Selling Italy by the sound: cross-cultural interchanges through cover records

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Abstract
Since the beginning of modern canzone, cover versions have represented a shortcut to importing and exporting songs across national borders. By breaking language barriers, these records have played the role of ambassadors of Italian music abroad and, vice-versa, of Anglo-American music at home. Although cover records mania boomed especially in the 1960s, the history of Italian popular music is disseminated by such examples, including exchanges with French- and Spanish-speaking countries as well. After reflecting on the nature of ‘cover’ and offering a definition that includes its being a cross-cultural space most typical of Italy and other peripheral countries in the age of early contact with pop modernity, the paper focuses on the economic, aesthetic and sociological paradigms that affect the international circulation of cover records and suggests a few theoretical explanations that refuse the obsolete ‘cultural imperialism’ thesis in favour of a more flexible view hinged upon the notion of ‘deterritorialisation’. In the final section the paper provides a short history of Italian records that were hits abroad, decade by decade, and ends by highlighting those artists that played the role of cultural mediators between Italy and the world.

Introduction
During a talk backstage at his first Sanremo Festival, in the year 1964, Frankie Laine was asked by a journalist who his favourite Italian singers were. ‘Tony Bennett and Perry Como’, he said. ‘I said Italian’, insisted the interviewer. ‘But they are Italian’, replied the Italian-American artist born as Frank Paul Lo Vecchio. How can you blame the fifty-year-old pop star if the two people he mentioned were called Anthony Dominick Benedetto and Pierino Como and were the only Italian singers he knew? By that time, in fact, no Italian singer could claim to have achieved worldwide fame, save maybe for the meteor Domenico Modugno, whose ‘Volare’ had been a ‘one hit wonder’ in 1958. The only international stars in the early 1960s coming from Italy belonged to cinema, from Sofia Loren to Federico Fellini, from Marcello Mastroianni to Sergio Leone. Music was far behind. If Cinecittà studios, the poetics of neo-realism, comedy Italian style and the beginnings of the spaghetti western are still judged by historians as some of the most advanced experiences in the cinema of the 1950s and the 1960s, giving way to fecund international exchanges on a productive and aesthetic level, canzone italiana was hopelessly provincial and domestic. Its major institution, the Sanremo Festival, had long been oriented towards preserving the purity of Italian
singing, acting like a Ministry of Fine Arts. But in 1964 things began to change: following the example of the world of football, where foreigners had been playing in Italian teams for years, the competition was opened to foreign interpreters. Only a year earlier, domestic politics had witnessed a remarkable change with the advent of the first centre-leftist government in its Republican history. ‘From today everyone is more free’, announced the Socialist daily paper *L’Avanti!* At Sanremo it seemed that the same wind of liberty had started to blow when the first Foreign Legion came over from the Americas to sing brand new songs: their names were Frankie Laine, Frankie Avalon, Paul Anka, Gene Pitney and Bobby Rydell, who headed the teen idol squad, followed by outsiders such as soul man Ben E. King, the Chilean Antonio Prieto and the Cuban brothers Los Hermanos Rigual. An exciting festive spirit soared in this New Babel, but with limited familiarity with English and with a lack of information about the guests; mistakes were made when foreigners were presented by the compère’s assistant Giuliana Lojodice and artists acted like Totò and Peppino confronting tourists in a famous movie gag. The foreign interpreters were humble and professional enough to respect the rules of the Italian contest and to try their best to win. It was fun hearing Gene Pitney sing ‘Quando vedrai la mia ragazza’ after hearing the same song in the voice of his Italian partner Little Tony, or ‘Ogni volta’ by Paul Anka after Roby Ferrante’s interpretation. The winner was the sixteen-year-old Gigliola Cinquetti, coupled with Patricia Carli from France: her song ‘Non ho l’età’, became an international hit after winning the Eurovision contest as well.

That was the beginning of a most fertile season in the mobilisation of musical artefacts and tastes, where cover records played a crucial role. Summer 1967, the so-called Summer of Love: just imagine a teenage couple in London or Bristol dancing to the record that topped the domestic charts for the months of June and July, ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ by the Procol Harum. In Turin or Florence, imagine a teenage couple dancing to another record, this time a hit in Italy, ‘Senza luce’, by a group named I Dik Dik. Their performances might have been identical for they were virtually dancing to the same record; as a matter of fact the music was the same, although performed by different bands; the lyrics, however, were different because of the language being employed. English in the first case, Italian in the second.

