

Musical words for a Mediterranean imaginary: Genoa in singer-songwriters' lyrics

ISABELLA MARIA ZOPPI

CNR-IRCrES, National Research Council of Italy - Research Institute on Sustainable Economic Growth, via Real Collegio 30, 10024 Moncalieri TO, Italy

corresponding author: isabella.zoppi@ircres.cnr.it

ABSTRACT

Genoa the Superba, a crossroad for History and stories, has been one of the cradles of the Mediterranean culture and identity and it has been a great source of inspiration for any kind of artists. This paper aims to suggest a specific perspective on this city of water and stone through an unusual journey within its cultural and territorial identity. The filter, or rather the compass of this path, are a few urban musical words born in the Mediterranean imaginary of some Italian singer-songwriters. This paper is complementary to the [video](#) presented by the author at the Blue Planet Economy (BPE) European Maritime Forum 2021.

KEYWORDS: Mediterranean identity, Mediterranean culture, Genoa, lyrics, singer-songwriters.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Zoppi, I.M. (2022). Musical words for a Mediterranean imaginary: Genoa in singer-songwriters' lyrics. In Vitali, G. & Zoppi, I.M. (eds). *CNR case histories in the Blue Planet Economy* (pp. 135-140). Quaderni IRCrES 16. Moncalieri, TO: CNR-IRCrES. <http://dx.doi.org/10.23760/2499-6661.2022.16.19>

1 INTRODUCTION

Genoa seems to urge on the Genoese and the travellers into telling the spirit of the place through novels, poems, thrillers, essays, songs, be they transparently dedicated or marked with a watermark, spread with echoes and references or gently punctuated with suggestions. Genoa has a harsh, faceted, powerful and pressing landscape which demands visibility within any artistic field: its intrinsic cultural meaning has to be expressed, narrated, re-founded through artistic creation. This paper focuses on a journey through this city of water and stone, an unusual journey guided by urban musical words born in the Mediterranean imaginary of singer-songwriters. I travelled along these paths for the first time in 2005, and the results were an essay (Zoppi, 2005) and a music album, *Porta dei canti* (2005)¹. Then, I retraced the same cartography along different roads in *Musical words for a city of water and stone: Genoa's waterfront as it has been told by singer-songwriters* (2012) and finally, last year, in a [video](#) presented at the Blue Planet Economy (BPE) European Maritime Forum. This new journey traces different paths, because the ever-changing soundscape is constantly evolving as well as the travellers' gaze, and their ability to listen.

2 "GENOA IS ONLY SEEN FROM THE SEA"

The sea, the shore, the Riviera, the wharf, the landing and the leaving, they all are mirrors where singer-songwriters reflect their tales of this city, giving voice to the waterfront and to its backgrounds.

If someone wants to look at Genoa as a whole, the favoured point of view is the access from the sea, according to Ivano Fossati and his *Chi guarda Genova* (Fossati, 1988). Great navigator of words and scores, he gives a clear and conscious portrait of the city, of its atmosphere, its singularities and its colours, from the perspective of someone who is really connected to his place by a bunch of love and water, of tension and desire, of a little illusion and some gloom:

who looks at Genoa knows that Genoa
is only seen from the sea
so do not stand there waiting
to see something better, something more
than those geraniums that youth
still makes grow in the streets²

The gaze that tries to grasp the great Genoa from the sea discovers the embrace of a natural theatre facing the Mediterranean, where the stone steps multiply in a theory of terraces, balconies, staircases, and walls. This city embodies the seduction of a falsely motionless Circe waiting for the careless sailor; it unfolds the mirage of a bazaar that promises to fulfil the imaginable and to evoke the unimaginable. The charm of Genoa is a swing of light and shadow, a vertigo. Avoiding the "continent and mainland" categories (Bertone, 2001, p. 8), Genoa is stretched along a coastline made of arches that look like the ribs of a massive stranded whale (Heine, 1960, p. 358), the Moby Dick sought for by countless artists and writers over the centuries. This obsession haunts even the Federico Sirianni's imaginary, where whale, water and journey become a metaphor for the human condition³:

¹ Both available at <https://www.byterfly.eu/islandora/object/ircres:portadeicanti>

² All translations from Italian are mine. "Chi guarda Genova sappia che Genova / si vede solo dal mare / quindi non stia lì ad aspettare / di vedere qualcosa di meglio, qualcosa di più / di quei gerani che la gioventù / fa ancora crescere nelle strade".

