

AEOLIAN TRADITIONS IN THE WORLD

The Life and Works of Angelo Merlino

(In memory of Angelo Merlino: 1940–2007)

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Introduction

The Aeolian Islands (also called the Lipari Islands) are a volcanic archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea off the north coast of Sicily. The group, with a total land area of 44 square miles (144 sq km), consists of seven major islands and several islets lying in a general ‘Y’ shape: Lipari, Panarea, Salina, Stromboli, Vulcano, Alicudi and Filicudi. The Greeks believed the islands to be the home of Aeolus, God and keeper of the winds, whence their name. Vulcano and Stromboli are active volcanoes and there are fumaroles on Lipari and Panarea. Excavations in the 20th century have established an uninterrupted archaeological record from the Neolithic period; Panarea and Filicudi have remains of Bronze Age villages. The Greeks established themselves in the islands early in the 6th century BC. Later there was a Carthaginian naval station, until the Romans took over in 252 BC. In Roman times, and again in the Fascist era (1920s–1940s), the islands served to house political prisoners. Since early medieval times the islands were conquered or controlled, first by the Saracens, then by the Normans in the 11th century, the Angevins of Naples and the Sicilian kings in the 14th century; and from the 15th century onwards, by Spain. When the last dynasty of Spanish descent, the Bourbons, capitulated in 1860, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was annexed to modern Italy (which was first a Kingdom, then a Republic).

Lipari is the largest town of the islands. The principal agricultural product used to be a heavy malmsey-type wine from Lipari, called *malvasia*. Unfortunately most of the vineyards were lost in a parasite epidemic which broke out in the late 1800s. The unemployment that resulted from the loss of those vineyards led many to emigrate to the Americas and then to Australia.

At the end of the 1940s the Panaria film production company undertook the first underwater filming in the Islands with experimental and rudimentary equipment. This attracted attention to the beauty and integrity of the islands both nationally and internationally. The next stage was the production of a film that is considered a milestone of Italian Neorealismo (New Realism) cinema: *Stromboli Terra di Dio*, by Roberto Rossellini (1950). Together with the film *Vulcano*, by Willam Dieterle (1950) this consecrated the new image of the Islands as exotic and remote places, inhabited by innocent, rural and ‘simple’ people full of passion. Thus films brought the Aeolians to the world, and made of Sicily and the Aeolian Islands more than a geographical location, turning them into a place of the mind and of the soul. The Aeolians were seen as a sort of archetypal ‘Mediterranean paradise’ still unspoiled by the ravages of post war industrialization. The Aeolian Islands were declared a UNESCO cultural world heritage site in 2000.

The new image of the Islands, which came from the outside, certainly had an effect on the way Aeolians perceived themselves: no longer cut off from the modern world, but on stage as a tranquil refuge from modernity’s stress. From being a place for political confinement, the

Islands became populated with outsiders who came willingly, such as city dwellers from Italy's new industrial centres looking for summer holiday houses. The newcomers bought houses which the poor locals had sold at ridiculously low prices in order to pay their fares to Australia to start a new life. Luxury hotels were built on the Aeolian Islands and old farmers' houses were transformed into charming love nests. Boat tourism boomed.

In this paper I will be discussing the work of one of the most internationally prominent Aeolian singer-songwriters of the post war era, Angelo Merlino and looking at the ways in which his music and career exemplify the position of Aeolians and Aeolian culture in the modern world.

Angelo Merlino's Life and Work

Angelo Merlino was born in Lipari on 12 February 1940 to a Sicilian father who was appointed general practitioner for the Aeolian Islands, and a Uruguayan mother, Amanda, who was of Aeolian descent. Amanda was influential in the formation of young Angelo, as she sang and played guitar, instilling in him love for South American music. Angelo's elder brother, Benito, has lived in Paris since his youth and is also a well-known musician. His elder sister, Irma, migrated to Sydney, Australia in her youth. Angelo spent his early childhood on the scantily inhabited island of Filicudi, which is in many aspects still remote and archaic.

