

The Sound of Italian-American Cultural Philanthropy

Joey Skee (September 15, 2008)



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That's Amore: Italian-American Favorites
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What happens when a PBS station targets Italian Americans as donors?



Hunkering down from tropical storm Hanna last Saturday night, I had just popped in a new DVD when the phone rang. My brother was calling to urge me to turn on the TV to Channel 13, New York City's PBS station. There was actor Danny Aiello making a pitch for the station's September pledge drive. The cultural hook for this fundraising event was a specially-produced musical program entitled "That's Amore: Italian-American Favorites."

So WNET-TV was looking to expand its donor base with an appeal to Italian Americans? Excuse me while I get my guinea up, but what has Channel 13 ever done for Italian Americans? In March, WNET aired Steven Fischler's documentary film [Beyond Wiseguys](#) [2]: Italian American and the Movies. And then there was . . .

thinking
thinking
thinking
OH, YEA!

Medici: Godfathers of the Renaissance



Now that really made me want to reach for my credit card.

The pledge drive was, as we say in Brooklyn, a real goomba fest. The uber-gesticulator Aiello looked like an Italian hula dancer, his flailing hands accompanying his narrative in hyper Vegas kinesics. Crooning and belting Italo-specters – Louis Prima, Perry Como, Connie Francis, Julies La Russo, Jerry Vale, “and more!” – were resuscitated from cathode broadcasts of the past. The patina of black and white television (Ah! Those flaring skirts!) and the tawdriness that was TV in the 1970s (Ah! Those countless light bulbs!) enshrined these “legends” and “genesis” in a pantheon of mid-twentieth century Italian-American entertainment giants.

Don’t get me wrong. No one loves Connie more than me. I still have the 78 rpm recording of La Rosa’s “Eh, Compari!” I heard repeatedly as a kid growing up. And most of the featured artists are in my iTunes. But Channel 13, this is your attempt to reach out to Italian Americans?

As a scholar, I couldn’t help but notice the academic issue of WNET defining “Italian-American music” with fuzzy phrases like “Italian flavored hits” and “Italian sounding songs” or that Rosemary Clooney (one of many singers who were “adopted as our own”) was said to have recorded “classic folk songs” like “Come On-a My House” (composed in 1939), “Botch-a-Me (Ba-Ba-Baciammi)” (composed in 1941), and “Mambo Italiano” (composed in 1954).

Woefully missing was any music recorded before World War II. The singers and songs of all those immigrant grandparents and parents who were shamelessly and endlessly evoked were absent. Ria Rosa M.I.A.

Joe Masiello Who’s that?

[Gilda Mignonette](#) [3] silence

Age was a major fundraising strategy. “The soundtrack of our culture and our memories,” we were told. Recent concert footage of nonagenarians Tony Martin and Frankie Laine – “made just weeks before he died!” – made explicit the targeted donor. Making his way through the ever increasing chorus of his signature song “Eh, Compari!” during a present-day show, La Rosa confessed, “I’m getting too old for this song.”

This music is the sound of a triumphant middle-class longing for its mythic past of Sunday dinners and front stoops back in the old neighborhood. The pledge drive’s wistful pallor was evident in the bucolic scenes of Italian peasants playing bocce and eating a communal dinner outdoor filmed in soft focus. People hugged and kissed in the golden glow of sunset.

Language played a critical role in Channel 13’s framing of Italian-American culture. A simple count of the words and phrases used during the two hour pledge reveals that nostalgia, claims of authenticity, show biz hype, and ethnic buzzwords were the semiotic payload for donor money:

- “great,” “greatest,” “best,” (not including the Sinatra compilation entitled “Nothing But The Best”), “big,” “biggest,” “the most,” “super,” “amazing,” “sensational,” legend,” (not including “Mr. Sinatra” [x 3]), and “genius”: 64 times

- “true,” “real,” “sincere,” “original(s),” “unique(ly),” and “the one and only”: 46 times

- “family,” “parents,” “mother,” “mamma,” father,” “poppa,” “grandparents,” “grandmother,” “grandfather,” “children,” and “kids” (but not including radio personality “Cousin Brucie” or “wedding[s]”): 40 times

- “favorite(s)”: 9 times

- “memory(ies)” and “remember” (not including “time,” “long time ago,” or “yesteryear”): 8 times

- “respect” and “rispetto”: 5 times

- “(old) neighborhood”: 5 times

- “paisan”: 4 times

- “culture”: 4 times

- “heritage” (including “preserve”): 4 times

- “honor”: 4 times

It was beyond my abilities (and my family’s tolerance level to hear the broadcast I had taped more than a fourth time) to catalogue the number of times the words “love,” lover,” “amore,” heart, “feeling,” “emotion(s),” tear(s),” crying” were used.

TJ Lubinsky, the producer of the “That’s Amore” compilation,” proclaimed “No one has put this together.” Oh, really? How about:

[“Eh, Paisano!: 100% Italian-American Classics](#) [4]?”

And the elephant in the room, [“Mob Hits - Music From and a Tribute to the Great Mob Movies](#) [5]?”



(And let's not forget "Mob Hits II: More Music from the Great Mob Movies" and "Mob Hits Christmas.")



What was truly shocking to watch was PBS exploiting the mob factor as part its donor appeal. Actor Vincent Pastore – who we were reminded starred in “The Sopranos” – arrived with John “Cha Cha” Ciarcia and Joe Rigano, his co-hosts of the Sirius Satellite Radio’s “[Wise Guy Show](#) [6].” They proceeded to perform their mafia minstrelsy with shtick about “pilfering” promotional items and selling them out of the back of the car, and taking bets over the phone instead of pledges. The November revival of Louis LaRusso 1975 play “Lamppost Reunion” with Pastore, Frank Pellegrino, and Aiello’s son Ricky was described sotto voce as being about “a friend of ours.” The play’s about Frank Sinatra, for God’s sake!

This is my Channel 13? The station I go to when I first turn on the television in my cable-free house? Where I watched the primaries? Where I watch science programs with my son? Sesame Street?

The two-hour taped Italo-pledge drive was repeated the following day and then the following Saturday. The viewers were informed on all three days with the same looped clip that the station had reached its fundraising goal.

I returned to my DVD, Reginald Barker’s 1915 silent film [The Italian](#) [7], with actor George Beban. Film scholar Giorgio Bertellini eloquently explained in his audio commentary how this classic of American silent cinema was about type, typology, and how “Italian” is constructed. Ninety-three years after the film – which was originally entitled *The Dago* – was released, PBS is still fishing the murky waters of Italian-American type in search of money.

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