

Zampogna: The Soul of Southern Italy

David Marker (December 18, 2013)



Filmed in Sicily, Calabria, Campania and Molise. A feature length documentary film about Southern Italian culture told through its indigenous folk music. The film focuses on how these traditions are dealing with the rapid changes in local economy and the homogenizing effect globalization has on local culture. Filmed by an Italian-American rediscovering his family's roots, the film takes the viewer on an odyssey through remote regions in Sicily, Calabria, Campania and Molise introducing the people who carry on these ancient traditions that most Italian Americans are completely unaware of. The Zampogna - the Italian bagpipe is the physical manifestation of this culture, its music representing the spirit and vitality of the Southern Italy.

When I was 25 years old, in the midst of law school, I took a backpack full of camera equipment to



southern Italy with the crazy idea of making a feature length documentary about Italian bagpipes. The film was to be a reflection of my personal and romanticized perception of the pastoral culture of southern Italy as I had experienced it through the hospitality of my Italian family. I wanted to make a 21st century odyssey, to show that the magical and arcane still exist in this information age. It's been over 5 years since I shot this film. Looking back I often envy the obsessive enthusiasm and total naivety I had going into the project. I feel very fortunate that I had this experience because it jumpstarted me and made me aware of a process of cultural exploration and discovery that I had never experienced on this level before.

What initially began as a form of artistic expression, making a film about a subject and culture near and dear to me, began to grow into a sincere desire to document and learn from a culture uniquely different from mine, but one in which I felt a strong connection to because of my family history. My contact with pastoral Italy got me interested in learning about the concept of cultural preservation and documentation. I viewed the pastoral culture of southern Italy as a pre-industrial, hand-made culture, a culture that was, and is, slamming head-on with a more globally homologizing culture of industrialization and mass information. To make things more interesting, I was also trying to place this pastoral culture within the contextual lens of an Italian-American identity, one that had often worked hard to rid itself of associations with peasantry or poverty.

For me, music is the most tangible manifestation of this culture. Or at least it is the one I can relate to the most. Other elements interested me such as regional dialects, agricultural and cooking techniques, religious observances, textiles and folk art, as well as other local folk practices and lore. But it was the traditional music that truly captivated me - the music and the people who created it. Yet unfortunately the people who create it are now few and far between. Cultural erosion had been taking place. The societal knowledge of these traditions was being quickly lost, as the younger generations were not carrying them on.

This erosion of traditional knowledge is certainly not unique to southern Italy and its pre-industrial culture. Southern Italy for me was relevant because I had access to the culture because of my family connection and my proficiency in the Italian language. And arguably, Italy has an extremely high density of cultural diversity within its population and landmass due to its fractured and isolating geography. The result is a complex patchwork of provincial cultures with their own unique music forms, dance, dialects, costumes, cooking, religious practices, etc.

From 2007 up until this past summer, I have had the privilege of making at least one annual trip to Italy to spend time in the field learning, documenting, and participating in the region's traditional music culture. My emphasis has always been on the study of what I perceive to be the most threatened music expressions. For example, in 2009 I begin spending considerable energy and travel time in the province of Amatrice in the region of Lazio documenting, obtaining and learning to play a rare form of bagpipe that only a handful of people still practiced. More recent efforts have been spent documenting, and learning to play a very rare bagpipe only now played by five people in the town of Monreale, Sicily. Another focus of mine was documenting the last few elderly players of a very rare four-stringed guitar in my grandfather's family's town in the province of Salerno. This included convincing the son of the last guitar maker to learn his father's craft and make me a guitar so that I am now learning this tradition as well as the accompanying singing style in the local dialect.

My experience with traditional Italian culture as well as my experience sharing it with Italian-Americans through the promotion of my film and field recordings has made me think a lot about the relationship between pre-industrial Italian culture and modern Italian-American identity. We as Italian-Americans have often allowed our indigenous culture to be whitewashed by what we believe to be proper or modern - letting others decide what is of cultural value. Some of this perhaps came from a desire to leave behind the poverty of a feudal economy that many of our ancestors left to come to the new world. But we threw the baby out with the bathwater. There are so many elements of the culture that our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents left behind that I believe we should strive not to forget. Even more, we should embrace them.

Italian-Americans have proven that as an ethnic group they can make it in the new world, in the new economy, and become "American." Now we are in a position where we can look at our ethnic past



from a new perspective –different from how the immigrants viewed the old world as they leapt off the boats to arrive in America. I believe that if we as Italian-Americans begin to embrace these elements of our past identity that this pride will carry over and embolden Italians in Italy to show more interest in their traditional arts. I know from experience that Italians do care about our perception of Italy and its culture, and what we value does matter to them.

I'm not saying that everyone needs to go out and learn to play the zampogna. But I think that Italian-Americans need to challenge themselves to view their ethnicity from a fresh perspective and rely less on the old and tired clichés and stereotypes that have been fed to us over the years by lazy Italian-American organizations. We need less “mambo-Italiano” and more “zampogna,” “organetto,” or “chitarra battente” playing the “tarantella.” Now with the Internet we can learn so much and facilitate even greater cultural connectivity with those across the ocean.

For the first time I am making my documentary film, Zampogna: The Soul of Southern Italy, available for free in high definition on Youtube. I think it's a very good starting place and introduction to the pre-industrial pastoral culture that I'm so passionately advocating here. I hope people can watch it with an open mind and an open heart and be proud of the beautiful culture and way of life that Italians created in their little part of the Mediterranean. And if you are Italian-American, don't forget that this is your culture too.

The DVD can be purchased online: <https://www.createspace.com/298147>

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