

LaVeritàLaVerdadTheTruth

Joey Skee (February 28, 2009)



Giuseppe Gagliardi's film *La vera leggenda di Tony Vilar* is a musical journey tracing the circuitous routes of the Italian diaspora.

The Italians have discovered us!
Italian Americans and other members of the Italian diaspora are the subjects of increasing scrutiny in



Italy. [Emigration museums](#) [2] are opening in major cities and small towns throughout the country. Italian scholars, from historians to literary critics, are making the lives and cultures of Italians abroad an integral part of their research. The John Fante Boom (did someone say obsession?) in Italy is deserving of some timely analysis. i-Italy.org is part of and contributes to this growing Italian awareness of Italian America. This was not always the case as historian Donna Gabaccia observes in Italy's Many Diasporas, "Italy has not developed a clear understanding of how its history of migration had defined its national identity" (2000, 173). It is immigration to Italy that is fueling, to a large degree, this long-awaited introspection.

Italian artists and performers are also looking at us, in appreciative yet frequently ironic ways. Here are some musical examples of what George De Stefano calls "[21st Century Wops](#) [3]":

- Lorenzo "Jovanotti" Cherubini's original choice of "Joe Vanotti" as his nome d'arte.
- Vinicio Capossela's curiosity in things Italian American and his desire to be understood as "Vic Damone's cousin."
- Raiz's adoption of the slur "[WOP](#) [4]" as a badge of honor in [his song](#) [5] and 2004 album of the same name.
- Roy Paci & Aretuska's Louis Prima-inspired, [feverish Siculo-glocal ska](#) [6].
- Turi's "If I had been born in America" [CalabroEnglish macaronic raps](#) [7].

Italian artists' discovery of Italian America is sometimes a playful masquerading that sets up a curious mimetic house of mirrors as we Italian Americans (Australians, Canadians, Germans, etc.) find ourselves watching them watching us seeing themselves as us.



Peppe Voltarelli

Adding to this exhilarating, cultural mix is Giuseppe Gagliardi's film *La vera leggenda di Tony Vilar* (2006), which I finally had the opportunity to see this past week (grazie Teresa Fiore). This self-proclaimed mockumentary follows Peppe (singer, composer, and co-screenwriter Peppe Voltarelli) in his search for Argentine teen idol Tony Vilar, an Italian emigrant who left Calabria after World War II as Antonio Ragusa. There are encounters with Vilar's real-life relatives and friends, and Italian actors playing Italian Americans, as the film takes us on a journey from Italy to Buenos Aires to New York City, with excursions to suburban Connecticut and New Jersey, in search of the elusive singer.

Along the way we are made to question the narrative's veracity – fact or fiction? lost legend or hip, pomo screenplay? – compelling the viewer to search the Net to relieve the nagging uncertainty. This



ambiguity is attributed, in part, to seeing Bronx denizens and “friends of friends” joining in the hilarity of dance routines and a musical dream sequence. In the end, we are left to heed D.H. Lawrence’s advice: “Never trust the teller; trust the tale.”

The tale, in this case, is a joyous, musical romp of popular culture tracing one route of post-World II Italian emigration – Mezzogiorno/Latin America/the States – that acquires layers of cultural resonance along the way. The truth/la verità/la verdad of the narrative is that Italians are discovering the accents, the hybridic variety, and the unique richness of Italian ethnoscaples like La Boca and Melrose Park to claim them as their own, as they redefine what it means to be “Italian.”

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- [1] <http://iitaly.org/files/7500vilarcloseup011235869123jpg>
- [2] http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rlz=1T4SKPB_enUS281US282&q=Museo+dell%27Emigrazione
- [3] <http://www.slideshare.net/giorgionyc/21st-century-wops-roy-paci-raiz-and-the-cultural-politics-of-migration-presentation>
- [4] <http://testi-canzoni.musiczone.it/raiz/raiz-wop/testo-canzone-w-o-p.html>
- [5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le7ZOQDKBz0>
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