A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ITALIAN BEAT MOVEMENT

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A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ITALIAN BEAT MOVEMENT

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Thesis

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I want to dedicate this work to my beloved parents, who have always spurred me on to further my education and to pursue an academic career.

Without their unrelenting support and encouragement I would probably have settled for much less. I thank the Lord for such a priceless gift.
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FOREWORD

Much of the information contained in this essay comes from interviews with Italian musicians that can be located in books, magazines and websites. The criteria adopted in referring the reader to such sources are those prescribed by Joseph Gibaldi in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

When a specific interview is contained in a chapter of a book or an article in a magazine, the name of the interviewer, which in the present case is invariably the author of the book or article from which the interviews derives, will appear, along with the relevant page numbers, in parenthesis at the end of the citation. If a reference includes only page numbers, the name of the cited text’s author will be found in the preceding text.

Page numbers are included in parenthetical references only when the former were available. The websites consulted do not exhibit pagination or other references markers, consequently, readers will not find parenthetical references for the interviews extracted from such websites. They will refer
to the list of work cited, where, under the interviewed artist’s last name, they will find information on how to access the relevant website.

The rationale for listing some of the interviews by interviewee’s name in the list of works cited, and precisely those found in electronic sources, is that in those cases the interview constitutes the entirety or near entirety of the text; consequently the interviewer’s role is simply that of eliciting the information and not that of authoring or producing it.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The term “beat music” refers to a musical style made popular by British and American bands of the early sixties, a style characterized by its marked emphasis on rhythm and its use of electrified instruments. A very similar type of sound had actually originated with American rock and roll in the first half of the fifties. However, what made beat music different, and in fact unique, was its colorful and creative use of vocal harmonies, as can be heard in Beach Boys’ and early Beatles’ songs.

The term “beat,” it must be observed, was not as original as the music it denoted; in fact, it had previously been associated with a group of young American dissenters, including poets, essayists, lecturers etc., who strongly opposed what they saw as the deleterious societal trends of post-war United States. They came to be called the beatnicks, and their movement was hailed as the Beat Generation. Its adherents denounced the increasing militarization initiated by the American government, its inability to dialogue
with the governments of other nations, and its domestic promotion of a lifestyle based on the relentless and alienating pursuit of material wealth.

The fact that the same label is used to identify both of these phenomena would lead one to assume the existence of an ideological common denominator, a philosophical continuum of which the two phenomena would constitute two progressive stages of development. This assumption would seem to be consolidated by at least two important considerations. Firstly, American beatnicks were avid listeners of rock and roll, jazz, soul and blues, from which beat music ultimately evolved. Secondly, such major themes of beatnick protest and dissent as pacifism and anti-consumerism frequently appeared in the lyrics of beat songs. Yet, this seemingly unquestionable connection between the two phenomena has not been universally endorsed by the various authors who have studied and written about beat music. As this study will show, their writings demonstrate the great diversity of approach that characterizes scholarship on the subject.

Matters can become considerably more complex if the discussion is expanded to include the transplantation, transformation and development of beatnick ideology and beat music in foreign, non-Anglo-Saxon countries. Such was the path followed by those Italian authors who directed their
efforts to analyzing and discussing the introduction of such foreign traditions as American anti-militarism, anti-consumerism and Afro-American music (and its British-mediated version) into their country. In their works, such authors often focus on the byproducts of that cultural invasion, that is, on the development of Italian varieties of the above mentioned traditions at the hands of a young and restless generation.

The present work does not intend to present an original interpretation of the Italian beat phenomenon. On the contrary, it is an overview and a comparative evaluation of existing Italian scholarship on the subject, and its main purpose is that of integrating the different sources into a more organic and comprehensive picture. The first part of the study attempts to assess the extent of the penetration of the Anglo-Saxon traditions into the contemporary Italian intellectual and artistic life, and then to define the different forms and characters they assumed in the new context. The second part features a series of relevant interviews with artists, writers, musicians and common people who participated in and helped write the story of an all-Italian beat world.
CHAPTER II

POLITICIZATION OF THE YOUNG GENERATIONS

Investigating the nature of the relationship between the American beat generation of the 1950’s and the Italian beat movement of the 1960’s, of which music constituted an important facet, ultimately amounts to attempting to answer a few basic questions: how politicized were Italian beat artists and their audiences? What political roles did they see themselves taking on upon becoming members of the Italian beat community? What role or function did they attribute to beat art, and music in particular, besides that of entertaining? American beatnicks had enthusiastically welcomed the advent of jazz, blues and rock and roll as allied forces joining in their fight to change society. Could a parallel be drawn between Italian beats and beat music in general?

There seems to be a common belief among several Italian music critics that, although many 1960’s Italian beat songs dealt with the very issues raised by American beatnicks fifteen years earlier, an identification between the latter and the Italian beat audience never took place. In fact,
one point several authors have made is that the new, exciting music and the extravagant aesthetic manifestations it promoted were all that mattered to that audience. Nicola Sisto, for example, has remarked that, at least initially, those youngsters who listened to beat music and considered themselves as part of the beat community felt no need to investigate the origin of the very word that defined their lifestyle:

In 1966 the term beat became a currently used word within the juvenile language. Initially confined to merely identifying an electrified and rhythmically accentuated music, the term rapidly expanded to encompass everything that related to the new and non-traditional ways of expression: beat pants, beat glasses, beat dance, beat meeting etc. It was a password whose symbolic value was such as to make it unnecessary to discover its original meaning. (9)

The few who wondered what the word “beat” really meant were often told that it came from Beatles, the fabulous British band whose original name (The Beetles) had been revamped by an old drunkard and frequent patron of The Star Club, in Hamburg. (Sisto 9) Even Big, Italy’s leading beat magazine, turn its attention on the elusive word and organized a debate on the subject, inviting such pop music experts as Renzo Arbore and Gianni Boncompagni. The proceeding, however, didn’t shed any new light on the issue and the conclusion reached was that the term “beat” was to be interpreted as referring exclusively to a type of music characterized by a strong down beat. (Sisto 10)
In Italy, Sisto points out, the connection between American beatnicks and beat music was missed because of the lack of the authentic juvenile culture that had emerged elsewhere in reaction to the cultural stagnation of the post war western world. He holds that the reason for which the Beatles’s music boomed in England is that there it had found the fertile soil of “changed societal attitudes that required new expressive channels.” (12) The Beatles, in other words, were the result, not the initiators, of a new culture in their country:

The Beatles’ was not the only voice of renewal, nor was it considered by many as the noblest…the Beatles’ proposal quite naturally situated itself on a cultural milieu of which it was the product. It was out of that very milieu that such phenomena as rock and roll and James Dean had developed. (Sisto 12)

Sisto also observes that a major component in the fertilization of that soil which produced an “authentic juvenile culture,” and of which the Beatles’ music was one of its manifestations, was the availability of black music. The music of the African Americans had since its beginning been considered inappropriate and even socially dangerous by the white majority and naturally so: it was the expression of an oppressed minority and as such it promoted freedom at all levels, including what white puritans feared the most, sexual freedom. Unsurprisingly, American beatnicks were avid consumers of black music, since they too advocated freedom from what they
considered as the shackles of white America’s bigotry and hypocrisy. In Italy, Sisto argues, unawareness of the black tradition behind British beat music caused the Italian audience to miss the connection, the cultural continuum of which such bands as the Beatles were the flowers:

The Beatles’ music drew...from a lively musical tradition in which pop music and black music coexisted...In Italy, however, in a completely different situation, the Beatles’ music was received as a one-sided, one-dimensional fact. There had been no post-war rejuvenating process taking place within the music realm: the type of songs, premiered at San Remo [Italy’s most prestigious pop music competition] essentially structured as it was at the turn of the century, still ruled unchallenged. (13)

Sisto ascribes Italy’s failure to produce a rejuvenating culture, comparable to that he sees taking root in 1960’s England, to a narrow-minded ruling class. In his views, the same rigid conservatism that controlled the media and kept Italian cultural life from evolving was also reflected in the backwardness of the nation’s educational system. He observes that the inevitable arrival of the Beatles’ music on Italian shores was a call to arms for countless youngsters who felt they were being trapped more than being educated by the system. Sisto concludes that despite their enthusiastic search for their roots those youths never developed a full awareness and understanding of the culture that had created the music they loved.
The Beatles personified and, at the same time, met the need for progress that the young generation, misinformed by a narrow-minded and deficient educational system, and raised in an opiating formalism, felt it could no longer postpone. Having grabbed the Beatles by the tail, ... Italian youngsters now wanted to get to the roots of that culture; they were after names, books, facts and places. It was a pathetic struggle against time ... What information they were able to obtain was poorly assimilated and they were left with only a superficial knowledge of the facts. (13)

Similar views are also those of musicologist Luciano Ceri. Although he concedes that at least part of the Italian audience discovered at some point the connections between black music, beat culture and American beatnicks, he, like Sisto, points out the inconsequentiality of such a discovery.

In the beginning it [the beat] was this: rhythm, music. Then came everything else. It turned into a magic word ... Everything was beat: music, girls, clothes, beards, glasses, meetings. It really seemed to be a beat world. Then someone recalled that there also was a beat generation somewhere between New York and San Francisco, alive and active way before the Beatles’ “Love Me Do” popped up in record stores in October 1962. A beat generation that loved bebop, Charlie Parker, Ray Charles and rock and roll and that would have welcomed the new electric-guitar-powered music. But it never was, at least in Italy, a perfect marriage. (Ceri 3)

According to Ceri, the politicization of Italian youths and their full identification with the post-war American beat generation occurred only at the end of the sixties. That is when the beat movement was on its way out of
history and a new and more radical crop of young Italian dissenters claimed the stage; their claims were rooted in the writings of the beatnicks.

The [American] beat movement, as a literary movement, remained foreign to [the] music. Although its “on the road” ideology was compatible with the message of explicit opposition to Western consumptive economy that characterized many beat protest songs, its ideology began to be tapped into in a much more consistent way only when the purely musical beat movement was coming to a conclusion, at the end of the decade. It was the counterculture of the seventies that recognized clear affinities with Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti and Burroughs, more than the sixties’ long-haired kids had done. (3)

If Sisto’s and Ceri’s views are essentially similar, in that they both point out the Italian youngsters’ lack of a full understanding of beat music’s roots (that is the culture of rebellion initiated in the fifties by the American Beat Generation), Tiziano Tarli’s survey tells a quite different story.

Beginning in 1965, a growing number of youngsters felt the need for a new kind of life, one different, in kind and form, from the pre-determined one. What sparked this new awareness was the American beat Generation: Italian youths became infatuated by this group of poets who proposed new and free ways of living and felt that they needed to shake off the comfort of their middle class situations to explore uncharted territories of their existences. The decade of the sixties, a time of great change, witnessed the unprecedented adventure of a number of [Italian] youths from the fringes of society who decided to live “on the road,” traveling and joining communities along the way and searching for a deeper meaning to their existences. (86)

Another American voice, besides the beatnicks’, speaking powerfully to young Italian ears, was that of those folksingers involved with civil rights movements and protest groups in general. Their songs brought back and re-
proposed the themes and messages of the Beat Generation, which where relevant to the contemporary political and social scenario of Italy and the West in general. Under the influence of these two cultural currents Italian youngsters took the initiative and began their rebellion against the institutions, beginning with the one closest to them, the family.

Ginsberg’s words and Kerouac’s stories revealed to the young readership just how boring and meaningless middle class life was, with its fixed precepts of raising kids, making money, serving the country, going to church and watching TV. Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang about peace and against war; the world was split into two opposing factions, the risk of a nuclear war loomed large, and a bloody war was going on in Vietnam. Kids had all the reasons for not being hopeful about the future, above all about the future of their own society. Italy was an intolerant country dominated by the hypocritical puritanism of the two main parties (the Christian Democratic Party and the Italian Communist Party), sexually repressed and adverse to progressive ideas. Divorce, sexual education, birth control, objection to military service and environmental protection were issues systematically ignored. Censorship [introduced by the fascist regime decades earlier] was still in force, and minors did not become legal entities until they turned 21. Those who did not wish to follow the rules invariably met violent parental repression. Fleeing their homes became an inevitable consequence. (86-89)

These youngsters who, just as their American heroes had done about fifteen years before, left their homes behind, identified themselves as “beats,” or adherents to an ideology and a modus vivendi so important to them that they were willing to face not only the hardship of a self-inflicted exile but even arrest and incarceration to live out their new credo. The following interview
with the director of a juvenile correction center, spotted by Tarli in a 1967 issue of *L'Espresso* (a major Italian cultural magazine), clearly illustrates this point.