Growing up in Italy’s mid-1960s meant – among other things – being exposed to the same new music which had come to hegemonise Western ears: beat, folk-rock, the Beatles, Motown and so on. The ways in which that music was listened to and the settings in which it was used were probably similar, even if at different latitudes and sides of the Atlantic: mono record players and low-fi loudspeakers squeaking from smoky basements where birthday parties took place.

That ‘revolution’ in sound was, however, hardly felt as a fashion imported from abroad: on the contrary, most of the hip records were sung in Italian, so that an entire generation, including the author of this article, grew up believing that ‘Che colpa abbiamo noi’, ‘Sognando California’ or ‘Ragazzo triste’ – just to pick three titles at random – were great Italian songs. Only a few years after, and only if you had some good reasons to go back to those songs, you might have discovered that ‘Che colpa abbiamo noi’, which gave immortality to a group of British immigrants based in Italy called the Rokes, was the Italian version of ‘Cheryl’s Going Home’, recorded by Bob Lind and the Blues Project. And you might have discovered as well that ‘Sognando California’ – with its epochal beginning ‘cielo grigio su, cielo grigio su / foglie gialle giù, foglie gialle giù’ – was nothing more than a rough translation of the Mamas & Papas’ big hit ‘California Dreamin’’. And, finally, you might have been disappointed by
discovering that the career of Patty Pravo, the teen-idol identified with ‘angst and rebellion’, was moulded on imported patterns: her debut single ‘Ragazzo triste’ was the cover version of ‘But You’re Mine’ by Sonny & Cher.

An entire season evolved under the sign of what I like to call the Big Cheat or, if you prefer, The Great Cover Version Swindle, long before the Sex Pistols came to rock the house. At that time, according to a well-know theory which states that cultural goods can be reappropriated in many different ways, originating new meanings or following unexpected paths, nobody really felt cheated. Quite the opposite, the very modernisation of Italian canzone occurred, for the most part, thanks to this ‘Big Cheat’ and it does not really matter if ‘Che colpa abbiamo noi’ was originally an American song titled ‘Cheryl’s Going Home’. The history of popular music tells us that only the former survived: the original record by Bob Lind (B-side of ‘Elusive Butterfly’, and #5 in the UK) and its cover by the Blues Project remained almost unknown both in the US and the UK, whereas the Rokes’ cover went to #3 in Italy, pioneering one of the most brilliant careers of the 1960s. ‘Che colpa abbiamo noi’, with its overt message epitomised in its title (‘what should be our fault?’) became an anthem of a generation. In 2003, the same song gave its name to a movie about the condition of youth in Italy. Why has it been so? Why was the same song almost a flop in its country of origin and a big hit in Italy, where it became a standard? The answer probably lies in the words: Mogol (nickname for Giulio Rapetti), the man who wrote the lyrics of ‘Che colpa abbiamo noi’, did not make a simple translation of Bob Lind’s song but chose to write a totally different text. ‘Cheryl’s Going Home’ was a song of love and despair. Its Italian version became a protest song, but with tones that were soft enough to be

Figure 1. Cover for I Dik Dik: ‘Senza Luce’ (1967).
accepted by a mainstream audience willing to change and to satisfy a youth audience who dared not to ask for too much.

Since the beginning of modern canzone, cover versions have represented a shortcut to importing and exporting songs across national borders. By breaking language barriers, these records have played the role of ambassadors of Italian music abroad and of Anglo-American music at home. Although the fad of cover records flourished in the 1960s, the whole history of Italian popular music is disseminated by such examples, including exchanges with French- and Spanish-speaking countries. After providing a more narrow definition of the ‘cover record’ as a cross-cultural space most typical of Italy and other peripheral countries in the pre-globalisation age, I will focus on the phenomenon mainly from a historical and sociological point of view, dealing both with Italian covers of foreign hits and foreign covers of Italian hits. The history of cover records – a much neglected aspect of popular music production in Italy – in a sense mirrors the history of cross-cultural interchanges and the fight for domination in the global marketplace, thus providing some good arguments for outlining a new musical geopolitics. Cover records did count at a time in which cultural products were mostly confined to the domestic market. Their decline began when people started buying the original versions of hit songs. This epochal turn is characterised as a paradigm shift from an (old) exoticism to a (new) globalisation.

