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The public face of Italy today is una brutta faccia. Silvio Berlusconi's regime is a riotous carnival of corruption, abuse of power, and sexual sleaze; organized crime wields enormous economic power throughout the peninsula and in Sicily; the Vatican intrudes with an ever more heavy hand into Italian politics; and racism, xenophobia, and homophobia are surging. The civil society organization Justice and Liberty raises alarms over the "unequivocal signs of social decay," but much of the populace couldn't care less - they'd rather turn on Berlusconi's TV channels and submit to the mindless mediated reality that historian Paul Ginsborg calls "videocracy."

Given all this, and the failure of the various parties and groups that comprise the Italian left to unite around a common agenda, it's up to artists to limn the current malessere. But members of the creative community - filmmakers, authors, and musicians -- aren't just making pointed social criticism (or, in the case of someone like documentarian Sabina Guzzanti, take-no-prisoners satire). They're also speaking for a different Italy, often reminding Italians of their best political and cultural traditions.

Carmen Consoli, Massimo Ferrante, and Enzo Avitabile, all from Italy's southern regions, have released new recordings that comment on the current situation or evoke traditions and stories of an Italy at risk of being forgotten in the seemingly interminable Berlusconi era.

Carmen Consoli, the most pop-oriented of the three, is a major star whose albums are best-sellers in Italy. Her latest, *Elettra*, is no exception, having debuted at the top of the charts late last year. *Elettra* continues the shift in direction Consoli undertook with her previous release, *Eva Contro Eva* (2006). In place of the electric guitars and rock grooves she'd favored since *Dueparole*, her 1996 debut, *Eva* featured acoustic guitars, mandolins, violins, accordions, bouzoukis, and even a string quartet. The tempos were slow to medium, and Consoli's singing was subtle and intimate; gone were the P.J. Harvey and Janis Joplin influences evident in her earlier work.



Like its predecessor, *Elettra* is concise, 10 songs in some 40 minutes. It also sounds much like *Eva*, with mainly acoustic instrumentation and stylistic influences drawn from Sicilian *musica popolare* and other Mediterranean folk music. But the pan-Mediterranean fusion she introduced on *Eva* is now even richer and more assured. The low key sensuality of Consoli's new style can create an oneiric mood that's a pleasure to get lost in; at other times, the music is punchier, driven by Sicilian and North African rhythms.

Consoli is a gifted lyric writer who does wonderful things with the Italian language. (Study her words, all you who are brushing up on your Italiano.) On *Elettra*, what's most on her mind is women's lives and experience, and especially their complicated relationships with men - lovers, fathers, and uncles.

The album's opening track, "Mandaci una cartolina" was inspired by the sudden death last year of her father Giuseppe. Though there's obviously deep feeling in the words, there's also irony; death is likened to an unplanned holiday, a surprise vacation. Consoli wonders, "Of all the days on which you could've left, why did you pick Monday?" Then, she asks him to "send us a postcard and a nice photo of you taking the sun on the beach."

The album's title character is not the Elektra of Greek mythology who instigated her brother to matricide;



she's a street prostitute who, though she practices a trade that subjects her to scorn, is moved by genuine emotion and passion. She craves a lover who will "embrace me, in the light of day." (That line is sung to one of the album's catchiest refrains.) On "Mio Zio," a young woman's recollection of the sexual abuse inflicted by her recently deceased uncle, Consoli's strident vocal and her band's agitated churning conjure up a memorable portrait of female rage reminiscent of "Matilde odiava i gatti," from her 2002 release, "L'Eccezione." The best track, "A Finestra," alternates Sicilian folk melody in the verses with a Balkan-sounding chorus, while Consoli's staccato phrasing and earthy timbre evoke the great Sicilian folksinger (and Consoli role model) Rosa Balestrieri. The dialect lyrics also offer the album's sharpest social criticism. The singer gazes from her window

at the street scene below, observing the behavior of the various passers-by. But her thoughts carry her from the here and now to an earlier Sicily, where Muslims, Jews, and Christians extended their hands in friendship to one another ("si stringeunu la manu"), a bygone world in which cultural diversity was prized - a pointed rejoinder to the intolerance all too common in today's Italy.

Cerebral and passionate, tender and angry, inward looking but acutely attuned to social realities, Carmen Consoli's *Elettra* captures a remarkable artist at a crucial stage in her career. At 35, she's no longer a "piccola cantantessa" (little girl singer) or "bambina impertinente" (impertinent kid), as she used to call herself. She's now a mature but still evolving artist, and one who, thanks to extensive touring in North America and elsewhere outside Italy, is attracting the international audience she richly deserves.

Jamu is the third album by the Calabrian folksinger **Massimo Ferrante**. His previous recordings, *U Ciucciu* (2005) and *Ricuordi* (2006) established him as an exceptional interpreter of traditional southern Italian music. But *Jamu* is his finest work to date, steeped in tradition but free of retrograde folklorism and fetishized authenticity. Ferrante's adaptations of Calabrian, Sicilian, and other Italian material are fresh and contemporary, as they should be, since the songs themselves are as pertinent now as ever.

The album opens and closes with "Lingua e dialettu," two parts of the same poem by the Sicilian writer Ignazio Buttitta. Part One expresses a central theme of *Jamu*: "A people becomes poor and servile/when robbed of the language handed down by their forefathers/They are lost forever." But "language" isn't only a system of communication; it's also cultural tradition, and a potential source of political resistance.

Ferrante's work is informed by Antonio Gramsci's idea that working class and peasant culture can be mobilized to undermine the ruling class's ideological hegemony and help "subaltern" people to attain power.