What really matters to them is the beat life, that kind of philosophy they are putting together with certain ideas which might be vague but ought not be hastily discarded: non-violence, condemnation of war, indifference toward money, and, above all, that extraordinary solidarity that they express to one another and that allows for these escapades to last for so long despite a total lack of money. (90)

It would seem that these youngsters constituted a quite faithful duplication of their American models, those itinerant philosophers who had adopted jazz and rock and roll as an expressive means to convey their vision of a new peaceful and free society, and later those folk singers who used their songs to achieve the political objectives of the groups they were associated with. However, in order to clinch such an apparently solid analogy, two questions must be addressed. First, what was the relationship between Italian beats and beat music? Did they consider it as a means to the end of promoting a new philosophy of life, or was it just a recreational resource? Secondly, what forms of expression did Italian beat protest and dissent take on? Were there any conscious and organized efforts to change society apart from the flights from home and the adventures on the road? As previously seen, such authors as Sisto and Ceri not only downplay the influence of the Beat
Generation on Italian beats, they altogether ignore the issue of assessing the latter’s impact on Italian society and its institutions. This would seem to indicate that the Italian beat movement did not produce any organized political action, or that its impact was so insubstantial as to be irrelevant to a survey on the Italian beat phenomenon.

Tarli’s approach, arguments, evidence and conclusions hardly if at all fit in this picture; it is as though he were covering a different story. In the second chapter of his work, which he titled *I Capelloni*, ‘the long-haired ones’, a derogatory term with which adults and conservatives in general used to lump together all eccentric-looking youths, Tarli defines the relationship between Italian beatnicks and beat-music-related culture.

The *capelloni*, or beatnick movement, developed within the same time frame as that of beat music. It originated in fact in 1965, the beat bands’ booming season, and died off in 1967, the end year of that season. Besides being a musical revolution, beat music also was a commercial, entertainment-related phenomenon, the beat movement instead was a world of its own, unrelated to any market strategies, opposed to consumerism and critical of society. (82)

Tarli makes it clear that within the larger group of long-haired youngsters there were sub-groups of dramatically different views and philosophies of life. It would seem from the picture he paints that at least part of the Italian beatnick, or *capelloni*, community, shared no more than its look with beat musicians and their fans. Although many beat songs embraced and greatly
popularized some of the themes and tenets of the capelloni’s ideology, the latter, far from acknowledging any indebtedness to beat musicians, looked with suspicion and hostility at their music and those who listened and danced to it. To substantiate this point, Tarli quotes from Mondo Beat, a counter-culture paper produced and circulated by Milan-based capelloni.

Beat art = guitars, ye ye, protest! Here is a ball of nonsense as big as the stupidity of those fools, a stupidity that makes the ball roll around themselves. The beat record, with all that is behind it, is nothing but a slimy tentacle of this monster society. The beat record… is useful only to the civilization of idiotic consumerism…Beat music fans do not realize that the very clothing they wear and the very music they listen to, which theoretically should represent their distancing themselves from the schematic and insignificant middle class way of life, are being monopolized by the same middle class that is actually transforming protest and anti-conformism into the conformism of the younger generation. So the conformism of anti-conformism was born. All you need to do is dress up in an eccentric way, have long hair, dance at the Piper and you are immediately classified as beatnick. (83)

Such fiery proclamations obviously represent the most radical and extreme wing of the Milanese beatnicks, part of which was not only tolerant of the “ye ye” boys but actually considered them helpful and even necessary to the growth of a countercultural movement. Tarli finds evidence and support for this point elsewhere in Mondo Beat.

In Italy we are witnessing the coexistence of several phenomena which differentiate from one another primarily on the basis of degree of awareness more than method of action. From the ye ye to the capellone, to the general protester, to the group with a clear and
conscious method: all these are necessary stages to the general movement. (84)

Tarli then reinforces this point by reporting an interview he had with a former beatnick on the relationship between the *capelloni* and beat music.

Speaking with Angelo Quattrocchi, a pure-blooded beatnick…I was able to ascertain that in effect the beatnicks were not hostile to beat music, so much so that they used to spend the nights in the bars playing the jukebox and dancing to the current hits or playing them on the guitar. Probably only the most radical individuals viewed beat music as a capitalistic element. (84)

On the basis of such evidence, Tarli posits the progressive formation of a cultural movement within which elements from different orientations and varying degrees of political involvement coexisted through the universally shared need for freedom from the oppressiveness of the establishment.

The discovery of the new values was stronger and actually eliminated differences in social class. It did not matter whether you were from the lower or the middle class, what mattered was being part of the new adventure: reading the American beats, listening to the new music, being a pacifist, wearing long hair, having mystical and psychedelic experiences and rebelling against the system. (84-85)

If on the one hand differences in social class were no obstacle to the integration of the individual to the larger beat community, on the other, a wider cultural and political background and a keener sense of civic conscience on the part of certain elements (especially those living in the larger cities) determined the emergence of a radical, militant wing that took
it upon itself to formulate the *capelloni’s* credo and their agenda. Tarli’s quotation from the *capelloni’s* manifesto, first published on beat magazine *Mondo Beat*, is illuminating.

We are the new words of the *Provos* [a very active Dutch beatnick group] and of all beatnicks of the world, of all vagabonds in the world who seek peace and the new man, the man who has buried the cave man’s club and fur and who marches hopeful towards other men…we are the non-violent ones who listened to Buddha, to the Christ’s Sermon of the Mountain, to the children’s laughter and then said, “now that’s enough” and threw away the comfortable and conformist skin of passivity and curried well the horse of freedom so that it might take us far away. (93)

It is clear from this passage that the *capelloni’s* uncompromising proposals, together with their criticism of the capitalistic, consumeristic society, which transforms men into mindless zombies who unconsciously develop the “comfortable skin of passivity,” went beyond the kinds of traditional alternatives offered by such systems as socialism and communism. The *capelloni* did not advocate a redistribution of wealth and power; rather, they questioned the validity of the very need for wealth itself and for an industrialized society. Tarli’s reporting of an article on the *capelloni’s* ideology by author and publisher Gian Giacomo Feltrinelli encapsulates its essence.

The *capelloni* go on strike not for a raise in salary, nor for a violent manager, but against the very essence of capitalism, against the consumeristic society, that is, against that instrument, that subtle
capitalistic philosophy by which factory workers, farmers and students are progressively integrated into the capitalistic system….Mondo Beat’s youngsters in effect are actuating a new form of strike: the consumer’s strike. That is, they refuse to consume. (94)

Mondo Beat itself makes this point very clear.

The beat movement is radically anti-capitalist because Marxism, far from differentiating itself from capitalistic bourgeois regimes, is itself a pre-planned, mechanized world that actually accentuates its own nature through an animal-natured collectivism whose consumeristic civilization differs from Western civilization only for the scarcity and the poor quality of its products. (107)

The capelloni’s refusal to identify with any of the institutionalized Italian parties, especially the major ones, which were able to influence public opinion through the media, dictated and shaped their idiosyncratic style of propaganda, one based on repeated, non-violent provocative demonstration. The years 1996 and 1967 were a time of particularly intense activity for the Milan-based capelloni, to judge from the following events reported by Tarli.

• On November 27th the capelloni demonstrate against increasing militarism by handcuffing themselves to the chains that run along the sidewalks of S.Babila square. Some hold up ironic signs saying: Shhh! Do not disrupt public order- do not awaken consciences.

During the demonstrations the beats make contacts with the Provos [inspired by their Dutch counterparts] and Onda Verde [inspired by
the American group Green Wave]. From then on the three groups would be acting together as *Mondo Beat*. (101)

- On December 18th 1966 the three groups carry out a demonstration in which hundreds of them with their hands raised in sign of surrender, attempt to enter a police station and “arm” the cops with flowers. Fifty of them are arrested. (101)

- On April 23rd 1967, members of *Mondo Beat*’s staff, pretending to be boy scouts leaders, manage to rent a field and set up a tent town to give shelter to the growing number of youths who come to the printing office of the newspaper for help. The beats proclaim their right to live there according to their own rules. The local newspaper, voicing the hostile sentiments of the population, name the camp “new bum city”.

- On June 12th the police break in, level the area and arrest its occupants. Upon being released they become the target of an angry and vindictive citizenry. Many of them leave Milan and travel to the Far East. (104) The hardliners, who call themselves the *Palumbo*, remain. They regroup in smaller communities and move in tiny cold apartments soon to resume their provocative activities. In the
following days they will routinely walk in downtown Milan dressed up like Christmas trees, with their faces painted.

In Rome, the Palumbo’s counterparts were the Cavalieri del Nulla, “The Knights of Nothing.” They could be seen walking on the city’s most elegant streets, wearing sandwich boards. One of them showed the picture of a naked woman and the other that of a bloody war scene. Under each picture was the writing: “which is more obscene?” (106)

It is interesting that even within Mondo Beat there was discrepancy and diversity of opinion about the nature and role of beat music in the beat movement. The following item presented by Tarli is a flyer containing Onda Verde’s manifesto. It was distributed by the group’s adherents to the students of a number of Milan high schools. The third item in the list recommends L’Equipe 84, a popular Italian beat act, as an antidote to the harmful effects of capitalistic power:

1) To remain united we must disobey authority.
2) Marx, Aristotle, the Minister of War, San Thomas are good as dust rags or chewing gums.
3) When the power makes you feel sad, Equipe 84 makes you feel better.
4) The Vietnam war is not wrong because it is waged by reds or whites, but because it is a war.
5) Those who make up principles of sexual morality are always wrong.
6) Our method is non-violence. Violence is the impotent’s method. (99)
This chapter has shown the variety of attitudes, beliefs and methods of action that characterized that group of restless youths who came to be called the Italian beat movement. It was probably that great diversity and lack of cohesion, besides of course the extreme nature of some of the group’s theories and demands that prevented a substantial impact of that philosophy on Italian social, political and institutional life. The next chapter will demonstrate how the same ideological discrepancies and divergences existed also within the community of beat musicians and artists in general, and how individual orientations shaped the contemporary intellectual debate and a variegated artistic production.
CHAPTER III
POLITICIZATION OF THE YOUNG ARTISTS

The previous chapter has hinted at some of the conservative aspects and repressive institutions of the Italian establishment against which the youths of the sixties rebelled. It has shown, for instance, how the Italian educational system excluded from the school curricula the discussion of a number of topics and issues considered undesirable, unsuitable or even incompatible with the education of the future members of a “healthy” society. The application of such rigid control of the public debate, however, was not confined to the student population, but concerned also individuals who, because of their particular roles, were in the position to influence public opinion. Decades earlier, censorship had been one of the means employed by the fascist regime to enforce public conformity to the state’s views; this was a regime whose inevitable demise the Christian Democratic Party never tired of referring to as the end of a barbaric era and the return to civilization. In reality, however, censorship was still alive and well in the sixties and essentially still served the interests of two mighty powers, the
state and the Catholic church. The favorite targets of these formidable forces were mostly artists and intellectuals, since they could engender suspicion of the government’s propaganda and disapproval of its policies.

Italy is a catholic country[…] the 1929 Concordato, ‘agreement’, between church and state was still in force in the sixties and the Vatican’s interference with Italian public life, although not clearly perceptible, was nonetheless remarkable. In a country where the ruling party called itself the Democrazia Cristiana, ‘christian democracy’, firmly rooted in the catholic faith, things could not have been different. The church had a dominating influence on society and its customs, and exerted a rigid and silent control on every kind of cultural manifestation. The sheep had to stay in the herd and not get lost while following heretical ideas, or letting themselves be corrupted by what someone had already named “the devil’s music”. At the time there were no private television or radio stations, RAI (the Italian state-owned broadcasting corporation) held the monopoly on all broadcasts. There was a preventive censorship that scrutinized all of the material proposed. The term “censorship”, of course, was not used for it, [for] it evoked memories of a regime we had just come out of; but in fact a true censorship was in place. It executed a preventive screening of the lyrics of the songs (and the music style)...In practice, everything was forbidden, labels were placed on records received by RAI; they might read “do not broadcast,” “not suitable” or “discard.” Typically pruned off were any words that made even the slightest reference to sex, political statements of any kind and orientation, disrespectful statements about the country, its religion, its president, magistrates, police etc., and finally any reference to topics that in the censors’ minds could pose a serious threat to the public morality. (Iurza 24)

If the state’s overseers and guarantors of the “public decency and morality” had been relatively inactive until the beat wave swept through Italy in the mid-sixties, the church on its part had never let the guard down
against the perpetrators of the devil’s work. In a 1948 document authored by contemporary bishop of Genova, Mons. Giuseppe Siri, and partially reported by Iurza, it can be seen how dancing, a favorite Italian diversion to celebrate a long-awaited peaceful era, was hardly approved of by the leaders of the catholic church.

Promiscuity is enhanced by contact, and the latter, in turn, is intensified by the bodily movement, itself aided by the lack of self-restraint, by the libidinous exaltation of the senses, by the complacent tolerance, even the malicious suggestion of the environment. (25)

Physical contact between the sexes was not the only preoccupation of the church. About a decade later, in 1956, when rock and roll and juke boxes made their debut on the Italian scene, the church’s conservative efforts were triggered not only by the fear of the “disastrous effects” the new sinful dancing might have on youths, but also by serious concerns about the lifestyle it brought along with it, and which was promoted among Italian youths.

