

Serendipitous Encounters of an Italian-American Kind

Joey Skee (July 25, 2009)



The shared histories of Neapolitan singer Alfredo Bascetta and political activist/film worker Gino Bardi are revealed by a Brooklyn walkabout.



This month I walked around my Williamsburg neighborhood to ask shopkeepers to hang posters advertising the Calandra Institute's Puglia Film Festival in what ultimately felt like a game of "Six Degrees of Separation." I stopped at a local realtor because I previously met Louis Bascetta who worked there and who had worked with my sister Annabella on the television show "Law & Order: Criminal Intent." That day his father Louis, Sr. was in and he agreed to hang the poster in the window as he did in March for the Institute's conference on the Neapolitan song. This time Louis, Sr. asked me, "Do you know who my uncle is?" I had no idea. "Alfredo Bascetta," was his reply.

I was familiar with Bascetta because an undated sheet of music, "Mamma luntana," was featured in the exhibition I co-curated "Chist'è New York: The Mark Pezzano Collection of Neapolitan Sheet Music from New York." In addition, I had been listening to his 1920s-1930s recordings "Le ragazze di New York," "'o Squarcione," and "Se n'e' fuiuto 'banchiere," from CDs of Neapolitan music recorded in the States that Paquito Del Bosco of the [Archivio Storico della Canzone Napoletana](#) [2] had given me during the conference. Between my conversations with Louis Bascetta, Sr. and some online sleuthing I learned a whole lot more.

Alfredo Bascetta was born born in the town of Pietrastornina(Avellino province) on September 14, 1889. He arrived at [Ellis Island](#) [3] on November 6, 1911 and was listed as married. He settled in East New York, Brooklyn. He was soon recording for [Victor](#) [4], Columbia, [OKEH](#) [5] Records, and others.

[\["Voce 'e stagione." sung by Bascetta](#) [6]]

The Italo American Corporation produced a film based on his recorded song "Mamma luntana!" (Mother in Distant Land!...) filmed in Naples and starring Bascetta. Almost a year after the film's premiere, Bascetta returned to New York on the Conte Verde, docking on September 9, 1923.





([Il Carraccio, Nov. 1922, p. 556](#) [7])

In 1927, Bascetta also wrote a topical song protesting the arrest, trial, and death sentence given Sacco and Vanzetti. "[Lacrime'e cunndannate](#) [8]" (The Tears of the Condemned):

Sta tutt'o munno sano arrevutato,

pe' Sacco e p'e Vanzetti cundannate.

E chì vigliaccamente la 'nfamate,

maie n'ora 'e pace nun addà truvà!

A tutte parte arrivano pruteste 'nquantità

Facenno appello, cercano e farle aggrazià!

The whole wide world is topsy-turvy

for Sacco and Vanzetti's sentencing.

And those who cowardly defamed them,

should never find an hour of peace!

Numerous letters of protest are arriving from all over,

attempting an appeal, trying to have them pardoned.

Doppo sett'anne e pene carcerate,

tra vita e morte, chisti sventurate.

Mo c''a cundanna l'hanno cunfermata:

nun c'è sta mezze pe putè salvà!

Sulo 'o Governatore giustizia le po fa,

si Dio c'ho mette 'ncore, a grazia le farrà.

After seven years of painful imprisonment,

these unfortunate wretches have been between life and death.

Now the sentence has been confirmed:

There's no way to save them!

Only the governor can provide justice,

if God changes his heart, a miracle happen.

So state senza core tutt'e quante,

pure e giurate, ma che 'nfame e ggente!

Nun sentene e raggione e chì è 'nnuccente:

chesta nun è giustizia, è 'nfamità!

Sti sfurtunate chiagneno, so rassignate già



E dint'a celle aspettanno ca Dio l'addà salvà!

Everyone has been heartless,
even the jury, a callous people!
They don't listen to reason to who is innocent:
This is not justice, but infamy!
These unfortunate ones cry, resigned to their fate
and they wait in their cell for God to save them!