³ "I grew up in a place where the sea is a fundamental part of the landscape and of man, and I wanted to pay homage to that sea: so I went to the Film Library of the Ansaldo Foundation Historical Archive in Genoa and asked them to

Holy water, salt water that is not wine
 Of acid rain, of calm, water of trade winds
 Water, water all around, the giant stirs the water
 But the giant isn't looking for me, it's me looking for her (Sirianni, 2021)⁴

3 THE INNER CITY AS A LABYRINTH FOR MEMORIES AND SENSES

Genoa's inner city is a sort of labyrinth to explore through all sensory codes in a synergic way. Any kind of experiences are equally useful to negotiate and recreate the relationship between memories and knowledge of the city's light and shade effects.

Fabrizio De André explores the inner city with its alleys – the typical *carruggi* – the waterfront and its surroundings, and he fixes their memories through unforgettable sketches. He tells the losers' space: the “graziosa” (the pretty one) waiting for her clients on the threshold of her room in *Via del Campo* (De André, F., 1967); the old professor and his “pubblica moglie”, everybody's wife (De André, F., 1965); the four half-poisoned pensioners spending their time at a coffee table⁵. These are all characters you can meet walking along the old wharfs “in that thick air full of salt, filled with smells” (De André, F., 1965)⁶. De André offers everyone a sympathetic look:

if you think, if you judge as a good bourgeois
 you will condemn them to five thousand years plus the costs
 but if you understand, if you look for them all the way
 if they are not lilies they are always children
 victims of this world (De André, F., 1965)⁷

There is a secret beauty in the vertical stratification of the Genoese *carruggi* between Palazzo Ducale and Sottoripa, built out of magnificence and misery, fulfilled of existences, goods and salt. Those are streets to be walked, taking one's own time, while talking to the city itself, like Cristiano Angelini (2010) does, as if he were talking to a beautiful woman, a dear and old friend lost and found countless times:

Sell yourself to the dreams of an old man
 Who saw you as a lady
 And who still loves you at night as an hour's bride
 Give yourself as a refreshment to the ducal palace
 Stabbed by us for four coins
 And a debt of charity⁸

help me. [...] so we chose to accompany the song with a chronicle of a holiday on the steamer Roma from the early 1930s” (“Sono cresciuto in un luogo in cui il mare è parte fondamentale del paesaggio e dell'uomo e a quel mare volevo rendere omaggio: perciò mi sono recato alla Cineteca dell'Archivio Storico della Fondazione Ansaldo di Genova e ho chiesto loro di aiutarmi. [...] così abbiamo scelto di accompagnare la canzone con la cronaca di una vacanza sul Piroscampo Roma datata ai primi anni Trenta del Novecento”). <https://lospettacolonelcassetto.com/2021/06/22/federico-sirianni-il-video-de-la-ballata-dellacqua-il-nuovo-singolo-del-cantautore-genovese-primo-estratto-dallalbum-maqrroll/> (Last access 21 February 2021). Video available at <https://video.sky.it/spettacolo/musica/video/video-federico-sirianni-la-ballata-dellacqua-679056>

⁴ “Acqua santa, acqua salata che non è vino / Di pioggia acida, di bonaccia, acqua di alisei / Acqua, tutt'intorno acqua, il gigante smuove l'acqua / Ma il gigante non mi cerca, sono io che cerco lei”.

⁵ Cf. “quattro pensionati mezzo avvelenati a un tavolino” (De André, F., 1965).

⁶ “in quell'aria spessa carica di sale, gonfia di odori”.

⁷ “se tu penserai, se giudicherai da buon borghese / li condannerai a cinquemila anni più le spese / ma se capirai, se li cercherai fino in fondo / se non sono gigli son pur sempre figli vittime di questo mondo.

