

Giuseppe De Franco (1933–2010): A Remembrance of an Immigrant Folk Musician

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Giuseppe De Franco was born in Serricella, a hamlet of Acri (Cosenza province), Calabria, on October 31, 1933. Blown to earth by the restless spirits of autumn, this talented and temperamental artist was raised in an isolated hillside village during a time when hunger and privation were the common lot of southern Italian workers, both rural and urban. Like most of their neighbors, Giuseppe's father performed agricultural labor for a large landowning family.

The oldest of seven children, little Giuseppe tended his family's and a neighbor's goats and sheep, taking them up to the violet-carpeted alpine pastures of the Sila in spring and summer. He made small whistle flutes out of cane and burned decorative patterns into them; this kind of flute is called a *friscalettu*, from the Calabro-Sicilian *friscare*, to whistle. It has four to six holes on the upper side, two on the bottom, a wooden mouthpiece, and is pitched in C. Bringing to life the Arcadian imagery in paintings and poetry of earlier centuries, Giuseppe told me how he taught his pet goat Sisina to dance and frolic to the *tarantelle* he played for her on his flute.

The bagpipe was then widely used by Italian shepherds, and it may have been during his time as a herdsman that Giuseppe learned to play, though he was not able to acquire a bagpipe of his own until many years later. And while he always enjoyed playing it, it did not become one of his primary instruments. In south-central Italy the bagpipe is accompanied by a wooden oboe called the *ciaramella*, and this Giuseppe also could play.

Giuseppe's memories of childhood were not happy ones. He got into trouble, and his punishments made him defiant; he plunged into musical pursuits. As an adolescent he taught himself the *chitarra battente*, literally the "beating guitar" because it was used primarily as a rhythm instrument to accompany dancing or strummed to chord changes for singing lyric songs. The folk version of the instrument, which appeared in southern and central Italy in the fifteenth century, is smaller and deeper bodied than the modern "French" guitar that entered the peninsula later. It is five stringed, often with a mobile bridge, and made of some combination of fir,

chestnut, walnut, or maple. An intricately cut, painted, and gilded rosette covers the sound hole. *Chitarra battente* luthiers are often fine artisans who produce both folk guitars and the elegant period instruments sought by conservatory musicians and collectors; two of them are still in business in Bisignano, near Acri. When he began performing regularly in the United States, Giuseppe had one made in Bisignano and brought to his home in Belleville, New Jersey.

Roaming the countryside as a free-spirited and rebellious young man living adventures and sowing his wild oats, Giuseppe serenaded girls and courted his future wife with his *chitarra*. With his leonine head thrown back, he delivered love songs of his own making, with unusual passages of vibrato and extended held notes delivered in a pronouncedly high nasal tone, alternating between sobbing, soft whining, yodeling, and howling – mannerisms that seemed to mock his listeners by hurling back at them a parody of the vocal style they knew. This would remind American listeners of the plaintive “high lonesome” sound of the great bluegrass singers such as Bill Monroe. Giuseppe’s talent still burned when he began performing in the United States in his forties, but he could rarely be persuaded to sing solo in public, perhaps because it bared too much of his soul. Yet if he had wanted to, Giuseppe had the makings of an outstanding southern Italian vocalist.

Giuseppe came of age in an Italy filled with music and song, not unlike the musical landscape of the southern United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Musicologist Alan Lomax called Italy “a museum of musical antiquities” and wrote a series of radio programs based on his collecting experiences there, which he aptly called *Listen, the Hills Are Singing* (Lomax 1960). That they did. The hills, fields, and streets echoed with the songs and cries of people sowing, harvesting, threshing, shucking corn, picking olives, harvesting grapes, threading tobacco leaves, hauling nets, hunting swordfish, herding sheep, quarrying marble and breaking rocks, driving piles and driving mules, and hawking wares. Songs courted and spurned lovers, shamed wayward girls, ridiculed the clergy, lulled babies, supplicated the saints, and mourned the dead. Hymns, chants, and *taran-telle* accompanied pilgrimages to shrines and alms seeking at Christmas and Easter. The full spectrum of music and dance was an integral part of ritual, storytelling, Carnival farces, and fantastical religious and folk tableaux.

