



## Music. A Passion Before All

Letizia Airos (January 12, 2011)



An interview with Ron before his New York concert. "I love contact with the public, I get bored in the recording studio" His long career of successes and difficulties. X Factor and music publishers today

We speak about music in front of a pizza. About music of today and yesterday. Of a 40-year-long



career together with a passionate artist. Passionate about music.

Ron is in New York for a concert at Sullivan Hall and for an event at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, and begins immediately to speak about ALS.

“When you have this job you must be aware of being lucky. In spite of all the difficulties and the obstacles that you face over forty years. In time you understand that being a musician can become useful for others.

It is also true that we play for ourselves, but we are also responsible for the songs that remain in people's hearts. What happened to me during the last ten years was quite important. My friendship with doctor Mario Melazzini, an ALS patient, whose side I have stood by, together with his family, and for whom I put my work on hold for some time.

I then understood that my work was actually useful for raising money. I found an unknown force within me.

And you contacted your colleagues...

I had never phoned my colleagues asking for help. But on this occasion I did. I explained what I was feeling, how devastating it had been to live with the diseased, who had become fellow travelers of mine.

An album with so many names was a very difficult thing to do, even to think about. But my motivation was the important factor. My colleagues felt my sincerity and began answering Yes. There were many who said Yes. They all sang one song of mine together with me.

The disc went well especially for a difficult moment, and raised lots of money.

I began to reconsider my work and not think about charts, recalling the motivation that made me take up this job: passion. That's it.”

Passion... a passion that began when you were very young...

Yes, it all began as passion and continues as such. I was born and grew up in the little town of Garlasco, in the province of Pavia. I like it a lot and I have a marvelous family there. My brother, when I was a child, went to piano lessons. The teacher also taught singing. I began with her when I was 13 years old and I ran in several competitions, which were being followed by talent scouts. One day, when I was 15, I was discovered by a record label. I went from being a schoolboy to Sanremo's stage. From a nobody to someone recognized on the street. I have to thank my family: they always helped me to keep it real.

What was the secret for such a “healthy” approach to such an “inebriating” job, especially for someone so young?

“I think that, without knowing it, I went to live this job as one would live abroad. With efforts. It's true that I was very young when I first went to Sanremo, but it was very tough, immediately and during the following years. Afterwards I was forgotten at least three times.”

Forgotten three times. When?

Sure. The first time soon after “Il gigante e la bambina”. It was 1971. In 1973 singer-songwriters arrived. People were protesting and lyrics became important, even too important. At the time I wasn't writing lyrics and I especially didn't want to mix music and politics, while a militancy was expected. Music came first, for me.

I slowly got back on my feet with “Banana Republic” with Dalla and De Gregori, especially as producer

With “Una citta' per cantare” I began again...

But in 1983 I stopped again. I wasn't convinced about what was being asked of me. I preferred not doing it. Then came “Joe Temerario”, another important moment of my career.

Anyway, I was never actually considered a singer-songwriter and I paid the price. In retrospect, the 1973 episode especially made me stop to reflect. There was a concert in the Rome sports center soon after the coup in Chile.

All the committed singer-songwriters were present. I had recently done “Il gigante e la bambina”.

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Certainly not a political song, but with a delicate topic. It's about a gardener that rapes a little girl, based on a true story. It was censored... it was disturbing.

Yes. My image was tied to the summer hit, television, business. 10,000 people were at the Palasport and they booed my performance. In spite of it being a poem by Neruda set to music, it was about people dead in piazze.

So I slowed down. I understood that my passion for music needed to be set aside at that moment...

Passion. This word recurs frequently in our conversation...

I wrote "Una citta' per cantare" for a reason. Jackson Browne's The Road. It is kind of my story, someone moving around singing with passion. In spite of it being difficult.

Is passion more important than success?

Yes. There is something stronger in singing in front of people. I prefer it to recording albums. More than anything else. I prefer walking up on stage and becoming someone else. Someone alive, who breathes in another way. I get bored in a recording studio.

Many of your hits, like "Piazza Grande" have become famous with other performers. Did you ever regret giving one of your songs away? Did you ever tell yourself: "if only I could sing it myself"?

My mother is one of those who nags me: you gave that song to that guy... like "Piazza Grande", which I wrote when I was 17 together with Lucio. Hearing it sung by Amalia Rodriguez a year later was a huge emotion.