Before dealing with the cultural implications of this turn and reviewing the history of cover records in Italy, I would like to briefly explore the nature of the ‘cover’ itself and offer a few reflections.

A theory of ‘coverability’

Is it possible to cover any song? And if not, what kind of songs offer more resistance and what others seem more apt to be covered? I will try to give some answers to these questions that involve the very nature of popular music (and maybe not only that).

Let me start with an attempt at definition: ‘the term cover refers to the second version, and all subsequent versions, of a song, performed by either another act than the one that originally recorded it or by anyone except its writer’ (Pareles-Romanowski 1983). This definition does not include the possibility of a language other than the original, but, technically, it works the same.

A more articulate definition comes from the Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World where ‘cover version’ is given a different meaning according to five musical and historical contexts: commercial music before rock, rock ‘n’ roll, rock, rock homage and sampled music. The only reference to foreign-language versions is made in the first case, that of commercial music before rock. In just a few lines at the end, the author reminds the reader that ‘cover versions can also be part of an industry-driven strategy of localisation, in which a song popular in a foreign country is adapted for a domestic market’ and quotes as an example a French version of Chubby Checker’s ‘Let’s Twist Again’ (Keightley 2003, pp. 614–17). Too little attention is given to the crucial role that cover versions had in the making of a modern musical mentality outside the USA and UK. The writer of the entry has developed his topic exclusively from an Anglo-American perspective. In my view, a cover version is a cross-cultural space most typical of Italy and other peripheral countries in an age of transition to full modernity. More specifically, the ‘golden age’ of the cover version was the 1960s, a decade in which the music industry – following a more general trend concerning a new cycle in
consumption and a worldwide thrust to assimilate products, styles, and behaviour patterns coming from the USA – capitalised the needs of the first affluent generation by addressing them in a new technological medium: the single 45 rpm record. The cover boom was therefore the result of a multiplicity of factors: economic, social and cultural. For the generation growing up in the 1960s, in virtually every Western country, the cover versions were the ticket to Paradise, if by Paradise is meant the chance of sharing a feeling of modernity not only with schoolmates but also with buddies of other countries, who would speak foreign languages but know exactly the same songs, dance to the same rhythms, cheer the same artists or the same typologies of artists. If you travelled to Brazil you did not find only bossa nova or samba. You could listen to a local version of the Yardbirds’ ‘For Your Love’ by Renato e seus Blue Caps, or to the Monkees’ hit ‘Last Train to Claruskville’ by the Sunshines.\(^3\) And if you travelled to Japan you could, surprisingly, find local versions of Italian hits such as ‘Renato’ (a hit for Mina, covered by Mieko Hirota), ‘Una lacrima sul viso’ (a hit for Bobby Solo, covered by Mari Sono) or ‘Arrivederci’ (a hit for Umberto Bindi, covered by the Peanuts).\(^4\)

Now I would like to explore in more detail the notion of ‘coverability’, and in particular what can be covered and why. It’s easier to cover songs conceived in the classical/pre-rock vein, with a recognisable structure and melody, songs that make sense out of a written score rooted in the Tin Pan Alley tradition but also in the beat explosion of the 1960s. You cannot cover Jimi Hendrix’s ‘Voodoo Chile’ or Led Zeppelin’s ‘Whole Lotta Love’, and in fact there are no covers available of them or of most of these artists’ repertoires, except for parodies, such as The Temple City Kazoo Orchestra’s rendition of ‘Whole Lotta Love’, performed with kazoos. But you can cover the Beatles, except for ‘Revolution #9’ maybe.