Angelo's life as a professional musician started in 1973, following his elder brother's venture to Paris in the early 60s. Benito and Angelo formed a group named Folk Musici delle Eolie (Aeolian Folk Musicians). Angelo lived in Paris for 10 years, from 1980 to 1990, where with his brother he established himself in the European folk music scene. This brought him into contact with many international stars who were to be influential in his life, notably South American musician Atahualpa Yupanqui and the group Los Calchakis. These musicians enhanced Angelo's taste for the creation of hybrid music, cross-fertilizing Sicilian and South American melodies and themes.

The first major work in which Angelo expressed this hybridity was the *Missa Eoliana*, the Aeolian Mass, a sequence of songs recounting the Passion of Jesus Christ in Sicilian dialect. The Mass was originally included on a side of the 1978 LP *Missa Eoliana et Visages de Sicile* (Aeolian Mass and Faces of Sicily). The inspiration for this 'Mass' was the 1969 Los Calchakis performance of the *Misa Criolla* (Creole Mass), an interpretation of the original and homonymous composition by Argentine composer Ariel Ramirez which integrated Argentine and Bolivian folklore into Church music (note: the official first LP released by Los Calchakis was actually in 1976).

The Merlino brothers also performed regularly in Berlin, in Switzerland and in South America. After the Paris years, Angelo returned to Lipari where he married, had children and took up a clerical job in order to support his family while continuing as a part-time musician. Meanwhile Benito became a well-established musician, recording many albums. In 1995 Angelo and Benito recorded a significant work consisting of a double CD entitled *Amore e rivolta* (Love and revolt) co-written with Sicilian poet and philosopher Lanza Del Vasto and Atahualpa Yupanqui. In the following years, Angelo recorded one album with Los Calchakis in Paris and five albums with Atahualpa in Lipari.

After Atahualpa died in the 1990s, Angelo dedicated an album to him. In 2003 he also recorded a CD dedicated to Chilean folksinger Violeta Parra. This CD was the first of those recorded by Angelo Merlino's new label, Associazione Culturale Athahualpa Yupanqui (Athahualpa Yupanqui Cultural Association), named after the man whom he regards as his master. The advent of this label marks a new phase in Angelo's life wherein, based in Lipari, he promotes the culture of the islands and their musical traditions through cultural initiatives: boat tours to Filicudi which tell the Aeolian Island's traditional stories and legends, with a

musical accompaniment; the yearly performance of the *Missa Eoliana* (Aeolian Mass) in the church of San Cristoforo at Easter; and musical interludes for tourists participating in the traditional swordfish hunt.

In the 40 years of their musical activity, both Merlino brothers have been to Australia several times, either together or with autonomous bands. They typically play for an audience of Sicilian emigrants in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Angelo and Benito's musical productions often overlap, as they have collaborated on common projects for most of their lives. Skipping to the last production of Angelo Merlino, *Antologia Musicale delle Isole Eolie* (2006), we can see it is an ambitious, multi-disciplinary project. The CD includes a set of songs describing each one of the seven Aeolian islands and their traditional fishing practices. The associated DVD, conceived by Angelo and Teodoro Mercuri, illustrates the geological history and archaeology of the Aeolian Islands and Angelo's cultural initiatives. In 2005, Angelo played songs from this album both in Italy and in Australia where he performed to emigrant audiences in Sydney and Melbourne.

Merlino's Musical Hybridity and the Re-invention of Tradition

Angelo's musical production is distinguished by its hybrid quality. Born into a multicultural family he has, since his childhood, had an original outlook on the different identities inherent in his Sicilian and Aeolian cultural heritages. The musical awareness instilled in the brothers by their mother was enhanced by the cultural awakening (described above) which the islands underwent in the immediate post-Second World War period.

The Merlino brothers grew up immersed in this 'new image', sensing all the appeal the Islands held for non-locals. Benito Merlino exported, first to Paris and then to the rest of the world, the best of what the Aeolians had to offer, what he had learned and what he had talent for: the music of the time of myth. Many parallels could be made with the same type of image-construction that has occurred in Nova Scotia, Canada, as illustrated by Ian McKay (1953: Chapters 1 and 2). McKay speaks in his essay of a myth of a 'time of innocence', a 'golden age' for which the man of the industrial and post-industrial society strives.

Angelo's music exemplifies how traditional music survives and is regenerated through cross-cultural mixtures and 'Sicilianization' of foreign forms of music. That this has been an age-old cultural practice can be demonstrated with some examples. Angelo's adoption of the Latin-American musical idiom to express feelings of attachment and belonging to his native island has many antecedents. The adoption of foreign musical idioms or genres of music/dance deriving from bourgeois, court or even Church environments, to the point where they become "traditional", has always happened.