As he got older, Bascetta moved to Florida to his daughter Gemma's home. His son-in-law Livio Giorgi played the part of the stage actor who held a gun to his head in the restaging of the Penninio-inspired sceneggiata "Senza Mamma." Bascetta, 93, died on December 6, 1982.

When I mentioned Bascetta's "Lacrime'e cunndannate" to Louis, he said, "Oh, my uncle Gino got his head knocked in protesting for Sacco and Vanzetti." Who's that? I asked. "Gino Bardi. He was Uncle Alfredo's nephew. He changed his name."

That wasn't a name I was familiar with, but I soon found out about a connection of the Bascetta family tree unknown to scholars of Italian American history and culture.

According to Louis, Alfredo's brother Biago's son Giuseppe was born in Italy on June 12, 1907 and arrived in New York with his family as a child.

Historian Gerald Meyer has written about Bardi in two articles: "L'Unità del Popolo: The Voice of Italian American Communism, 1939-1951" [The Italian American Review](#) [9] 8.1 (2001) and "Italian Americans and the American Communist Party" in [The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism](#) [10] (Prager, 2003), which he co-edited with Philip Cannistraro. Meyer describes Bardi's 1939 publication *Siamo Ariani?* (Workers Library Publishers; an English translation was published the same year), which addressed the notion of "Italians" as a pure race and "Aryan," attacking fascist Italy's anti-Semitism.







Gino Bardi, 1938.

That same year, Bardi became the co-editor of the American Communist Party's Italian-language weekly, *L'Unità del Popolo*. (I add this tangential nugget to the serendipitous connections encountered: Bardi's co-editor was Maria "Mary" Testa, the mother of Suze Rotolo, visual artist and author of the memoir, [A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties](#) [11] (2008), who the Calandra Institute presented in November 2008. Bob Dylan's song, "[Ballad in Plain D](#) [12]," references Testa in passing.). In 1940, Bardi ran for Congress as the American Labor Party's candidate for a district representing Greenwich Village. Meyer's account of Bardi ends with his enlisting in the U.S. Army in the spring of 1942.

Louis, Sr. provided some additional details of his relative Gino Bardi: Bardi obtained a degree in philosophy at Columbia College and returned to Italy to teach at the University of Florence. There he was drafted in the fascist army. He returned to the States, joined the Army, served in the Third Army, and wrote for the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. Bardi was recruited by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), as were [other Italian-American soldiers](#) [13], to assist Italian partisans behind enemy lines.

After the war, Bardi returned to Italy and worked in the Italian film industry, in particular with producer Dino De Laurentiis. He and director Luchino Visconti translated Arthur Miller's play "[The Crucible](#) [14]" into Italian.



Gino Bardi (cente) and Orson Welles (right), Italy, circa 1950.

Bascetta died in the States in May 1978 and is buried in St. John's Cemetery in Queens. His nephew, Basil Bascetta, is the Chief Administrative Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds at Queens College, the Calandra Institute's parent college. Bardi's unfinished memoir has been lost.

So much of Italian-American immigrant history and culture has been discarded or lost. We are left with a paltry litany of moldy names that are endlessly resurrected each Columbus Day or after the latest mafia movie premiere by those professional ethnics who have proclaimed themselves "community" spokespeople. This has contributed to a situation in which the lives and works of people like Alfredo Bascetta and Gino Bardi have fallen by the wayside. I count myself as fortunate that a fortuitous encounter in Brooklyn offered me an opportunity to learn about an unheralded yet significant aspect of Italian-American history and culture.

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- [4] <http://victor.library.ucsb.edu/talentDetail.php?id=1444>
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- [6] http://www.radio.rai.it/canzonenapoletana_eng/archivio_2009/audio/voceestaggione.ram
- [7] <http://books.google.com/books?id=VW3NAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA556&dq=alfredo+bascetta>
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