

Music. Marco Calliari. Universal “Italianità”

Marina Melchionda (May 05, 2009)



Marco Calliari will launch the new album “Italia” by Putamayo at Joe’s Pub on May 18. The project is a tribute to classical Italian music of the 1950s and features a collaboration among Italian contemporary singers. We interviewed Marco, a Canadian artist of Italian origins that believes in the universality of the feeling of “italianità”.

He is Canadian, he is Italian. He plays Jazz, but loves Opera. He was a heavy metal musician, now he plays classical Italian songs. His name is Marco Calliari and is one of the artists that adhered to the project “Italia” by Putamayo, an association committed to introducing people to the music of the world’s cultures.



“Italia” is a tribute to the classical Italian popular music of the 1950s and features the collaboration of a group of singers and song-writers that fairly represent the Italian contemporary music world. Giorgio Conte, [Gianmaria Testa](#) [2], Simone Lo Porto, Alessandro Pitoni, Alessandro Mannarino and Rossomalpelo, Serge Gaggiotti, Lino Straulino Bandabardò, Lu Colombo and others share Marco Calliari’s aim in spreading and promoting Italian music throughout the world. Marco will represent his colleagues and friends in New York, launching the new album at Joe’s Pub .

Born and raised in Québec, Marco is the son of Italian immigrants in North America. He always had

full consciousness of his roots, having learned Italian as his first language and being particularly active in the life of the local Italian community. Although he came to become very knowledgeable about Italian Opera at a very early age, thanks to his parents’ passion for Pavarotti, at the age of 14 he got interested in heavy metal music, a genre he abandoned many years later with his first Italian album “Che la via” (2004), that sold over 25.000 copies in a primarily French-speaking audience.

After this great success he launched a second album, “Mia dolce vita “(2006) in which he presented his own version of “L’Americano”, the great hit that he is proposing again in this new “Italia” project.

This great audience was not the only one to appreciate his work. In 2007 he won the Prix Étoiles Galaxie (CBC) during the [Emerging Music Festival](#) [3] in Rouyn-Noranda (2004), and then in 2005, the [RIDEAU](#) [4] event (The Independent Network of United Artistic Events Promoters). Finally, in 2005 and 2007 Marco Calliari was among the nominees at the Gala de l’[ADISO](#) [5] (Association québécoise de l’industrie du disque, du spectacle et de la vidéo) in the “Album of the year- World music category” section.

i-Italy interviewed Marco for its readers. We asked him about his personal story, his music and his relationship with Italy.



Marco, you are the son of two Italian immigrants to the US. Can you tell us something more about the story of your family?

My parents were both born in Italy. My mom is from Milan and my dad comes from Val di Non, near Trento. They both arrived in the United States in 1961 but at that time they did not know each other. My mother came here because of her sister, whose husband had an opening for a job for Pirelli. She was the youngest of nine children. My father began to work here since in Trentino Alto Adige at that time it was very hard to find a job in the countryside. Right after him, his four brothers came here leaving only one sister in Italy. She had health problems and the government did not let her come in. So she went to live with the nuns in Turin. My parents raised me as a true Italian child, teaching me the language of my country of origin and taking me there when still very young.

Do you feel that your Italian origins helped you in carrying on your career and becoming an internationally well-known singer?

Yes, for sure. First of all, I would have never had a similar knowledge of Italian music if I did not grow up in an Italian family, which means growing up listening to Pavarotti and Italian radio. I grew up in Italian associations where I learned a lot about my people's culture and life style. Even when I started playing music when I was 14 years old and I had my heavy metal band I felt an Italian sound in my music and in the way I performed.

When did you to abandon heavy metal music and embrace Italian jazz?

It was not a spontaneous decision, but the change was the result of a long process and of many happenings in my life. When I was 20 I went to Italy for a month and a half. One day I went to the beach with my cousin from Turin and there she asked me to play some of my music in front of other people. At that time I was not playing any Italian music. I used to play Beatles or maybe French hits. I knew a lot of Opera, I am a big opera fan. But I never played it. So there I was, standing in front of these people and at one point there was this elderly person who just told me 'You are Italian, why don't you play some Italian music!'. This comment got me: when I went back to Montreal I bought a book with all Italian classic such as Bella Ciao, Torna a Surriento, O sole mio and I just learned them. These songs actually inspired me to compose Italian songs. So I wrote my first album, "Che la vita"



in 2004. I sold over 20.000 copies of this album and I was lucky enough to have even a greater success in 2006 with my second Italian album, "Mia dolce Vita". I wanted to make a tribute to Italian music again Italian in my style....

