

The Real Legend of Peppe Voltarelli. Calabrian Notes in NYC

Marina Melchionda (November 06, 2009)



Calabrian singer, composer, writer and actor, Peppe Voltarelli will perform at Le Poisson Rouge in NYC on November 11. On the previous day, a screening of his movie "The real legend of Tony Vilar" will take place at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò. Peppe told us about his land of origin, Calabria, and about how his music was influenced by its cultural values, melodies, and dialect. Defined an "emigrant singer", Peppe talked with us about the perception of Italian music abroad and his personal approach to a job that "must be put to the service of the people". Finally, he revealed more about the scheduled outline for his concert and the special guests he will have



The first impression we had about Peppe Voltarelli when we first talked is that he is a very fun person to have a conversation with. Friendly, open, and cheerful, he is everything you would expect in a guy from Calabria – high spirits and a great attachment to tradition in every possible field, both in his private and professional life.

Peppe is a singer, a composer, and an actor in his 40s. He has been known in the Italian music world since the early 1990s, when he founded his group “Il parto delle nuvole pesanti” (The birth of the heavy clouds), a band whose music mainly consisted in a mixture of rock and traditional Calabrian folk rhythms. Twice recognized with the prestigious Italian “Tenco” music award, Peppe left the group in 2006 and released his first album as a soloist, “Distratto ma però” (Distracted But However), in 2007. Often defined as an “emigrant singer” for his continuous travelling in search of new music and rhythms to be inspired by, Peppe has worked and collaborated with singers and musicians from every walk of life, some of which being the German-born [Vinicio Capossela](#) [2], Sicilian [Roy Paci](#) [3] and Neapolitan [Daniele Sepe](#) [4].

Peppe is not also a versatile musician, but also the author of a book. His “Non finito

Calabrese” (Unfinished Calabrian) is a collection of 20 semi-autobiographic short stories, poems, and tales through which he tells his readers about a Calabrian guy that travels throughout Italy and the world with a dream in his pocket, to become a musician and share his thoughts and points of view with the rest of the world. In 2000 he also published “Raggia”, poems written in Calabria dialect with an English translation on the side.

Music and lyrics, however, are not

the only means of communication Peppe uses. He is in fact also an actor, and has already had parts in three films, “Doichlanda” - a 2003 documentary about Italian immigration - “La vera leggenda di Tony Vilar” (The true legend of Tony Vilar) and “Fuga dal call center” (Escape from the call center). Finally, as a pacifist Peppe composed the original music for “Roccu u Stortu” (Rocco the Crooked), the anti-war saga of a Calabrian soldier’s desertion in WWI along with the Florence-based Krypton troupe. He has also been strongly active against the Iraq war and he participated with other artists in a peace concert held in Bagdad’s Palestine Hotel. His social commitment is also shown by his frequent participation in campaigns and activities aimed at fighting hunger and poverty in the world.

Peppe Voltarelli’s performance at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) [5] in the Greenwich Village on November 11 will be enriched by the presence of the Italian-Canadian singer [Marco Calliari](#) [6], a talented musician well-known to the New York audience. Special guest star Tony Vilar, the man whose story was told in one of the movies Peppe played in, will also be present. Shown at the official selection of the 2007 TriBeCa Film Festival, “The real legend of Tony Vilar” is the story of an artist that emigrated from his Calabrian village (Vilar), found fame and fortune in Argentina in the 1960’s and eventually disappeared into anonymity in the Bronx’s Italian community along Arthur Avenue. A screening of the film will be held at [Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò](#) [7] on November 10 at 6 pm and will be followed by a Q&A session with Peppe and Calabrian director Giuseppe Gagliardi.

His debut in NYC is only one of the performances Peppe will have during his American tour which started on November 4 in Los Angeles and will touch Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Mexico City, Toronto and Montreal. We interviewed him before his arrival in NYC and asked him about his music, his relationship with the land of his origin, Calabria, and his expectations for this trip to America.

What does it mean to you to play in the United States?

It means a lot! I am bringing with me a “different” kind of Italian music made of music and lyrics that are deeply tied to my land of origin, Calabria, and strongly focused on the issue of emigration. It is an important challenge for me: I know that the American audience is very demanding, so this tour is also an important opportunity to find out how Italian art is perceived on this side of the ocean.



You'll travel to different cities of the US with your tour. Does your performance in New York give you a particular emotion? What does this city mean to you?

You can imagine how my small home town, Mirto, must be very different from New York. This city is the place where every artist feels at home, it's the center from where the most different artistic currents originate. And of course this is also true, and may be especially true, for the music field. I have already been here several times: in 2007 director Giuseppe Gagliardi and I presented the movie "The real legend of Tony Villar" at the Tribeca Film Festival. We had shot some of the scenes in several areas of this city the year before. In 2001 I also came to the Bronx to play with "Il parto delle nuvole pesanti" the group I was leading at the time. I think that no other city than New York can better test the artistic value of a song or a singer.

