

Investigating Afro-Italian Intersections in Popular Music

John Gennari (June 06, 2017)



Excerpted from "Flavor and Soul. Naples and Palermo were cultural crossroads where European, African, and Arab music had intermixed for centuries; the migrants who passed through these port cities on their way to the New World participated in the process of intercultural synthesis that produced jazz, the tango, the rumba, and other new song forms and dance styles which in turn traveled from New Orleans, Buenos Aires, Havana and other cities back across the Atlantic.

In the American popular imagination, an Italian man was a bootblack, a ditch-digger, a dago, a wop, a stiletto-wielding bandit. Or a lover – like [Rudolph Valentino](#) [2], whose film roles as a fantasy Mediterranean lover made him Hollywood's first male sex symbol. Or a singer – like [Enrico Caruso](#) [3], the product of a Naples slum, who became a household name, a global media celebrity, the first international pop star of the twentieth century.

Italian men, like black men, were feared, reviled, denigrated, and subjected to ritual violence; they were also, like [Bert Williams](#) [4], [Buddy Bolden](#) [5], Louis Armstrong and other black entertainers, progenitors of a new and exciting modern culture, a culture of physical expressiveness, fleshly desire, motion, and emotion that changed American middle-class culture by overturning the country's Puritan and Victorian mores.

In 1920s New York, Anglo middle-class slummers went to Harlem for the racy cabaret culture; white bohemians settled in Greenwich Village, meanwhile, where their rebellion against Victorian asceticism included their intimacy with Italian immigrants, who were seen as the most exotic of the European ethnic groups: dark-haired, olive-skinned, and descendants of a Mediterranean culture steeped in mystery and sensuality.



Passione and Melancolia

Pellegrino D'Acierno writes of Neapolitan song as a “music of passione (the Italian equivalent of “soul”) and exacerbated melancolia (the Italian equivalent of “blues”). We find similarly explicit analogizing between African American and southern Italian music in some of the responses to the film *Passione* (2010), [John Turturro](#) [6]’s ode to the music and people of Naples. “The music in *Passione*,” wrote New York Times film critic A.O. Scott, “combines sensual suavity with raw emotion, mixes heartbreak with ecstasy, acknowledges the hard realities of poverty and injustice and soars above them. I suspect that if artists like Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding or Aretha Franklin were to see this film, they would recognize their own art within it.”

Songs of yearning, of fleshly pleasure, of love and love lost, bilateral aggression and derision, betrayal and revenge; songs that speak frankly about the intrigue and anguish of personal intimacy – this is the domain of the blues, soul, and Neapolitan music alike. The art in each of these idioms is a ritual of confrontation and catharsis, a sharing of feelings so deep as to exceed the capacity of verbal language – hence the power of this music even among listeners who may not understand the lyrics. The Neapolitan term of art is *la comunicativa*, an act of communication that is contagiously expressive.

Unexpected Intersections

The history of Afro-Italian intersection in popular music from jazz to doo-wop, soul to hip-hop, is a deep and fascinating one rooted in analogous and sometimes shared vernacular cultural practices of orality and aurality, sounding and listening.

A voluminous scholarly literature on African American music, religion, literature, social history, and even politics has taught us to recognize spaces of sounding and listening such as family social events, Baptist and Pentecostal church services, street corners, and barbershops as a central—some would say defining—feature of black vernacular culture. Italian American culture has a similar claim to soundfulness not simply as a valued ethnic trait and badge of communal solidarity, but as a foundational dimension of group discourse and sociality.

Much as is the case in African American culture, the canonical spaces of Italian American life are fundamentally audible and aural spaces. Dinner tables, kitchens, delis, cafés, pizzerias, social clubs, barbershops, schoolyards, candy stores, street corners, front stoops—what [Joseph Sciorra](#) [7] calls “a beguiling realm” of “landmarks on the mythic topography of the Italian imaginary,” all of them scaled adaptations of the Italian piazza—are spaces where Italian Americans literally create themselves as a social body through practices of sounding and listening. What makes this acoustic terrain so vivid and richly layered is the performativity that marks it. D'Acierno describes Italians and Italian Americans as a people with a feeling for scenes and spectacle: not just a deep appreciation for the visual, musical, and performing arts, but a disposition to dramatize and aestheticize interpersonal and public encounters, to make the everyday world a “work of total art.”

