Jazz Italiano

Jazz Italiano:

A History of Italian Syncopated Music 1904-1946

By

David Chapman

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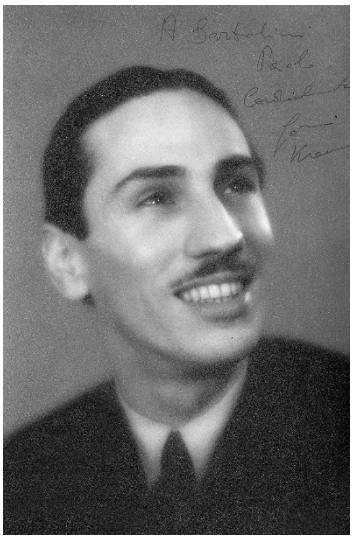
Negli anni Venti giunsero a Rivarolo Mantovano molte persone che ritornavano dall'America dove erano emigrate quindici o vent'anni prima e portavano con loro molti dischi di musica Americana da ballo, di Paul Whiteman, e altre orchestre. Rimasi folgorato. Più tarde, quando avevo sedici o diciasette anni, verso il '29 o '30, cominciai a conoscere personaggi come Ellington e Armstrong. Insomma mangiavo pane e Ellington.

In the 1920s several people arrived in Rivarolo Mantovano who returned from America where they had emigrated fifteen or twenty years earlier, and they brought with them several records of American dance music by Paul Whiteman and other orchestras. I was thunderstruck. Later when I was sixteen or seventeen years old, around 1929 or 30, I began to recognize people like Ellington and Armstrong. In the end, I lived on bread and Ellington.

—Gorni Kramer



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FOREWORD

When I told people that I was writing a book on the history of jazz in Italy, they would often give me a quizzical stare and say, "I didn't know they had jazz in Italy." That jazz found a welcoming home on the Italian Peninsula is a fact that few foreigners realize—often even native-born Italians are unaware of their own country's heritage. But in reality, jazz and syncopated, rhythmic music has a long and distinguished pedigree in the land of Verdi, Vivaldi, and Puccini. For me the most fascinating part of the story of Italian jazz was its development and success throughout the turbulent years of Fascism. This book is an attempt to explain how a musical form like jazz—born in the African American neighborhoods of New Orleans, sustained in America's multiracial and polyglot cities, expanded and reinterpreted by largely Jewish musicians in Tin Pan Alley—could have flourished in Europe, especially during some of the worst years of political repression and genocidal intolerance the world has ever seen. Yet, flourish it did, even through times of political turmoil and world war. It is true that some critics saw rhythmic music as a dangerous foreign carbuncle that should be excised quickly and thoroughly, but many others viewed jazz as a healthy grafting of new culture with the old.

The repressive political regimes of Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union were extremely uncomfortable with the new musical form, but not just because of its origins. The encouragement of free thought, novelty, and improvisation made many Fascists, Nazis, and Communists profoundly nervous, and they often tried to stamp out this insidious music form before it had a chance to infect their peculiar visions of utopia. Quite a few conservative European critics would spew their anti-jazz venom into the journalistic atmosphere in Vesuvian eruptions of invective. Italian composer and fanatical Fascist supporter Pietro Mascagni (1863–1945) despised jazz and would fulminate against it both in print and in public. Siegfried Wagner (1869–1930), Richard Wagner's son, hated the savage "nigger rhythms" of jazz, and could not understand "how German youth can dance to vulgar tunes turned out by half-civilized Negroes."[1] Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), Soviet Russia's favorite playwright said that jazz called to mind the "rumblings, wails and howls like the smarting of a

[1] "S. Wagner Attacks Jazz" *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1925. Quoted in *Jazz Planet*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 143.

metal pig, the shriek of a donkey or the amorous croaking of a monstrous frog." He perhaps hit on the secret fear of traditionalists everywhere when he worried about the possible sexual implications of fox-trotting to jazzy tunes. He said that after listening to the throbbing rhythms of jazz, "one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member."[2]

To be honest, there were plenty of critics in the United States who were also claiming that syncopated music was cacophonous, infuriating, and libidinal, but they were not officially sanctioned spokesmen for any repressive regime. At one time or another, operatives in all three pre–World War dictatorships tried to suppress or eliminate jazz, but with little effect. Government administrators tried various tools to achieve their goals of discouraging jazz; these ranged from ridicule and regulation to official opprobrium. In the end, nothing worked.

