

Music & Words. Prose & Poetry. Two Days in New York with Gianmaria Testa

Marina Melchionda (April 14, 2010)



A concert at Joe's Pub in NoHo to present his latest album in front of an international public; a glass of wine and a long chat in SoHo. During our moments spent in New York together with Gianmaria Testa we listen and talk about love, roots and travels, about Europe and America... Then we return to Italy, to its political, cultural and social issues, to its transformations and the new problems to be faced. First of all, immigration

With these words, on these notes, [Gianmaria Testa](#) [2] begins his concert at [Joe's Pub](#) [3], on the first, fresh night of a New York April.



The atmosphere is intimate, the lights are dim, the public is composed of people from France, America and Italy. They surround the small stage of a historic NoHo club. He is alone on the stage, at the center, with his guitar. Alone, like the title of his latest album [Da Solo] he has come to town to present which was recorded at the [Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rom](#) [4]e in May 2008.

We sneak into his pocket as well and accompany him in a journey that lasts almost two hours, taking a walk along the most important stages his long singer-songwriter career.

From Gli amanti di Roma [The lovers of Rome] to Lucciola d'Agosto [August Glow-Warm], from Comete [Comets] to Un aeroplano a vela [A Sailing Plane] , moonlights give way to starlights, to time slipping away; the sound of footsteps on the street, panoramas and sights filled with memories and sighs; the amazement of passing seasons, of new encounters, of sudden discoveries. It is a build-up of experiences, emotions, observations and introspections.

Via da quest'avventura [Away from this adventure], maybe not by chance, closes the first part of the concert. Sardinian trumpet player Luca Fadda – who lives in New York and is a good friend of Gianmaria's – joins him on stage. Two duets, Extra-muros and Nient'altro che fiori [Nothing Else But Flowers] , an unexpected gift received with a warm silence.

Another hour of music awaits us, the second part of the concert, dedicated to the main theme of the evening: travel, migrations. The attention with which our singer-songwriter stops to explain the stories and the meaning behind the songs change direction. Gianmaria knows that he is in front of a public of immigrants, knows we can understand, or at least try to understand, the difficult and painful experiences of those who sought the American dream in Italy and often did not find it.

“There is in island in the Mediterranean which is the new Ellis Island. It's called Lampedusa”: with these words he introduces Seminadori di grano [Cultivators of Grain] , Al mercato di Porta Palazzo [In the Market of Porta Palazzo], Polvere di gesso [Chalk Dust], Il Passo e l'incanto [The Step and The Enchant], lyrics extracted from Da questa parte del mare [On this Side of the Sea] , a monographic album about immigration released in 2006, which not only won him the important [Tenco Prize](#) [5], but also international critical acclaim. The songs guide us through a world different from our own, where sacrifice and tiredness for hard work and the constant daily challenges go side by side to a pride that never yields to contempt, determination and hope.

The same pride that he sings about in Miniera [Mine], a song from 1927 that still has a strong meaning today:

From afar comes a song so sorrowful

it's the emigrated dark miner down there

his song is the song of an exile.

A felt homage to De Andrè with Hotel Supramonte precedes Gianmaria's last song, Come al cielo gli aeroplani [Like the Planes to the Sky], the only unpublished piece from his album Da Solo.

The lights fade out; microphones, speakers and instruments are taken away.

We say goodbye to Gianmaria, calmy, without rushing to go away.

A breath of fresh air in front of Joe's Pub brings us back to the previous day, when we met for a long chat and a glass of wine at Epistrophy, a small Sardinian restaurant in SoHo, owned by Luca Fadda...

Starting from the end, from America, what does this country mean to you?

There are two Americas for me. The first one is relatable to a typical expression from Piedmont: when someone suddenly gains a fortune, he is asked if he discovered America. Or else we say “you were lucky, you discovered America”... Because America is synonymous to emigration, fortune



seeking...

The other one, namely the United States, is the one I saw when I came here for the first time in 2005. I went on tour and played in Chicago, Cleveland and Los Angeles. I was strongly prejudiced about everything America represents: imperialism, capitalism... then when I got to New York I had to change my mind. I took in its beauty: I would never have imagined, beyond scenes from movies that I knew, that a series of huge boxes apparently randomly placed in Manhattan, could touch me like that. It's the fourth time I return here and I'm always bewildered.

What made you decide to do your album launching here?

Curiosity. A good part of my musical education derives from the American musical culture. From [Leonard Cohen](#) [6] to [Bob Dylan](#) [7]: I had trouble understanding the lyrics, but the emotional charge of their music pushed me to reflect upon them and understand their message. You could feel that those songs were deep just by hearing the music.

In spite of this great passion for American music, though, your songs found their first public in France...

Yes, my first three albums were made there, although I sang in Italian. But it was by chance: in 1994, the song form was "culture" in France, while in Italy it only existed as a private initiative... Which helped for my Parisian debut. My first album, Montgolfieres, was very well received by the critics and, since Paris is a much more international center than Rome or Milan, it allowed me to make myself known quickly throughout Europe, and also in the whole French-speaking world.