[The church’s] first and true war was waged against rock and roll, accused of providing adolescents with a dose of rebelliousness and transgressiveness the likes of which had never been seen […] With the advent of rock and roll, toward the end of 1956, juke box- and pinball-equipped bars threatened the associative models proposed by parishes, where kids played ping pong, soccer and staged plays. The church’s high prelates intensified their demolition campaign against rock and roll dancing by activating their organizations, especially the juvenile branches of Azione Cattolica, “catholic action.” Psychological pressure was exerted on the young to induce them to
desert the dance ground, where they might harm their moral conduct, while losing both their purity and the possibility of a future and proper marriage. Even the most progressive elements of the clergy expressed a clearly negative judgment on the youngsters’ favorite diversion. (Iurza 25)

If, on the one hand, the state’s and the church’s interests and objectives largely coincided, on the other hand, their methods in the pursuance of such objectives were clearly different. While the state’s laws were political and legal means of regulating both individual and public conduct, the church’s ethical precepts and principles did not have legal or political basis and, essentially, rested upon its moral authority. The catholic church’s function then was that of instilling in young minds a set of values and behavioral models that would facilitate conformity with both its doctrine and the state’s laws. But if the state could legally restrain and punish what it deemed illegal, the church could not legally restrain what it considered indecent, immoral or sinful. While the state could afford to ignore or postpone indefinitely the requests of the young, the church had to open up to them in order not to lose them. Tarli captures this dynamic as follows:

The sixties, besides being the years of beat, miniskirts and sexual freedom, were also the years of Vatican Council II. The church was concerned with the fact that an increasing number of young citizens, attracted by new economic opportunities in the northern large industrial centers, were progressively distancing themselves from the catholic traditions. The Italian population, especially the juvenile, was losing contact with a spiritual community [which was] hardly
modernized and frozen instead in reactionary and anachronistic positions. New stimuli were reaching the Italian population and an attempt at fighting them off might have been counterproductive. The church understood that time had come to reform itself […] with Vatican Council II the church changed its institutions and its ways of dealing with the external world. It introduced the Mass in the vernacular to enhance attendance at its rites, and emphasized its need for opening up to the world, for welcoming and striving to understand the needs of the people, especially the young. (119)

Among the stimuli reaching the Italian population of the time, music was certainly one of the most powerful. It has been previously pointed out how the church’s demonization of dancing and rock and roll had begun long before the advent of beat music. However, around the time of the council, the church recognized the tremendous impact beat music was having on the juvenile masses and intelligently chose not to oppose it but instead to integrate it with its ritual. The result was the emergence of the beat liturgical music that replaced the ancient modal sonorities of Gregorian chant with the sound of contemporary British and American bands.

Within a couple of years the kids’ new music had succeeded in making a very high number of converts, among whom were also fervent Catholics. With the help of priests they knew, these catholic Christians were able to form religious bands and even cut records for Vatican-associated recording companies. Hard to believe, a small Catholic beat movement was born that attempted to bring the young generations closer to the church through beat music. (Tarli 119)

This marriage of beat music and sacred texts, whose most important offspring was what came to be called the “Beat Mass”, made the church’s
ritual significantly more palatable to the young. They could now sing their belief in the catholic god, which is what the church expected of them, to a Beatles-sounding musical accompaniment. It would seem that this brilliant compromise had made everyone happy, yet not every kid was willing to settle for a pious variety of beat, and certainly not every catholic approved of this “adulteration” of sacred music. The following comments, from a hardly progressive contemporary author reported by Iurza, clearly exemplify the hard-line orientation of certain segments of the catholic population.

In 1960’s Rome we witnessed the so-called beat mass phenomenon. Its effects were like those of a nuclear explosion, with the fatal consequence of granting liturgical citizenship status to a dangerous and hazardous procedure that makes liturgical music a simple transposition of secular, fashionable music. Such high-consumption music, unsubstantial, unworthy and ephemeral, is erroneously and unjustly called “popular”, just as equally erroneously the term “concert” is applied to those screams, those “disconcerting” noises and those contortions that are so delightful to oceanic mindless crowds. It is this false “popular” genre, imposed by the overwhelming power of the media, in the hands of unscrupulous merchants, that has brought about the aridity of the pure fountain spring of Gregorian chant and of that cultured and popular music that constituted the most beautiful décor of our churches and celebrations. (27)

The foregoing paragraphs give the reader a sufficiently clear picture of the context in which beat musicians operated and of the adversities they had to endure as self-appointed missionaries fighting for a better world. However, it must not be assumed that censorship was inactive until the advent of the
beat movement, nor that beat artists were indifferent to society’s problems until they embraced the beat revolution of the mid-sixties. In fact, some of the most important songwriters of the time began their careers before The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez became the objects of Italian idolatry, and their songs, though not yet infused with such typical American folksingers’ themes as anti-militarism and anti-racism, or sung to a rocking British sound, had enough subversive elements in them to motivate the guardians of public morality to step in.

One such figure was Luigi Tenco. Singer, composer and charismatic young intellectual, Tenco had experienced censorship early on in his career; however, far from inducing him to reconsider his ideological positions, such a setback simply reinforced his conviction of the need for a new generation of Italian artist whose primary task would be that of awakening consciences rather than entertaining ears. Tenco was associated with the so called *Scuola Genovese*, or “Genoese school,” a group of Genoa-based university wits with a strong interest in existentialism, maudit literature, jazz, blues and French song. Among the numerous interests of the group was also songwriting. It was through a series of unusual circumstances that they ended up becoming also the interpreters of their compositions.
It all happened almost by chance within the span of two summers, those of 1959 and 1960. The administration of Ricordi, which until then had been only a publisher of sheet music, decided to become also a record publishing label and entrusted the project to such extravagant and anti-conformist-minded young men as Nanni Ricordi and Giovanno Crepax. They did not waste any time and decided to take advantage of possibly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try and launch new talents. Soon they were swamped with extremely diverse requests and demo tapes from a multitude of singers and composers...[some of the songs they received] were totally different from those that had dominated the market until then...they were titled “La Gatta” (the “she-cat”), “Arrivederci” (See You Later) or “Non Arrossire” (“Don’t Blush”) and seemed to have been written specifically to meet the tastes of a juvenile audience starving for novelties...but who could possibly sing such eccentric songs? The two managers decided that since the songs themselves were novelties they might as well ask the composers to try their hand at singing them. (Borgna 275)

Such singers were called cantautori, that is, author-singer. Over time this term came to include not just Scuola Genovese exponents but all those artists who interpreted their own compositions. Tenco and his associates met with success overnight. The question of how a bunch of young “weirdos” managed to impose their new, idiosyncratic styles on a market still dominated by traditional Italian songs, both in terms of music and lyrics, is indeed an interesting one.

The persisting hegemony of a popular style that still featured opera-reminiscent singers accompanied by orchestras and revisiting age-old highly cherished themes would hardly indicate the existence of a progressive
audience. Tenco’s and his associates’ breakthrough, however, seems to confirm them in their belief that consciences could and must be awaken.

The cantautore idea turned out to be a winner, [but] perhaps there is a subtler reason for their immediate success. Italy in those years was profoundly provincial not only in its songs. Bigotry and conformity ruled unhindered, only scratched by the new and, possibly, even more vulgar and intolerable myths of wealth and consumerism. Those early cantautori offered to that puritan, record-loving Italy a charge of anticonformism and spontaneity. (Borgna 275)

At a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, in which more and more people could afford lifestyles unheard of in previous generations, the cantautori of the Scuola Genovese sang of a deep-seated discomfort and dissatisfaction which permeated their lives and with which many young people could identify.

Were the 1960’s carefree and happy? Maybe, but they, the cantautori, were voicing a different kind of feeling, a widespread uneasiness, especially among the young. Their lyrics were filled with authentic pain. Their lives were as well: Paoli attempted suicide in 1963, Tenco took his life during the 1967 San Remo festival. (Borgna 276)

In 1962 Tenco made his recording debut, and almost all of the songs of his first album were censored by the commissione d’ascolto, or “listening committee.” One of them, “Cara maestra” (“Dear Teacher”), attacked three key institutions of Italian society: the church, the educational system and the military, and was thus clearly “doomed” at its very conception. Yet, despite RAI’s refusal to bestow its almighty support (a huge setback since RAI was
the only legitimate Italian broadcasting agency), “Cara maestra,” and other
censored songs met with immediate commercial success, a clear sign that
there was an audience out there who shared Tenco’s views. A brief look at
the subject matter of “Cara maestra,” borrowed from Tarli, will clearly
illustrate why the song was chastised by the censors and exalted by the new
emancipated generations.

In “Cara maestra” Tenco recalls that the teacher taught her students
that we are all equal in this world, yet when the janitor walked in, the
students could remain seated, but when the principal showed up, they
had to stand up. Similarly the priest stated that the church was the
house of the poor, “yet he filled it up with gold/and how can the poor
feel at home in there?” [Tenco] then reminded the mayor of when he
used to say “we must either win or die” yet he didn’t die and in his
place died a lot of people who neither wanted to win nor die. (65)

In 1966, in the midst of the beat revolution, when, following the
emergence of the American peace movement, Tenco’s interest centered
around antimilitarism, the most radical beats criticized his dual role of
successful recording artist and champion of the pacifist cause as
inconsistent. The following debate, taking place in a Rome beat club, shows
the extent of Tenco’s commitment to his mission. In his willingness to
expose himself to the flack of a merciless crowd of young extremists, whom
he does not regard as beyond redemption, and to dialogue constructively
with them, Tenco almost comes off as a beat messiah who, having left
behind the loftiness of artistic stardom, reaches down to the unenlightened to share his vision.

**Audience:** Protest song is a consumption-geared type of merchandise, a kind of exploitation like many others. You live off it, so you are an exploiter too.

**Tenco:** That’s absolutely not true. I write songs, and instead of trying to make money by singing about little flowers and the like, I sing about the things I believe in.

**Audience:** And by so doing you promote the interests of those you protest against. Because you finance the big shots, those who determine the present state of affairs. Because Mr. Bob Dylan gives millions of dollars to the American weapon makers, who are the real war wagers. And he who participates in a system which he opposes, with words or music, is either a mystifier or a mindless servant.

**Tenco:** Then we need to understand each other very well on this participation business. First of all let’s acknowledge the fact that the society we live in is one of an industrial kind. Therefore if I want my discourse, if not my protest to reach the public, I have to do it on the industrial level, don’t I? Sure, protest songs have been written before, and probably more intelligent ones at that; the problem is they were of no consequence. Today we’re seeing kids tearing up draft notifications, and in large numbers too. We’re seeing marches joined by lots of people. And why do these people join in?

**Audience:** You don’t think that is just the result of your songs, do you?

**Tenco:** Think of Bob Dylan, of Barry Mcguire when he sings “Eve of Destruction,” he’s doing something he couldn’t have done if he hadn’t been part of a certain kind of society in which at one point you have to…

**Audience:** But now you are in it, perfectly integrated and harmless, and you have obviously compromised with it. Your protest doesn’t even tickle it. Does all that look serious to you? Does all that look consistent to you?