It is perhaps ironic to remember that jazz is still alive and vital, but the dictators and their empires are all dead. This fact points out the problems of trying to legislate culture. In his excellent book on the history of Soviet jazz, *Red and Hot*, S. Frederick Starr discusses the problems that the Communists had in attempting to control art and taste "from above." As Starr wisely states, "The agents of change in this case were independent-spirited young men and women working conspicuously and sometimes gleefully 'from below.'"[3] Jazz certainly did not cause these dreadful regimes to fall, but it did serve as a measuring stick to count out the distance between what the government ordained and what the people wanted.

Jazz in Fascist Italy was detested by many just as heartily as it was in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's USSR (and for most of the same reasons). But the arbiters of taste in Rome had more sense than to try to eradicate or suppress American-style jazz; instead, they tolerated it until the United States entered the war late in 1942, and then they decreed that it was not the jazz that they detested; it was the race, religion, and nationality of its creators that was so disturbing. So long as one played jazz written by anyone but the enemy, it was fine with them. The various techniques that Italian jazzmen used to get around this proscription were often ingenious and form the subject of much of this book.

One of the complaints of great Italian jazz performers during the Fascist era was that they were by and large isolated from other players

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[2] Quoted in S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union*, (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994), 89–90.
[3] Starr, *Red and Hot*, xv.

abroad. Without interaction and international contact, Western art often shrivels and atrophies. When the Allies finally battled their way up the Italian Peninsula, they brought with them examples of contemporary American jazz, and it was something of a surprise to hear the new sounds and techniques that had developed in the free world while Italians were stuck in provincial isolation. Musical innovations like bebop and modern jazz were revelations to many in Europe when they heard them for the first time on V-Discs [US Army–issued records] or in live performances.

As important as artistic cross-pollination might be, there is also something to be said for a little protective sequestration. Italian jazzmen were arguably the most numerous exponents of jazz in the Axis countries, and their distance from and ignorance of musical trends from abroad meant that they had to develop their own style and their own idioms. Despite all the problems, there was a tremendous flowering of jazz in Italy during the twenty-year span of Fascist domination. It marked a highpoint of innovation and ingenuity that (in some ways) would never again be attained.

When musicians from a country as musically literate as Italy are left on their own, they can be counted on to produce sounds and rhythms that are unique and interesting—they were evolving in different but no less fascinating directions. The Fascist concept of *autarchia* or national self-reliance and isolationism caused many problems for artists as well as for ordinary citizens, but it allowed the tree of Italian jazz to bear beautiful fruits. When American jazz flooded back in 1945, Italian jazz became international once again. From then on, there was very little to distinguish the jazz produced in Milan (excellent though it was) from that made in Manchester, Mumbai, or Minnesota.

We can trace the history of Italian jazz thanks in large part to the work of several remarkable scholars. The two most important of these are Luca Cerchiari and Adriano Mazzoletti. The former produced *Jazz e Fascismo: Dalla nascita della radio a Gorni Kramer* [*Jazz and Fascism: From the Birth of the Radio to Gorni Kramer*] in 2003. The latter has written what is the definitive work on the subject: *Il Jazz in Italia* (2004, 2010), a massive set of three volumes that traces the history of Italian jazz from its beginnings to the 1960s. It would have been impossible for me to write this book without Mazoletti's encyclopedic look at his country's syncopated music, and we all owe him and his wife, Anna Maria Pivato, a great debt of gratitude. Aside from works like Anna Harwell Celenza's excellent book, *Jazz Italian Style* (2017), only a few sources exist in English, so this history is largely unknown to those who cannot read the language of Dante.

I am not sure whether this work will do much to stop people from looking askance when I mention the subject of Italian jazz, but it might start a discussion that others will continue. Italy is the home of many remarkable musicians; I hope that a few of them like Gorni Kramer, Pippo Barzizza, and the Lescano sisters will now be acknowledged and appreciated abroad.

David Chapman, Seattle

PREFACE

Modern music history was made in 1936. In that year an Italian bandleader and accordionist with the unlikely name of Gorni Kramer created and recorded a jazzy song with an even more unlikely name, "Crapa pelada." Italians had been listening to and making jazz for a decade and a half, but this homegrown music had almost always been a slavish imitation of the American art form. Although Italy is a musically rich nation, it was rather slow to catch on to a non-European form like jazz; most bands were content to ape the American style with little attempt to put a uniquely Italian spin on the music that they played. This is what makes Kramer's recording of "Crapa pelada" so unusual. Here was a piece that showed what the Italians were capable of in the world of modern music. His tune was unlike anything ever produced before, but it was unmistakably jazz.

Since the Fascist Party considered jazz to be "barbaric negroid anti-music" it discouraged the broadcasting of jazz on state-run radio, but Kramer had come up with a clever subterfuge to avoid official displeasure. He took a common children's nursery rhyme and raised it both to the level of high art and great music. The words to the song are in Lombard dialect and tell of Crapa Pelada (Baldhead) who makes some tortelli (a kind of stuffed pasta), but refuses to share it with his brothers.

