabrian parents. Benedetto said that as a child, he listened to Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, and Louis Armstrong. What is the great crooner's most famous song? "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." Get it? He left his heart in San Francisco, not Caltanissetta, Ragusa, Potenza, Reggio Calabria or Cava dei Tirreni! No, in Frisco, home of the early psychedelic sound and legendary bands like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Santana. As far as I know, the guy never dreamed of covering songs by Italian singers, but he signs his paintings (meanwhile he has also taken up painting) with the name Benedetto (strange, no?).

We'll stay with jazz and talk about Lennie Tristano, a blind master of the piano, among the most influential musicians of his generation. Born in New York to parents from Aversa, blinded by the Spanish influenza, and after flunking out of several schools his passion for music emerges. He was an innovated artist who was greatly esteemed by his colleagues, the most famous among them Lee Konitz, Charlie Mingus, and Bill Evans. Italian influences? Nowhere to be found. Think that one of his pieces is called Turkish Mambo. Not Mambo Italiano!

And what about Angelo Badalamenti, composer of the wonderful Twin Peaks soundtrack? During his career he collaborated with David Lynch, Paul McCartney, Nina Simone, Marianne Faithfull, and many other artists. But none of them are Italian. His sometimes oppressive melodic lines, at times dreamy, are as far removed from the luminosity that characterizes the Bel Paese stereotype.

Well, we could go on for pages but then Letizia would shut down my column...and so I will stop the dissertation here and pose the question again: Why doesn't Italian-American music exist, which has its own specificity with respect to the Italian model? Why doesn't it seem that Italian music has minimally influenced the artists I mentioned above? The situation is all the more puzzling when one considers the impact that Italian and Italian-American culture and traditions have had on the work of great Italian-American directors like Coppola and Scorsese. Same goes for the Italian-American literature which today is recognized and appreciated in its own rite. And the music? I will repeat that Tamburri and Viscusi are needed to give the final, conclusive word. I would advise the few readers who have continued to end of this article to get some albums by some of the artists mentioned above.

Frank Zappa: I prefer Zappa the jazz musician but I don't like Zappa's pop-rock songs and those with endless guitar solos. So I would get Hot Rats (with the masterpiece Peaches en Regalia), Kink Kong (released under the name of Jean Luc Ponty, but in fact written, produced and arranged by Frank), Burnt Weeny Sandwich, Grand Wazoo and Uncle Meat

Laura Nyro: Eli and the 13th Confession, Gonna Take a Miracle

Lennie Tristano: The New Tristano

Happy listening.

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)



Links

[1] <http://www.ility.org/files/frankzappa1254255019jpg>