"Attenti al lupo", for example, was never intended to be sung by me. Although I hadn't considered the lyrics as a farce, as Lucio made it become. At the end of the lyrics the wolf is life, the world. I thought about people living in a small world, afraid of leaving their homes, of being involved. Lucio ironically turned it into a tailored song.

Did you write it thinking that you would not be singing it yourself?

I had secret meetings with my grandmother every afternoon. Secret because my aunts were jealous. She would prepare cookies and tea...

One day on my way home I saw a beautiful rose bush. And from afar I could see tiny windows in the house. I sat at the piano. I had recently heard Sting's "The English Man in New York". In the same tempo, but with different harmonies and melodies, I created "Attenti al lupo". Music and lyrics came together. The first times, I had never been able to write music and lyrics together.

And what happened then?

I immediately realized that it was distant from me. I put it away and pulled it out one day, together with some other stuff, and played it for Lucio Dalla. He always exaggerates and told me "If you give it to me we'll sell a million records!". And we sold a million and a half!"

Returning to passion, is it possible to be passionate in the world of Xfactor?

I can speak well about Judy Ferreri. My producer is from her home town. She would go shopping there. She came to my studio for 10 years of auditions. She is a fantastic author, amazing, but they haven't allowed her to prove it, yet. The record industry gets scared and has her do easy stuff.

Marco Mengoni is another good one. He has great talent and never needed anything else when he emerged. These things you either have them or you don't. Talents come out of Xfactor, but the problem is that no authors emerge, and that is bad for our music. Nobody knows those who write well. Record labels don't give any room once someone has success, they just use that success. I



could say that in a certain way record labels are becoming useless. They wait for names to come out of Xfactor, so they don't have to invest in research. Then they make albums in a rush and wait for more success. They have no interest in developing a talent to its maximum. Beyond the initial moment.

Is Internet at fault, as well?

I don't think so. Music is optional in Italy. Sanremo is only important for its spectacle, not for its music. There are many guests and certain audience levels must be met.

You had a good relationship with Sanremo. Many colleagues have snubbed it...

I went when it was right to go. I didn't write "Vorei incontrarti tra 100 anni" for Sanremo. I then went to Sanremo with "L'Uomo delle stelle" to release the disc with all the guests together with Sony, in the name of research.

What is your relationship with the United States?

I was here first in 1971. I sang at the Madison Square Garden with many others. The theater was full. They tore my shirt off... then we played in Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and Montreal. I saw a very violent America, then. When I first arrived at 42nd Street the impact I had was terrible. I heard gunshots approaching, and I saw someone running away, chased by a gunman...

I returned in 1981, ten years later. It was a very different trip. I will never forget it. The record label, after "Una citta' per cantare" decided I had to be at the center of music, collaborate with others. They sent me here. We set up appointments. We drove around in a Cadillac, paid for by RCA. It was three amazing months.

The point was establishing contacts and exchanges that never materialized. I went to Los Angeles in search of Jackson Brown. The answer I got was: J.B. Doesn't want to see anyone. Nothing.

Did you meet him, then?

Yes, but only in 2000. He came to my studio. He apologized. It was a beautiful moment for me. We made an unforgettable video. In the Piazza Ducale of Vigevano. At 7 in the morning. With two guitars we played "Una citta' per cantare".

How did you find New York, this time around?

Beautiful. It immediately gave me lots of energy and peace. I went immediately to Times Square. There was a sea of people laughing and walking around. I felt at ease among the multitude. The atmosphere was beautiful everywhere. Even where music is made, unlike Italy...

There is a sad undertone to what you are saying...

In Italy my colleagues and I are suffering. There doesn't seem to be any space. Singer-songwriters are almost never played on the radio. Large networks have emerged and many are launching their own record labels. De Gregori, Dalla, Renato Zero, myself, and many others aren't targets for them. And albums don't sell. This applies to everyone, even to those that have always sold a lot. Today one reaches the charts with 20,000 copies, so labels don't invest. 25,000 copies make a Gold Disc, while it used to be 300,000.

Artists aren't followed anymore in their dignity as a musician, in their aptitudes. If a disc comes out they send you advertising on television as everyone else. Everyone follows the same steps. Nothing is personal.

I had made an album called "Voci del mondo", from a book by Robert Schneider. It was an album that needed to be communicated differently, in an emotional way. This didn't happen."

Can you tell us something about your events in New York?

I'm working on it. At Casa Italiana I will speak about ALS and play the piano, close to the public. I want people to understand who I am.



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