



"C'è la luna": Anatomy of an Italian-American "Folk" Song

Joey Skee (June 14, 2008)

An Italian-American standard turns out to have a convoluted history that belies the simplistic label "folk song."

Searching the web for references for Neapolitan music in the United States, I came across a fascinating video clip of American folk singer Pete Seeger performing an English version of "C'è la luna." Recorded for the **1967 "Rainbow Quest [1]" TV series, Seeger's tune is labeled "The Butcher Boy," followed by Ralph Marino (I couldn't find anything on him) singing in Italian.**

There have been numerous versions of this ethnic pop classic, from Lou Monte's 1958 "Lazy Mary" to Morgana King's (as Mama Corleone) rendition in *The Godfather*. This song is usually attributed as a "Sicilian folk song."

Seeger comments that the song made the 1932 "American Hit Parade." "C'è la luna mezzo al mare" on the music charts during the Depression?! A couple of clicks and I found the intriguing back story on "[Behind the Hits](#) [2]," an informative site based on Bob Shannon's and John Javna's 1986 book of the same title.

Turns out the song is based on music and lyrics by Gioachino Rossini's 1835 "La Danza (Tarantella Napoletana)," "Sicilian seaman" Paolo Citorello claimed authorship, the [Italian Book Company](#) [3] of New York City copyrighted it in the 1920s, it was first recorded in 1927, it was involved in a lawsuit the following year, and it was a hit for Rudy Vallee in 1938 as a novelty number entitled "Oh! Ma-Ma! (The Butcher Boy)." And the rest is history, or, at least, buried history.

(Luciano Pavarotti singing Rossini's "La Danza.")

The web site has excellent resources, including the [excerpted decision from the copyright case](#) [4] to several audio files, including a version by Italian-American Rockabilly singer Tony Martin (Tony Marchianda).

The Web site quotes folklorists Frances Malpezzi's and William Clements's [Italian-American Folklore](#) [5] (1992), which claims that "this almost infinitely expandable song was collected from Sicilians in Tampa, Florida, in the late 1930s," a reference found in Manuel Ramirez's "Italian Folklore from Tampa, Florida" *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 5 (June 1941): 101-106. Could it be that the Sicilian folk of Tampa actually adapted any one of the recordings from 1927, 1928, 1930, as well as Vallee's 1938 hit?

It seems more than likely that this so-called "Sicilian folk song" actually entered the Italian-American repertoire through the means of mechanical reproduction, becoming, in turn, an "Italian-American folk song" through vernacular performances and the [reinforcement of endless recordings](#) [6], ultimately [returning to Italy](#) [7] as an example of "exportable Italianess," a global pop phenomena.



Related Links: <http://www.bobshannon.com/stories/lazymaryback.html> [2]
<http://www.bobshannon.com/stories/lazymary.html> [8]

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Links

- [1] <http://www.peteseeger.net/videogra.htm>
- [2] <http://www.bobshannon.com/stories/lazymaryback.html>
- [3] <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/vitrage/all/im/ihrc1093.html>
- [4] http://cip.law.ucla.edu/cases/case_italianrossi.html
- [5] <http://www.amazon.com/Italian-American-Folklore-American-Frances-Malpezzi/dp/087483533X>
- [6] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=Wf9ezcjX7fU&feature=related>
- [7] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=mqaAnejlUmU&feature=related>
- [8] <http://www.bobshannon.com/stories/lazymary.html>