You have been defined an "emigrant singer". How does this definition fit you?

I come from Calabria, but I moved to Bologna at the age of 18 when I started going to the university. Then I went to Rome, and afterwards I moved to Berlin...so it's true that I have been continuously travelling throughout my life. It is something that often happens to those who come from Southern Italy, and from Italy in general to say the truth. I think that living in different places can be very stimulating, since it kind of "obliges" you to confront your experiences with those of people of different backgrounds and walks of life. In my case, it helped my music career, and inspired me in writing my music and the lyrics of many of my songs. So, you might call me "the singer of the emigrants", or "the emigrant singer", I like this definition.

How do you think Italians

abroad keep their cultural identity alive?

I think that this is a very difficult moment for "the Italian identity". I travelled and performed throughout Europe, Argentina, Australia, and I realized that the myth of Italian culture is declining quite a bit. People from abroad can see that the Italian music panorama is quite static, and their interest towards us is becoming merely folkloristic, if I can use this word. We look like we are not going any place and remain too attached to the great musical tradition of the past. We should move on and find the courage to propose something different. This is also why I sing in Calabrian dialect. I want to question the behavior of many Italian artists.

I think Italian artists should be the first people to commit themselves to help change the image of Italy abroad. In 2005, during the period I was here to shoot "The Real Legend of Tony Vilar", the President of the Region of Calabria Francesco Fortugno was assassinated. It was terrible that here in America people knew about my homeland because of a homicide. I decided I had to do something so I try to bring the best of my home to these people.

I can see from the different side activities you carry on and from your music itself that you are strongly socially committed. But it is also true that you don't like to be "labeled" in anyway - on the contrary, you consider yourself a "free artist"...

Yes, I want to be free and write whatever I feel like, always keeping my main aim very firm in my mind: I want to celebrate life through my research, my music, my songs. I don't care if people see me as right or a left oriented singer. It just matters to me that my songs stir up a debate, and are criticized or liked just for what they are. I think that music must serve civil causes, whether they might be the fight against hunger, poverty, or organized mafia. It must have a social use, and be put to the use of the people

Let's go back to the beginning of your career, when you founded your group "Il parto delle nuvole



pesanti" (The birth of the heavy clouds). Can you explain why you chose this name and the reasons why you ended up leaving it?

It's kind of a weird name indeed. We were a group of 11 people who were all friends and wanted to experiment with new rhythms and melodies and mix them with the traditional music of our different regions of origin. So we thought that nothing better than a thunderstorm, the "heavy clouds", could represent this kind of approach, from which a new genre could "have birth". I left the group because I am self-centered and wanted to sing alone (laughter)

Is there a particular singer or current that inspired your approach to music?

In Italy in the '90s there were many singers that believed in this kind of "fusion", one of the most famous groups was the Almamegretta. We kind of followed their path to invent our own sound.

And what about the Italian music of the past? Is there an artist that particularly influenced you? With no doubt it was Domenico Modugno. He is one of the first singers who used dialect and folk rhythms in his music. He started a path that I believe can still be followed in the contemporary globalized world. Dialects must not be seen as obstacles: a universal concept or contact, even if expressed in dialect, can overcome every possible border.

An American artist with whom you would like to duet?

Prince, no question about it

What will be the outline of your New York concert?

I will play pieces from my solo album "Distratto ma però" (Distracted But However), and songs I wrote with my former group. Besides arranging a piece by [Domenico Modugno](#) [8], I will also duet with Marco Calliari, the Italian-Canadian singer who will open the event. Maybe Tony Vilar will play something with us too, but we still have to agree with him on what to do. After all, he doesn't sing live since the '60s, but I would love him sing "Quando calienta il sol" (When the sun sets), his biggest hit, to our audience.

"La Vera Leggenda di Tony Vilar"

Tuesday November 10, 2009 - 6pm
Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo'

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New York, NY 10011-8604
Telephone: (212) 998-8730
Fax: (212) 995-4012
Email: casa.italiana@nyu.edu [9]
www.casaitaliananyu.org [7]

PEPPE VOLTARELLI

Wednesday 11/11/09 (Le) Poisson Rouge, New York, NY
158 Bleeker St (@ Thompson St)
Concert starts @ 10:00PM (Doors open @ 9:30PM)
Tickets: \$15.00
Info.: <http://lepoissonrouge.com/> [10] or (212) 505-3474
Tickets: <http://lepoissonrouge.com/events/view/594> [11]
or 866 55 TICKETS



Related Links: <http://www.myspace.com/peppevoltarelli> [12]

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[2] <http://www.viniciocapossela.it>

[3] <http://www.roypaci.it>

[4] <http://www.danielesepe.com>

[5] <http://lepoissonrouge.com>

[6] <http://www.marcocalliari.com>

[7] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org>

[8] <http://www.domenicomodugno.it>

[9] <mailto:casa.italiana@nyu.edu>

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