⁸ “Venditi ai sogni d'un vecchio che ti ha visto signora / E che ti ama ancora la notte come sposa di un'ora / Regalati come un rinfresco al Palazzo Ducale / Da noi accoltellata per quattro monete / Ed un debito di carità”.

4 THE OLD PORT

The amphibian Genoese unit which was symbol of centuries of history and culture has been partially broken when the docks in the Porto Antico (the old port) were abandoned. Piazza Caricamento once was the place where the goods were load on freight cars and wagons. Now, it is the viewpoint between the Palazzo San Giorgio and the Bigo. Regaining space, air and colours, Genoa, as a sea city, has lost that old binary rhythm which opposed sails to furnaces. Nowadays, the new rhythm seems to be built on the alternation of empty and full spaces, of lights and sounds, of chiaroscuro and darkness:

the street is full of moonlights
and your hands sails for the sea
on this night that is worth it
the wheezing of the chimneys (De André, C., 1995)⁹.

The waterfront has gained a new life, notwithstanding the changes and transformations of economics and industry. But in Cristiano De André's lyrics this square remains the metaphor of a hard living, industrial archaeology, smoke of drugs, chimneys and funnels, and fogs of memories:

because it's the whole life that cries inside
or maybe it's the smoke of Caricamento
there were mouths to drink everything
and then spit it all out to the sky
they were nights adrift
nights of Genoa I don't remember and I don't believe (De André, C., 1995)¹⁰

5 THE FOURTH WALL OF WATER FOR A CITY OF SOUNDS AND STONE

The Porto Antico requalification process has re-founded a new relationship among man, sea, land and architecture. Nevertheless, both in its past shape and in the new one, the waterfront maintains a powerful seduction on travellers, navigators, observers and people passing by. The fascination is powerful and demanding, be it on foreigners or on home-insiders, such as Fossati. Navigation, the ancient metaphor of life, becomes less frightening when you know that, anyhow, you can find a port you recognise, and you feel comfortable considering that it can recognise you, too:

How can I tell how time passes
how can I say how slow
Lord of this port
see, I come closer too
sails still stretched
Genoese flag
that's me (Fossati, 1990)¹¹

The Genoese fascination traces its own cartography on waves and stones. It breaks down the fourth wall, thus allowing the imaginary to escape and come into a world made of water and winds: singer-songwriters re-found a wider Mediterranean identity deeply rooted in tradition and

⁹ "La strada è piena di chiari di luna / e le tue mani vele per il mare / in questa notte che ne vale la pena / l'ansimare delle ciminiere".

¹⁰ "Perché è la vita intera che grida dentro / o forse è il fumo di Caricamento / c'erano bocche per bere tutto / per poi sputare tutto al cielo / erano notti alla deriva / notti di Genova che non ricordo e non ci credo".

¹¹ "Come posso dire come passa il tempo / Come posso dire come passa lento / Signore di questo porto / vedi mi avvicino anch'io / vele ancora tese / bandiera genovese / sono io".

innovation, as in the song *Libeccio*, where Max Manfredi (2008) offers his own Mediterranean cartography in a modern and personal ode to the South-West wind:

Sing a fate that didn't catch me, trinkets of gunfire along the shoreline
Slingshot and flights, the jump of the witches, the flight of anchovies on the salt roads.
Sing for me, green wave motions, tomb of surfs, cradle of seabed
Chillax the saudade, wake of shipwrecks, lacquer of vinyl and leather of boot"¹²

6 CONCLUSIONS

Musically speaking, the Mediterranean hosts and inspires great streams and mainland navigators, unique bards of the bond between identity and territory, between water and emerged dreams. Genoa seems to be a place which demands to be told, and it offers itself both as a matrix and as an instrument, that "fourth string"¹³ that Giorgio Caproni (1989, p. 186) mentions in his *Litania* as the perfect enchantress, a syren which cannot go out of tune and you cannot forget.