Crapa pelada, l'ha fa' i turtei.
Ghe ne dà minga ai suo' fradei
I suo' fradei fan la frittata
Gher ne dan minga a Crapa pelada.

Baldhead made some tortelli,
But he didn't give any to his brothers.
His brothers made an omelet,
But they didn't give any to Baldhead.

It is a silly nonsense song, but Kramer infuses the words with a menacing drive and a serio-comic creepiness that gives the composition more meaning than the words alone. Added to the melody are the scat singing and an adventurous orchestration employing an instrument that would never have occurred to most American jazzmen: the accordion.

Although his career continued for many years, this one song established Gorni Kramer as the first original master that Italian jazz had ever produced.

In addition to being Italy's first great jazz melody, "Crapa pelada" was considered by many to be a veiled political commentary. There can be no doubt that Kramer had little love for Mussolini and his draconian politics, and this song about a selfish baldheaded bully was seen as a sly attack on Italy's most famous and powerful baldhead, the Duce himself. Fortunately, it seems to have slipped past the censors since Kramer was never prosecuted. The song might have been overlooked by the Fascists, but it was certainly not ignored by the public and the critics. A few modern Italian musicologists have since recognized it for what it truly is: an original and unique jazz masterpiece.[1]

[1] Cerchiari, Luca. *Jazz e fascismo: Dalla nascita della radio a Gorni Kramer*, (Palermo: L'Epos, 2003) 44. Cerchiari calls the piece "a minor masterpiece." In an e-mail to the author, the jazz historian confirmed his high opinion of the song as well as its mixture of Italian and American elements: "I think "Crapa pelada" is a very original recording. The spirit is Italian, but with quotations from American jazz: thematic (Duke Ellington) and stylistic (Boswell Sisters)." 9/31/06.

LA MUSICA "RAC-TIME"

"Crapa pelada" might have been the first original jazz tune ever produced in Italy, but the fascination with Afro-American music had begun many years earlier. Minstrel shows and choirs featuring black Americans singing spirituals had toured Europe from the middle of the nineteenth century—but none had come to Italy. It remained cut off from many of the musical trends that had engulfed the rest of Europe. One of the reasons for this isolation was that Italy had not existed as a unified country until the 1860s, and it was consumed with the task of becoming a nation. Revolutions and social disorder are not conducive to traveling artists, so this might offer one reason for the lack of Negro entertainers. In addition, most American theatrical groups tended to stay in Great Britain and northern Europe for linguistic and cultural reasons.

The first known group of black Americans to visit the peninsula was the Louisiana Troupe, two men and two women who performed at the Eden Theater in Milan on March 16–30, 1904. The group's principal claim to fame was the highly dubious assertion that they invented the cakewalk, a popular Afro-American dance form of the time.[1] Other vaudeville performers, mostly from the northern US, followed at irregular intervals, but it was not until a small number of native Italian musicians began to learn and adapt the syncopated forms that American styles and melodies were slowly incorporated into Italian theaters. The early twentieth century also marked the height of Italian immigration to America, and after a few years some of these new residents began to return on visits to the homeland. They brought back some knowledge of the musical traditions as well as sheet music that they had picked up in the United States.

An early instance of an Italian musician who mastered and played the new American forms was the accordion virtuoso Guido Deiro (1886–1950). He first came from his native Piedmont to America in 1909 to perform at Seattle's Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition; while in the United States, he quickly absorbed the ragtime music that was being played everywhere. The accordion was a common Italian instrument, particularly in the context of folk music. Deiro used a newly invented improvement on the traditional instrument, which he called the "piano-accordion" because of its extensive keyboard, broad range, and richness of tone. After an initial concert in San Francisco, he went on the vaudeville circuit with his

instrument, and earned huge profits and great success. While in New York City in August 1912, he recorded his most famous composition, the “Deiro Rag,” thus becoming one of the first Italians to make a phonograph record in the new American idiom.[2]

Fig. 3 Italian musician Guido Deiro contemplates his “piano accordion” c. 1910.

