

The Big Man - Conversation with Mauro Pagani

Tiziana Rinaldi Castro (September 15, 2016)



Many of the words in the song "The Big Man" by Mauro Pagani are verbatim quotations from speeches by an inconvenient and disturbing political American character, with whom many of us find it hard to relate on the eve of the presidential elections.

"We gotta be tough we gotta be strong no fear no pity, no mercy for our enemies stay with me we'll win 'Cause in the end everybody loves me "

The song underlines an elegantly directed video, pleasant to watch, and sometimes even amusing. In it a flamboyant and quite puppet like character with an extended belly and a prominent blond hairdo, wearing a pair of huge boxing gloves bearing a white and red symbol, moves clumsily on the scene. This changes fast between a post atomic landscape of skyscrapers under attacks by cartoon



missiles, the four Mount Rushmore Presidents' heads opening their mouth to vomit some dark green stuff and winged pigs flying before the blonde.

Meanwhile he punches through the air and advances in a threatening manner but at an erratic pace, or winks dubiously at the viewer while inviting the latter to come closer, amidst dilapidated factories and a lonely, overgrown country side with forgotten silos in the background. In an empty hangar, Mauro sings, dressed in Edwardian clothes and sporting a bowler hat, sitting on a plush leather armchair. He holds a cane with an animal head silver knob which, if he is not using it as if it were a bass he pummels the air with it, possibly in an attempt to drive out the unsavory character out there, who now appears to be the head of a disturbing small army of young soldiers clearly bearing on their shirted elbows the same symbol on his gloves, and dancing behind him, as in a musical. Close-ups shots of people young and old, seemingly distressed, a black strap on their eyes, are brought forth while a Fitzgerald's volume and a copy of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide go up in flame.

Both the rhythm section and the horn line are tight, expressing a sense of urgency mirrored in Mauro's voice, and the song is beautifully supported by female background vocals. Ultimately, however, the mere possibility that this coming winter we could end up with a similar histrionic political figure as our president, makes this an unsettling experience.

I reach Mauro by phone in early August. He's closing his recording studio in Milan, Officine Meccaniche, for a well-deserved vacation and he speaks to me about the reasons behind this project.

"America belongs to everyone, because in our imagination it plays a greater role than any other foreign country, but you lived in NY on and off for four years, so I imagine your reasons are even more personal".

"Yes, I owe a lot to New York for my personal development as a musician. What a forgery that city has been for improvisation, for the pursuit of creativity, and thanks to its obsession with novelty! in a way, because I received so much as a musician from America, I guess I also expect so much from America on a political and social level, content and progress wise.

I guess I expect it because it's still a new nation, even though is older than Italy nation wise. It's a new continent, and one that could have been built and still could build apart from all the mistakes of European civilization. It could have left these in Europe while taking the best from the latter and make itself the next cradle of the new human progress. I also expect that if America considers itself the lighthouse of the world and the defender of democracy, it would have to observe the obligations that such a role has".

"To be the greatest one has to behave like the greatest".

"Exactly. And that would mean for example to be the Lords of peace. On the contrary She is the Lady of War. Unacceptable, especially when She is the nation with the largest military arsenal in history. Let's not forget Iraq, for example, and how, in the wave of military fury, America engaged in that horrendous offensive, only to admit, years later, that there were not weapons of mass destructions there, nor they had ever been. In doubt, a responsible nation doesn't attack, but in America the tendency is to always choose the military option. Now, in matters so delicate and dangerous, the possibility that Donald Trump can serve as commander-in-chief in America affects everyone in the world. So it involves me as a citizen of the world".

"And so you came up with this song".

"Well, first I realized how important the topic was to me: I'm used to take along with me a moleskin notebook and take notes, and at some point I realized that the last fifteen notes were relating to Trump. I had to express myself on this: to feel like a living person, who remembers being part of a civil forum in which we are all obliged to contribute morally. Unfortunately, I also had to censor myself, three-quarters of the things I wanted to say I couldn't; I consulted with my lawyer".

"What made you think of a satire?"



“Trump doesn’t show good common sense and neither education. I have been naturally tempted to express my concern in a whimsical way, typical of songwriting... you know, in the end we aren’t but minstrels and we shouldn’t forget. Also, when we do, we are immediately reminded anyway: ‘stay in your place, you are but a minstrel!’”.

“So you turned it into a joke”.

“Yes, I did my job and took the liberty then to satirize it, to ridicule it, to put it in jest. Though I'm not laughing at all, ‘cuz the picture is quite dramatic. I did reflect on many things. We Europeans are so used to consider Americans as cowboys, at best “big kids”. And when it gets bad in the world we make allegiances with these “big kids”, but when it is the boogey man who assumes power in America, who do we make allegiances with? What do we do?”

I can’t forget an image on TV, which I consider emblematic, during the Trump electorate: a father in his fifties, a middle age white man, a redneck. Along comes his young son, a pimply face, looking not too bright, with his backpack and an automatic rifle! on his shoulder, and a small American flag hanging from the barrel of the weapon. Once I recovered from the shock I realized that we Europeans are really not aware of the racial problem in America, and of how serious it is. Now, as long as the States are able to keep their worse instincts at bay we can hope for a slow and inevitable progress. Should they choose to be governed by those who represent those worse instincts, I have to worry”.

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