



Mangia La Musica II

George De Stefano (December 07, 2008)



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A Nontraditional Menu for a Buon Natale

Christmas is coming, and if you're like me, you love the holiday but hate the music. Want something besides "Silent Night" or "Little Drummer Boy" to accompany your Buon Natale? Here's a sampling of some of my favorite fare from 2008, and like the first Mangia La Musica, it's a mix of sapori italiani and other flavors. Enjoy!

Ry Cooder, I Flathead (Nonesuch), The UFO Has Landed (Rhino Records)

Cooder, the California-born blues guitarist extraordinaire, singer, and cross-cultural collaborator, has had a fascinating 40-year career. He's played with bluesman Taj Mahal in The Rising Sons and exploratory rockers Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band, joined The Rolling Stones in the studio for their Let it Bleed album, and, beginning in 1970, put out a series of his own excellent albums. A master of the blues and other bedrock American idioms, Cooder's also produced two extraordinary world music projects, Cuba's Buena Vista Social Club, and Talkin' Timbuktu Blues, a collaboration with the Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré.

His most recent work has been a “California trilogy” that began with Chavez Ravine (2005), followed by My Name is Buddy (2007) and culminating in this year’s I, Flathead. All three are remarkable – Chavez is a flat-out masterpiece -- not just collections of songs but concept albums, a format supposedly obsolete in the digital age. Each one focuses on a particular era in the history of southern California’s multi-ethnic working class. The UFO Has Landed, a two-CD career retrospective, contains much of his most indelible work, with lots of his soulful slide guitar. And guess what, paisans – Cooder’s half-Italian, the son of an immigrante named Emma Casaroli.

Bob Dylan, Telltale Signs (Columbia)

The latest in Dylan’s “bootleg” series of unreleased material, the two-disk Telltale Signs is a must for any Dylanophile. It includes alternate versions of songs from four albums Dylan released between 1989 and 2006, live performances, and several numbers written for films. Dylan’s alternate takes are always fascinating, even when they’re not as good as the versions he decided to release, because they allow you to hear familiar songs in entirely new ways. “Dignity,” “Everything is Broken,” and “Ring them Bells,” all from 1989’s Oh Mercy, sound like different songs stripped of producer Daniel Lanois’ murky atmospherics. “Mississippi,” from 2001’s Love and Theft, shows up in two versions, one whispery and ethereal, the other a slide guitar-enhanced blues (the winner hands down). Some of the unreleased stuff is so good you wonder why the hell he didn’t put it out before.

Afterhours, I Milanesi Ammazzano il sabato

Mark Gartenberg, a promoter who has brought such Italian artists as Carmen Consoli, Vinicio Capossela and Avion Travel to New York and other American cities (give him a round of applause), turned me on to this, the latest album from the Milanese rock band founded in 1990 by singer-guitarist Manuel Agnelli. “Milanese rock band” sounded about as appealing to me as “Bloomberg’s third term.” But, curbing my Mezzogiorno cultural chauvinism, I heeded Mark’s urging and gave it a listen. He was right. Most of the Italian rock bands I’ve heard sound like lame imitations of Anglo-American groups. But Afterhours is the real thing, raucous, exciting, and, if you want to identify an Italian element in their sound, melodic.

Roy Paci, Bestiario Siciliano (Etnagigante/Universal)

In my recent I-Italy article about Paci, I made a serious gaffe – I inexplicably forgot to mention that one of the CDs in this two-disk set includes a highly entertaining documentary film of Paci and his band Aretuska on tour and in concert. Paci's caponata of canzone siciliana, ska and reggae, jazz, funk, rap, and Latin (whew!) makes for a captivating stage show that leaps over linguistic and cultural boundaries. The exuberant leader is fabulously charismatic, singing, rapping, playing trumpet and cavorting on and off-stage, and the multiethnic band commands all the genres in its repertoire.