As innovative as he was, Deiro was not the only Italian to embrace ragtime music. Thanks to easier travel and communication, people like Guido Deiro could venture across the world and international trends were transmitted faster than ever before. Europeans were writing their own cakewalks, grizzly bears, black bottoms, and ragtimes soon after they had been originated in the United States. Consequently when Americans began to dance a new step called the fox-trot around 1913, it only took a short time for it to reach Italy. Already in 1915 at Turin there was a notice of the arrival at the Cinema Ambrosio of one Professor St. Clair, a specialist in

the American dance advertised as "a complete novelty for Italy." The music that the dancers did their fox- and turkey-trots to was also new—so new, in fact, that journalists were not entirely sure how to spell it. The *Giornale di Torino* announced in 1915 that listeners could enjoy an orchestra playing the "one-step, two-step and rac-time." [3]

The fox-trot arrived in Rome shortly thereafter, and it was added to a growing list of racy dances like the waltz, mazurka, polka, and tango. When conservative Pope Pius X witnessed this last dance, he was scandalized by the prospect of men and women swaying to sensuous rhythms. He much preferred the chaste country dances of the peasants, not these modern invitations to sin. He asked in dismay, "But why don't they dance the furlana which is so beautiful?"[4] Unfortunately for the pope and other social reactionaries, Italy and the rest of the world had moved on. The furlana and the music it was danced to were relics of an agrarian past that would never return.

Despite papal disapproval, many Italians were particularly eager to participate in the new musical movements that were sweeping across both the Old and the New Worlds. One of the greatest Italian advantages was the massive immigration to the US that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the decade of 1871–1880, the total number of Italian immigrants numbered 55,759, but by the peak decade of 1901–1910, that number had soared to over two million. By 1910, Italians constituted one fifth of all immigrants, and this meant that they had become one of America's largest ethnic groups.[5] These large numbers also meant that there was considerable cultural diffusion going on; Italians were absorbing many of the influences from native-born Americans and vice versa. Since music had always been an important component of Italian life, it is not surprising that this was one of the first areas of artistic interaction. One of the conduits for this cultural interface between the popular cultures of Italy and the United States was through a small, stringed instrument.

There could be no more-typically Italian music maker than the mandolin, and it is perhaps not surprising that this little stringed instrument was the first to be used by immigrants to interpret the rhythms of America. The first mandolin-like instrument achieved popularity in America in 1880 when a troupe of musicians called the *Estudiantina Figueroa*, or "Figueroa Spanish Students," appeared in New York with striking costumes and exotic music all played on bandurrias (another small, lute-like folk instrument that is played with a plectrum). This group was a huge success in America, and they spent several years touring up and down North America's East Coast. They were so successful that one

enterprising Italian musician, Carlo Curti, formed his own band of “Spanish Students” made up entirely of Italians. He later led the more appropriately named “Roman Students.” Both groups toured the theaters of America. Curti correctly guessed that his American audiences would not be able to tell the difference between the Spanish bandurria and the Italian mandolin. Thanks to this early exposure, there was soon a good deal of interest in the Italian instrument, and musicians all over America began to learn how to play it. Although it was most often a solo instrument, many players joined clubs and ensembles where they could perform in large groups consisting of mandolins, mandolin-banjos, mandolas (tenor mandolins), guitars, mandocellos, and other instruments that increased the tone and harmonic possibilities. Between 1890 and 1918 catalog giants Montgomery Ward and Sears sold mandolins in tremendous numbers; Sears devoted six entire pages to the instrument in its catalog of 1905.[6]

Soon Italian and Italian American composers were writing popular ragtime tunes for the instrument. Rocco Giuseppe Iosco—who Americanized his name to Bob Yosco—was an Italian-born mandolinist and vaudeville performer who (along with his harpist partner, Giorgio Lioni [a.k.a. George Lyons]) wrote “Spaghetti Rag” in 1910. This famous piece was scored for mandolins and soon became a standard tune for mandolin ensembles. Also in 1910 another Italian immigrant, Alfredo Piantadosi, published *That Italian Rag*. This composition for mandolins includes a number of traditional tunes that had been syncopated to give them a sprightly rhythm. The list of Italian composers of rags and one-steps is long and impressive, and it shows that immigrants quickly accustomed themselves to the new American trends. It also means that American syncopated music reached Italy at least as fast as it did other European regions, and almost certainly at a more rapid rate.

One of the peculiarities of Italian immigration to the USA was that this ethnic group crossed and recrossed the Atlantic many times, visiting the old country and often encouraging others to make the same move. Between the years 1899 and 1924, almost 50 percent of all Italian immigrants returned either permanently or temporarily to their home country.[7] This was a much higher rate than other national emigrations of the time, and it meant that there was an unexpectedly large cultural exchange going on between the two continents. Many returning migrants brought with them wider social and economic experience, pockets bulging with dollars, and a new appreciation for the music that they had enjoyed in America. Not everyone who came back to the Old World was a fan of American syncopated music, but it is hard to believe that these

intercontinental travelers had not at least *encountered* popular music. Most immigrants were young men and women who had a well-developed sense of adventure, so it is not unreasonable to think that they might also have listened to and enjoyed ragtime music.