A song that has a strong identity as sheet music seems to have more chance of being covered because it is available in notational form and not only as recorded sound. The written form guarantees a higher degree of rationality (in the sense that Max Weber would give to this notion) and the more accurate it is (i.e. the closer it gets to its performed version), the more rational, abstract and universal is the song. In other words, the more its performance can do without the original recording to be successfully covered (as is the case for all classical music), the more it can be reproduced in another language too: by simply changing the lyrics. This was the way popular music functioned for a long period of time, say until the early 1960s: cover bands, dance orchestras and combos all relied upon a written text (sheet, score), rather than on records, to perform their music. It was a time dominated by arrangers, who then almost totally disappeared with the arrival of rock.

Rock represented a leap back into orality and performance: in terms of mainstream sociology, rock leaned towards ‘particularism’ instead of ‘universalism’ for its sound, its very ‘core’ was in the hic et nunc of a particular performance made by those musicians and not by others. As such, a rock song was not as replicable as a pop song. In this respect, rock (and the whole Afro-American tradition, where rock was partially rooted) resuscitated what Walter Benjamin called ‘aura’, i.e. something ineffable tied to the uniqueness of the art product and something on which rock built its ideology of authenticity. No wonder, therefore, that there are no classic rock songs covered in Italian. No Cream, no Pink Floyd, no Genesis . . . but plenty of Beatles’ and Motown song, in a few cases sung directly by the original artists such as Stevie Wonder, the Supremes, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Edwin Starr, Smokey Robinson and Jimmy Ruffin.
It happened only once with the Rolling Stones (‘Con le mie lacrime’, a cover of ‘As Tears Go By’), Procol Harum (‘Il tuo diamante’, a cover of ‘Shine On Brightly’, 1968) or David Bowie (‘Ragazzo solo ragazza sola’, a cover of ‘Space Oddity’, 1969), but it was the rule for people like Neil Sedaka, Paul Anka, Gene Pitney, Petula Clark, Sandie Shaw, Tom Jones or Pat Boone, who in the mid-1960s enjoyed much success in Italy and often topped the charts with Italian versions of their original hits.

The same occurred to an even greater number of French singing artists, such as Richard Anthony, Antoine, Alain Barrière, Dalida, Michel Delpeche, Nino Ferrer, Françoise Hardy, Johnny Halliday, Michel Polnareff, and Spanish and Latin American artists such as Chico Buarque de Hollanda, Roberto Carlos, Los Hermanos Rigual, Antonio Prieto and Toquinho. And it was also a good test for more occasional acts such as Cher, Shirley Bassey, Ben E. King, Bobby Rydell, Mary Hopkin, Udo Jurgens, Dusty Springfield and the Sandpipers, all of whom recorded in Italian and many of whom participated in the Sanremo Festival of Canzone Italiana (see Agostini in this issue of Popular Music).

In more recent times, Sting and Michael Bolton have recorded in Italian thanks to friends and mediators such as Zucchero or Luciano Pavarotti, whereas Eros Ramazzotti has recorded duets with many international stars including Tina Turner (‘Cose della vita’ – ‘Can’t Stop Thinking Of You’), Cher (‘Più che puoi’), who has gone back to Italian on several occasions, and Anastacia (‘I Belong to You’ – ‘Il ritmo della passione’). Last but not least, Laura Pausini got a Grammy Award in 2006 as Best Latin Artist for her album Escucha in Spanish, whereas the Israeli artist Noah participated
in the Sanremo Festival of 2006 singing in Italian, together with Carlo Fava and the Solis String Quartet.6

The international record market experienced a dramatic development in the last few decades, which has brought a radical remapping of its geography, logics and opportunities. In order to understand what lies behind the practice of covers and their slow but irreversible decline, it is necessary to ask a few questions of a theoretical nature. Therefore, I would like to go back to an explicative theory which has been long applied to cultural products, but which does not seem to fit cases like this.

**From cultural imperialism to deterritorialisation**

Reflecting upon cross-cultural interchanges, it is almost inevitable to refer to a theory which seemed to explain the geopolitics of music until a few years ago: the so called ‘cultural imperialism thesis’. If we go back to the Italian media literature of the 1960s, for example, we come across a first relevant statement by Francesco Alberoni, who saw mass culture stratified into five major areas:

1. the cultural centre (USA), characterised by an integration of pleasure and a sense of duty;
2. an area of high acculturation (i.e. West Germany) which contained zones not influenced by the centre but where the USA is seen as a positive model;
3. an area of partial acculturation (i.e. Italy, Japan), where mass culture has an external origin and the USA is a source of controversy;

4. an area of disintegration (i.e. many Latin American countries) where mass culture, originated outside, starts up a revolution in expectations ending up with a disorganisation of the system; and

5. the area of new oppositional syntheses (i.e. USSR, China) where mass culture is partially assimilated and partially fought, and the USA is a negative model (Alberoni 1966, p. 123).

