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▼ 2009 (30)

▼ June (3)

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territory in the
Danish fo...](#)

[Two new looks at the
ancient tarantella](#)

[Ethiopia's Mulatu
Astatke goes to
England](#)

► May (10)

► April (4)

► March (13)

► 2008 (16)

► 2007 (11)

► 2006 (52)

TUESDAY, JUNE 09, 2009

[Two new looks at the ancient tarantella](#)

Rione Junno

Taranta Beat Project

Rai Trade/CNI (www.cnimusic.it)

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Mimmo Epifani

Zucchini Flowers

Finisterre (www.finisterre.it)

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It's amazing that the pizzica, a centuries-old folk music from an obscure part of southern Italy, not only has survived but now thrives, as both a living tradition and as a foundation for some exciting and forward-looking new music.

The pizzica (also known as pizzica pizzica and pizzica taranta) originally was the music of tarantismo, a cultural phenomenon that emerged in the southern Salento peninsula of the Puglia region. Music and dance were employed in a symbolic ritual to cure peasants, mainly women, from illnesses purportedly caused by the poisonous bite of the tarantula.

The afflicted would dance, to the point of collapsing, to the frenetic rhythms of the pizzica songs (usually in straight or accented 6/8 time) played by a small group that included tamburello (large tambourine), violin, chitarra battente (a large four- or five-string southern Italian guitar), and organetto (a type of accordion).

The spider's bite, however, was a metaphor for other conditions, such as grief, depression, and sexual frustration. Dancing the pizzica was a culturally-sanctioned and collective way for poor, politically disenfranchised peasants to act out and exorcise individual psychological conflicts.

Nandu Popu of Sud Sound System, a band that mixes traditional Salentine styles with reggae and rap, has called pizzica "the music of our grandparents, who were slaves of the aristocrats."

Tarantismo has pretty much died out, albeit relatively recently; psychotherapy has taken its place. The pizzica "has acquired a new function, that is, to represent the cultural identity of Salento," according to ethnomusicologist Tullia Magrini.

But not only Salento: the pizzica long ago spread to other parts of Puglia, mixing with various local idioms. The tarantella, the "spider's dance" common throughout southern Italy and Sicily, developed from the pizzica taranta.

Today there are musicians who specialize in traditional repertoire and performing styles (Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino, Uccio Aloisi Gruppo, Tarantolati di Tricarico), those that perform new material in traditional styles (Officina Zoe, Aramirè), and others that fuse pizzica with global sounds, mainly reggae and dub, rock, rap, and techno (Nidi D'Arac, Sud Sound System, Ammaracippa). Since 1997, pizzica has been the drawing card at La Notte Della Taranta, an annual event held in the Salento town of Melpignano that has become one of Europe's major music festivals.

In 2000, the Neapolitan singer-songwriter Eugenio Bennato founded Taranta Power to promote the pizzica and other southern Italian music, through concerts, recordings, and music education initiatives. The Taranta Power project, says Bennato, aims to counter "the unfortunate backward image that the tarantella has assumed in the world's collective imaginary, conveyed by lame folkloric groups and by banal musical expression totally divorced from the raging reality of the taranta ritual."

Bennato hails Rione Junno, a new sextet made up of young musicians from Monte Sant'Angelo, a city in Puglia (but not Salento), as exemplars of the Taranta Power ethos. Eschewing "backward-looking folklorism," they instead are "part of an alternative and contemporary wave in ethnic music...one of the most outstanding representatives of the new music rooted in tradition but looking toward the future."

Tarant Beat Project, their first album, for the most part justifies Bennato's praise. As the title suggests, the rhythms of pizzica are the main focus. The band uses traditional instruments -- chitarra battente, tamburello, and zampogna, southern Italian bagpipes -- but also electric bass and programmed beats. Recorded in Naples, the album's chief auteur is Vinci Acunto, of the Neapolitan rock band Bisca, who produced, arranged, and mixed Taranta Beat Project, as well as programming the electronics on every track.

Rione Junno - named after Monte Sant'Angelo's Junno neighborhood, the city's ancient historic center - don't have a charismatic frontman like Nidi D'Arac's Alessandro Coppola or virtuosic instrumentalists. With no one personality dominating the band, the ensemble sound - lean and beat-y, rooted in tradition but definitely non-folkloric -- is the thing.

A roster of guests joins the core band on most tracks. Sha-One from the Neapolitan rap group La Famiglia shows up for "23 Marzo," which recounts the violent police repression of a 1950 workers' demonstration. Guitarist Elio "100 Grammi" joins his Bisca bandmate Vinci Acunto on several selections.