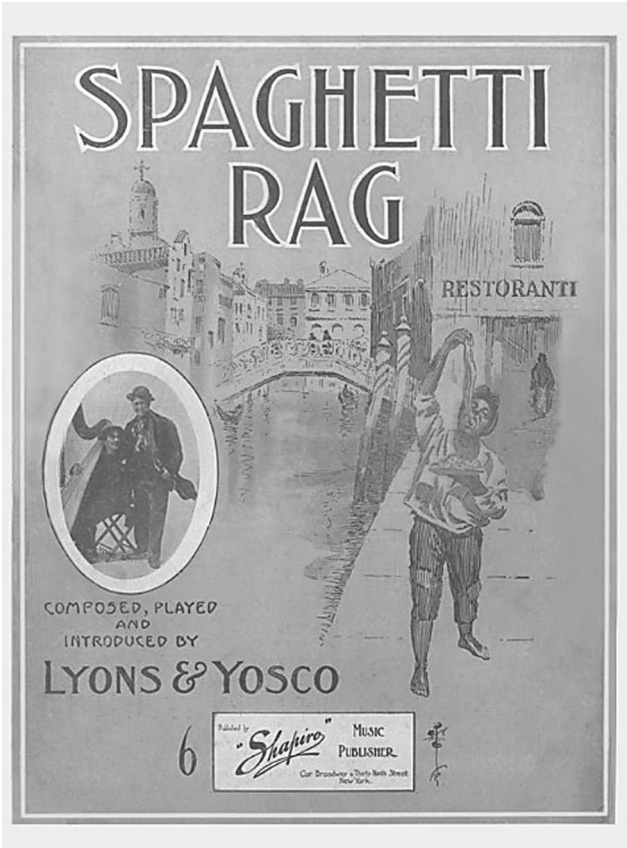

Fig. 4 “Spaghetti Rag” sheet music cover features a pasta-eating youth and other Italian stereotypes, 1910.

There were two main reasons for the fluidity of Italian travel back and forth between the continents. First, unlike religious or political exiles, Italians emigrated principally for economic reasons (workers could double or triple their wages by working in America); they could therefore return anytime they had accumulated enough of a fortune to warrant it. No matter

how long Italians remained abroad, they could always reclaim their citizenship easily, even if they had renounced it in the New World. The Italian government actively encouraged her wandering children to return to the mother country and share the fruits of their foreign labor with the home population. “Italians were never stateless,” historian Mark I. Choate reminds us. “The state aimed to bring all Italians together to recreate the international prestige, power and wealth of Italy’s former glories.”[8]

A second reason for crossing the Atlantic multiple times was that the Italian government required its male citizens, and even the American-born sons of those citizens to perform their national service in the Italian army. Naturally, many men chose to ignore this summons, but a surprising number went back when they were conscripted. This was especially true during the Great War when Italy paid for the repatriation of nearly 304,000 troops between 1915 and 1918. Although population statistics are unclear, it was estimated that there were around six million Italian immigrants in the United States at this time, so this means that about five percent of this population was mobilized for the fight. Along with their physical necessities, many of the young soldiers packed in their cultural kit bags some of the new artistic tastes that they had acquired in American; this almost certainly included a love of syncopated music.[9]

By the time the Second World War loomed on the world stage, the cultural back and forth between Italy and the United States had slowed considerably. America became more isolationist in its outlook, and Italy became Fascist and xenophobic. Another factor that decelerated Italian contact with America had to do with the growing suspicion of immigration in Congress and on Main Street. Between the early to mid-1920s, the US Congress began limiting the number of southern and eastern European people moving to America, and by 1925 the floods of Italian immigration were squeezed to just a trickle. By 1927, when it was apparent that American immigration on a grand scale was a thing of the past, Mussolini, who was by then the dictator of Italy, decreed that Italy’s age of migration had come to an abrupt halt, and he ordered all of this countrymen living overseas to come home. This time very few heeded the call.[10]

The dramatic cultural interchange in the first quarter of the twentieth century brought about profound artistic changes in both Italy and America, and nowhere was that interchange more apparent than in the southern city where jazz was born. Italian immigrants in New Orleans picked up the new sounds and rhythms very quickly, and their contributions to the development of jazz are often overlooked because of their desire to be identified as unhyphenated Americans. Thus musicians like Giuseppe Alessandra (who was known as Joe Alexander), Ernesto Giardina, Johnny

Provenzano, and many other Italian-born artists were early contributors to the development of jazz in its birthplace.[11] Italy's fascination with syncopated music forms was apparent from a very early time. Historian Anna Harwell Celenza has noted that one of the earliest descriptions of a jazz band was made in 1919 by the Italian Consul General in New Orleans. He noted that there were two types of jazz ensembles operating in the city; the first was comprised mostly of Blacks who "perform in the hotels, restaurants, dance halls and social clubs." The other consisted often of Italians "that play in the cinemas, in variety shows and in those numerous theaters."[12] The Crescent City was not the only place where transplanted Italians made jazz; some chose to settle in large northern cities.