In Acri and its environs, a favorite evening pastime was to gather outside a neighbor’s house to drink, sing, and dance accompanied by any instrument at hand, including clapping, whistling, and percussive mouth music. (Mouth music was another of Giuseppe’s specialties, though he would rarely perform it publicly.) There would also be *villanelle*, eight-line poems lined out in polyphony by a mixed group with a leader and a high drone

part called *lo sguillo*. The poetry of these songs is quite literary, full of charm and vivid and startling imagery as mysterious as dreams. People found pleasure in reciting as well as singing them. Town-based musicians who would play and sing with Giuseppe said they believed these verses were originally composed by Virgil; as artisans living in the town of Acri, they would have heard of the poet and would have been acquainted with the long literary tradition. Be that as it may, I never heard an end to the stock of lyrics for *villanelle* and *canzuni* still circulating in the Acrese immigrant community in the 1970s and 1980s. The richness of the poetic landscape in the Calabria of Giuseppe's youth can only be imagined.

In this climate, Giuseppe also learned the *organetto*, a small free reed diatonic button accordion, from his father and became a virtuoso, playing with complete engagement of body, mind, and soul. The *organetto* was introduced into Italian folk music in the nineteenth century and imported diatonism into the South, as did the many popular, military, school, and religious compositions that began to enter the folk repertoire and could be accompanied by the accordion with ease. However, folk musicians adapted the instrument to their own repertoire as well, making it accord with the minor melodic modes that prevailed in the music of the region. The instrument assumed an important rhythmic role in the dance and could function as a harmonizing voice for group or solo singing, as well as adding dramatic flourishes at the end of a line. The *pièce de resistance* of southern Italian *organetto* music is the compelling "tarantella montemaranese," the fast, staccato set piece still very much alive and played during Carnival in Montemarano (Avellino province), Campania. Giuseppe was also a first-rate *tamburello* (tambourine) player, with the endurance essential for any musician playing for extended *tarantelle*. But because of its versatility and general recognition factor, the *organetto* would become his signature instrument.

In the late 1940s Giuseppe fell in love with Raffaella Montagna, a petite, dark-haired beauty with large flashing black eyes and a compassionate heart, two years his junior. She was to become the center and stabilizing force of his life for the next fifty-five years. Raffaella was one of ten children in a poor but well-regarded family from Carello, a hamlet in Acri just below Serricella. He had seen her as a child as their families were related by marriage. She had been doing day labor (for about seventy-five cents a day) from childhood and had never attended school—there were no schools (or clinics) for miles—but she was determined to accumulate a dowry of handmade furniture and linens. Bread and onions in their pockets, the women and young girls went to work in groups, hod carrying, clearing the fields, gathering chestnuts, washing in the river, and

carrying burdens of more than fifty kilos on their heads. They sang all the time, Raffaella “throwing” (*iettannu*) her strong high voice in the drone part. Once a stranger appeared with a recorder and asked them to sing for him, but they refused, taking his machine for an instrument of magic. In the heights of the Sila they planted potatoes, and in the coastal plains they sowed, weeded, cut, and threshed wheat and picked olives and fruit. Giuseppe perched on stone walls playing the *organetto* and eyeing Raffaella as she walked along with her companions.

Finally the two came to an understanding and married in 1955, moving into a one-room house with a small kitchen. One after the other, the children came until there were six in twelve years: Anna, Antonio, Fausto, Salvatore, Paola, and Francesco. At age two, Fausto contracted polio and was given the vaccine, but the clinic neglected to administer the final dose and in a year or two his legs were entirely wasted. The De Francos were persuaded that he would be best off in a children’s “hospital” near Naples, run by the clergy. Meanwhile, industrial work was opening up in Germany, and Giuseppe tried a stint or two there but was unable to stay away from his home for very long, although he was still restless when back with his family. Once home, he made the journey to visit Fausto, now five, and found him unattended, unwashed, and overcome with hunger and thirst. Horrified, Giuseppe carried him off then and there against the protests and threats of the nuns, saying he would rather his son died than stay in such a hell.