**Tenco:** Oh, come on, cut it out! I have never made compromises with anyone. Because I can’t do that, I can’t compromise with my own conscience, that is, with my convictions. I am the way I am, and besides, my protest doesn’t start off intellectually, upon deciding to
protest against this or that guy. It is a protest born outside one’s will, born out of the fact that one doesn’t feel he’s part of a certain mechanism…a thought might hit me all of a sudden and I’ll say “I can’t be a soldier, I don’t want, I can’t go to die. This is a spontaneous reaction, it’s a sincere protest, not a pre-planned one. So the lyrics of all my songs express this kind of uneasiness. One can protest in a thousand ways and forms, this is the way I do it, and it comes directly from my character. (Tarli 43)

That very sense of painful uneasiness and dissatisfaction with a world he ultimately realized he could neither change nor come to terms with was responsible for his premature death. In 1967 Tenco entered the Festival di San Remo, the most important showcase for Italian singer and songwriters. For the occasion he wrote “Ciao amore ciao,” with which he hoped to sensitize public opinion to the painful exodus of thousands of Italian Southerners. These young men’s only “fault” was having been born in a no man’s land, abandoned by the central government and controlled by the mafia, an economically depressed, crime-infested region that had nothing to offer to those who sought prosperity within legality. The price to pay for those who migrated to the industrial centers of the North was very high: the rigors of long, harsh winters, the indifference, if not hostility and prejudice of their new neighbors, the painful separation from their families etc. Tenco felt compassion for and solidarity toward these men:

   And then a thousand streets
   As grey as smoke

31
In a world of lights
Feeling like you’re no one

The exclusion of his song from San Remo’s final phase and, more importantly, the message that such a rejection entailed, namely that there was no room for social criticism at San Remo and that singers had to leave politics alone, shattered any hopes Tenco may still have entertained of ever impacting Italian society through his music. Before taking his life, he wrote:

I have loved the Italian public and I have devoted to them five years of my life. I’m doing this not because I’m tired of life (just the opposite), but as an act of protest against a public that voted “Io tu e le rose”, [I, You and the Flower”] into the final and a committee that selected “La Rivoluzione” [“The Revolution,” a beat-mocking song]. I hope this will clarify someone’s ideas. (Tarli 67)

In 1967, just prior to Tenco’s tragic end, Tenco himself and other beat artists had spearheaded Linea Gialla (yellow line), a strongly politicized artistic movement. To understand its raison d’etre, an overview of the events leading up to its emergence is in order. In 1966, the growing popularity of beat music and culture had forced San Remo’s producers to admit beat bands to the competition. A deadly mix of incompetence on the part of RAI technicians, and prejudice on the part of the jury, resulted in the eliminations of almost all the bands in the preliminary phases of the competition, and a clamorous scandal had ensued. The beat magazine Big, backed up by a number of beat artists and by the creators of the beat radio
show Bandiera Gialla (“Yellow Flag”), articulated the feelings and views of the beat community at a press conference by announcing Il Manifesto Della Musica Nuova (the manifesto of the new music). It read as follows:

1) Today it’s not enough to write a song. What matters is how you write it.
2) We tap into tradition but we don’t respect it.
3) A tradition is valid only as long as it evolves; otherwise it belongs in a museum.
4) A song is a living thing, but in order to remain such it must look to the future, not the past.
5) In 1966 musical nationalism is nonsense, both from the historical and the stylistic point of view.
6) We want to be honest with the public, thus we want to give them the most lively, amusing and politicized music available.
7) Hallowed icons do not scare us.
8) We are definitely against all those who do not share our views.
9) Before someone points it out, we’ll admit from the beginning that we are part of that artistic current that originating from the various Ray Charles [all black singers], passes through the Beatles and Bob Dylan.
10) The way we conceive of music is the way we live.
11) We believe in the young people and work for them.
12) One can be old even at 18 years of age.
13) The blues is not only a basis, but, above all, a faith.
14) We seek the contempt of all those who don’t share our views. They despise us anyway. (Tarli 50)

In the fall of 1966, the beat magazine Big reported the emergence of a new artistic movement. It had named itself Linea Verde (green line) and was headed by lyricist Mogol. Its members opposed to the fiery proclamations and accusations of Manifesto promoters a new philosophical
approach to music-making. Their songs would not be characterized by a harsh criticism of society, but by an affirmative hope in an ideal world of peace and brotherhood. The inevitable reaction of the hardliners, who now polemically called themselves Linea Gialla and among whom was Tenco, appeared shortly after on the pages of the same magazine. Tenco and his associates believed that Linea Verde was just an attempt to dilute the revolutionary potential of beat music and to cash in on the conflict between conservative and progressive forces by offering an easily marketable music with a beat sound and harmless lyrics. Linea Gialla’s suspicions were reinforced by the fact that Linea Verde artists had never been particularly eager to join their cause. To Tenco and company, such songs as The Rokes’ “Cercate di abbracciare tutto il mondo come noi” (“Try and Embrace the Whole World Like We Do”) sounded like empty, fake appeals for a peace they knew could be achieved only through political involvement and personal sacrifice. To them, Linea Verde songs were at best an escape from reality, and at worst a tacit approval of what was seriously wrong with the world:

The young people’s reasons for protesting are far from being exhausted. All one has to do is look around, at Italy and at the world, to realize that the presuppositions on which the young people’s protest is based are more than ever relevant. Because nowadays the young people’s freedom is at risk everywhere in the world. The risk comes
from all those reactionary forces that, far from having been 
eliminated, have instead developed new and formidable weapons to 
anesthetize brains and seal mouths…Why then *Linea Verde*? What 
does it serve for? And, more importantly, whom does it serve? The 
answer seems quite simple. It serves those who want to confound 
public opinion, to make themselves more popular, or other speculative 
purposes. Let those hear that have ears to hear…the young people 
should know that we, in open opposition to *Linea Verde*, are closely 
linked with the blues, with Dylan, with Kerouac and all those who still 
believe, whether in musical or non-musical terms, in the irrepressible 
need for peace and freedom. We don’t want to “hope” in peace and 
freedom; to keep or conquer them; we prefer to fight on a battlefield 
made of splendid and meaningful notes. It is well that this be known, 
as it is well that the young people beware of the mystifiers of popular 
music. (Bruccolieri 11-12)

Soon, again on the same magazine, appeared *Linea Verde*’s answer. In it 
Mogol rejected all accusations from *Linea Gialla*, whose leadership, he held, 
had totally misinterpreted *Linea Verde*’s message of an apolitical, impartial 
kind of love, the only answer to the problems besetting Italy and the world at 
large.

Dear director, one thing is certain, Tenco [and his associates] didn’t 
understand anything about *Linea Verde*. It is not their fault, on the 
contrary, we don’t hesitate to admit that we are at fault. Unfortunately 
we haven’t yet had the time to explain what *Linea Verde* is and whom 
it serves…*Linea Verde* is not optimism, it is hope. Hope doesn’t 
mean surrender, even less does it mean victory. We are not betraying 
the beat philosophy. From it, we don’t deny, we drew courage, purity 
and all its creeds. We don’t, however, consider it as an arrival point, 
but rather a departure point. To us, *Linea Verde* is the perfecting of 
the beat philosophy, more love in a universal sense. Love is a word 
that the beatnicks have almost never used. (Bruccolieri 12)
The unabating controversy was further complicated by the emergence of a third movement, *Linea Rossa* (“Red Line”), whose mission was to create songs “geared toward the new generations actively involved in Italian politics, and through those songs counter the neo-capitalistic propaganda with a new propaganda based on a socialist vision and interpretation of reality.” (Tarli 52) Unlike its opponents, *Linea Rossa* was aligned with Italian major political institutionalized forces and its music supported the clearly defined social, economic and political agendas of the left wing parties. Inevitably, they mistrusted *Linea Verde*’s, visionary, idealistic approach, and even more *Linea Gialla*’s rebellious, anarchic, anti-alignment stance. More than the lack of universal love, which *Linea Verde* advocated, or the progressive erosion of peace and freedom “here and everywhere” which *Linea Gialla* lamented, what mostly preoccupied *Linea Rossa* was the exploitation of the working class. To them, what workers really needed was not the possibility of walking around hugging people, nor that of growing their hair and beards, smoking conscience-enlarging “grass” and congregating in pro-world peace and freedom marches (especially since the beats demanded freedom from oppressive communist regimes, such as the Soviet Union and China). What *Linea Rossa* thought workers needed was more money, fewer working hours and better working conditions. This is
well illustrated by the manifesto of the movement, the song “Linea Rossa,” in which food on the table ranks higher than love, and hostility is more useful than peace in the process that leads to a more equal and fair society. Interestingly, it was a remake of a Beach Boys’ song (“Sloop John B”), whose lyrics had been completely altered to fit its new purpose and audience. Its interpreter, Giovanna Marini, a staunch supporter of the communist cause and an accomplished musician, had furthered her musical studies not in the Soviet Union, China or Cuba, but in the USA. Even more curious is the fact that, in seeking a suitable piece of music to accompany her Linea Rossa manifesto, she did not tap into the rich American folk tradition of, say, Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger, but rather into the happy, carefree-spirited repertory of fun-loving Beach Boys. Such a choice was possibly dictated by the need for competitiveness in an arena where beat sounds ruled unchallenged. It was a choice that time proved to be quite sensible; Linea Rossa in fact never met the success and popularity achieved by Linea Gialla and Linea Verde. One probable reason was the fact that most of its songs were stylistically close to an old, Italian folk idiom that was more appealing to ethnomusicologists than the restless young crowds of the time:

Peace, love, justice, truth
We agree are good things, but
We need to go further
We need to go further
Red Line has always gone further

In place of peace
I’d rather have hostility
It doesn’t sound so good to all
But it sounds good to those who
Everyday wonder
If next day they’ll have food on their table

Refrain (Peace, love etc.)

In place of love, yes
I’d have war against those who
Drink the blood of the people they own
It’s nicer, I know, to call it charity
Sure, truth is not so pleasant

Refrain

Justice and truth is just what we want
And here all they talk about is freedom
But even that, we know,
Is an ingredient of a quality song recipe.

Not every artist of the Italian beat era can be easily or precisely placed within the three ideological currents represented by Linea Verde, Linea Gialla and Linea Rossa, or in any given movement. Some artists’ orientations were more eclectic than those of, say, Mogol, Luigi Tenco or Giovanna Marini. In some cases such orientations evolved in response to the artist’s cultural and intellectual growth. A case in point is poet,
songwriter and singer Francesco Guccini. At the beginning of his career
Guccini became infatuated with the writings of a group of early 1900 Italian
poets called the *Poeti Crepuscolari* (crepuscular poets). These men
maintained that poetry had no social or civic function and that the poet was
not a promoter of social progress. In short they shared a total mistrust
toward any religious, political or social ideal. Yet, later on Guccini credited
left-wing songwriter Fausto Amodei with inspiring him to compose his own
songs. In 1963 Amodei and a number of other musicians, some of whom
associated with the PSI (Italian Socialist Party), and some others with the
PCI (Italian Communist party) like future *Linea Rossa* exponent Giovanna
Marini, had founded a left-oriented literary and musical movement, *Il Nuovo
Canzoniere*, whose works promoted the socialist cause. However, a few
years later Guccini discovered Bob Dylan, the American peace movement
and the beat generation, all of which inspired him to write two of his most
popular songs: “Auschwitz,” in which he echoes Dylan’s “Blowing in the
Wind”:

_I wonder, how can a man kill his brother_
_Yet there are thousands of us_
_whose dust is in the wind_
_the cannon is still thundering_
_the human beast’s thirst for blood still isn’t quenched_
_and the wind is still carrying us away_
_I wonder when men will learn_
to live without killing
and the wind will become still

and “Dio e` morto,” or “God is dead,” in which he paraphrases Allen Ginsberg’s “The Howl”:

I’ve seen people of my age going away
Along the roads that never lead anywhere
Pursuing the dream that leads to insanity
Seeking something they can’t find in the world
...
It’s a dead God
Along the curb of the streets God is dead
In the cars bought on installments God is dead
In the summer myths God is dead

These songs, which Guccini sold to two bands, L’Equipe 84 and I Nomadi, caused their interpreters various problems with conservative audiences and the censorship. “Dio e` morto,” which was a condemnation of the spiritual emptiness that materialism and consumerism, patently revealed was censored by the short-sighted, narrow-minded officials of the commissione d’ascolto, whereas Pope Paul VI, who understood the true message of the song, publicly praised it.

In 1972, years after the beat boom, Guccini abandoned the American themes of pacifism and anti-consumerism and began composing songs whose political content clearly showed their ideological connection with the Nuovo Canzoniere. In “La locomotiva,” (“The Locomotive”), the
locomotive’s great power is compared with the equally explosive force of a people that, having been awakened from the hibernation of submission by the arrival of the new doctrines (communism, socialism, anarchism) furiously revolts against its oppressors.

And the locomotive seemed to be a strange monster
Which man subdues with his thoughts and with his hand
As it roared on, it left behind itself spaces that seemed boundless
It seemed to have inside a tremendous power
Even the force of dynamite.
But another great force was then spreading its wings
Words saying that all men are equal
And against kings and tyrants
the proletarian bomb exploded in the street
and the torch of anarchy
illuminated the air.

In 1974, with “Stanze di vita quotidiana” ("Rooms of Everyday’s Life") Guccini returned to more personal, intimate themes, much closer to his early literary interests. His artistic journey had now come full circle.

My old friend of bygone days and thoughts
How long we’ve known each other
Twenty-five years is a long time and let’s say
With a little irony, it feels like yesterday.
But I know that it’s not true and you know
What time has given and taken from us
I, hardly young, have aged
And you, maybe, have never been young
The cigarettes furiously smoked
The old blue jeans and the few dollars
It seemed as if it would never end
But with every autumn the summer ended.
A comparison of the lives and careers of these two giants, Tenco and Guccini, of the Italian *canzone impegnata* (a type of song in which its author expresses his commitment, views and feelings about certain serious issues) can reveal particularly interesting facts. One worthwhile consideration concerns the different routs by which they arrived at parallel ideological positions. While Guccini derived the typical beat motifs of pacifism, anti-consumerism and non-alignment with institutionalized political groups from the American beat generation and peace movement of the following decade, Tenco became familiar with these themes through the French protest songs of such singers as Leo Ferre’ and Georges Brassens. Leo Ferre’, for instance, had attacked the French middle class’s materialism, consumerism and triviality in “Les Rupins,” criticized French politicians of all sorts (including those in the trade unions), in “Salut Beatnik,” and condemned the French military occupation of Algeria in “Les Temps Difficiles.” Also interesting is Tenco’s and Guccini’s convergence on the question of whether an artist can effectively influence the political course and development of the society of which he is a member. Guccini, as the following interview shows, believes that since songs express a personal and
not a political institution’s point of view, they cannot be political instruments.