One of the most successful of all Italian-born ragtime musicians working in America was Domenico Savino (1882–1973). Unlike the other men mentioned above, Savino's home base was New York, and it was there that he became one of the most successful popular musicians of the early twentieth century. Savino was born in the southern Italian city of Taranto in 1888, and studied piano, composition, and conducting at the prestigious Royal Conservatory of Naples. Savino came to America in 1913, along with the famous operatic tenor Tito Schipa (1888–1965), probably as the singer's accompanist, but he parted company with the tenor and began to compose in the ragtime idiom. Savino adopted the pseudonym D. Onivas (which is merely his name spelled backwards), and soon produced several popular hits. The most successful of these was "Indianola" (1917) which quickly became a standard with dance bands all over the country.

Shortly after Savino arrived in New York, a good friend of the family heard of his success in the New World and decided to test his own luck across the Atlantic. Rudolph Valentino had learned from Domenico's sister that the musician was experiencing great prosperity in America, so the future silent-screen star came over to see if he could achieve a little of that success for himself. Savino apparently did what he could for his friend; when Valentino needed proper clothes, the composer bought him an elegant tuxedo, which allowed him to become a "taxi dancer," or paid escort, at a high-class dance hall. This simple but effective assistance apparently started the actor on on the road to fame as a Latin lover.[13]

During the 1920s, Savino was appointed musical director in New York for the French record label Pathé, and he became a major force in popular music. He wrote the Gershwin-like piano and orchestra work "A Study in Blue" for Paul Whiteman in 1928, arranged hundreds of tunes for other musicians, and continued to be in the forefront of mainstream popular and

light music. He returned to Italy in 1934 and recorded many of his compositions as well as becoming music director for many films of the time, including *Vivere* in 1937, starring his old friend Tito Schipa. At the end of his long career, Dominic Savino was a rich and powerful man who later turned away from his early love of jazz and ragtime to more acceptable but bland, easy-listening music. Savino died in New York in 1973.[14]

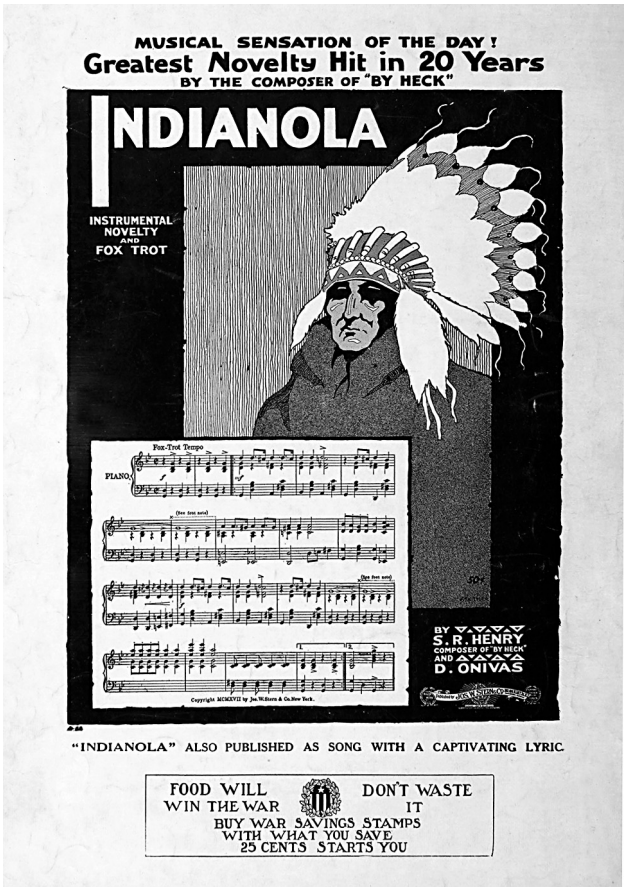

Fig. 5 “Indianola” sheet music by Onivas (pseud. of Dominic Savino), 1917.

Another reason for the growth in popularity of ragtime music among Italian immigrants was that modern music helped bond and acculturize recently arrived residents who wanted to assume a new American identity.