Twenty years later the record industry applied a similar theory to understand the penetration in world markets:

1. The USA. If a record is a hit in the USA, there are good chances that it becomes a hit in most other markets.

2. The United Kingdom. Its influence is second only to the American one and if a record is a hit in the UK, it will probably be a hit in most countries except for the USA and Japan.

3. West Germany. The only influential country left: a hit there may be a hit in most other European countries, except for the UK.

4. The Rest of the World. Here, the relationships among markets must be examined case by case. For example, Spain may influence South America except for Brazil; a hit in the Netherlands may become a hit in Germany, and so on.

This explanation of how markets influence each other undoubtedly has many faults, primarily because the music market is turbulent (i.e. is very unpredictable), but it makes clear how the notion of ‘cultural imperialism’ might be applied to mass media and, more specifically, to sound artefacts. This media imperialism has been defined as ‘the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries, without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected’ (Boyd Barrett 1977, pp. 116–35).

The cultural imperialism thesis maintained that in many parts of the world, local cultures – identified as ‘authentic’ – were menaced by the indiscriminate flow of low-value products coming mostly from the USA. This forced modernisation brought about the shaping of local institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominant centre of the system (Schiller 1976).

Yet, a critical view counterposed that this notion was oversimplified, for it does not take into account the role of strong regional exporting countries such as Mexico and Argentina, for example, with regard to their neighbouring countries, or Egypt with regard to the Arab world, or India with regard to many Asian and African countries. The list could be increased by adding exporting countries such as the former USSR, with regard to East European countries, Sweden, with regard to Scandinavia, Spain, France and Italy (Tunstall 1977, p. 62). Moreover, not every product coming from the centre has to be regarded as disruptive of the local culture. Firstly, because the very notion of cultural identity as authentic is highly suspect, being often taken as nostalgic and/or reactionary (Garnham 1984, p. 6); and secondly, because the first targets of those products are the young who, since the 1950s, have been using foreign music ‘as a means to distance themselves from a parental “national” culture’ (Laing 1986, p. 338).

The theory which saw a clear contraposition between products and markets of central and peripheral countries was ‘probably very applicable to the time in which it
was proposed, the 1970s; with the advent of advanced communication technologies that allow for a multi-directional as opposed to a uni-directional flow of information between countries, cultural imperialism is no longer a useful framework for explaining the same phenomena . . . ’ (White 2001, p. 9). In a global world, popular culture dynamics take the most unexpected forms. How should we explain the incredible success that many Italian products and artists have experienced in Japan, where there are no Italian communities, no immigrants, only a few business persons? Canclini argues for the need to erase the distinction between centre and periphery and use instead the notions of ‘circuit’ and ‘frontier’, more suited to explain the dynamics of cultures that appear to be more and more hybrid. At the same time, it makes no more sense to distinguish between ‘hegemonic’ and ‘subaltern’, as was implied by the cultural imperialism thesis. What we are facing here is not a vertical flow from a class to another inside the same territory (geographic, political) but a horizontal flow from one place to another. Under these conditions, hegemony is lost and frayed, and tends to reconstitute itself as a ‘new hegemony’ rather than as ‘subalternity’ (Canclini 1990).

Borrowing from Canclini and Appadurai, I would prefer to speak of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation to better explain why, for example, a good portion of our popular music is ‘big in Japan’, from Claudio Villa to prog rock for collectors, from techno pop to local artists playing in Italian (e.g. Cioccolata). Nothing is more inappropriate than the notions of ‘imperialism’ or ‘homenegenisation’ (both strictly tied to the notion of ‘Americanisation’) to make sense of these cultural trends. What is imported in other countries tends to be assimilated and appropriated in different forms and to produce practices and artefacts that may not exist in the original country (Appadurai 1996).