You wrote a song, Joking Lady, dedicated to Paris and its many facets, its frenetic life, its different neighborhoods. Do you feel very tied to Paris?

I love Paris but I wouldn't live there. I would define it a "pointy" city, different from the other European cities where you can fit in, be lost in a crowd, become part of the city. Paris is in its own rush, nervousness, in which I don't feel at ease. I don't know why it is that when I perform in Paris I always feel a sense of urgency, maybe exaggerated.

In spite of this, I always return there with pleasure, and I translated many of my lyrics for my French public. I translated them, but without singing them. I felt the urgency to do it to "reward" those that buy my albums without understanding my songs. It cost me, though... some of them are really difficult to translate.

Why did you choose to rarely appear on TV in a country, Italy, where it is obligatory to participate on Television shows to achieve success?

The answer is obvious, it's enough to turn on the television. It's not a difficult choice, it's quite easy, in fact. Spaces for dignity on Italian television are very rare if not completely missing. It's not a militancy issue, but simply normal personal ethics.

Weren't you scared to remain confined in a certain niche? Or did you do it on purpose?

I believe I write popular songs, but I'm not interested in mass success. For 25 years I worked for the railroad so I would never be forced to say 'yes', and my songs hide this same concept. I carefully try to never reach that friction point in which the purposes of my work as a singer must give in to the market. It's two different languages, two very different worlds, that inevitably touch. But when the market wins over creativity, the latter loses its freedom, which is my guideline when I write.

I'm not Mozart, I'm not an artist, I'm someone who narrates using an alternative method to the spoken word. If I allowed the market to win I wouldn't be able to tell my small truth and instead I would adopt the one that others want to hear and buy.

But how did you become a singer-songwriter? What made you decide to leave the railroad?



I decided to leave the railroad and dedicate me completely to music very late. But I have sung and written for ever. When I was 14 years old, since I had good grades, my father decided to give me a gift. For a farmer like him it was a great sacrifice. I would have wanted to ask him for a piano, but he wouldn't have been able to afford one... So we bought a guitar for 25.000 Lira's.

After three months I wrote a song. I can't tell you why, it just came to me, but I had never thought of the guitar as an instrument to play by itself, without lyrics. This is why I'm not a guitarist, but someone who accompanies himself when singing.

Among Italian singer-songwriters, who influenced your growth the most?

[Fabrizio De Andrè](#) [8]. No doubt about it. I'll tell you a story...

It was the early Sixties. We lived in the country, in the poor Piedmontese planes, and in the house we had a radio around which we sat, the whole family, to listen to "Lascia o Raddoppia" (Leave or Double) , or the boxing matches that my father loved, or the rankings of songs by [Rita Pavone](#) [9] or the [Festival of Sanremo](#) [10], which were always being played.

Then one day a friend of mine, almost in secret, played for me Gorilla by De Andrè, a song translated from Brassens about a judge raped by a gorilla. In France it had been censored, and even in Italy it was considered scandalous. But it was an easy song to play, only two chords... so I picked up the guitar and learned it. That moment opened my eyes: I realized that there were people who put everything in their songs, not only love and heart, but actually told things. Used them cleverly. This was the effect De Andrè had on me, opening a world previously unknown to me. After him, Nancy by Leonard Cohen influenced my approach to music definitely, as well as my way to be a singer-songwriter.

Singer-songwriter, poet, or artist?

I'm not an artist, who is able to look at the world and narrate it to people. An artist is someone like Van Gogh who paints sunflowers. When you look at them, you find them exactly how you always imagined them. But he is the one who is giving shape to your fantasy: without him, you would never have seen them like that.

Today the word "artist" is strongly misunderstood... and devaluated. Today, anyone who goes on television is defined as "artist", while maybe he is only doing correct communication or, worse, saying what he is told to say, lies. Artists, on the contrary, usually disregard any kind of rule and follow an impulse that is almost a disease. That is why they are usually poor and sad, because they aren't similar to anyone, they are outside of their own time, are already "beyond" present.

Speaking about artists, how do you think the Italian musical panorama is changing, even considering the latest Sanremos?

Music has become the mirror of the disastrous Italian situation. This was confirmed by the latest regional elections. It's as if people have lost contact with idealism and – for example – turn to realities such as the [Lega Nord](#) [11]. I don't know why all this is happening, but luckily there are still a few who resist and manifest their ideas.

Sanremo is a mirror of this decadence, although it isn't masquerades like this that worry me. They are only the reflection of an existing stagnant situation. The music known in Italy is the one that appears, that goes on television and on the radio and surely it's a victim of a market force which is much stronger than the idea of creativity and communication. If my pieces aren't played often on the radio it's because they aren't radio-friendly. But it doesn't worry me, because often the radio-



friendliness of a song is inversely proportional to its quality.