Lucariello, Quiet (Sanacore)

On his first album, rapper Luca "Lucariello" Caiazzo serves up nine slices of contemporary Neapolitan street life, bringing a poet's insight and compassion to his portraits of a lesbian oppressed by family and religion ("Mariarca"), a boy with Down's syndrome who craves love ("Totore"), and an African prostitute who longs to return to her homeland ("Queen of the Streets"). Co-produced by Lucariello and Japanese digitalist Taketo Gohara, the tracks mix electronics and acoustic instruments, including string sections, to powerful dramatic effect. Lucariello is one of the most noteworthy of current Italian pop artists. His recent collaboration with Roberto Saviano, "Cappotto di Legno" (not included on Quiet but available online) was bold and shocking, the kind of thing that gives one pelle d'oca (goosebumps).

Les Amazones de Guinée, Wamato (Sterns)

Ahmed Sekou Touré, president of the African nation of Guinea from 1956, when the French colony gained independence, to 1984, instituted a cultural policy called authenticité, which subsidized the creation of music that was grounded in tradition yet modern. The policy produced great bands like Bembeya Jazz and the Horoya Band, but one of the finest, if least-known exponents of authenticité are Les Amazones de Guinée. The band, led by soldiers from Guinea's women's militia -- members have titles like "Commandant" and "Capitaine" -- has made only two albums, one in 1982 and this year's Wamato. It's amazing that a band that hasn't recorded in 26 years would sound so vibrant and confident, as if they'd never left the scene. The three lead singers and the two terrific guitarists are the stars of the 11-piece, all-women ensemble (augmented by guest vocalists and musicians), but the entire band is a joyous, propulsive, polyrhythmic wonder.

Calle 13, Los de Atras Vienen Conmigo (Sony BMG)

Rene Perez Joglar (“Residente”) and Eduardo Jose Cabra Martinez (“Visitante”) are half-brothers who make up the duo Calle 13. (The name comes from the address of their family home in Trujillo Alto, Puerto Rico.) Though usually labeled reggaetón artists, they’re really an experimental, modern Latin pop band. Reggaetón’s typical “dem-bow” rhythm drives some of their music, but there’s also hip-hop, cumbia, salsa, electronica and tango in the mix. Their left-wing, independista politics inform their lyrics, and have caused some controversy in Puerto Rico. But they’re just as often nuttily surreal, lewd, and very funny. Two of the album’s best tracks are collaborations with Latino eminences, Mexico’s Café Tacuba (“No Hay Nadie Como Tu”), and the great Panamanian salsaero Ruben Blades, who acquits himself quite well as a rapper (“La Perla”).

Stew & Company, *Passing Strange* (Ghostlight)

Mark Stewart, the singer-songwriter known as Stew, created a smart and thrilling rock musical about an alienated young black man – him as a youth – who flees his middle class Los Angeles background in search of “the real.” His journey of re-invention takes him to Amsterdam and its marijuana cafes, then to Berlin, where he falls in with left-wing avant-garde artists. *Passing Strange* has great rock and soul music performed by an outstanding band featuring Stew’s partner Heidi Rodewald, and an outrageously talented, all-black cast. The album was recorded live at Broadway’s Belasco Theatre, where *Passing Strange* played for six months earlier this year, winning the Drama Desk award for Best Musical and a Tony for its book. If you missed it, watch for Spike Lee’s filmed version, which will be presented at the next Sundance Film Festival and released theatrically next year.

Lucinda Williams, *Little Honey* (Lost Highway)

After a couple of albums full of her great country, rock, and blues songs, Williams really hit her stride with 1998’s *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, generally considered her masterpiece. Her terse but fully observed narratives of her Louisiana childhood, of “drunken angels” and beautiful, doomed losers, of erotic longing and faithless lovers, evoked a world as vividly as the best southern literature. Just about perfect, *Car Wheels* was followed by a string of uneven albums, the good stuff mixed with dull, ponderous material. On *Little Honey* she sounds focused, energized, and happier – her melancholy had devolved into moroseness on her last couple of releases -- which she has attributed in interviews to having finally found a good man. “Real Love,” “Circles and X’s,” “Tears of Joy,” “If Wishes Were Horses,” and “I Didn’t Know” are vintage Williams. “Jailhouse Tears” is a funny and blunt duet with Elvis Costello. *Little Honey* ends with a bang – Williams’ gutsy cover of AC/DC’s “It’s a Long Way to the Top.”



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