**Interviewer:** Can one engage in politics by means of his songs?
**Guccini:** No, but you can align with a party. My songs are not directly political, even though I talk about politics. They come out of me and are, therefore, a reflection of my way of seeing things. But political activity must be undertaken with other means. (Guccini)

Probably for similar reasons, Tenco had asked Ricordi director, Nanni Ricordi, not to print his name on his records upon deciding to join the leadership of the PSI (Italian Socialist Party). Possibly Tenco was concerned that the lyrics of the song that “came out of him” might be interpreted as conflicting or even incompatible with the views and objectives of the PSI. Perhaps Tenco was considering a complete withdrawal from his musical career to devote his undivided attention and efforts to a political career, in which he might have felt he had a better chance of affecting Italian lives. On the contrary, Guccini, himself a former supporter of the PSI (he later distanced himself from the party on account of a scandal involving the party’s leader), has always rejected invitations from left-wing parties to join their ranks out of concerns for his personal privacy.

Tenco and Guccini are examples of the few beat artists who always strove to maintain their commitment to composing *canzoni impregnate*, or “songs of commitment.” The vast majority of solo singers and bands of the
period chose the safer course of sticking to songs that had a beat sound and “harmless lyrics.” Such a choice could be spontaneous, as in the case of Linea Verde’s exponents, or it could be induced, in more radical, militant artists, by the notorious commissione d’ascolto of RAI. Such was the case of I Nomadi, as the following interview reveals.

**Interviewer:** Your first LP “Per quando noi non ci saremo” (“For when we won’t be around”) was one of the most important and revolutionary records of the sixties. What reasons caused the band to change its course?

**I Nomadi:** we were opposed from all sides, we had a thousand difficulties to overcome. The radio and television, for one, were constantly censoring our pieces; honestly, we had to survive.

(Caffarelli 81-2)

In other cases, the choice of leaving politics alone was not induced by social or institutional pressure, but by personal concerns and moral considerations. In the following interview, Maurizio Vandelli, leader of the band L’Equipe 84, recalls that the idea of becoming politicized-- thus contributing to the exacerbation of already high social tensions--was frightening to the band.

**Interviewer:** You too, like I Nomadi, went through a Guccinian phase, although a short-lived one. Witnesses of it are two songs, one very famous, “Auschwitz,” and the other less so, “L’anti-sociale” (“The Antisocial”). Tell me about this phase.

**Vandelli:** It was a time of disorientation, this was the moment when we became frantic at a general situation we could no longer understand, a situation that was out of our hands. Should we prioritize the lyrics? Should we become politicized? The idea was scary.
There was a lot of confusion around us. Many of those with whom only a year before we were peacefully smoking grass now were talking about bombs and revolution. At that point it might have been better to disband; but we couldn’t, we were still too hot. (Sisto 90)

The mildest type of politicized beat songs concerns the idealistic appeals to world peace that characterized the *Linea Verde* approach and whose main purpose seemed to be to cash in on the explosion of the “flower power” fad. However, in some cases the artists’ intentions could be genuine. In the following interview, Shell Shapiro, former leader of The Rokes, explains that behind the recording of “*Cercate di abbracciare tutto il mondo come noi*” was in fact the idea, or at least the hope, of steering its artistic trajectory in the direction of a more serious and authentic repertory.

**Interviewer:** Earlier you mentioned the song that became the manifesto of the Italian flower power, “*Cercate di abbracciare tutto il mondo come noi*.” Let me ask you abruptly, did you guys believe in that?

**Shell:** We believed above all in what was behind flower power, in its pacifist foundation, in Dylan’s song, which was the ancestor of that particular type of politicization. Of course we couldn’t believe in Scott McKenzie and his “If You’re Going to San Francisco” which, as beautiful as it was, smelled fake from a mile. We too realized we had commercialized that idea, but the purpose for “*Cercate di abbracciare tutto il mondo come noi*” was that of creating a new space within the audience to propose new, more serious and genuine things. The expedient, at least on one occasion, worked. We were invited [to a TV show] to talk about our new flower power trend and we were able to perform Dylan’s “Masters of War.” (Sisto 103)
Noteworthy is also the fact that on August 8th, 1970, The Rokes concluded their career with a memorable performance at the *Festival Dell’Unita* ("Unity Festival"), a seasonal, pre-elections cultural event organized by the PCI (Italian Communist Party). Maybe this was the English band’s way of saying to thousands of Italian left-wing youths: we are sorry we didn’t get more involved with you before, but we want you to know, before we part from you forever, that we share your cause.

Another major beat band that incorporated into their repertory Dylan’s concerns for world peace, although in a diluted dosage, was *I Giganti* ("The Giants"). Dylan provided the group with a perspective on social issues that was sorely missing in the work of most other bands. The following reminiscences are from Papes, drummer and bass voice with *I Giganti*.

[We also listened to] Dylan and Donovan. However, there weren’t many people who expressed themselves through their lyrics, which tended to be rather light. With our lyrics we were trying to touch upon social issues, although they were actually a little bland [probably compared to Dylan’s or Joan Baez’s]. (Papes)

The least politicized beat artists, of course, were those whose songs never reflected an interest in the social and political issues of the time, and to whom the label “beat” can only be applied on strictly musical terms. Such was the case of *I Satelliti*, “The Satellites,” as Roberto Guscelli, the band’s guitarist, candidly admits.
Interviewer: what kind of relationship did you guys have with the beat movement, were you influenced by it, or connected with it in any way?
Roberto: the beat world for us was just a slogan, nothing more than that. We didn’t feel we were involved with it or influenced by it in any way. (2)

Franco Capovilla, guitarist and leader of I Delfini, “The Dolphins,” even admits that the only aspect of the beat revolution he and his buddies were interested in was its sexual liberation.

Interviewer: I Delfini were a beat band, but I have never noticed in your lyrics any reference to the problems and the ideology of that generation…[most] of your output consists of either love songs or carefree, humorous songs. Was it your own choice? Were you guys interested in what was going on in those years (the violent confrontations between the beats and the police in the large cities, the strikes and demonstrations against politics and war…all that rebelliousness that culminated with the fiery 1968). Many of your colleagues built up their entire careers by singing protest songs, possibly without any real interest in those issues, so that such songs were nothing but expedients to capture a wider consent among the youths…maybe then your repertory was more honest.
Franco: For us the beat [ideology] was a fad, we had just graduated from high school and didn’t yet know the beat writers, or Hesse, Marcuse and the others who became popular later. The only revolution we put into practice was the sexual one, especially with the foreign girls we met on the beach, who had no taboos, while Italian girls, who were still playing the faithful fiancée, were a few years behind. (Marino 3)

Ferry Sansoni, keyboardist with I New Dada, not only admits his band’s lack of interest in the ideals upheld by the beats and a few radical bands, but also justifies such an attitude as the consequence of a legitimately different
political orientation. The band’s role models were not the angry, long-haired and unshaven capelloni, or such bands as I Nomadi, who represented those youngsters, but the elegant (both in music and look) Beatles.

**Interviewer:** Did the beat movement mean anything to you? Did you feel you were part of a juvenile movement, or were you just in love with music and success?

**Ferry:** Mainly, we wanted to make music. We were never politically involved, like the Nomadi and other colleagues. We played music for our own enjoinderment and for the excitement of our fans. We never thought of protesting against something or someone, there already were people out there doing it. And if we had done that, our political position certainly wouldn’t have been the same as the Nomadi’s. I can honestly tell you that both we and the other bands recorded pieces we thought were going to sell well; then someone realized that with protest songs they could catch a larger portion of the market that was connected to a certain political ideology [the left] and decided to stick to a genre which, however, was more congenial to them (see the Nomadi). We always looked to the Beatles for inspiration and couldn’t conceive the idea of performing before an audience in dirty, worn-out clothes. (Truffi 2)

The previous two chapters have illustrated a variety of attitudes and approaches to the new and revolutionary tenets of the sixties among the artists, their audiences and the general young population of contemporary Italy. The next chapter, more strictly musicological, will reconstruct the genesis of an Italian beat idiom through the testimony of its makers.
CHAPTER IV

A REVIEW OF THE PRE-BEAT MUSICAL WORLD

Italian beat music of the sixties is the culmination of a process of emancipation from tradition undergone by Italian popular music during the previous five decades. That process, therefore, needs to be succinctly covered to understand the cultural and musical soil out of which beat music emerged. The account given here comes primarily from Gianni Borgna’s *Storia della canzone italiana*, specifically from chapters IV through XIV, in which he examines pre-beat Italian songs and the contexts in which they originated.

The arrival in Europe of exotic dances, coupled with the advent of the recording industry, perfectly met the old world’s need for novelty and its craving of the “forbidden fruit.” In 1905, the cake walk dance made its first appearance in Italy, followed in 1913 by tango and in the twenties by foxtrot, rumba, giava, charleston and black bottom. Dance halls and dance academies mushroomed in Italian major cities, despite the Catholic Church’ harsh condemnation of the activities they promoted. The twenties were also
the years in which jazz became firmly established in the land of bel canto.
The first musicians to play the new, syncopated music on Italian soil were
the Rome-based American troops led by General Pershing, whose ensemble
also included a thirteen-year-old Italian banjoist named Vittorio Spina. In
1918, impresario Arturo Agazzi organized in Milan the first live
performances of all-Italian jazz bands and in 1920 he opened the first jazz
club, the Ambassador’s new club, where the Ambassador’s jazz band
performed regularly. On the invitation tickets, sent out to encourage
attendance of these events, and on the club’s bass drum, the printed word
“jazz” had made its first Italian appearance, although 1921 alternatively
spelled (with only one z).

The first modern music club in Rome opened in 1921, and was soon
followed by similar clubs in other Italian cities. The need for performers of
the new music and the interested it generated resulted in the emergence of a
Roman jazz band: The Black and White Jazz Band, which featured
something never seen before, a professional saxophone player (Felice
Barboni). Because in the 1920’s Italian recording companies had no interest
in jazz, the music these early Italian jazz bands performed came from the
extremely rare American jazz records that found their way into Italy. Very
little Italian jazz was recorded, perhaps from the lack of a market for it,
mostly by minor, small-sized companies, which, however discontinued such activities at the end of the 1920’s. In 1935, recording of Italian jazz resumed, but the output of the initial historical stage had been lost forever.

Another obstacle to the healthy evolution of an Italian jazz movement was of course the fascist dictatorship, which “strictly controlled not only Italian political life, but also the various types of mass communication and even the most disparate musical phenomena.” (Borgna 106) In 1929, for instance, official pronouncements by the regime ordered all foreign songs to be translated into Italian, and defined as “incompatible with national order” and “disrespectful to authorities” various types of musical composition. The list included such national anthems as “La Marseillaise,” and all socialist and anarchical songs. Furthermore, with the implementation of the patti lateranensi (a treaty between Benito Mussolini and the Vatican), in the same year, no disrespectful reference to the state religion would be tolerated. (Borgna 107)

Fascist attitudes toward jazz were not always consistent. The regime’s initial reaction to the advent of the new American music was one of outright hostility. The following 1928 article, appearing in the newspaper Il Popolo d’Italia (The Italian People) and titled “Fascismo e tradizione” (“Fascism and Tradition”), is illuminating:
It is unhealthy and insulting to our tradition, and therefore for our race, to lock in the attic mandolins and guitars and then blow saxophones and beat on drums to accompany some barbaric melodies that live only through ephemeral fads. It is stupid, ridiculous and anti-fascist to go into ecstasy over a mulatto woman’s belly dance, or to run like idiots to any *americanata*, ‘American silly thing’ coming from the other side of the ocean. It is up to us to create our own types of life, art and beauty, just as we are create our own type of government, our laws and our highly original institutions. (Borgna 107)

Yet from 1927 to 1929, EIAR (ente italiana per le audizioni radiofoniche), the fascist-controlled and sole Italian broadcasting corporation, almost daily broadcast live jazz music from dance halls all over Italy. In 1929 EIAR even started a daily program called Eiar Jazz, which went on air for a whole year. Then the program was suppressed and no jazz music was broadcasted until 1935.

1930 is a particularly important year in the modernization process of Italian popular music since it marks the emergence of the swing big bands. These ensembles soon revolutionized all the local instrumental and singing styles. (Borgna 129) In 1936, EIAR entrusted its own official big band to Pippo Barzizza, an accomplished band conductor with a penchant for jazzy, swinging orchestrations. Barzizza revolutionized the line-up of the band by adding more horns and a top-notch pianist-arranger. The result was an
excellent, heavily jazz-oriented ensemble capable of a performance level comparable to that of its American counterparts.