Luckily there are still Italian singers and musicians that express quality and sincerity. I'm thinking, for example, of [Vinicio Capossela](#) [12] who often surprises me. He is one of those who have brought back dignity into Italian music.

Piracy is damaging the recording industry in Italy and abroad. There's no doubt about the fact that this phenomenon is hurting this slice of the market, but what effects does this have on the actual music?

To begin with, I want to make it clear that I cannot have anything against piracy. I'm convinced that if you like a piece or an album, even if you have downloaded it, you will then go out and buy it. On the contrary, I might even say that it would be terrific if piracy could help the listener to skim through what is available, giving him the opportunity to download, before buying only the discs he actually likes.

I've been insulted by many people in the industry who accused me of biting the hand that was feeding me, but I believe that if something is possible and accessible, a person will do it and do it well. I don't see why I should spend 20 Euros to buy an album, when I can download it, especially if I then discover I don't like it.

The first album I bought, I bought only because I liked the cover. But the relationship between my life-style of the time which was very low, and the cost of the disc, still made it accessible. Today this isn't so. You cannot expect that 16- or 17-year-olds spend 20 Euros every time they want to buy a CD. At the most they can buy one a month, but only if it's a work of art.

I would like to talk about one last thing, immigration, a theme which is very present in your music and the subject of a whole album of yours, *Da questa parte del mare*. To begin with, you have been traveling with your music for years. Would you define yourself as a migrant?

There is no possible comparison between myself and the people I write about in my music. To move about is a choice of mine, while for them it's an imposition.

I wrote an album about this theme to remind Italians about their past as immigrants during now that Italy has become a country that receives migratory flows.

Between 1870 and 1960 fifty million Italians left the country. This means that there is another Italy outside of Italy and that there is more Italian blood in Toronto than in Bologna, more in Sao Paulo in Brazil than in Cremona. And this is not because Italians were great navigators, but simply because they were hungry, had to feed their children, and went where this was possible.

We all know that they had to suffer insults and abuses practically everywhere and this is exactly why I expected that Italians themselves would behave differently than they are in fact behaving.

Of course I'm not so naïve to think that such a massive immigration doesn't create problems, but I thought that these people would have been welcomed with open arms, without prejudices and discriminatory behaviors. I imagined that they would have been treated as decent people, which they are, until told otherwise.

What many people fear is that the new immigrants impose a different culture upon the Italians. I don't want this to happen either, but I certainly don't think they want to rob me of something. Italy must understand that it needs the ones it calls "day laborers", these foreigners that do the jobs Italians don't want to do. It must understand that if we went along with the Lega Nord and sent them home, the country would suddenly stop.

This fear of those that are "different" has made parties like the Lega grow and gain consent, but has also led to victory politicians, mayors and ministers, that were once Fascist goons who walked along the streets holding a truncheon.



Having said this, I'll ask you a question that possibly has no answer. Simply, how can we get out of this situation?

The situation in which Italy finds itself today is one of dramatic stupidity. I was very touched by Mario Monicelli's interview which was aired a few days ago on TV, in which he said that Italy "for me, is truly a shitty country and the only possible solution is a revolution". Not that I'm a supporter of it, but a revolution always comes with consequences... let's say it brings a dramatic contingency...

Come to think of it, there has never been a revolution in our history: we went directly from Mussolini to the Liberation, so quickly as to forget the Fascist chapter and sanctify the Resistance as if it had been a revolution, but it was actually carried out by very few.

The result is that Italy has never actually come to terms with the absurdity of Fascism and Italians have convinced themselves that they are not a xenophobic people, but it's enough to walk out in the streets of our cities to witness shameful acts of racism.

The theme of travel is often present in your songs. But what is a travel for you? Is it the rush to leave or the wish to arrive somewhere?

Do you remember the farmhouse from the film 900? With a central farmyard surrounded by porticos... My father had rented such a farmhouse. And that farmyard, that little space of Earth in which I was born, for me enclosed everything, represented all that I knew. We were two families, 20 people, such a closed world that made me want to travel.

Then one day I was seated at the Trocadero Bar in Paris, a beautiful sight in front of me, the Eiffel Tower in the background. At that moment I felt part of the world, and realized that all I had learned, I had learned in my home's courtyard. In the town where I was born. It's not the most beautiful place in the world, but it's the only one I recognize, where everything resembles me, even the ugly things. Even the things I hate I find upon me. Respect, work, fatigue, tenderness, anything, everything came from there. My traveling only confirmed that, and also that humanity is much more alike than we would think – at any latitude – with some overall quite small shades of difference.

It was at that exact moment at the Trocadero that I completed the song *Il Valzer di un Giorno* (The Waltz of A Day)

All is here that we can't see

All is here hidden in the folds

and if it will amaze us it will be just

like certain news we already knew...

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