What is your "style"?

It is a kind of mixture of different styles. When you grow up in Quebec you find yourself dealing with French, English, Spanish, Italian people. It is a multicultural environment so when I started making my music it came out as a sort of "melting pot" of tarantella, flamenco, jazz, swing, all these different rhythms. This for me is the real essence of world music, it is a mixing of all these cultures in one music, one album, one show.

In which country are you most successful?

It is really in the province of Quebec, where I sold over 60.000 albums since 2004. This is an enormous success for such a small province. I think that francophones are those who like my music the most: they are very open to exotic music. I was also the first one in my generation to promote Italian music in my region, and they appreciated it. Even Italian singers of previous generations used to sing more in French than in Italian. So they responded very well to my albums.

Nowadays there are many singers who play Italian music in North America, They are either Italian-American or Italian-Canadian. What makes you different from them?

Well, theirs is mostly pop music, they mainly rearrange the most famous hits of popular contemporary Italian singers. That is not my bag: I do not do [Eros Ramazzotti](#) [6] or [Laura Pausini](#) [7]. I like to take instruments from the root. I like playing with a fisarmonica, the drums, percussions, mandolin, classical guitar, they are the true essence of Italian music. I do not like cheap reproductions. I want to modernize classical music, but I still do not want to transform it to the point that it becomes irre recognizable. I do not understand when people say "I do not listen to old music". But what is old music? I think that "old" is not a proper term for music that has been composed regardless of the time but which even today gives emotions. It is important to modernize it and keep it always there. It is always a means to understand the culture of a people.

Your are very famous in francophone countries but you sing in Italian. There are many young Italian singers nowadays that are obliged to go abroad before becoming famous in Italy. Some of them have actively contributed to the production of the album you are soon going to present in New York, "Italia". One of them, Gianmaria Testa, for example, first become famous in France and then conquered a good public in Italy. Why is it so that young talented Italian singers find it so difficult to get their share of visibility in Italy?

What I understand of Italian culture is that Italians just follow the trend and do not give great chances to Italian talents. The media and, more than the others, RAI, the Italian National Broadcasting Company, are just so powerful, it is incredible. The Festival of Sanremo and these kind of music events are followed by the greatest majority of the population. They sort of "Impose" a genre, a song, claiming that it is the best you can find around. And people follow the "advice". But it is not true, people should understand that Sanremo is just a contest and there is so much more out there. Gianmaria Testa, Giorgio Conte, Bandabardò, [Carmen Consoli](#) [8], [Vinicio Capossela](#) [9] and



dozens of others are just not appreciated enough. And this is only because they do not play a lot on TV or on the radio. It is very sad. I don't say that Italy is a unique case, it is just that I do not know any other country where media have such an incredible power in the music field. The point is that Italy has given birth to many good artists who are not renowned there because of this significant obstacle. So they just go abroad, mainly in France, where the

y are one of a kind, one in three million and they are considered "different" and thus loved (in most cases). They get their share of visibility and become well known. It is only at that point that Italy will be ready for them.

Has the same thing happened to you?

No, my situation is different. I am not properly an Italian singer, I am a "figlio di emigranti", a second generation Italian. So I can tell people something different, I can introduce them to a new culture and to new sounds, which are those of the Italians abroad. I can give them something different, and of course I am not saying that it is better, just different.

So when you play in Italy what kind of message do you want to hand down to your fans?

One of the greatest messages is that we do not have to speak the same language to have a great time together. You know, regularly I sing in front of a francophone public. They do not know Italian and have no idea of what I am singing. They just feel my music and they like it. My main goal is to show everybody that the feeling of "italianità" can be universal.



The new album "Italia" by Putamayo was actually created based on this philosophy....

Actually being part of that project really makes me feel very proud, I feel part of the gang, of an Italian mission to spread and promote our musical tradition throughout the world. In this sense I really feel that I am an Italian singer, regardless of my birthplace and life experiences. My goal is to teach Italian music to my friends in Quebec and I try to do it by inviting some of my friends to play in Canada. Bandabardò and Vinicio Capossela were here one time, Carmen Consoli twice. They are the real essence of Italy.

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