The eminent sociologist William Isaac Thomas quoted an informant from Syracuse, New York, who offered an explanation of why Italians avoided traditional music and preferred to buy modern, jazzy phonograph records.

> More than any other cultural group, Italian immigrants are faithful to their music. When they are in their own homes or those of their friends, they sing folksongs, but they are ashamed to do so when they are in a group of Americans. . . . The reason why the young people buy ragtime music is that they do not want to be different from their American friends. . . . Thus they buy the same records as their American counterparts.[15]

There was an understandable identity issue going on among the first- and perhaps even second-generation Italian immigrants; they did not want to lose their roots, but they also wanted to jump into the American melting pot as soon as possible. We should also wonder how widespread the embarrassment at openly enjoying the traditional music of the old country really was. There are no statistics given, and it is perhaps more of a comment on the process of modernization and acculturation that these new American teens were embarrassed by their parents' culture than they were shunning of the old ways. It might be more likely that they were merely becoming typical American adolescents. The important thing to note from this account is that, for whatever reason, ragtime music was one of the measuring sticks of modernity and "Americanness." The concepts of modernity as well as the exotic appeal of Americanism made syncopated music all the more attractive to many from the other side of the Atlantic.

Back in the old country the ancient traditions were still in place, at least among the upper classes. For the first decade of the twentieth century, entertainment for the elite was completely linked to the nineteenth century. The café-chantant and the tabarin with their playfully naughty songs along with variety acts remained all the rage. Still, there was a growing desire for something more daring, something different. "The taste for the prohibited and the sinful was flourishing around the night life, and this often translated into ever-greater consumption of absinth, tobacco, ether, morphine, and cocaine."[16] Bored aristocratic and upper-bourgeoisie patrons of these establishments were thus ready for new and shocking innovations in their pleasures, so when the orchestras began including cakewalks in the mix of waltzes, polkas, and czardas that were traditionally played in dance salons and music halls, it all seemed so natural.

Among those of more modest means, there was another way that ragtime music was disseminated, and that was through recordings, sheet music, and piano rolls. Most of these were imported from across the

Atlantic, but starting in the early twentieth century, a few homegrown musical groups were producing their own recordings. *La Musica della Regia Marina Italiana* [The Band of the Italian Royal Navy] recorded the ragtime two-step “Hiawatha” in Milan in 1906. Military or marching bands were very popular at the turn of the twentieth century, and it did not take Italians long to participate in a fad that had made people like John Philip Sousa a household name around the world.

The recording of “Hiawatha” was the first ragtime recording made in Italy, but it was certainly not the first disc made by an Italian brass ensemble. That honor was taken by another concert band that came to the United States and for a while it was one of the most popular bands of the era, including the great brass ensemble of John Phillip Sousa. The group was the *Banda Rossa di San Severo* [Red Band of San Severo], so called because of their scarlet uniforms. The Banda Rossa, which was always referred to in the American press by its Italian name, was initially formed in the southern region of Basilicata, but its first great triumph came in 1892 at the Columbian Exposition in Genoa where it played to great acclaim.

Five years later the group crossed the Atlantic and played its first concert at the Metropolitan Opera House on October 15, 1897. At this time its repertoire consisted principally of march and operatic selections, but its renowned leader, Eugenio Sorrentino, realized that Americans wanted to hear popular music as well as the European classics. On a subsequent tour of the United States, Maestro Sorrentino came ready to play syncopated music. “Last night,” reported the *Kansas City Times*, the Banda Rossa, “played great ragtime, and if there be anybody who doubts that these swarthy sons of Italy can get into the spirit and swing of a cakewalk, just go out to Fairmount Park and hear them.” When the bandleader was queried by a reporter who was surprised at his authentically rhythmic interpretation of such music, Sorrentino assured him, “Ragtime? Yes, oh yes, [we can play] anything . . . everything.”[17] The band’s success was such that around 1897 or 1898 the group made around thirty recordings using Emile Berliner’s revolutionary Gramophone method, a system that used discs rather than the more popular Edison wax rolls. At least two of these ephemeral recordings still exist. Although neither surviving disc is a ragtime composition, it is certain that such tunes were recorded at the time.[18]

Sorrentino’s was not the only ensemble making tours of the United States; there were, in fact, quite a few Italian bands in circulation at the turn of the twentieth century. Probably the most famous and popular of these was the sixty-piece band led by Giuseppe Creatore (1871–1952). The

