

La Madonna Nera of New York City

Joey Skee (September 02, 2008)



Italian Americans gather at a gay bar in Manhattan in celebration of the Black Madonna.



Since 2004, Italian Americans (myself included) have gathered informally each September 8th at Manhattan's Phoenix Bar. This annual celebration recognizes the Sicilian immigrants from Patti (Messina province) who organized Il Comitato Pattese alla Vergine SS. del Tindari in 1905 to honor the Black Madonna in the streets of New York City. Eight years later, this lay, voluntary association opened a store front chapel and social club at 447 East 13th Street and operated it until 1987. In 1998, the space was converted into the Phoenix Bar.



Members of Il Comitato Pattese alla Vergine SS. del Tindari, circa 1935.
Courtesy: Anne Palermo Carroccio.

Lauren, the bar's original owner, was at first leery of a gathering for the Virgin Mary, concerned about Catholic homophobes and/or an attempt to usurp this gay space. As the event evolved, her concerns were alleviated and Lauren, the bartenders, and patrons began anticipating our arrival. Jamie, the bar's new owner, was well aware of the annual fete when I called him last week ("Of course I know about the Black Madonna!") and is as gracious as his predecessor ("Let me know if you need anything.").

The annual "event" is a spontaneous, free flowing, evolving affair, consisting of what ever participants want to do that particular year. Artists B Amore, Annie Lanzillotto, Adele La Barre Starensier, and others who draw on southern Italian and Italian-American culture in their work regularly contribute to the occasion. In 2005, folks danced to recorded pizzica music from Puglia. The following year, people created a chalk drawing of the Madonna del Tindari on the sidewalk outside the bar. This year there is talk of an altar being created from whatever objects people bring.



Adele La Barre Starensier & her painted banner, 2006.
Photograph: Smiljana Peros

Participants' varied and occasionally conflicting motives – cultural, religious, political and/or convivial– contribute to the sometimes faltering, sometimes exhilarating results. Many attendees are influenced by a series of interrelated works dealing with ethnic revival and cultural reclamation, from Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's book *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (1993) to I Giullari di Piazza's opera "Earth, Sun, & Moon" (1995), from neo-stregheria to neo-tarantismo. A few attendees are practicing Catholics actively reviving older, often defunct immigrant religious devotions. Others simply come to chat and laugh with like-minded paesani over a cold beer.

A new generation of Italian Americans has adopted and transformed the Madonna Nera image into an icon of italianità by linking it to a reconfigured, ecumenical spiritually, a politically progressive position, and a multicultural perspective, as an ongoing reimagining of what it means to be "Italian" in the 21st century. Come and join us.

Monday, September 8, 2008, 6PM

The Phoenix Bar

447 East 13th Street, off of Avenue A

Manhattan

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