

Mangia La Musica

George De Stefano (June 26, 2008)



A Tasting Menu of New and Recent Sounds, Some with Italian Flavor



“Great music!” our friend Paul exclaimed during dinner with Rob and me at our place. We were enjoying the linguine al pescatore I’d prepared, along with a good aglianico, the background music provided by my I-Pod on shuffle. (I do listen to albums in their entirety, unlike these short attention span kids today. But when entertaining guests it’s more convenient to let Apple’s little device play DJ.) So, cari i-italiani, if I can’t serve you my seafood pasta I at least can offer a tasting menu of musical delicacies. And some even have Italian flava. Here they are, in no particular order.

Al Qantarah, Ammaraccicapa (CNI)

Ammaraccicappa, a new band from the Salento area of Puglia, is the brainchild of percussionist-vocalist Umberto Upapadia and digitalist Antonino Chiaramonte. They connect southern Italian idioms -- pizzica, tammurriata, tarantella -- and North African gnawa and rai, with electronics as the cement in this sonic bridge. The fusion often is so seamless that you are momentarily disoriented, unsure which shore of the Mediterranean you’ve landed on.

Salento Senza Tempo, Nidi D’Arac (Promo Music)

After the driving techno-taranta of their great 2006 album *St. Rocco’s Rave*, Nidi D’Arac (Spiders Nests), the Salentine band founded by singer-guitarist-percussionist Alessandro Coppola, stepped back and made *Salento Senza Tempo* (Timeless Salento), an all-acoustic, but not entirely traditional, album. There are acoustic guitars and tamburello (large southern Italian tambourine), but also trap drums and string quartets. Though I prefer its more adventurous predecessor, Coppola’s latest is a thoughtfully conceived and beautifully executed homage to Salento’s roots music.

Evil Urges, My Morning Jacket (ATO)

I’m a latecomer to this Kentucky-based quintet, whose concerts are legendary for infusing kick-ass rock with a spiritual yearning that aims for, and often reaches, the transcendent. But now I’m a believer. Jim James, the band’s lead vocalist and shamanistic frontman, writes terrific songs that somehow manage to sound familiar (influences include the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Prince, Neil Young and Dylan) yet totally distinctive. *Evil Urges*, MMJ’s latest, is sprawling but cohesive, full



of killer pop hooks and moments of wonderful weirdness.

History Mystery, Bill Frisell (Nonesuch)

“Jazz guitarist” doesn’t quite capture Frisell’s musical identity, although he indeed is one. He’s also explored other strains of Americana as well as African and Brazilian music. His latest, a two CD set, manages a pretty impressive feat. The tracks were recorded live and in the studio, over two years. There’s jazz (including a cover of Thelonious Monk’s “Jackie-ing”), blues, folk, country and R&B. Yet it all hangs together as a unified and satisfying work.

Raising Sand, Robert Plant and Allison Kraus (Rounder)

Like everyone else, I’m in love with this. Who would’ve imagined that Led Zeppelin’s golden-tressed wailer and the cool queen of bluegrass would make such beautiful music together? Plant sings more subtly, and with greater warmth, than in his former band, although traces of his old lubricious yowl crop up now and then. Krauss supplies ethereal vocals and sweetly soulful violin. The songs are mostly by other writers, including Tom Waits, Gene Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Doc Watson and the Everly Brothers. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, who put together a great band that includes New York guitar wizard Marc Ribot.

Uno, Raiz (Universal)

Fans of ex-Almamegretta vocalist Raiz who were put off by the pop leanings of W.O.P., his first solo album, should like Uno just fine. Here the husky-voiced napolitano returns to the sound that made him and Almamegretta famous. Dub, reggae, tammurriata and Neapolitan melody dominate, with Arab, Spanish and Brazilian flavors as well. On some of the tracks he laments the dire conditions of his native city; in fact, much of the album is suffused with melancholy and anger, which seems just about right these days.



The City That Care Forgot, Dr. John (429 Records)

Mac Rebennack, the piano-playing avatar of New Orleans funk (or fonk, as they say in Nawlins), is still furious about Bush and Company's malign neglect of his hometown post-Katrina. On his latest he's enlisted some illustrious pals (Eric Clapton, Willie Nelson, Ani Di Franco and Terence Blanchard) to join him on 13 songs that celebrate his hometown and damn the powers that be. The good doctor's righteous anger is bracing and the musicianship is fine, but the songwriting is inconsistent. "My People Need a Second Line" is the standout track.

Made in Dakar, Orchestra Baobab (World Circuit)

This seminal Senegalese band went on extended hiatus after its propulsive but relaxed Cuban-flavored style lost favor to the harder-edged mbalax introduced by Youssou N'Dour. Bandleader and ace guitarist Barthelmy Attisso even gave up music altogether to practice law in Mali. But the Baobabs regrouped to record *Specialist in All Styles* (2002), with N'Dour as producer. Their comeback was a brilliant mix of reworked versions of old hits and new material. *Made in Dakar* is even stronger.

Passaggi, Luigi Cinque and the Hypertext Orchestra (Radio Fandango)

Saxophonist-digitalist Cinque crafted one of the more memorable "world music" recordings in recent years, *Tangerine Café*, with a stellar international cast of musicians and vocalists (including Raiz). *Passaggi*, while not quite as striking, retains its predecessor's rhythmic drive and mysterious aura. Collaborators this time include the superb griot singer Badara Seck, Italian jazz stars Gianluigi Trovesi, Danilo Rea and Sal Bonafede, and organetto master Riccardo Tesi.



Salento Senza Tempo and Al Qantarah are available from CD Roots (www.cdroots.com [2])

Uno and Passaggi are available from CD Universe (www.cduniverse.com [3])

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