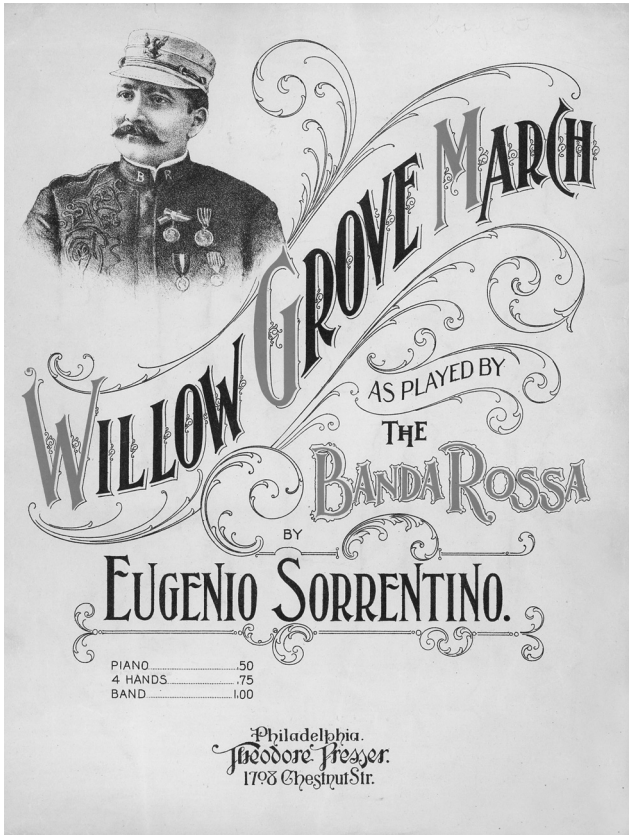

Fig. 6 Sheet music featuring a portrait of Eugenio Sorrentino of the Banda Rossa, 1899.

Neapolitan-born trombonist played all over North America and for a time, he was second in popularity to the great Sousa. In his concert programs, Creatore concentrated on traditional marches and transcriptions of operatic tunes, and it would not seem that the bandleader was particularly drawn to ragtime or American popular music. Still, he had to give the audiences what they wanted, and if syncopation was requested, then he was determined to deliver it. It would be impossible to know how often the band performed ragtime, but Creatore did record an original composition called “Syncopation” in 1925. It was released for the Italian market as “La Sincope—Marcia sinfonica.”[19]

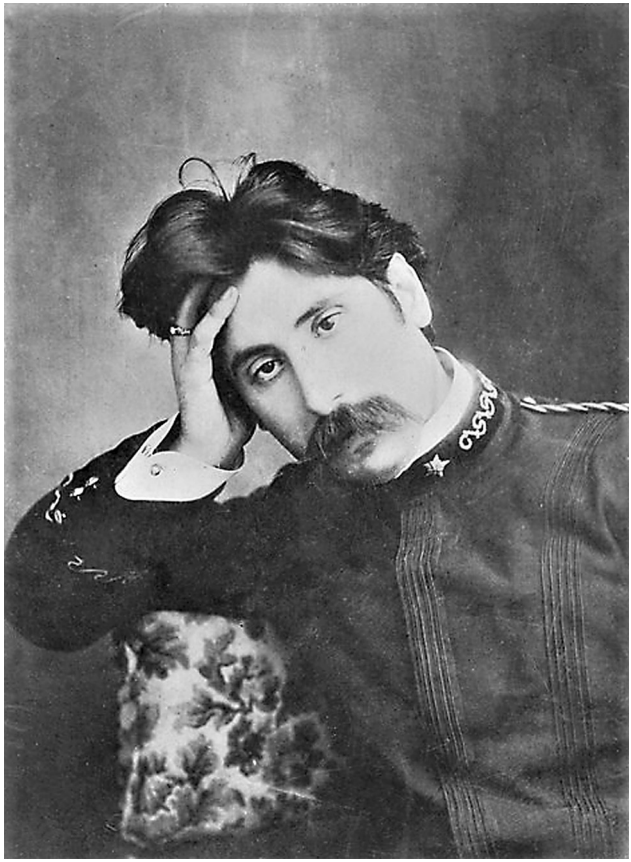

Fig. 7 Charismatic band leader, Giuseppe Creatore, c. 1900.

But it was not as a musician (superb though he was) that made Creatore a star; it was his talent as a showman. The handsome Italian became a sensation when he led his band because he turned himself into an attraction by histrionically keeping time with his hands and, as one critic described, “conducting with his whole body.”[20] The handsome, mustachioed bandleader lept around on the platform, threw his long hair back and forth in a sort of early version of headbanging, and generally made an extremely entertaining spectacle of himself. Creatore “laughed and cried, shouted and hissed, posed dramatically one moment and dashed wildly about the next.”[21] His onstage monkeyshines left audiences howling with pleasure and his musicians in a state of sweat-drenched exhaustion.