From Caruso to Armstrong

In the first decades of the twentieth-century, the music of southern Italy circulated in a Mediterranean/Atlantic orbit connecting the peninsula and its islands to Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and both South and North America. Naples and Palermo were cultural crossroads where European, African, and Arab music had intermixed for centuries; the migrants who passed through these port cities on their way to the New World participated in the process of intercultural synthesis that produced jazz, the tango, the rumba, and other new song forms and dance styles which in turn traveled from New Orleans, Buenos Aires, Havana and other cities back across the Atlantic.

The growing phonograph record and music publishing industries commercialized this process and quickened its cultural impact. Caruso’s “Core ‘ngrato” was composed and recorded in New York, then returned to Italy to enter the canzone napoletana canon and serve over the next century as a symbol of authentic italianità.

In New Orleans, a teenager named [Louis Armstrong](#) [8] went to work in Henry Matranga’s honky-



tonk saloon; there, among Sicilians and blacks, he first heard Caruso on record. This helps account for the operatic bravura of Armstrong's trumpet style, his red hot high-register pyrotechnics, and his cagy habit of sneaking opera sound bites into his solos (the so-called "Rigoletto break" in his 1927 recording "New Orleans Stomp," the quotation of "Vesti la giubba" in his 1930 and 1932 recordings of "Tiger Rag"). Armstrong knew a lot of opera aside from his Caruso favorites, but it was from Caruso, above all, jazz critic Ben Ratliff provocatively suggests, that Armstrong absorbed the "long tones and flowing annunciatory statements" that the trumpeter used "to change the jerky, staccato nature of early jazz."

A must Read:

[**Flavor and Soul: Italian America at its African American Edge**](#) [9]

John Gennari

University of Chicago Press

Pag. 269 \$30

In the United States, African American and Italian cultures have been intertwined for more than a hundred years. From as early as nineteenth-century African American opera star Thomas Bowers—"The Colored Mario"—all the way to hip-hop entrepreneur Puff Daddy dubbing himself "the Black Sinatra," the affinity between black and Italian cultures runs deep and wide. Once you start looking, you'll find these connections everywhere. Sinatra croons bel canto over the limousine swing of the Count Basie band. Snoop Dogg deftly tosses off the line "I'm Lucky Luciano 'bout to sing soprano." Like the Brooklyn pizzeria and candy store in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*, or the basketball sidelines where Italian American coaches Rick Pitino and John Calipari mix it up with their African American players, black/Italian connections are a thing to behold—and to investigate. In *Flavor and Soul*, John Gennari spotlights this affinity, calling it "the edge"—now smooth, sometimes serrated—between Italian American and African American culture. He argues that the edge is a space of mutual emulation and suspicion, a joyous cultural meeting sometimes darkened by violent collision. Through studies of music and sound, film and media, sports and foodways, Gennari shows how an Afro-Italian sensibility has nourished and vitalized American culture writ large, even as Italian Americans and African Americans have fought each other for urban space, recognition of overlapping histories of suffering and exclusion, and political and personal *rispetto*. Thus, *Flavor and Soul* is a cultural contact zone—a piazza where people express deep feelings of joy and pleasure, wariness and distrust, amity and enmity. And it is only at such cultural edges, Gennari argues, that America can come to truly understand its racial and ethnic dynamics.

*[**John Gennari**](#) [10] is Associate Professor of English and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, University of Vermont. This excerpt from his [**Flavor and Soul**](#) [9] is printed with permission from the University of Chicago Press.

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- [1] <http://iitaly.org/files/investigatingafroitalianintersectionsinpopularmusic.jpg>
- [2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolph_Valentino
- [3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enrico_Caruso
- [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bert_Williams
- [5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddy_Bolden



[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Turturro

[7] <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/joseph-sciorra-phd-0>

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong

[9] <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/F/bo25094688.html>

[10] <https://www.uvm.edu/~english/documents/GennariJohnCV2017.pdf>