Other important figures in the Italian jazz scenario of the time were: singer, composer and accordion virtuoso Gorni Kramer, and singers Natalino Otto, Alberto Rabbagliati and the Trio Lescano. Kramer was the first artist to sing in jazz, scat style on an Italian record and was also the first to use the accordion as a jazz instrument. A true pioneer of the new music, Oddo learned his trade while singing and playing drums on cruise liners sailing between Genova and New York. His continuous journeying across the ocean gave him the opportunity to attend live shows of American jazz singers and to perform for an international and modern audience. Boycotted by EIAR for his international taste and orientation he established a reputation solely through his records. His style was in fact, too close to the “barbaric, negro anti-music” for EIAR policy. (Borgna 153)

Another great interpreter of Italian swing was Alberto Rabbagliati. In 1926 he traveled to the USA in pursuit of his dream of becoming a movie star. In 1930, upon realization that his dream would not materialize, he returned to Italy and made his singing debut on the music scene with Pippo Barzizza’s Blue Star Swing Band. A restless spirit, soon Rabbagliati packed and set out for Paris only to change his mind again and return to Italy at the
end of the thirties, where success was awaiting him. In 1941 he was so popular that he had his own radio show every Monday night. (Borgna 153)

However, the true and iconic protagonists of Italian swing were the three Dutch sisters known by their Italianized name of Trio Lescano. Following in the steps of the American Andrew Sisters, who became world-famous in 1937, the Trio Lescano sold, mostly thanks to the radio, about 350,000 records a year, a stunning average for the time. Their fortunes changed when the fascist junta, in alignment with the Nazi regime, initiated their persecution of the Jews. Boycotted by the radio, they continued to perform, but in 1943, in the middle of a performance, they were arrested and incarcerated. After the war was over, they left for Argentina, never to be seen or heard of again.

When WWII ended, the street lights were turned back on and young Italians began celebrating a long-awaited peace in overcrowded dance halls to the sound of the new American craze, the boogie woogie. Jazz began again to dominate the scene and a new Italian jazz hero, Francesco Ferrari, stepped into the spotlight. From 1945 to 1954 he hosted and performed on the jazz radio program “Stasera Swing” (Tonight Swing). Suddenly and abruptly, however, this jazz renaissance was swept away. This time the imposition came not from religious or political authorities, but through the
unexpected return of the old and traditional Italian music styles among the people.

In the spring of 1955 the first jukebox arrived in Italy directly from Chicago. Its appearance on the Italian scene would be instrumental in the introduction and popularization of another American craze, rock and roll. Designed for noisy locales (like bars, pool rooms, night clubs etc.), the jukebox was not naturally suited to the crooners’ soft sighs or to the elaborate melismas of traditional Italian singing. It called for powerful and rough voices capable of catching the ear immediately. These were the voices of a new generation of singers whose style earned them the nomenclature of urlatori (“screamers”). They constituted the Italian reaction to the first American rock and rollers. The first of the Italian urlatori to achieve success was Tony Dallara, who had perfected a style highly imitative of Tony Williams’s (Williams was lead singer with The Platters). His recording debut took place in 1957 and only one year later his “Come prima” turned out to be a smash hit. Following in his steps came the first true Italian rockers: Ghigo, little Tony, Giorgio Gaber and, above all, Adriano Celentano and Mina. Endowed with an extraordinary vocal extension and technique, Mina earned the respect of both music critics and fellow musicians, including Louis Armstrong, who considered her as “the
world’s greatest white singer.” (Borgna 248) Adriano Celentano was the perfect Italian counterpart to the American rockers of the fifties. Singing about physical rather than romanticized, idealized love and exhibiting an attitude of unrestrained eccentricity rather than one of elegance or self-dignity, Celentano was the exact antithesis of the traditional Italian singer who sang about noble sentiments with tears in his eyes. More than any other artist of the time, Celentano signaled the drastic changes Italy was undergoing in those years.

Celentano’s songs, with their vitality and ostentatious anti-conformism, were the faithful mirror of a country that gradually but steadily was leaving behind the narrow horizons of its provincialism and ruralism. (Borgna 251)

Celentano was the product of new, post-war Italy. He had been born and raised in Milan, the city that more than any other exhibited Italy’s determination to refashion itself as a modern, Western nation. The following chapter will focus on this city’s crucial role in the development of new Italian music styles imported from the Anglo-Saxon world.
CHAPTER V
THE EVOLUTION OF AN ITALIAN BEAT MUSIC

The first manifestations of the erosion of Italy’s narrow cultural horizons appeared in the country’s industrial and economic capital: Milan. It is no coincidence that a significant number of Italian beat bands and artists lived and operated there. Milan was not only a major—in fact the principal—recording center in the sixties, it was also a powerful magnet for youths in search for employment, financial and parental freedom and a more exciting life style. It was only natural that such non-traditional, rhythmically developed styles as jazz and rock and roll would take root in a place full of youths who could afford to buy records and musical instruments, play the jukebox and attend live music events. In the clubs of 1960’s Milan, jazz and rock and roll delighted crowds of youngsters who had begun their flight from the provincialism of their hometowns by reading the poems of the beat generation.

Primo Moroni, from Chetro & Co., one of the most progressive exponents of Italian beat, recalls those days:
A formidable juvenile universe gravitated around the poets of the beat generation, one of its main reference points was music. Rock was a bomb that exploded right in the midst of this universe. [The adoption of rock] was facilitated by a new way of conceiving the meaningful use of one’s leisure, namely, the frequentation of three Milan clubs: the Taverna Messicana, the Arethusa and the Santa Tecla Honky Tonky. The traditional adult-geared liscio (an old style dance and the music that accompanies it) orchestras had disappeared from these places and were superseded by jazz ensembles. Many of the band members worked in government offices. They listened to hundreds of jazz records and played an elegant and innovative music. These clubs played a crucial role in promoting dancing among the youths and in bringing the two sexes, until then rigidly separated, together through dance-engendered socialization. On Sunday afternoon only rock music was played and danced in these clubs. I remember that when Bill Haley’s “Rock Around The Clock” arrived in Italy, a real bomb of excitement went off on the dance floor. (Bruccolieri 39-40)

A central figure in the Milanese pre-beat music scene and an authentic pioneer of rock and roll (he actually preceded the more famous Celentano) was Ghigo Agosti, known in the art world simply as Ghigo. He began his recording career in 1955, one year after Elvis Presley’s recording debut and Bill Haley’s release of “Rock Around The Clock.” Previously he had been involved with both jazz and rock musicians, organizing jam sessions in his home, where future Milanese rock-and-roll stars Giorgio Gaber and Enzo Iannacci appeared, and rehearsing elsewhere with his rock band Gli Arrabbiati (The Angry Ones).

I used to pester him [Giorgio Gaber] about jamming at my house and performing my exclusively jazz compositions. On those occasions no one of us even dreamed of hinting at his own songs or lyrics, musical
discussions and jam sessions were always and solely on jazz[...] rock existed only out of my house with Gli Arrabbiati.

Despite this rigid jazz-rock dichotomy in his early musical life, Ghigo believes that the two styles are progressive stages in the development of black music and holds that he had his first experience of rock while listening to big band jazz.

In the 50’s I was soaking up the rock language from concerts that were not labeled as “rock.” Let me explain, in the concerts’ most intense moments, the jazz orchestras [such as Lionel Hampton’s] and their solo singers reached maximum momentum with vocal and instrumental riffs (usually on a blues progression) which also got the audience involved…a relentless, obsessive echo, rock music was already there. I would soak up those waves of musical frenzy, and rock music was already there with them.

When, in the mid-sixties, rock was replaced by beat, Ghigo did not adopt the new music and like other rock and roll pioneers (most notably Celentano), he expressed an aversion toward it; however, unlike Celentano and probably other pre-beat rock and rollers, he had a deep appreciation and even reverence for The Beatles. It was now the task of younger rockers to follow the lead of the fab four.

**Interviewer:** In the mid-sixties beat triumphed also in Italy. How did you, initiator of Italian rock, view the advent of this new music, less impetuous than the older rock, but definitely more successful among the youths?  
**Ghigo:** My physically and emotionally painful military service spared me the torment the new music trends could have inflicted on me. [However], I found the Beatles revolutionary both in cultural and
musical terms. . . Apart from the cultural context, I placed The Beatles in the same category as Porter, Berlin, Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart.

A similarly complex and heterogeneous background, in which jazz played a prominent role, was Silvio Settimini’s, vocalist, guitarist and composer with Rome-based band, *I Jaguars*.

In the early sixties, in my house we only had a radio and I would listen to whatever was available: rock and roll, our so called *urlatori*, ‘screamers, Mina, Celentano and Tony Dallara. I used to like [swing] singers like Buscaglione and Carosone and the *cantautori* of the *scuola genovese*. I was also attracted to the instrumental music of the Champs and the Shadows.

Later on, as his musical taste matured, Silvio became obsessed with more cerebral and intellectual brands of jazz.

One day I came across a couple of records, one by Charlie Parker and the other by The Modern Jazz Quartet. I have no words to describe what I felt when I listened to “Lover Man,” a universe opened up. I listened to it so many times that I memorized every single note of it…no less shocking was listening to “Three Degrees East Two degrees East,” by MJQ. In a couple of months, thanks to the information I found in the magazine *Musica Jazz* I knew a lot about the past and the present of this music. In 1965 I attended the Sistina (a major theater in downtown Rome) jazz concert series. I saw Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Stan Getz etc.

The rest of the Jaguars had a more limited musical background and a less refined taste. Their exclusive infatuation with rock and roll informed the Jaguars’ recording activity, as one essentially based on Beach Boys
Covers; Silvio’s own eclecticism and proclivity for black music caused him to embrace new styles that arrived in Italy in the second half of the sixties; namely rhythm and blues and folk. “[Unlike my band mates] I used to like black music: the Ray Charles of the Atlantic period [for example] but also Bob Dylan and some other folk music, obviously after jazz.”

Outside of the Jaguars Silvio even tried his hand at performing some pieces of the scuola genovese’s repertory, a genre that had been obliterated by the modern danceable rhythms of beat music, but that, in his opinion, has a classic, timeless value.

When I sang “La ballata del Miche’” for my friends, De Andre’ (major exponent of the scuola Genovese) was known by very few, I’d say by no one. His arrangements may have been stylistically outdated at the time, however, when a musician’s work is valid, dates do not apply.

If Silvio’s eclecticism and versatility, especially his interest in contemporary jazz trends caused him to experience the Jaguars’ musical life as somewhat restrictive, Ferry Sansoni, keyboardist with I Dandies, and successively with the more popular I New Dada, found jazz less than exciting if compared to his band’s repertory, a mix of beat, rock and roll and rhythm and blues. Only later, in the 70’s, after exploring progressive rock with a third band, was he able to appreciate the sophistication of jazz.
Interviewer: who were your favorite artists?
Ferry: Beatles, Rolling Stones, James Brown, Chuck Berry.
Interviewer: Did you started out playing jazz?
Ferry: No, the jazz temporary experience came after the Dandies broke up and lasted only a short time...when the Dada asked me to join them on the stage while performing in Milan, I jump on the opportunity and stuck with them, leaving behind my boring jazz ensemble.

The same mix of rock and roll, beat, rhythm and blues plus the extra ingredient of folk was characteristic of Pisa-based band *I Satelliti* (The Satellites). Unlike what happened with other groups, this was not simply the natural result of individual or cumulative eclecticism within the band, but a conscious business decision dictated by the market’s trends. Roberto Guscelli, the band’s lead singer, explains the pros and cons of this position.

Interviewer: what music styles did you guys listened to?
Roberto: A little of everything, pure rock, folk and rhythm and blues. From Ray Charles to Chuck Berry, Gene Vincent, The Shadows and Bo Didley. (Truffi 1)

Interviewer: You recorded covers of high-profile groups and singers: the Troggs were a purist beat group, the Yardbirds played rock and blues and were already hatching hard rock, the Loving Spoonful were already anticipating the West Coast sound and Donovan was a folk champion. Why such disparate genres, was it because you guys were eclectic or because tastes changed so rapidly in those years?
Roberto: You see, we chose not to pigeonhole ourselves into a specific cliché also because, as you said, tastes changed so rapidly that it was impossible to remain anchored to a specific genre. However, in the long run this choice didn’t turn out to be a winner, and I think it caused a lot of groups to disband in the late sixties and early seventies. (Truffi 3)
Similar to *I Satelliti*’s, *I Giganti*’s music featured an interesting mix of styles which resulted from their listening to British pre-beat instrumental ensembles (like the Shadows), rock and roll and folk. The latter, as observed in Chapter III, affected their lyrics more than their sound. The following reminiscences are by Enrico Maria Papes, drummer and bass singer in the band.

Musically we were influenced by the Jams, the Shadows and then certainly rock and roll, all those crazy guys, among whom was Elvis Presley, even though there were more interesting ones. In those days there were some incredible guys, above all Gene Vincent; yes, we were surely influenced by that music. Then Dylan and Donovan.