It helps if rebel music has good tunes, and *Jamu* is full of them. Ferrante and the Swedish-Calabrian guitarist Lutte Berg have adapted most of the songs - tarantellas, carols, cantastorie (story-songs) and lullabies -- and they and the other musicians (Lello Petrarca, bass; Enrico del Gaudio, drums; and Francopaolo Perreca, clarinet) turn them into a kind of Mezzogiorno folk-rock. Berg, who leads his own jazz fusion band and has composed film soundtracks, is impressive throughout, and especially on "Strina du Judeo," where he takes an extended,

wailing solo.

He also shines on "La Piove e la fai Soulelh," the album's only non-southern Italian song but one totally in synch with Ferrante's concerns about language and culture. The lyrics are in D'oc, a Romance language brought to southern France by a community that originated in Piemonte but fled Italy during the Middle Ages to escape religious persecution. The Occitan language still is spoken in southern France, Spain, and in parts of Italy - including the linguistic enclave of Guardia Piemontese in Calabria. So in a sense, "La Piove e la fai Soulelh" is a southern Italian song, regardless of its actual provenance.

Ferrante and company remake two traditional Calabrian songs: "Ari Cincu" gets the marching band treatment, with brass, reeds, and crashing cymbals; the upbeat "I Fischì," with its reggae-cum-Mezzogiorno rhythms, recalls Daniele Sepe's "Tarantella Calabrese," which featured Ferrante as lead vocalist. "Lamentu pi la morti di Turiddu Carnivali," by Ignazio Buttitta and the Sicilian composer Otello Profazio, memorializes a labor leader murdered by the Mafia in 1955. Ferrante performs it solo, accompanying his somber vocal on "chitarra catanese" (a guitar from the eastern Sicilian city of Catania), and it's perhaps the album's most affecting number.

With *Jamu*, Massimo Ferrante has solidified his status as a premier exponent of southern Italian folk and



folk-derived music. He's got great taste, serious chops as a singer, guitarist, and arranger, and a compelling vision. His kind of music is ignored by the pop culture industry; it doesn't get played on the radio or exposed on national television and pop music critics rarely acknowledge it. But its beauty and integrity speak for and of another Italy, one that resists the oppressive status quo and the irredeemable vulgarity of Berlusconi Time.

Enzo Avitabile, a saxophonist, singer, and composer from Naples, has followed a creative path that has taken him from American funk and rock to cross-cultural fusion to Neapolitan roots music. He has recorded with Richie Havens, pop-jazz diva Randy Crawford, hip hop founding father Afrika Bambaata, and Guinean griot singer Mory Kanté. But in recent years he has focused on what he calls "my own musical

language."

In 2004 he made one of his most successful recordings, *Salvamm' 'o munn'* (Let's Save the World), for which he recruited I Bottari, a percussion ensemble from Caserta, near Naples. Avitabile's next release, *Sacro Sud* (2006), consisting entirely of devotional songs (popular rather than ecclesiastic material) delved even deeper into indigenous Neapolitan music.



The title of his latest, *Napoletana*, recalls the classic three-volume compendium of canzone napoletane recorded by Roberto Murolo, the late dean of Neapolitan musica popolare. Like Murolo's album of the same name, Avitabile's *Napoletana* aims to capture the soul of a city that throughout the ages has been romanticized, vilified, and exploited.

In recent years, Naples has become known for garbage crises, political corruption, and the economic might and ferocious violence of its camorra crime syndicates. Media accounts gave the impression of a wild, chaotic and ungovernable city. (But one that boasts the world's greatest pizza.) Decades earlier, Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, in their famous 1925 essay, described Naples as a city of "rich barbarism" where nothing is fixed or stable, and where improvisation is the rule.

Avitabile's *Napoletana*, however, posits a timeless cultural and spiritual essence that persists regardless of the vicissitudes of history. This is, according to Marino Niola's album notes, the "Spanish and Oriental [Byzantine and Arab]" Naples, whose music is full of minor scales, Greek tetrachords, and "ancient rhythms of mercy." Niola likens the music of *Napoletana* to the pizzica taranta of the Puglia region, whose rhythms heal, "transforming the suffering heart into a ringing cymbal, chasing away for at least a while the black sun of melancholy."

Melancholy, however, is the dominant mood on *Napoletana*; there's even a track - a haunting one - called "Malincunia." If the emotional range is narrower than on Murolo's magnum opus, there's no denying its concentrated power. And musically *Napoletana* is richer. Murolo had only his guitar to accompany his voice; Avitabile is backed by an excellent trio that includes his brother Carlo on percussion, Umberto Leonardo on guitar, and Marco Pescosolido on violoncello. Enzo, who wrote all but two of the twelve songs, handles the vocals and plays arpina (a small Neapolitan harp), piffero (a double-reed instrument akin to an oboe) and soprano sax.

Though the instrumentation is acoustic, the arrangements and playing aren't exactly traditional. The approach is closer to Nidi D'Arac's most recent album, *Salento senza tempo*, which was a tribute to the traditional music of Puglia imbued with touches of modernity.

"Amaro nunn' êss'a essere màje," *Napoletana*'s most gripping performance, fuses ancient folk roots (Leonardo's guitar ostinato and Carlo Avitabile's pizzica beats) and jazz's harmonic sophistication (Enzo's comping and soloing on soprano sax). I hesitate to apply the overworked "hypnotic," but I can't think of a better way to describe the effect.

Avitabile has subtitled *Napoletana*, "songs and music written in cement." His vision of his magnificent, maddening, and wounded city couldn't be farther from the cliché images of "O sole mio" and the cartoline napoletane (picture postcards). This is the Naples of underdogs and outcasts, the poor and powerless. Cultural patrimony is their only wealth, and Avitabile honors it with his own remarkable artistry. - George de Stefano

Carmen Consoli's CDs available from Amazon.com

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