For example, one of the oldest Sicilian traditional dances is the *contraddanza*, first recorded in Sicily by ethnographer Giuseppe Bonomo (1950). In his *La contraddanza in Sicilia* he retraces its origins in the 16th century French *Contre Danse*, a court dance which is actually a version of English Country Dance, such as that recorded and published by John Playford (1999) in *The English Dancing Master*. Another example is the waltz, which has been danced and played in Sicily as folk music since at least the early 20s (VV.AA, 1996), when 'the folk' first came in contact with this genre via radio. The mazurka, the polka and the tango also have their regional and folk versions. With the return of the first emigrants from Argentina, the tango was either introduced or reinforced as a folk dance. The earliest recordings of these four last-mentioned genres date from the early 20th century and are North American (many by Columbia records, on 78 rpm vinyls). Waltzes, mazurkas, polkas and tangos were popularized in Sicily via the mass diffusion of radio and by 78 rpm vinyl records brought back by the emigrants from the USA and South America.

Other examples of the process of 'folklorization' in Sicily reach back centuries. Ethnomusicologist Ignazio Macchiarella (1995) demonstrated how the chants of the Holy Week in Sicily, as with those of most of Southern Italy and its islands (including Sardinia), derive from a vulgarization of the early Renaissance technique of Falsobordone. This is a four-part singing style used in Church music whose most authoritative representative has been the French-Flemish Guillaume Dufay (1397-27). The examples could continue; covering all genres defined as 'traditional genres' by a certain branch of ethnomusicology.

Connections between South American rhythms and Southern Italy run deep through history and in culture. Evidence of this connection can be found by examining the quantity of Sicilian/South American music that has been produced since the dawn of the recording industry. Some examples of this early hybridisation with South American rhythms can be found in remastered 78rpm recordings released on CD by the Taranta and Phone labels (VV.AA 1996; 1999). In the liner notes, supervising ethnomusicologists Pino Gala (University of Bologna), Mario Sarica (University of Messina) and Giuliana Fugazzotto (University of Bologna) observe that the source 78s were the first widely available recordings of Sicilian folk musicians in the world. Importantly, the ethnomusicologists inform us that these recordings would have been a source of information and inspiration for traditional musicians in Italy at the time (beginning of the 1910s), to whom the records would have been made available by returning migrants.

Amongst this repertoire are a number of tangos. From the 1910s–1960s, tango was the most recurrent Latin-American genre featured in Sicilian folk music recordings. This changed in the 1960s when mambo, rumba and cha-cha-cha entered into the new Italian pop music scene, mediated through the figures of Fred Buscaglione, Rosemary Clooney, Connie Francis and Domenico Modugno. Modugno, in particular, was seminal in the popularisation of mambo and other Latin-American music forms in Sicily as he also sang songs in Sicilian dialect (bridging the two cultures and communities of listeners). Tango, mambo, rumba and cha-cha-cha remained popular in the Italian folk music scene, and in particular in Sicily, through to the present day. Such forms feature in the discography of one of Sicily's greatest folk musicians, Gino Finocchiaro, as well as in what is considered 'dance music' (*ballabili*), in the e-catalogue of Mondialmusica, one of the major distributors of folk music productions in Southern Italy (at www.mondialmusica.it).

In the 1970s, Latin American music and culture became more than just a musical trend; it became politically significant. The *nueva cancion* movement, whose singers opposed brutal military regimes in South America, introduced a style of music which was more assimilable to that of folksingers such as Bob Dylan, taking up more of the indigenous/Indio sounds and leaving behind the ballroom dance forms (tango, mambo, rumba and cha-cha-cha). Exiled performers such as Athahualpa Yupanqui, Violeta Parra and Inti-Illimani appealed to working class Italians at a time of immense political tensions in Italy (i.e. torn between rampant Liberalism and strong Communist influences). In 1968 and in the years that followed in the 70s, left-wing European youth and intelligentsia adopted the musical forms and politically-loaded messages of the *nueva cancion* as tools to advocate revolution and social change.