The Giganti’s extensive use of vocal harmony was certainly the most prominent feature of their sound. In this respect they were primarily indebted to the Everly Brothers who, in Papes’ opinion, influenced even the Beatles.

The Beatles, whose advent Papes considers as the official birth date of beat music, certainly were the principal influence on another Milan-based group, *I Dik Dik*. The Beatles, with their highly polished musical products, motivated the band to achieve a high level of musicianship and to make of their music something more than an expedient to become popular among their peers, especially those of the opposite sex. In the early stages of their career their listening activities were limited to American rock and
roll singers and a pre-Beatles English band, The Shadows, as Pietro Montalbetti, band’s guitarist and leader recalls:

**Interviewer:** How did I Dik Dik’s dream come up?

**Pietro:** Pepe, Lallo and I had known each other since childhood, we lived in the same part of town and the true reason why we started to play was not a musical urge: it was to pick up girls. Those were the days of the Shadows, we imitated them and the trick worked.

**Interviewer:** Then The Beatles arrived…

**Pietro:** I heard “Love Me Do” on Radio Luxembourg and I was shocked: I didn’t even know how to pronounce their name correctly, but I went to my friends to tell them about this extraordinary group. So I immersed myself into their music: I would either tune in on Radio Luxembourg or go to Lugano [Switzerland] to purchase their imported records.

It was the assiduous practice of faithfully reconstructing the songs of the “fab four” that eventually refined their sound and obtained for them a recording contract with such a glorious musical institution as Ricordi.

It was the Beatles’ growing success abroad that induced Italian recording companies to open up to the groups, until then viewed as simple accompanists to a singer.

**Interviewer:** Was the importance of those records immediately clear to all?

**Pietro:** To a certain degree yes. In actuality the recording companies didn’t understand exactly what was going on but sensed a potential business and began to sign groups in. So when we proposed ourselves to Ricordi, they immediately scheduled us for an audition[…]

**Interviewer:** What did you guys play for the occasion?
Pietro: Two Beatles’ songs: “And I Love Her” and Love Me Do.” Ricordi offered us a recording contract because we could reproduce those songs identically.

It was the painstaking work of studying and faithfully reconstructing the Beatles’ song that later enabled the I Dik Dik to execute perfect, although uncreative, covers of such international hits as Procol Harum’s “A Whiter Shade Of Pale” and Mamas and Papas’ “California Dreaming.”

Their repertory however did not exclusively consist of covers; it actually included some original compositions written for them by Linea Verde lyricist Mogol and Lucio Battisti, a young and gifted composer from Rome who, as will be seen, also wrote for the two leading bands of the Italian beat scenario: L’Equipe 84 and The Rokes.

Hailed by their contemporaries as the Italian Beatles, the Equipe 84 started out playing rock and roll and 1950’s danceable tunes in the balere (the dance joints of rural towns), where farmers had long been dancing liscio. Just like I Dik Dik, their repertory mostly consisted of covers of international hits and some pieces written specifically for them by the Giulio Rapetti (Mogol)- Lucio Battisti team and the more intellectual Francesco Guccini. However, unlike I Dik Dik, whose artistic efforts were aimed at reproducing original compositions as closely as possible, L’Equipe 84 specialized in revamping and personalizing them. Their covers were so
fresh and creative that often they were preferred to the originals, when the latter eventually entered the Italian radio space and record market. For L’Equipe 84, more than for any other beat group of the time, the realization of a cover was not just a commercial operation, but an artistic challenge, an opportunity to measure themselves against foreign, internationally acclaimed colleagues, as Maurizio Vandelli (the band’s singer, and lead guitarist) explains in an interview with Luciano Ceri.

With our covers we always sought to improve, at least in our own opinion, the originals. Take, for example, Barry McGuire’s “You Were On My Mind”: it was a very simple song, and we had to make a lot of changes to make it become “Io ho in mente te.” We tried to imitate the original as little as possible when we made our covers; we sought to get out of a song our own arrangement of it. (23-4)

In the early sixties, international hits were not published simultaneously Everywhere, and RAI, the only legal radio broadcasting company, was not particularly interested in contemporary musical development in Britain or the USA, so the only way for young and progressive musicians like Vandelli to keep the pace with their international counterparts was to tune into clandestine radio stations.

All of us musicians would be listening to Radio Luxembourg or Radio Carolina, broadcasting from a ship. This way we played talent scouts, that is, we discovered the interesting pieces, since no one would tell us “this is England’s best selling record at the moment.” We’d hear a song, like “Bang Bang” for thirty seconds and then it would be gone since we were listening to long waves programs and reception came
and went…so sometimes we started working on a piece without knowing how it ended. In the meantime we’d send someone out to find the original record and then we’d remake it immediately in Italian. Back then, months went by before the original made it to Italy, unlike nowadays when it is published simultaneously all over the world. (Ceri, 22)

Interestingly, it was when the original record could not be found and only recordings of fragments were available that the band’s remake of it turned out most innovative.

Sometimes it happened that, because of the disturbance, instead of the whole piece we could catch only a few fragments. But we didn’t care, we’d use those too. Such was the case with “Prima di cominciare,” which constantly repeated the Beach Boys’ refrain “I get around,” the only thing we’d been able to hear. (Sisto 86)

The question of why such accomplished and inventive musicians like the L’Equipe 84 did not author any of the songs that earned them the nickname of “Italian Beatles” is an intriguing one and has been addressed by several scholars, to whom Vandelli has sometimes offered different explanations.

Sisto: …how does it come that your output, apart from few exceptions, consisted of Italian version of foreign songs, the famous “cover versions?”

Vandelli: mostly because we didn’t have time to devote to composing. Soon the Equipe became a machine design to churn out hit after hit, that was exactly its purpose. Our daily job was to select tens of pieces and eventually choose the one we felt would work. (Sisto 86)

In another interview Vandelli offered a different explanation and ascribed the scarcity of original composition in the band’s repertory to his lack of
sufficient self-criticism, probably referring to his inability to assume an
objective stance toward his own creations.

I didn’t use to feel I could write original pieces, I have never had
sufficient self criticism to produce a piece I could believe in. I was
always trying to express what I felt inside, but I confined myself to
writing a few Italian lyrics for a cover, I couldn’t find the key to
compose a hit. However I could sense talent and potential in others.
(Ceri 23)

It was this very sense, this insight into the potential of a product, with which
he selected from his radio-recording sessions the right pieces for his covers,
that also allowed Vandelli to identify in such extraordinary song writers as
Guccini and Battisti a gold mine to be tapped into. Guccini for example
provided their music with a depth and an intellectual bent that was absent in
the lyrics of the foreign songs they covered.

The B sides of our singles usually were somewhat particular songs;
they meant something and differentiated themselves from the purely
musical endeavors represented by the A side. We sang such songs as
[Guccini’s] “E` dall’amore che nasce l’uomo,” “Auschwitz” and
“L’antisociale” to let people know that there was a bit of culture and
research in our band and that we were not just a bunch of long-haired,
electric-guitar-playing rockers. (Ceri 22)

The relationship between L’Equipe 84 and Guccini was mutually beneficial
and perfectly met the opposite needs of the two parties: Guccini needed a
more commercial type of music to propose his poems to an audience that
preferred beat to folk sonorities, while *L’Equipe 84*, as noted above, intended to confer to their music a more intellectual slant.

Francesco [Guccini] needed to return to a type of commerciality he had lost. The Italian audience in those days were very attentive and receptive to our music and he viewed us as a kind of megaphone for his ideas… His songs offered us an alternative. We were stuck to the beat and wanted to move in different directions.

The other source of musical ideas for *L’Equipe 84* to elaborate and turn into a polished perfect product was Lucio Battisti. The creative vein of this young composer was such that Vandelli viewed him as an “extra radio station” offering a wealth of still unpublished, potentially successful songs. Eventually it was the Equipe’s admiration and encouragement that led Battisti to undertake a performing and recording career that was to make him the supreme guru of Italian pop music.

Battisti at the time, in the mid-sixties, had no intention of singing [his pieces]; it was us and other people at Ricordi who convinced him to sing in front of an audience. When we discovered him, it was like listening to those fantastic songs we use to listen to on Radio Luxembourg. He could write wonderful songs, one after the other, and we could pick and choose what we liked. (Ceri 22)

The unique formula of *L’Equipe 84*’s huge success then consisted of two fundamental ingredients: 1) an ability to select suitable pieces (whether radio-broadcasted, foreign polished products or seminal sketches heard directly from Italian composers) to elaborate and transform into smash hits,
and 2) a high level of musicianship enhanced by a perfectionist attitude and drive. The latter, in Vandelli’s opinion, was what made them special.

I felt we were different from other groups in our approach to the music. In our contract with Ricordi we demanded and obtained a preset amount of rehearsal time before recording. We wanted to find the right sonorities. I in particular have always believed that making music means making your own music, always being a little different from others. We wanted to do research.

This progressive element probably was one of the band’s characteristics that invited the comparison with the Beatles, even though, as Vandelli remarks, the Italian audience was not as equally receptive to cultural change and innovation as the British.

We were always searching for a new path; I mean, every new record by someone else gave us ideas and strength to move forward. Because if such a record as the Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” came out, it meant that the world was ready for that music, those sonorities, and so we thought that we too could give it a try. It often happened that we ventured too far out and wouldn’t be understood by our audience, so we stopped and took a step backward. (Ceri 26)

This process of rejuvenation of Italian music and taste, which such bands as Equipe 84 initiated upon discovering the new American and British music on clandestine radios, received major extra impetus from the arrival and swift ascent to stardom of a real English band, The Rokes.

In 1959 Shell Shapiro, the future creator and leader of the band, had joined The Blue Caps, back-up band for Gene Vincent, popularly known as
“king of rock and roll.” The experience did not last very long and soon Shell started his own band, The Shell Carlson Combo, with Bobby Possner on bass, Mike Shepstone on drums and Vic Briggs on guitar, who later left the band to join the Animals and was replaced by Johnny Charlton. Unlike many of their colleagues, who were playing rock and roll (Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard being the most famous examples), they were more interested in the source of this style: they listened to and played the blues. Because of their orientation toward pure, undiluted African-American music, they naturally ended up hanging out at London blues club, The Roaring Twenties, where they shared the stage with African-American musicians and British blues bands. The following are Bob Possner’s reminiscences of those days:

The Roaring Twenties was one of the first R&R clubs in London, it was frequented by a lot of black Americans and musicians. When you walked downstairs into the club there was a strong smell of grass, no hash, brown or black, only grass in those days. The resident band was Cyril Davis and The All Stars. Cyril sang and played the harmonicas (he had a roll of cloth with lots of pockets in it with about a dozen harmonicas sitting in them). He was absolutely brilliant on them. Another regular was Long John Baldry, a great singer and also an excellent harp player. He would sit in with the All Stars. We would start playing and warm them up, and then Cyril, then us, and then Cyril again. I have some good memories of our weeks at the Roaring Twenties.

At the time The Roaring Twenties was the training ground where the
future stars of British blues rock were sharpening their sensitivity for the genre and fine-tuning their skills. Unlike the commercially oriented early beat bands operating in the Liverpool area, the groups that gravitated around London blues clubs were not highly marketable, nor were they extremely concerned about marketing their music. The enjoyment these musicians derived from playing the blues was in itself a good enough reason to be in their trade. Shell Shapiro recalls those days:

Interviewer: was it difficult to be a [professional] musician in England?
Shell: Not all over England. For example, in the North those who played beat in the Mersey area hardly ever went hungry. Our problem was that we played the blues and that we played in London, which at the time didn’t musically represent the whole country. Spaces for those who played this genre were limited: the US military bases and the canteens were the main ones. In one of these clubs, The Roaring Twenties, on Carnaby Street (which wasn’t yet a famous street) we regularly had everlasting jam sessions with such names as Eric Clapton, Mike Taylor and Nicky Hopkins. All of them were, like us, unknown people who, on the next day went, with sleepy faces, to collect the agreed-on ten-pound compensation from the manager. (Sisto 99)

Shell’s reconstruction of the musical life of the late fifties and early sixties highlights black music’s crucial role in shaping the sound of England’s most glorious bands of the years to come. It is easy to see how without the influx of race records (American records geared toward the black audience and
virtually inaccessible to white record buyers) there would have been no beat or rock music, whether in Europe or in the USA (where these genres did not evolve directly from black music but from the British bands’ repackaging of it).

I used to listen to a lot of black music, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, The Drifters, The Chess Records artists: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Reverend Gary Davis, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, and, of course, Ray Charles[..] I realized that a part of the audience in England listened to Cliff Richard and another much smaller part who, like me, listened instead to other things. In the end it turned out that we were not such a small minority, because while I was listening to the Chess records, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were listening to them too. All the records of the artist mentioned above had been going around for years among the lovers of this music and we were already playing their song in 1958-1959. (Ceri 128)

If in Italy such bands as L’Équipe 84 or I Dik Dik started out by hunting down English beat records to reproduce and offer to an audience starved for new sounds, in England The Rokes had begun their career playing for an audience that wanted to hear their own traditional music: US black troops. In either case the situation called for a musical research that was bound to affect the bands’ professional development.