With respect to the interaction between peripheral and core popular music production (keeping in mind that the ‘periphery’ exists in virtually every country as well as nationally on a world scale), some observers hold that there are three broad stages of musical evolution: ‘a) learning to understand another type, style, of music; b) peripheral repetition of that dominant music, and c) peripheral creation of original music that combines indigenous and “Other” musical elements’. The ‘cover’ fever belongs to the second stage and is clearly associated with repetition, emulation and the like: ways to appropriate a foreign style which was dominant in virtually all the Western world.

As Roger Wallis and Krister Malm suggest, ‘the world had been flooded with Anglo-American music in the fifties and sixties’ and it was only in the late 1960s that local musicians began to develop their own style paving the way to national rock. The Swedish rock movement exploded around 1970, with thousands of groups singing in Swedish. The same happened in Wales, with musicians adopting Welsh as the official language in their songs. The first pop record sung in Sinhala was released in Sri Lanka in 1969, whereas in numerous African countries (e.g. Kenya, Tanzania) jazz and pop bands began to speak their languages. ‘After almost ten years of copying the Beatles, Elvis or Chubby Checker, musicians in the small nations started trying to develop their own national forms of popular music’ (Wallis and Malm 1984, p. 303). The cover phenomenon in Italy takes over and develops in those ten years or so characterised by ‘imitations of transnational pop and rock music by local groups’ which, according to Wallis and Malm, is a common feature to the nine small countries taken into consideration in their seminal study, but which seems to apply to other countries as well, Italy included.
Let us look briefly at some other countries that in the 1960s were in conditions similar to Italy, in order to make further comparisons. Take Greece, for example: rock groups established in the early 1970s played their own music along the lines of Anglo-American pop-rock, while singing in English. This represented a significant break with the tradition of singing in Greek or translating foreign songs into Greek (e.g., through the practice of covers). But that ‘borrowed’ rock did not become very popular: on the contrary, people stuck with the ‘real’, original rock.

Take Eastern European countries, such as Estonia, where in the 1960s ‘everyone wanted to copy the Beatles and other groups’ and Western hits in general; or Hungary, where hundreds of amateur beat groups tried to reproduce current British and North America hits in high school, university, and company clubs. The cover mania was significant in countries that were officially immune to Americanisation, such as Bulgaria, where amateur student groups covered the repertoires of the Shadows, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones; or Croatia, where the ‘imitative rock bands’ dominated the scene before the release of the first domestic rock album in 1968.

The cover mania was certainly more visible, if not significant, in those Western countries that fell directly under the Anglo-American influence in shaping their cultures, tastes, and consumer choices. Take for example Austria, where the Vienna Beatles and the Beethovens led a string of imitators, or Finland, where ‘the early years of Finnish pop consisted of outright imitation and applications of Anglo-American models’ and Norway – ‘during the years 1960–64 numerous bands emerged covering the Shadow’s music’. Not to speak of France, Germany, and even Spain, where artists and groups produced Spanish versions of international hits, but French and Italian songs were highly successful as well.

And everywhere in the non-Western world that would fall under Western influence, music played a crucial role: for example in Hong Kong, the Chinese anomaly that wasn’t part of the Cultural Revolution but looked West for its development, the young liked a music that was ‘fully derivative of Western pop and rock . . . and the bands had all English names’. In South Korea the assimilation of North American popular music dates back to the 1950s, first in an imitative vein, then by appropriating an overall ‘underground’ style as was the case of tong-guitar singers covering Bob Dylan’s protest songs, whereas in Malaysia the pop-yeh-yeh movement exploded in the early 1960s and generated hundreds of Rolling Stones’ and Cliff Richard’ clones. A slightly different story is that of the Philippines, long dominated by US politics and culture: along with the Anglo-American influence, the 1950s witnessed a significant Latin American fad. A few years later Beatlemania swept the country resulting in generating groups ‘clearly patterned after such famous groups as the Ventures, the Dave Clark Five, the Monkees and the Rolling Stones, as well as the Beatles’.