Eugenio Bennato's on board, too, singing lead on "Sponda Sud," one of his recent songs about "zingari ed emigranti" (gypsies and emigrants) traversing the seas of the global South. Several African vocalists who've worked with Bennato, and other Italian artists -- Mohammed el Alaoui, Assane Diop, Samir Toukour, and Zaina Chabane - augment the band's singers, who favor the plaintive monody typical of much southern Italian folk and folk-derived music.

Rione Junno's first record is a bit thin - nine tracks, plus three re-mixes. The group's identity doesn't quite seem fully formed.

But if the band isn't yet as commanding as Nidi D'Arac, whose brilliance was evident on their first recordings, Rione Junno is nonetheless a promising new addition to Puglia's rich musical scene.

I like to think of Mimmo Epifani, a terrific musician from San Vito dei Normanni in Salento, as the Yomo Toro of Italian roots music. Like the great Puerto Rican cuatro player, a stalwart of so many classic Fania salsa records of the 1970s as well as a solo artist, mandolinist Epifani is rooted in folk tradition yet hardly limited to it. Like Toro, he's a virtuoso and a bold improviser. Now that Epifani has grown a mustache and has given up his shiny black pompadour for a shaggier 'do, they even resemble each other.

Epifani has collaborated with some top Italian musicians -- Roberto de Simone, the esteemed musicologist and founder of La Nuova Compagnia di Canto Popolare, vocalist Massimo Ranieri, Eugenio Bennato, Avion Travel, jazz pianist Danilo Rea, and Tuscan rocker Piero Pelu. He released his first album as a leader, Marannui (Forrest Hill Records), in 2004. A wide-ranging but cohesive mix of pizzica and other styles (there was even a jazz ballad), Marannui ranks as one of the best Italian recordings of the past decade.

There was a good story to go with it, too. Mimmo called his band the Epifani Barbers because he'd learned to play mandolin and mandola in a barbershop owned by Costantino Vita, a musician well versed in traditional Salentine music. Vita, along with Peppu D'Augusta, who led several pizzica groups, schooled the young Mimmo in pizzica and other local styles. Following his apprenticeship under Vita and D'Augusta, Epifani studied mandolin at the Padua Conservatory.

His new record, *Zucchini Flowers*, continues Marannui's blend of tradition and innovation, but it's even more adventurous. Produced by Fausto Mesolella, the guitar wizard of Avion Travel, the album's 12 tracks give Epifani plenty of space to display his remarkable technique on mandolin, mandola, mandolincello, and guitar. His instrumental versions of Domenico Modugno's "La Donna Riccia" and "Lusingame," a fine if lesser-known canzone napoletana by Nino Taranto, are dazzling but not show-offy; Epifani's embellishments serve, and enhance, the songs.

Epifani sounds even more self-confident as a leader than he did on his debut. On *Marannui* he shared vocal duties with several singers. He handles most of the leads on *Zucchini Flowers*, and his singing is as distinctive as his playing - a big, earthy voice with a pronounced vibrato. Sometimes his vocals have a bleating quality that sounds Balkan, not surprising given the longstanding Greek influence in southern Puglia and the region's proximity to Albania.

Listeners used to smoother and less rustic Italian vocal styles may be in for a shock. But to me his vocal attack is as bracing as a glass of good primitivo, Puglia's best-known grape.

He shares vocals with flautist Giorgia Santoro on "La Pizzica delle Fate," an a capella number that's the album's most unusual track. "Fate" is Italian for "fairies," and Santoro's breathy lead sounds like it's emanating from some ethereal being. When Epifani leaps in, the piece becomes something else altogether - an encounter between the otherworldly and the material world, the latter incarnated in Epifani's gritty voice.

"Cucuzza e acqua," "Lu Sittaturu" and "Garbato e Saporito" should make his teachers Vita and D'Augusta proud of their former pupil- they're pizziche that demonstrate Epifani's mastery of the traditional form and his gift for making the ancient idiom sound absolutely up to the minute. "Lu Sittaturu" starts off slow and mournful before exploding into an up-tempo rave up, Epifani playing and singing like a man possessed. "The raging reality of the taranta ritual" that Eugenio Bennato misses in lesser artists' work is fully present here.

Sud Sound System's Nandu Popu, noting that the pizzica was born out of poverty and oppression, has expressed the hope that "we will come to sing fewer songs of suffering and more hymns of freedom."

There's not much that's hymn-like in Mimmo Epifani's zesty music, but there's definitely the sound of freedom, and a lot more. - George De Stefano

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Artist' web sites:
www.rionejunno.com
www.mimmoepifani.it

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