We played in American bases, the soldiers would ask for certain pieces we might not know. So the next day we ran to His Master’s voice in Oxford street and looked for the original record of that artist. They might tell us that they didn’t have it yet. In this respect it was a dimension of true musical research, and those who didn’t follow or play English music necessarily found themselves in that dimension. (Ceri 128)
If, on the one hand this research was artistically and intellectually stimulating, on the other it didn’t allow for steady employment and financial security. That is why at one point the Shell Carlson Combo, like many other British groups, set out for Northern Europe. It was there that their manager informed them of the Italian opportunity. At a time when even in England American bands were viewed simply as a front man’s support, AS Bob Possner recalls, The Rokes’ huge Italian success as their own band was indeed an extraordinary achievement.

We did tours of England, Scotland and Germany… It was over there that we received a telegram from our agent back in London asking us would we like to do a four-week tour of Italy, accompanying Colin Hicks. At the time it was still mostly a singer accompanied by a group, like Cliff Richards with The Shadows…Buddy Holly and the Crickets.

When The Rokes arrived in Italy, they realized that the transformation the influx of black music had brought about in English musical life was nowhere to be found there. It was their collaboration with Rita Pavone (an aggressive and dynamic teenager whose music style drastically departed from the rhythmically deficient pieces of the fashionable cantautori) that convinced them that the Italian audience was ready for change and The Rokes could play a role in it.
The situation in Italy was still very vague. I didn’t seem to feel symptoms of imminent change[…] Rita Pavone instead was certainly a sign that something was changing in Italian pop music, she was definitely a new fact. I remember that when we played with her we had ten thousand people in front of us. For such a young girl that really was something unusual. This was the time when the cantautori were popular and Rita was a sign of renewal. Some of her pieces were rhythmically very intense, although as not so much as the rhythm and blues pieces we played without her to open the show. The problem was to figure out whether the change would last or gradually die out. (Ceri 128)

Rita Pavone’s forward-looking manager, Teddy Reno, felt that this was only the beginning of a process of transformation already started in Italian pop music and that The Rokes could play a major role in it. So he arranged for them to audition at the Rome branch of multinational recording giant RCA. However, confronted with the narrow-minded RCA Italian management, The Rokes understood that the road to success was still a long and arduous one and that they had to rely on their live performances to establish a reputation. The perfect opportunity came up when they were hired to play at what was to become the Roman temple of beat music: the Piper.

RCA was a multinational operating on a culturally limited territory like Italy. It had the formal look of a multinational but it lacked the typical American dynamism to risk investing money on a non-traditional product. Besides, our unpleasant look [very long hair and leather boots and jackets] might be offensive to someone. Their doubts remained until we began broadcasting our name from the Piper’s stage, to promote ourselves like crazy and to be liked, regardless of whether or not we had a recording contract. (Sisto 98)
Once the recording contract was secured, The Rokes earned with it also a certain artistic freedom that allowed them to be particularly creative in the manufacturing of their covers, an example that would soon be followed by *L’Equipe 84*, and to record their own compositions, something no other band realized to their extent (except for *I Giganti*). This alternation between innovative covers and original compositions, already evident in their first album, was to characterize their entire recording career:

Our first single was “*Quando eri con me*” (“Shake, Rattle and Roll”) and I actually wrote the former. We enjoyed writing songs more than copying them, even though sometimes we might took a liking to an American song and decided to remake it, often because we liked its text more than its music. Our “Shake, Rattle and Roll” was not a cover in my opinion; when I say “cover” I mean that you just copy the original. I simply consider it another version of “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” (Ceri 129)

Often a particularly effective cover by The Rokes would inspire other Italian bands to remake the same original piece. It is by comparing these covers—or “versions,” as Shell calls their remakes—that one can fully appreciate the difference between the mature Rokes’ style, developed during their English years, and the tentative approach of their still raw Italian competitors. This fact also sheds light on The Rokes’ leading role in fostering and shaping the evolution of Italian beat and rock.

Our version [of Jackie De Shannon’s] sounded different from Ricky Gianco’s, *I Camaleonti*’s and *I New Dada*’s. [Besides eliminating the
refrain] we had significantly changed the melodic division of the stanza; our version was certainly slower than the other three. This was the fundamental difference between us and the other Italian beat groups, that is, on the one hand there were those who had acquired rock, that is, those Italian artists who were eighteen/nineteen years old in 1960 and on the other those who, like us, had lived through, grown up with rock […] take for example Jackie De Shannon’s] “When You Walk In The Room,” the difference [between us and the Italian bands was that those who grew up rock could never have come up with such a nervous riff as I Camaleonti’s. It was conceived to be on top of the music and not laid back, or heavy, because rock music is heavy. The Italians would always play it light, it was never laid back. Instead, all great rock pieces at times seem to slow down. Even with heavy metal the same thing happen, because there too the same rock concept applies: you don’t play on the beat, you lag behind it. Today the Italians too play rock that way, because now it has become an assimilated language, but it wasn’t the case back then. (Ceri 131)

When the Beatles’ phenomenon boomed in Europe and the “fab four” set the standards for the new-born beat idiom, their music became the object of close scrutiny for the musically ever-searching Rokes. The latter considered that music a perfectly reproducible product, in no way beyond their capabilities. In time, however, it became clear that not all of the Beatles’ achievement could be duplicated. Shell has no qualms admitting it.

We used to study scientifically everything we listened to. Of course the Beatles too were object of discussion and analysis and, let me say this honestly, we considered them people exactly like us, with a level of preparation no different from ours, so we thought we could achieve the same results. Of course we were wrong in not taking into account Lennon’s and McCarthy’s genius, but that is something we had no way of foreseeing back then. (Sisto 102)

However, at least initially, Shell was correct in assuming that The Rokes
could actually match the quality of the Beatles’ product.

We had made a very successful recording of “Hold My Hand.” It sounded just like a Beatles’s piece. At RCA someone jokingly played for a bunch of people, each time saying “Hey, listen to the latest Beatles’ record, isn’t it wonderful?” Everybody was enthusiastic, especially when they found out that it actually was The Rokes’ new piece. (Ceri 135)

A typical trait of The Rokes’ music, and of beat music in general, which the Beatles helped to establish, was the consistent use of vocal harmony. In the following statements, however, Shell clarifies that this was a long established English musical practice whose introduction he does not ascribe specifically to the Beatles or to American vocal groups like The Everly Brothers.

We took extreme care of the vocal aspect of our songs, it was a very important aspect of our sound. I don’t think we ever wrote a piece without choirs, we have always used them[…] the use of the choir was a tradition of the English groups […] that had preceded us […] Even though small those groups sounded like orchestras. (Ceri 133)

Another aspect of the Beatles’ music that was particularly attractive to The Rokes was their constant search for new sonorities. It was mainly through the Beatles’ authoritative example that Shell, in collaboration with RCA sound technicians, took a leading role in a process that was to modernize the sound of Italian pop music.
I, more than anybody, had a clear idea of what sounds needed to come out of the recording studios. Often it was I who suggested certain sound solutions, sometimes trying unorthodox paths. Once the RCA technicians realized that I proposed strange but effective solutions, they also started to get into that logic and eventually jumped on sound experimentation. In those days the interest in discovering new sounds was spreading and our listening to the Beatles’ records confirmed that they too were pursuing the same path. (Ceri 136)

Before concentrating on the composition of their own songs, The Rokes, like L’Equipe 84 and many others, had recorded pieces written for them by Lucio Battisti. In some cases The Rokes even made English versions of a Battisti piece, if they liked it and it happened to have been recorded already by another Italian band.

The collaboration with Battisti came about through Mogol. I must say I used to like Lucio’s pieces very much. He had played for us some of his future hits like “Per una lira” and “29 Settembre”; we knew them all way before they were released. On one such occasion he had written for us “Io vivro` senza te.” Not many people know that he wrote it specifically for us (the piece gained great popularity through the interpretations of such giants as Mina and Lucio himself). We also did an English version of “Il vento,” it was titled “When The Wind arises.” We decided to do that just for our pleasure after I Dik Dik had already recorded the original. I think RCA released in some European countries. (Ceri 135)

Sometimes The Rokes themselves wrote songs for other artists. Such was the case with “Il ragazzo del mio palazzo,” which they wrote for Annamaria Izzo, “Eravamo amici” for Dino, and “Lettera a Gianni” per Patty Pravo. Sometimes they would make a new version of a foreign
song and beside rearranging the music they might collaborate with a lyricist in writing the Italian text. This was the case with “Cheryl’s Going Home.”

The songs, in Shell’s and Mogol’s hands, became the manifesto of *Linea Verde* and all those young people who felt the undeserved ostracism of the older generations.

Someone at RCA had proposed to us to make a cover of “Cheryl’s Going Home.” We liked it right away. At first I wrote the Italian text, it was about the world that collapses on you at the end of a love story. Then we played the song for Mogol who, after disappearing for about forty-five minutes, came back with the lyrics of “Che colpa abbiamo noi,” in which, however, he had retained the images of the night and the world collapsing on you, which were mine. (Ceri 133)

Toward the end of the beat era, when musical taste had begun to change, The Rokes, unlike other popular bands of the time (especially their rivals par excellence, *L’Equipe 84*), did not attempt to recycle themselves and repackage their music to suit current trends. They preferred to disband and forever be remembered as the creators of Italian beat.

Maybe it was because we didn’t want to end up doing things we didn’t believe in that we decided to quit. We were tired and I [Shell] was already thinking about other directions for my life[…] On our last concert, on August 12th 1970, twelve thousand people showed up. No one knew it would be The Rokes’ last show. (Ceri 137)
CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY

This chapter concludes a survey of what could be defined as the Anglo-Saxon musical colonization of 1960’s Italy; the following is a synopsis of the facts covered above. In that eventful decade a complex transfer of culture from The United States and England took place on two different levels, the political/ideological and the artistic. The former concerns the Italian adoption of typically American ideas originating among young elements associated with such groups as the beat generation, the civil right movement, the peace movement etc. Such an adoption was facilitated by the simultaneous presence on both sides of the Atlantic of certain particular conditions: the post-war peace, prosperity and technological development that had produced a meaningless and alienating lifestyle characterized by materialism, consumerism and self-isolation. The American beatnick cause was embraced in Italy by the capelloni, who were particularly active in such large urban centers as Milan.
There was an extraordinary variety of attitudes and degrees of commitment to those causes among Italian youths, and they all contributed in various ways to the circulation of the beat ideology and the growth of the general movement. An analogous diversity of attitudes existed also among the artists themselves, whose political commitment ranged from a cosmetic assumption of a codified beat look to the consistent use of protest song, sometimes despite the relentless repression of the censorship, to sensitize public opinion.

The second level on which the culture transfer occurred concerns the adoption of indigenous American and English music styles by Italian artists. Also in this respect it must be noted that the transfer was facilitated by an essentially similar dissatisfaction with the stifling middle class culture among the youngsters of both the new and the old world. In all the societies in question popular music sorely lacked the dynamism and vitality that characterized other non-western cultures. One of this was the electrified urban black music of the United States (here “non-western” is to be interpreted in musicological, not geographical terms), but in that country such music had always been segregated because of its allegedly “corrupting” nature. The first stage of the culture transfer occurred within the United States, when white youngsters such as Elvis Presley appropriated and
popularized a blues-derived genre that came to be called rock and roll. The second stage in the transfer took place when English and Italian rock and rollers, such as Cliff Richard and Adriano Celentano, emerged. Shell Shapiro’s testimony demonstrates that blues and rhythm and blues were also part of the English pre-beat musical life and that they played a role in the development of beat. The same testimony illustrates how The Rokes, authentic English band, continued their evolution from blues and rhythm and blues to beat on Italian soil, thus encouraging analogous developments in countless Italian bands. Furthermore, the accounts of such artists as Ghigo, have revealed that jazz was another important element in the Italian pre-beat musical life and that in such large cities as Milan it coexisted with rock and roll on the stages of the first modern, non-traditional, live-music dance clubs.

Beat music, with its typical sound mix of electric guitars, drums, bass and harmonizing voices, ended in the late sixties with the search for new, more sophisticated sounds initiated by the Beatles. The beat’s expiration however did not bring along the end of the musical colonization of Italy, which has continued to the present day through the local acquisition and reproduction of such English and American genres as soul, progressive rock, hard rock, heavy metal, rap, etc. From a strictly musicological standpoint,
all of these stages of the colonization process are equally significant and worthy of the scholar’s consideration. However, in a culturally larger picture, beat music is indeed the “most especially significant” of all. Because of its close association with the revolutionary currents of thought that characterized the restless sixties, it will always be remembered as the music of an international community of youngsters who believed, for ten magical years, that they could change the world.
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