

## ADVISORY BOARD

John Alcorn  
*Trinity College*

Eleonora Rao  
*Università degli Studi di Salerno*

Robert Casillo  
*University of Miami*

Maria Concetta Costantini  
*Università degli Studi G. d'Annunzio*

Luciano Iorizzo  
Professor Emeritus, *SUNY Oswego*

Michael LaRosa  
*Rhodes College*

Rita Ciresi  
*University of South Florida*

Martino Marazzi  
*University of Milan*

Donna DeBlasio  
*Youngstown State University*

James Morone  
*Brown University*

Ferdinando Fasce  
*University of Genoa*

Martha Pallante  
*Youngstown State University*

Edvige Giunta  
*New Jersey City University*

Maria Galli Stampino  
*University of Miami*

Kathleen Zamboni McCormick  
*SUNY Purchase*

Copyright 2016 Carla Anne Simonini & Carol Bonomo Albright  
ISSN 096-8846

Cover photos provided by  
Casa Italia Library Chicago

Presbyterian Church of Our Savior Chicago Heights ca 1938  
Mothers, girlfriends, wives and sisters display their blue and  
gold stars representing the neighborhood boys in the US military.  
194323rd and Wallace, Chicago Heights.

## ITALIAN AMERICANA



In Memory of Founders, Ernest S.  
Falbo & Bruno A. Arcudi

---

Volume XXXVIII

Number 1

Winter 2019

---

*Italian Americana*, a cultural and historical review devoted to the Italian  
experience in the New World, is printed in cooperation with Loyola  
University Chicago.

### Editor-in-chief

Carla A. Simonini  
Department of Modern Languages  
Loyola University Chicago  
Chicago, IL 60660

### Co-editor & Review Editor

John Paul Russo  
Department of Classics  
University of Miami  
Coral Gables, FL 33124

### Fiction Editor

Christine Palamidessi Moore

### Poetry Editor

Maria Terrone

### Fiction Editorial Review Team

Robin Ray

### Poetry Editorial Review Team

Steven Reese  
Barbara Poti Crooker

### Editorial Assistant

Thomas Slagle

Founded by Ernest S. Falbo and Richard Gambino  
Past Editors: Bruno A. Arcudi and Carol Bonomo Albright  
Poetry Editor 1994-2003: Dana Gioia  
Poetry Editor 2004- 2016: Michael Palma

An international peer reviewed journal, ITALIAN AMERICANA  
is published semiannually at Loyola University Chicago.  
Email address: [italianamericana@luc.edu](mailto:italianamericana@luc.edu)

The fate you have at least chosen,  
An odyssey of your own,  
An odyssey without an Ithaka.

In this difference between the Homeric hero and Everyman also lies the difference between Poetry and Life, that is, between the realm of the Possible and Something which happens to us and for which we will not have a second chance.

*Sicily Jass: The World's First Man in Jazz* directed by Michele Cinque. GA & A Productions, 2015. DVD format. 73 minutes.

Review by Vincenzo Caporaletti  
*Università di Macerata*

This documentary traces the human and artistic vicissitudes of Dominick “Nick” LaRocca (1889–1961), a self-taught cornetist, the son of a Sicilian shoemaker from Salaparuta who emigrated to New Orleans. LaRocca is responsible for what is considered the first jazz record, *Livery Stable Blues/Dixie Land Jazz Band—One Step*, recorded on February 26, 1917. With his group, Original Dixieland Jazz Band, he won resounding success in the 1910s and 1920s, only to be obscured by the Great Depression when LaRocca returned to working in the building trade.

The film employs the language of fiction and documentary, dramaturgically counterpointing LaRocca’s story, told by mixing film and first-hand accounts, with the character of the Narrator given to Mimmo Cuticchio, a true *puparo* (puppeteer) and *cuntastorie* (storyteller) of the Sicilian tradition. Sicily is portrayed in the ruins of Salaparuta, devastated by an earthquake, in which the music of Roy Paci and Salvatore Bonafede offsets that of New Orleans. The film’s narration is suggestive and well renders LaRocca’s controversial character. Surprisingly, he is a figure to whom the historiography of jazz today does not recognize a founding role, considering his individual contribution in the framework of much broader social and cultural dynamics. It is no coincidence that one of the most touching aspects of the film lies in the attempts that LaRocca made during his entire life to reaffirm his leading role in jazz.

If as an artwork *Sicily Jass* provides a provocative juxtaposition of settings, as a documentary on jazz it seems to get caught up in unresolved aspects that distort the historical figure of LaRocca, projecting him into an erroneous mythographic dimension. With regard to this specific historiographic aspect, the ideology of jazz as oral culture made Cinque miss an important point. In Italian culture, and in Sicilian culture, influenced by classical Greek civilization, oral culture was rooted in Greek myth. This

was the world of the rhapsodes, the bards, of the traditional “genuine” community, as Edward Sapir has said, of transparent values with no “accursed share” (Georges Bataille) of the accumulation of value (economic, sexual, authorial). It was the culture of the “We” not of the “I.” The *cuntastorie* in the film wants to represent all too openly, and somewhat didactically, this legacy of oral tradition. Cinque is able to superimpose the two images—Nick La Rocca and the *cuntastorie*—on the grounds that U.S. jazz is interpreted, in anthropological literature, as an emanation of oral culture. And this is problematic, because in LaRocca, instead of the “We,” there is a hysterical and dramatic, compulsive “I.” Within the “oral scheme,” this contradiction is neither resolved nor explained.

LaRocca was no anonymous bard; rather he flaunted his authorship and his identity as a composer (even if he was illiterate, according to literate canons). With a “way of being in the world” akin to the *cuntastorie*, he had found that “forbidden fruit” which took him away from the innocence of oral culture. In the emerging record industry of the 1910s, this was the phonographic medium, which imposes its own logic on the music recorded, as an emanation of capitalist property that reproduces its intrinsic structure in the private ownership of a work of art. Recording was something that imprisoned the music collectively shared in the oral culture of New Orleans, by reifying it into an object, a product, and inextricably linking its performer to itself. Like a technological Faust, it projected the performer into the dazzling light of show business and fleeting glory.

This process introduced values completely different from those found in oral culture, and which clashes with the image the movie wants to suggest of “LaRocca *cuntastorie* in America.” LaRocca becomes the “owner” and thus the “author” of those same “floating folk strains” that freely circulated in New Orleans: he thus transforms himself into a trickster, a “divine thief” of music. This explains the profound hatred and resentment he aroused in the jazz community, in particular in that, doubly excluded, of African Americans. The hatred shown by his old companions and the denial of his paternity of jazz by scholars would cause in him an incurable wound. His most violent reaction was against African Americans, whom he attacked on several occasions with expressions of violent racism. They were guilty, in his view, of the worst abjection: to have dethroned him, historically, as “the world’s first man in jazz.” But he, and others, simply had the bad luck of living on the edge of the catastrophe that separates oral culture from something other than itself.

*Bitter Trades: A Memoir* by Giovanna Miceli Jeffries. Mineola, N.Y.: Legas, 2018. 240pp.