In 1968, the family immigrated to Nutley, New Jersey, following Giuseppe’s father, sisters, and two brothers. It was hard going at first, with Giuseppe taking a factory job and adapting himself to any job he could find, including bricklaying, plumbing, and barbering, at which he became quite expert. Raffaella cleaned a factory and a bank at night, and two more children were born: Giuseppe and Maria. Many people from Acri immigrated to the United States in the 1960s, settling in older family destinations in Westerly, Rhode Island, Brooklyn and Nyack, New York, and Belleville, Nutley, and Lyndhurst, New Jersey. Every family grew tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, and hot peppers even in the city and canned and pickled them. They made wine, hot and mild *soppressata* and sausage, and *cavatelli* and obtained their favorite cheeses from Calabria. They feasted and partied as frequently as possible, in social clubs, church basements, and the kitchens of one another’s homes, keeping their customs to a high degree and creating their own merry, effervescent world. Besides the cash that circulated at weddings, birthdays, and funerals, the main currency between families was hospitality and food. The wine flowed. There was constant joking, allusive teasing, and rhyming repartee, as well as the occasional fight, and at the drop of the hat there was singing, music, and dancing, which could

last until everyone collapsed. Good *organetto* players were in demand, and Giuseppe made the rounds. He played at home and at local bars, and the organetto and the bagpipe accompanied family excursions to the Jersey shore, to the mixed mortification and delight of the children.

In the 1970s, the Smithsonian Institution began to internationalize its annual Festival of American Folklife on the Mall. Alan Lomax, my father, was one of the principal advisors for the Smithsonian's ambitious plan to highlight each year several ethnic groups living in the United States together with counterparts that would be recruited from the originating countries. Twenty-five Italian and twenty-five Italian-American musicians were featured and toured in 1975. I was recruited to do the American fieldwork and present the entire program, purely on the strength that at the time there were few American folklorists who were familiar with the gamut of Italian folk music, which I had absorbed as a child while helping my father edit his recordings. With few leads to go on and being an outsider wherever I went, I kept running into brick walls: "No, no one around here knows these old things anymore. No one is interested," was the refrain. There were those who opposed what they believed was an ill-advised quest: "It would shame our community to be represented by the music of backward peasants — we have famous songwriters and composers." For the most part there was indifference, perhaps concealing the deep sensitivities built up by Italian working people during generations of slights and scorn for their language and culture, which they had encountered in both Italy and the United States.

With a cassette of representative musical examples in hand, I haunted parish halls, senior centers, social clubs, followed mostly cold trails from Carla Bianco's fieldwork of 1963–1964 (Lomax and Bianco 1965), and even advertised on radio and in the Italian language newspapers. At last an old priest who officiated at the St. Rosalia Roman Catholic Church in Brooklyn suggested that I speak with his sacristan, Giulio Gencarelli, who might know of something along the required lines. After listening to a recording of Calabrian polyphony on the cassette, this red-faced, beak-nosed gentleman shyly invited me to come by the church the following Saturday to see "a few little things," apologizing in advance for what he said would be an offering unworthy to bear the name of "music." But his mischievous eyes told a different story, and that Saturday night I entered a vision of a Calabrian mountain house party transposed to St. Rosalia's basement, Americanized only by the much greater abundance of food. About twenty people of all ages were present, there were *tarantelle*, *villanelle*, *canzuni*, and *barzelette* (jokes) lasting late into the night, and there was Giuseppe De Franco and his *organetto*.

After several visits and much explanation, seven members of the Acrese community, including Giuseppe (who would not go without Raffaella) agreed to participate in the 1975 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which would be the first known occasion at which such down-home Italian music would be presented to the American public. Joining them were four Sicilians, a friction drummer and singer from Basilicata, a bagpiper and a *ciaramella* player from Molise, a Neapolitan street singer and former vaudeville queen, and an Alpine chorus from the Trentino-Alto Adige from Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey. From Italy came a large company of Campanian *tammurriata* musicians dedicated to the Madonna del Castello, Calabrian shepherd pipers, and a group from Liguria who sang ballads in polyphonic chorus.

This was the first time Italian folk singers from different Italian regions and representing very diverse local cultures and musical styles had been brought together, had been introduced as contributors to American and world culture, and had experienced the interest and appreciation of a large and unfamiliar public. Together over the course of two weeks, they developed an unusual *esprit de corps*. They not only encountered one another, but they danced and made music with their counterparts from Mexico, Lebanon, the Mississippi Delta, and California, as well as with Native Americans from the Northern Plains. Later some would say that sharing their full cultural identity with one another and with Americans was an experience that surpassed any other successes they had had. It was a turning point for Giuseppe who, like others in the group, came away more knowing, confident, and determined.