Conclusions

On the basis of evidence presented above, I argue that 1) there is no purely 'traditional genre' in the sense of one that is entirely original to the Aeolian islands; and 2) Angelo Merlino's music, despite its apparent contrast to music that is commonly accepted as 'Sicilian traditional' is, in fact, perceived as folk music and should be accepted as such.

In the microcosmos of the Aeolian Islands and its expatriate communities, Merlino's music is well known to the many Aeolians who have seen him perform or know him personally. Angelo

is a legitimate representative of the Aeolian population because his family's ancestors are from the Islands. This has permitted him to organize his performances in conjunction with major traditional festivities and cultural activities on the islands: Easter public performances, performances on sword-fishing and tourist boats illustrating the folkloric patrimony of his music. The repeated performances of his music in these cultural milieux underline his stature as a local icon.

By exporting their Aeolian stories and myths into the global world, Angelo and Benito saved this heritage before it could be swept away by the emerging consumer culture. They responded with great efficiency and creativity to the challenges of a changing world. Such adaptation and change in order to preserve identity in a new frame is the most important sign that a culture is still alive and well.

In regards to his music and its apparently exotic sound, Latin-American melodies are not foreign to Sicily or the Islands. At least since the 1940s these rhythms have been heard on the radio and on records. Most importantly in the case of Angelo, they stem from his mother who hailed from Uruguay, although being of Sicilian ancestry. Angelo Merlino's music was influenced both by the Italian folk music 'stream' of Latin-American music and by the more bourgeois/political/left wing 'stream' epitomised by Athahualpa Yupanqui, synthesizing both trends in a distinctive manner. Within a contemporary Mediterranean context, it is important to consider that Merlino's music was hardly ever published on a major (or even medium-scale) record label. In this sense he can be considered as an 'underground' and, in some ways, 'cult' artist, appealing to a small, dedicated local audience, many of whom knew him personally. He was influenced by the European Folk Revival movement of the 70s, but always remained on the fringes of it, eschewing easily marketable 'Sicilian ethnic' product.

While Merlino's use of traditional Sicilian and Latin instruments linked him to the Folk Revival movement, the style of his compositions, and the personality expressed through them, more closely resembled other Italian 'ethnic-flavoured' singer-songwriters (*cantautori*) such as Fabrizio De Andre'. In the Mediterranean context, Merlino's music is also comparable to that of singer-songwriter Loudovikos ton Anoyon, Michalis Terzis, and the group The Athenians. All of these artists have signed to leading international music labels such as Network Medien GmbH in Germany (www.networkmedien.de) and ARC Music in Great Britain (www.arcmusic.co.uk). In the Italian island context, musical parallels can be made with other traditionally-influenced singer/songwriters working in local/insular markets, such as the Sardinians Maria Carta, Elena Ledda and Clara Murtas. Like Merlino, these artists have maintained their distinctive personalities and not been absorbed into world music markets or folkloristic 'pigeon-holes'. In the Sicilian island context, Angelo Merlino's music is comparable, in terms of style, personality and niche market audience with Palermitan Fabio Politi and with Gianni Bernardo, from the minor island of Lampedusa. In an ensemble context, significant parallels can be drawn between Merlino's work and that of Roy Paci and Arestuska, who have drawn on a similar mix of Latin-American and Sicilian Folk to achieve national chart success. This demonstrates, once again, how the deeply-rooted musical connection between Sicily and South America continues in the present.

Angelo, together with his brother Benito, has influenced a whole generation of young Aeolian musicians who define themselves as folk artists. The Merlinos are regarded as spiritual fathers of the musical community of the islands. Their music is widely and diversely performed in restaurants and bars. It has a deep connection with the land and its people and gives voice and resonance to the Islanders' contemporary views of reality. The Latin American idiom is perceived as an original form of music by the people, and not as a 'metisse' or a 'pastiche' from somewhere else. Unmistakable proof of the fact that this music is contemporary folk is that some islanders sing the Merlino brothers' songs without knowing who composed them. Thus, even within the lifetime of its creator, the music has entered the public domain.

In conclusion, music can be defined as folk or traditional when, detached from its point of origin, it enters the public domain and is considered by a large percentage of the working and middle class as a common cultural patrimony, becoming a vehicle and a feature of local identity. We should hence define folk music in terms of its social audience and its impact, rather than by its aesthetic/structural form or even its national origins.

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