

Italian Jazz: Bebop, Swing, and Bella Musica

Enzo Capua (January 08, 2016)



Two years ago I began writing this jazz column for i-ItalyNY for two reasons: the honor of having been asked to work with such an esteemed publication and the desire to extend my knowledge of American and Italian jazz to casual listeners.

In all of my articles, I have sought to trace a clear path. My readers must have certainly noticed that, and I hope they have appreciated my efforts. Recently, however, a happy surprise has caused me to slightly deviate from my usual path, and I must admit my happiness is tinged with a bit of envy. The surprise is a beautiful book from two Chicago scholars, Bill Dal Cerro and David Anthony Witter, called *Bebop, Swing, and Bella Musica – Jazz and the Italian American Experience* (available on



italiansinjazz.com).

Nothing could come closer to my own early intentions! As I read page after page, my envy grew. Envy of the friendly variety, of course, since the work of the two authors demands admiration. A book as well written and researched as this has been sorely missing from the

jazz canon. *Bebop, Swing, and Bella Musica* details the lives of Italians who have played an important role in the centennial-plus history of jazz: from its origins in New Orleans, to the beginning of the twentieth century, to the present day.

Those who don't know this story, or rather, this combination of stories, will no doubt be fascinated to read about the contributions Italians have made to the development of the genre – *Bella Musica*! – over the years. But even those who know a bit more than the casual listener

will still be surprised to learn just how many musicians actually had Italian roots. That Louis Prima, Frank Sinatra, and Tony Bennett – to cite the most famous names – came from Italian backgrounds is well known. But other fundamental musicians, like guitarist Eddie Lang, drummer Louie Bellson, and saxophonist Flip Phillips, were also descendants of Italian émigré parents. Note their birth names, in order: Salvatore Massaro, Luigi Paolino Francesco Balassoni, and Joseph Edward Filippelli.

Their talents and contributions to jazz are indisputable. As I mentioned way back at the beginning of my column, so many random people have coincided to trace indelible grooves in the evolution of jazz. And many of those people have Italian roots, tying us ever tighter to the large cultural fabric of the American people. I plan on telling many more such tales in the pages of i-ItalyNY. In the meantime, good folks, Italians and Americans alike, if you want to know more about the art and passion that we share, read this book!

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