Giuseppe made a second career of his music. He and Raffaella appeared at concerts in church halls, Manhattan performance spaces, and at all kinds of Italian and mainstream folk festivals, with colleagues from their hometown and elsewhere. They were leading artists on a Folkways record of Calabrian immigrant folk music that I curated (Chairetakis 1979); were featured in a 1981 concert series of Italian folk music in New York City and three national Italian Music Tours (1983–1985) produced by the Center for Traditional Music and Dance and me, with major funding by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Italian Foreign Ministry; and they appeared at the Scampagnata Italiana at Artpark in western New York in 1984. Fausto, who had taught himself the *organetto* and *triccaballacca* (three-pronged clapper) and spoons, began performing with his parents in the 1980s, as did longtime family friend, Francesco Cofone, a wicked improvisatory singer and tambourine player with a sly and roguish air.

After I moved to Florida in 1990, these four, sometimes joined by *paesani* from Rhode Island, formed the group Calabria Bella and booked



Giuseppe De Franco at the *giglio* feast, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1984. Photo: Martin Koenig, Center for Traditional Music and Dance.

their own shows with the aid of brochures and other self-management materials made for them by me and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. In 1990, Raffaella and Giuseppe won a National Heritage Fellowship and, escorted by Fausto De Franco and Franco Cofone, were honored in Washington, D.C. When I asked if they would one day like to return to Italy, Giuseppe and Raffaella said, “No, Never. You don’t understand. We were abandoned there.”

As time went on, the De Francos became seriously dedicated to disseminating and preserving Calabrian musical traditions for their own sake and regarded their folklorist “managers” as their allies in this endeavor. They understood that the monetary rewards for their music would probably remain modest. At first Raffaella was unkindly criticized by some Acresi, who said she was “prancing around like a goat,” showing herself to the public immodestly. She cried and refused to go to any more shows, “but then I decided that it was more important to stand up for our traditions than to listen to them.” Raffaella wept when she came to the realization that the *villanella*, the soulful, haunting song form that supports a world of delicate poetry, would never be sung by the next generation.

Giuseppe and Raffaella were entrancing storytellers. They spun endless yarns about their lives in Calabria, funny, grotesque, or tragic. Sometimes their stories bordered on the fabulous: There were the black snakes that lulled new mothers to sleep and stole their milk; the stranger with “the gift of

St. Donato" who cleared snake-infested fields by luring the reptiles into his sack with low whistling, then carried them into the wild and set them free. Giuseppe and Franco Cofone told scandalous tales of lecherous priests and monks who came to ludicrous but horrible ends; of female private parts that ran away from home; of trickster husbands and simple wives, and vice versa; of amazing feats of seduction in the countryside – truly a rustic *Decameron*. Raffaella knew her share of these but wisely chose to listen and laugh; her own specialty was fairy tales – variants of the Giambattista Basile tales and others unknown to us.

Giuseppe and Raffaella's biggest success was their family. Under economically and emotionally harrowing circumstances, they raised eight children all of whom turned out well. They gave Fausto the best of care so that he grew up normally, worked, married, and had five daughters of his own. For years Raffaella provided daycare and careful nurture for most of her sixteen grandchildren as babies and toddlers. At the time of Giuseppe's death the couple had eight great grandchildren.

For many years until his retirement, Giuseppe worked in indoor maintenance for the pharmaceutical company Hoffman La Roche. His final years were plagued by illness – diabetes, heart arrhythmia, and asthma. His children attended him with great devotion and were heartbroken when he died on November 3, 2010, just three days past the date of his birth. This stormy little man, single-minded, unfathomable, lovable, whose circumstances always remained humble, was attended in death by family members and fellow countrymen in the hundreds. His music was played continuously throughout two crowded viewings at the funeral home and represented him at Holy Family Roman Catholic Church in Nutley where the funeral mass was celebrated. A police escort rode with the long procession that accompanied him to his burial ground, East Ridgelawn Cemetery in nearby Clifton. Their presence was an unspoken tribute to what he had done for their musical traditions.

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