

Talkin' Hybrid Moments

Joey Skee (November 18, 2010)



Introductory comments to the Calandra Institute's November 5th symposium "Hybrid Moments: Independent Music in Italian America."

by Rosangela Briscese and Joseph Sciorra

Any one with even passing familiarity with Italian culture can not help but consider the similarity of the Italian gestures for and against the evil eye, as well as that signifying cuckoldry, with the universal hand gesture that has come to symbolize metal music, and in turn, has simply become the ubiquitous [gesture](#) [2] of the rock-based concert partier.



It comes as no surprise to many that the late [Ronnie James Dio](#) [3] of Black Sabbath and other bands—who is credited with popularizing the “metal horns” or the “devil horns,” as the gesture is now referred to—stated that he learned the sign to ward off the malocchio from his grandmother.

The overt connection between popular Italian Catholicism and metal—let’s not forget that Ronald James Padavona took the Italian word for “God” as his stage name—offers an interesting vantage point for considering the varied and nuanced iterations of Italian American in a host of popular music forms—metal, punk, experimental, singer-songwriter—and their associated subcultures.

Ethnic identity—that is, white ethnic identity—has not been the defining feature, per se, of alternative, independent, and underground musicians’ creativity. Various musical styles and their subcultures, especially punk and metal, are cherished, in part, because of their non-ethnic affiliations, a breaking away and erasing of familial and local references considered provincial, restrictive, oppressive. These art forms may well be perfect examples of what sociologist [Richard Alba](#) [4]’s has referred to as “the twilight of ethnicity.”

Yet some think not.



Steven Lee Beeber, author of [Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's](#) [5]: A Secret History of Jewish Punk, states: "The shpilkes, the nervous energy of punk, is Jewish. Punk reflects the whole Jewish history of oppression and uncertainty, flight and wandering, belonging and not belonging, always being divided, being in and out, good and bad, part and apart." Who knew?

But at [the conference "Loud Fast Jews"](#) [6] held at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research last year, Chris Stein of Blondie stated explicitly, "I'd be hard pressed to think ethnicity has something to do with my music." And yet.



We and others could not help but notice the propensity of Italian surnames in various types of alternative, independent, and underground music. David Marchese's 2008 posting, "[Italian Rockers? Fuhgeddaboutit!](#) [7]" for the SPIN magazine blog, listed the likes of Frank Zappa, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler, producer Steve Albini, Weezer frontman Rivers Cuomo, Ween's Dean Ween aka Michael Melchiondo, Jr., and other Italian-American musicians of various stripes. We would suggest that artists performing in a variety of musical styles, from Ronnie James Dio to Vinnie Stigma of [Agnostic Front](#) [8], from [Natalie Merchant](#) [9] to [Ani Di Franco](#) [10], from [Joe Jack Talcum](#) [11] to [Ted Leo](#) [12], represent an Italian presence—sometimes veiled, sometimes overt—in the American music scene.

These Italian-American artists' *italianità* or Italianness is articulated through surname retention, lyrics, cultivated persona, and/or performance style. They may be likened to the novelists Don DeLillo and Gilbert Sorrentino that literary scholar and Queens College professor Fred Gardaphé writes about in [Italian Signs, American Streets](#) [13]: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative:

While [they] rarely choose to deal with distinctly Italian American subjects, and thus are more easily read through the more mainstream American aspects of their Italian American culture, ethnicity and cultural difference underscore all of their work. These authors may have avoided or suppressed dominant ethnic traits in their attempts to transcend ethnicity, but their work contains signs of *italianità* that can be connected to an underlying philosophy which is informed by their ethnicity.

The symposium's title, taken from [the Misfits](#) [14] song—the Lodi, New Jersey band with members Glenn Anzalone, and the brothers Jerry and Doyle Caiafa—allows us to explore those "hybrid moments" that momentarily reveal the looks hiding behind the scars.

Such a moment emerges in Natalie Merchant's song performed with 10,000 Maniacs, "My Sister Rose":

Big plans are being made for my sister's wedding day.

We'll have a ball at the Sons
of Roma Hall.

Family, friends come one and all.

Other times, attention to a musician's ethnic background is due to ascription. For example, a press release entitled, "So who's Vic Ruggiero?" about the singer/songwriter's Netherlands tour, opens with the sentence, "A 34-year Italian New Yorker (what else could you be with such a family name?)."

Or consider the online review of a [Bouncing Souls](#) [15] concert which described lead singer Greg Attonito as the "[Frank Sinatra of the punk scene](#) [16]," because of his "calm and effortless" belting out of songs.



And what are we to make of Agnostic Front's first concert in Bologna, Italy, in which Vinnie Stigma—as a friend described in an email—came “on stage in full skinhead attire waving an Italian flag”?

One of the purposes of this type of event is to engender scholarship where none or little exists. This is what we did in 2002 with the Calandra Institute's conferences on [women's needlework](#) [17] and [historic preservation](#) [18]. [Today's symposium](#) [19] consists primarily of roundtable discussions with artists and other participants in the music world.

We envision this event raising more questions than answers. Some ideas we hope will be addressed are:

- What is the process by which ethnic identity is submerged, erased, or revealed?
- The issue of place: the suburbs as an incubator for certain types of music and the punk scene as a replacement for community of the “old neighborhood.”
- To what degree can the cultivated performers' musical personae, especially the attitude of the front man, be considered a channeling of a Louis Prima or Frank Sinatra?
- What about male/macho posturing of hardcore, and the underrepresentation of women?
- In what ways are race and whiteness articulated? What are we to make of white-power skinhead bands and that culture?
- And then there are the “Wannabe Italians.” Yes, [the Ramones](#) [20], and [the Rezillos](#) [21], and Ross the Boss Funicello, and others. What is that all about?!



"Italianità in a Minor Key" panel, (left to right) Vic Ruggiero (The Slackers)

KAVES (The Lordz), moderator Antonino D'Ambrosio (La Lutta NMC), and

Martín Perna (Antibalas). Photograph: Rosangela Briscese.

This event has been long in the making; we first began actively working on it in March 2009. We invited a number of artists who either did not respond or were unable or uninterested in participating, such as Ani Di Franco, Natalie Merchant, Marissa Paternoster of the Screaming Females, Ted Leo, Jack Terricloth of World/Inferno Friendship Society, Guy Picciotto of Fugazi, Greg Attonito, Cliff Rigano of Storm Troopers of Death, and the brothers Bob and Jerry Casale of DEVO. We don't see today's symposium as the end of a conversation but just the beginning.

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- [5] http://www.amazon.com/Heebie-Jeebies-CBGBs-Secret-History-Jewish/dp/1556527616/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&camp=s=books&qid=1290096738&sr=1-1
- [6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/13/nyregion/13punk.html>
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- [13] <http://www.amazon.com/Italian-Signs-American-Streets-Americanists/dp/0822317397>
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- [17] <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/academic/aneedle.html>
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