

Roy Paci's Sicilian Bestiary

George De Stefano (November 17, 2008)



BESTiario Siciliano captures ten years of the genre-blending music of Paci and his band Aretuska

Leave it to Roy Paci not to call a collection of his best-known recordings his “Greatest Hits.”

That’d be too predictable, too boring for the ebullient Sicilian trumpeter, vocalist and bandleader.



Paci instead has titled his new career respective BESTiario Siciliano. It's a typical bit of wordplay for Paci, who named his last album SuoNo Global, to play up the fact that the genre-blending music was his ("suo") and that he embraced the "No Global" movement against corporate-driven globalization.

A bestiary literally is a compendium of beasts. Bestiaries became popular in the Middle Ages as illustrated tomes that described various animals. Each illustration was accompanied by a moral lesson explaining the animal's unique role in the divinely-ordered natural world.

Roy Paci's Sicilian bestiary comprises 19 songs, on two CDs, that span the ten years since he formed his band, Aretuska. (The name combines Aretusa, a figure from Greek mythology, with "ska," the up-tempo Jamaican dance music that predated reggae.) Paci's an entertainer, not a moralist like those medieval bestiarians. But his music embodies a unique sensibility and attitude that's remained consistent over the past decade. These "beasts" could have been created only by him.

And what fine creatures they are. They include early numbers like "Yettaboom," with its linguistic mash-up of French, Spanish, and Italian, his idiosyncratic and often irreverent interpretations of canzone siciliane ("Ciuri ciuri," "Che vitti 'na crozza," "Sicilia bedda," "Malarazza"), ska ("Nesci lu sulì"), rap ("Mezzogiorno di fuoco") and several of the hybrid Spanish-Italian numbers from 2007's SuoNo Global: "Italiano a Barcelona," "Giramundo," and "Toda Joia Toda Beleza."

That last track is Paci's biggest hit, an irresistible samba that fully lives up to its title. During the summer of 2007, the song, with its maddeningly catchy chorus, was inescapable in Italy. I heard it on the radio, and in department stores, restaurants, cafes, and clubs. A Neapolitan comedian even recorded a parody, "Toda Munnezza" i.e., "all garbage," to comment on Napoli's trash emergency.

(The version on BESTiario Siciliano, however, is not the hit version, which featured the Spanish-French rocker Manu Chao on vocals. It's the alternate "Italian" take, also included on SuoNo Global.)



I'm glad that when Paci combed through his back pages to select the Bestiario tracks he grabbed "Cantu siciliano," the real "Mambo Italiano," except that in Paci's version the "crazy Siciliano" dances to a ska beat.

There also are three previously unreleased tracks - the recent single "Defendemos la alegria," "Slum Shock," and "Cambierò."

Rosario "Roy" Paci, born in 1969 in Augusta, Sicily, started out as a jazz trumpeter, playing in local bands when he was barely in his teens. These days the jazz element survives mainly in his trumpet solos and the swing of his band's rhythm section. But the sound he's crafted with Aretuska, a multinational aggregation comprising Sicilians, mainland Italians, and Africans, is definitely a suono globale, both in the polyglot lyrics and mix of musical genres.

Paci's affinity for Latin music and the Spanish language was born during his stint in the Italian navy. He was vice-director of a military band, and got to travel and perform throughout South America for nearly three years. He's modest about his mastery of Spanish, but he can write catchy colloquial lyrics and rhymes en español.

On his early recordings Paci sang mainly in Sicilian and Italian. His recent lyrics are in a lingo he calls "italoño," a blend of Sicilian, Italian, Spanish, French, and English. In the notes for SuoNo Global, Paci states the sociopolitics of this hybrid tongue: "With our Sicilian language, one of the most ancient in the world, rich with Greek, Roman, Arab, French and Spanish influences, we are...creating l'italoño, an idiom that brings us closer to all peoples..."



In "Italiano a

Barcelona," from SuoNo Global, Paci, switching between Spanish and Italian, celebrates a "global cultural mix in the same music," a pan-Latin identity that includes southern Italians, as part of a "raza mestiza."

Paci has cultivated a look and persona that, like his sound, is both familiar and unique. He's a live wire of a performer who evokes another extroverted horn player, bandleader and vocalist -- the Sicilian-American Louis Prima. With his brilliantine black quiff and pencil mustache, Paci also recalls 1950s star Fred Buscaglione, one of the first singers to bring Latin music to Italian pop. But the overall effect is of a hipster doing an ironic turn on the gangster image, Paci the mafioso of music who wears an AIDS red ribbon on his suit jacket lapel and plays benefit concerts for the radical leftist political party Rifondazione comunista.

Politically and aesthetically Paci is close to the left-wing rocker Manu Chao. He has toured with Chao and played on several of his albums, including *La Radiolina*, his latest, and on *Dimanche à Bamako*, the Chao-produced hit album by the Malian duo Amadou and Mariam. Chao, returning the favor, sings on Paci's SuoNo Global.

In addition to his work with Aretuska and Manu Chao, Paci organized one of the most exciting "world music" projects in recent years. In the summer of 2006, he, klezmer musician Frank London, and Serbian bandleader Boban Markovic began touring as "Il Terrone, l'Ebreo, and Lo Zingaro." (The "terrone" of course is Paci, "l'ebreo," the Jew, is London, and "lo zingaro," the gypsy, is Markovic.) The multiethnic trio's wild but totally right mix of traditional Sicilian music, klezmer, and Serbian dance tunes, has rocked concert halls all over Europe.

Paci records for his own label Etnagigante but his albums are distributed by V2 Music, the company founded by Richard Branson and now owned by Universal. *Bestiario Siciliano* was released by Universal in Italy on November 14. It can be ordered from online Italian music stores (<http://www.ibs.it> [2]) if you're willing to pay the unfavorable exchange rate and shipping costs. Check Amazon.com and I-Tunes for its availability.

Roy Paci and Aretuska Official Website:



<http://www.aretuska.com/> [3]

Paci & Aretuska myspace:

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewProfile&friendID=126564200> [4]

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