Genoa demands to be told or sung, more than walked or lived, so that personal memories can melt into a shared imaginary, making the one part of the community – making the single breath part of a Mediterranean collective cultural identity. In the end, we all are people from the Mediterranean. As Gino Paoli (1974) sings, translating *Mediterráneo*, a song by the Catalan Joan Manuel Serrat (1971), the fact that we all share the same sea as a matrix marks us deeply and indelibly, wherever we want to or not:

To your fire-red sunsets are accustomed the eyes of a child who ran
I'm a singer I'm a liar I love the game and the good wine I'm a man born at sea
what can I do if I was born in the Mediterranean
I was born in the Mediterranean¹⁴

7 REFERENCES

- Angelini C., (2010). *L'ombra della mosca*. In *L'ombra della mosca*. Gutenberg Music. First version recorded in *Porta dei canti* (2005). Available at <https://www.byterfly.eu/islandora/object/ircres:portadeicanti>.
Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bw3YbAwVwB8&ab_channel=PrimigeniaProduzioni
- Bertone, G. (2001). *Letteratura e paesaggio. Liguri e no. Montale, Caproni, Calvino, Ortese, Biamonti, Primo Levi, Yehoshua*. Lecce: Manni.
- Caproni, G. (1989). *Poesie 1932-1986*. Milano: Garzanti.
- De André, C. (1995). *Notti di Genova*. In *Sul confine*. WEA. 2003 version from the album *Un giorno nuovo* (Edel Music) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0m_wK_o_iA&ab_channel=travis83100
Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0m_wK_o_iA&ab_channel=travis83100
- De André, F. (1965). *La città vecchia/Delitto di paese*. Karim. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2L5MJdTCFI&ab_channel=FabrizioDeAndreVEVO
- De André, F. (1967). *Via del campo/Bocca di rosa*. Bluebells records. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ5jjUVqHbE&ab_channel=FabrizioDeAndreVEVO

¹² "Canta un fato che non mi ha beccato, ninnolo di spari lungo il litorale / Fionda e fughe, il salto delle streghe, il volo delle acciughe sulle vie del sale. / Canta per me, verdi moti ondosi, tomba di marosi, culla di fondale. / Scialla la saudade, solco di naufragi, lacca di vinile e cuoio di stivale".

¹³ "Genova quarta corda / *Sirena che non si scorda*".

¹⁴ "Ai tuoi tramonti rosso fuoco sono abituati gli occhi di un bambino che correva / son cantante son bugiardo amo il gioco ed il buon vino sono un uomo nato al mare / che ci posso fare se son nato in Mediterraneo / son nato in Mediterraneo".

- Fossati, I. (1988). Chi guarda Genova. In *La pianta del tè*. CBS. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rwx8qBfYx3M&ab_channel=IvanoFossatiL%27interadiscografia. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBE2rnGwG3c&ab_channel=EliosF
- Fossati, I. (1990). Passalento. In *Discanto*. Epic. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLbcN1r0FeU&ab_channel=koba5622
- Heine, H. (1960). *Reisebilder*. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese.
- Manfredi, M. (2008). Libeccio. In *Luna persa*. Ala Bianca. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdEmGK0DTRE&ab_channel=MaxManfredi-Topic. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7sR2T5uE8Y&ab_channel=Mazzipunk
- Paoli, G. (1974). Mediterraneo. In *I semafori rossi non sono Dio*. Durium. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2k75U6z5Ds&ab_channel=burgenhagen. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qYeByM-D80&ab_channel=PereMasPascual
- Serrat, J.M. (1971). Mediterráneo. In *Mediterráneo*. Novola. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2WOHs9wG4&ab_channel=savant624. Live version available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xh9EFTp3gNs&ab_channel=Chileenvivodvd
- Sirianni, F. (2021). La ballata dell'acqua. In *Maqroll*. Nota.
- Zoppi, I.M. (2005). Un profilo musicato. Genova attraverso le voci della canzone d'autore. In Gallinari, L. (ed). *Genova una "porta" del Mediterraneo* (pp. 1119-1155). Cagliari, Genova: Brigati.
- Zoppi, I.M. (2012). Musical words for a city of water and stone: Genoa's waterfront as it has been told by singer-songwriters. In *Portus Plus*, 3. Available at http://retedigital.com/portus_plus/portus-plus-3-2012/