

Pepe Voltarelli: Storyteller of our Times

Tommaso Cartia (December 28, 2016)



New York's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò hosted singer-songwriter and storyteller Pepe Voltarelli for an intriguing presentation of his new record project "Voltarelli canta Profazio." The Calabrese singer rediscovers both his ethnic origins and the work of Otello Profazio, one of the most important folk singer-songwriters in southern Italy. Stefano Albertini, director of Casa Italiana, presented the event alongside with Joseph Sciorra, Director for Academic and Cultural Programs at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (CUNY)

Sweet, bitter, elegant, angry, spicy, melancholic, happy, clever, ironic, dramatic, and at times desperate. These are some of the undertones that enter your ear and your spirit when you listen to a voice from southern Italy. The sound is inescapable and seductive, like a Siren's call. It's alive and full of the incredible history from which it stems. Through its storytellers and narrators, southern Italy's traditional folk music has always expressed passion and a sense of social redemption, which is often dressed with satiric irony from people from "the [Mezzogiorno](#) [2]."

As with the great oral traditions that date back to the storytellers of Ancient Greece, a large portion

of musical heritage would be lost if it weren't for the contemporary singer-songwriters who are involved in rediscovering it and eternalizing it with their recordings. Storytellers used to be the reporters of daily life before communication other than writing existed; therefore, they were often responsible for documenting great changes during the course of history.

Artists such as [Edoardo Bennato](#) [3], Carlo d'Angiò, Antonio Piccinino, [Rosa Balisteri](#) [4], [Pietra Montecorvino](#) [5], and [Teresa De Sio](#) [6] preserved this tradition and passed it on to future generations.

Another great passing of traditions occurred with [Otello Profazio](#) [7] and [Peppe Voltarelli](#) [8]. Profazio is a Calabrese folk storyteller that reinterpreted both traditional songs from the south and [Ignazio Buttita's](#) [9] Sicilian poems. Voltarelli is one of the last Italian musical storytellers following in Otello's legacy. His latest project is a disk/book entitled "Voltarelli canta Profazio."

Peppe Voltarelli is a Calabrese singer, songwriter, and actor who is known for founding the experimental folk-rock band "Il parto delle Nuvole Pesanti" in 1991 in Bologna. In 2005 he began his solo career, which contained notable recognitions such as the "Premio Tenco" in 2010 and his successful tour abroad, particularly in the United States, Canada, and Latin America.

Voltarelli's concert was presented at [Casa Italiana](#) [10] by director [Stefano Albertini](#) [11] and director for Academic and Cultural Programs at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, [Joseph Sciorra](#) [12]. Additionally, the event included a multimedia performance assembled by Neapolitan artists [Anna and Rosaria Corcione](#) [13] who also handled the visual content for the booklet that accompanies Voltarelli's album. Anna Corcione attended the event.

Before the concert we had the chance to record the interview that Albertini conducted with the singer-songwriter. This interview will soon be featured on our television program [i-Italy NY TV](#) [14], which airs every Sunday at 1PM on the NYC Life channel.

Voltarelli spoke about the importance of his new project, a book/disk published by Squilibri Editore with artistic production by Carlo Muratori. He also spoke about his fateful encounter with Otello Profazio. The instinct that pushed the Calabrese singer to rediscover the musical origins of his people also brought him closer to his fellow countryman, Profazio. The two established a relationship beyond art and shared the stage together many times; one occasion in particular was for the Premio Tenco. The dimension of journey is very important for the storyteller, he needs to leave his home bringing with him the stories that inspired his music, to generously share them with the public.

Great storytellers moved from city to city. Their performances were accompanied by visual aids, which gave context to their work and allowed their audiences to better understand the stories that they were telling. Voltarelli followed in their footsteps and began his journey accompanied by images from Anna and Rosaria Corcione. Their inventive collages entitled "Strappi e stratificazioni" cross modern images of Voltarelli with disc covers from Profazio and other artists together with historic moments and Anna and Rosaria's personal pictorial commentary.

The metaphor of stratification in the collages, uncovering the levels of the past connected to modernity, amplifies the musical union between past and present, which Voltarelli officiates with his encounter with Profazio. Anna and Rosaria were also inspired by the great Calabrese artist, [Mimmo Rotella](#) [15], who began his dècollage works at the same time that Profazio was preparing to revisit the folk repertoire. In juxtaposing and combining the faces of these two key players, the artists highlighted the similarities and the differences between the two singers from a south of Italy eternalize in a metaphysical immobility like in a [De Chirico](#) [16] painting.

The audience at Casa Italiana was fortunate enough to have the chance to see the show that illustrated Voltarelli's theatricality and wit. Voltarelli sang some of Profazio's songs, one of which was "Qua si campa d'aria," which was also the title of the album that sold more than one million copies. Today Profazio is actually the only folk singer to have done this.

In addition to performing some of his own pieces, Voltarelli also dabbled in traditional Sicilian songs, in particular of the lyrical poems of Ignazio Buttitta.



Nostalgia, social condemnation, and bittersweet irony that narrate an ancient world that feels surprisingly close to our times. “Qua si campa d’aria” sounds contemporary, and it creates a snapshot of the economic crisis in Italy and the Italian immigrants’ difficulty in building a life abroad.

The migrant soul of Voltarelli’s southern Italy embraces the Italian-American public. In fact, for another one of his projects “Il viaggio, i padri, l’appartenenza” (The journey, ancestors, belonging) he declared:

“It’s part of my experience as an emigrant and part of the experiences of many others as well. From a distance you can see the separation from and the rediscovering of one’s roots. There’s also the acceptance of a cultural heritage that is, in fact, our own, and it lies within ourselves, whether we like it or not. It’s up to us to benefit from this baggage and to make it become a strength for us, an identifying element.”

Speaking with and identifying with an Italian-American audience was also important for Voltarelli. The audience returned the warmth that he showed them that night at Casa Italiana, expressing themselves through their laughs, teary-eyed expressions, and applause.

Voltarelli canta Profazio’s tour has just begun and can be seen in the United States and in Latin America before concluding in January.

To follow the singer and his concert dates, please visit www.peppevoltarelli.net [8] for more information.

External Source: [Peppe Voltarelli Official Website](http://www.peppevoltarelli.net) [8]

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