



▲ BILL DAL CERRO & DAVID ANTHONY WITTER

EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

It is one of the more head-scratching ironies in the jazz world: Considering that Italy's jazz scene didn't really coalesce until after the post-World War II period, how did it produce, decades earlier, so many turn-of-the-century Italian immigrants who eventually mastered the music in America?

To many scholars, this irony is easily explained. Says Francesco Martinelli, one of Italy's top jazz educators: "Given Italy's great musical history, this is not a fluke. Both Italians and Italian Americans come from a culture where music was deeply revered: classical, folk, and opera."

Martinelli's comment is borne out time and again when you look at the childhood histories of first- and second-generation Italian American jazz musicians. Many of them grew up in households where music was an integral part of their nurturing environment; their parents sang folk songs, listened to opera records, or played in local symphonic or festa bands.

Bebop, Swing and Bella Musica

by Bill Dal Cerro and David Anthony Witter

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Our contributions TO JAZZ

by Fred L. Gardaphe

Longtime Chicago-area freelance writers and high school teachers Bill Dal Cerro and David Anthony Witter have joined forces to explore the incredible contributions Americans of Italian descent have made to jazz from its origins to today.

Written with journalistic flair through the eyes of amateur historians and with an activist's bent, this compilation of profiles of major players and overviews of minor figures offers ample evidence of the great impact these composers, musicians and singers have had on jazz history.

Short chapters composed in a generally snappy style make for quick pacing and a conversational tone throughout. There is no grand narrative arc here, with each piece capturing historical highlights dating back to the genre's birth in New Orleans' Congo Square. That birth was midwived in part through the interactions of African Americans like Louis Armstrong and Italian Americans like Nick LaRocca, whose Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded the first jazz record. LaRocca's seminal impact has often been overlooked in previous jazz histories for reasons the authors explore and counter with an ample treatment of his life and legacy.

Early chapters are devoted to single players like LaRocca, Louis Prima, Sam Butera, Leon Roppolo, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Joe Marsala, Flip Phillips, Louie Bellson, Pete and Conte Candoli, Buddy DeFranco, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Bucky Pizzarelli, Lennie Tristano and many more. More general sections adequately introduce Jazz in Italy and Women in Jazz, and provide a breadth

that earlier selections suggest.

Dal Cerro draws particular attention to the discrimination visited upon Italian immigrants as well as the stereotyping they were subjected to, perhaps overstating the message that Italians had to overcome much in their efforts to assimilate into American culture. The sheer number of Italian Americans who have made

contributions to the genre offers ample evidence. The book concludes with a lengthy section containing cameo-like entries in what the authors call "The Ensemble Cast" and a gathering of what might be called outtakes in "Fascinating Facts." A bit of editing here and there would have eliminated the redundancies encountered when reading cover to cover, but for those who dip in here and there, these are

trivial. There are a few sections of photographs and a lengthy bibliography that point toward the deep well of material from which the authors drew to create their stories.

The strongest entries are those that contain interviews conducted by the authors; the weakest are those that depend totally on research. Overall, the book earns the praise that historian Frank A. Salamone gives it in his "Foreword": "This book is long overdue. It documents the role that Italian Americans have played in the development of jazz without denying the tremendous influence made by African Americans and others."

Jazz, a truly original American contribution, might have been made by a few, but it certainly belongs to all of us, no matter our racial, ethnic, gender or class background. Dal Cerro and Witter have provided us with an important vantage point from which we can begin to appreciate its rich history.