Covers of Western pop had been common in Singapore and Thailand since the 1950s, and the Beat era featured copy bands like the Quests (covering only Shadows’ songs), the Cyclones (Beatles) and Wilson David (Elvis Presley) – all of them from Singapore – and the Cats – from Thailand. Aping Anglo-American pop rock was by no means a phenomenon limited to Europe and Western-influenced Asia, but concerned Africa too: in a country such as Algeria, that musically found a very distinct way from the 1980s on, the 1960s and the 1970s were featured by ‘groups with anglicized names such as the Students, the Vultures, the New Clarks’, whereas the major Anglo-American hits of those years were adapted for mandolin-like instruments by Mozambique’s conjuntos foclóricos. In Zimbabwe,
'the mid-to late 1960s saw the rise of bands covering songs by the Byrds, Cream, the Kinks and Jimi Hendrix' and in the pre-fundamentalist Iran (under the Pahlavi regime) 'guitar groups and solo singers emerged in imitation of such stars as Elvis Presley and the Beatles'.

The case of Japan is even more striking, since the assimilation of Anglo-American popular music into the country’s habits dates back to the 1920s, and the 1960s reveal many similarities with what happened in Italy: the long-haired male groups that formed by the hundred ‘initially modeled their own compositions on those of the British groups as well as copying them’, and they all had English names.

Cases apart from these include countries that had political relationships with Italy in their recent history, such as Greece – again – where, in the 1960s, Italian pop ballads stood beside Anglo-American pop and rock in influencing the youth taste, although ‘most of the early pop groups in Greece were very modest imitations of British and North American bands’.

Cover records in Italy offer just one more example of how sometimes objects do not fit into the available analytic tools on cross-cultural exchanges. Wallis and Malm classify the kinds of interaction between local and international music in four categories, none of which seems to apply to our object: the first pattern is cultural exchange, where the two cultures communicate and influence each other on the same level; the second pattern is cultural dominance, when a culture is imposed on another; the third pattern is cultural imperialism, when the dominance is augmented by the transfer of money; the final pattern is transculture, when two or more cultures blend in a new transnational culture. We can say that covers in Italy are by no means a product of cultural exchange (pattern 1) for the impact of Italian music on Anglo-American music is not comparable to its opposite; nor are they a product of cultural dominance, although it might have been the case: covers were more often original rewritings of foreign records. We cannot then speak of cultural imperialism simply because the ‘money element’ is not primary: cultural imperialism adds money to cultural dominance and money here is equally shared – as far as copyright is concerned – between foreign authors/publishers and domestic lyricists (not just translators) (Wallis and Malm 1984, p. 299). As far as royalties are concerned, they went to domestic performers who did not necessarily have any relationship with the original record companies. Finally, cover records do not represent a transculture at all.

Nevertheless, one more element seems to be able to explain the cover phenomenon in the 1960s and its huge impact on the young generation: those records came together with a radical innovation in media technology and in the use of mass media. They were not only associated with those epochal changes but were their ambassadors: if you convinced your dad to substitute your old radio set with a brand new stereo, the first thing you wanted to play was a single in English or a beat song in Italian (mostly a cover version of a British or American hit). That gesture proved that a family battle for modernity had been won, although that did not mean you had won the war.

A brief history of Italian songs covered abroad

If Italian covers of foreign hits would make up an endless list of titles and their history would probably raise poor interest to a public of foreign readers, I believe it is more interesting to focus on their contrary: the more limited field of Italian songs covered...
abroad. The first one to cross over and became an international standard was probably ‘Ciribiribin’, written by Pestalozza with lyrics by Tiochet and published in 1898. It was launched by the German singer Mitzi Kirchner and recorded by Prince’s Orchestra (#3, 1911, USA), Grace Moore (in the movie *One Night of Love*, 1935 #15), Bing Crosby & the Andrews Sisters (#13, 1939), Harry James (who adopted it as his theme song in 1940 – #10), Frank Pourcel, Frank Sinatra and a host of actors including Jane Powell, Debbie Reynolds and Vic Damone in *Hit the Deck*.28

1900s – 1940s

Neapolitan songs were made internationally famous first of all by opera stars like Enrico Caruso, Beniamino Gigli or Mario Lanza, but in a few cases some songs entered foreign interpreters’ repertoires, such as ‘Torna a Surriento’, recorded as ‘Come Back to Sorrento’ by Richard Tucker, Bing Crosby (1947) and Gracie Fields. A few years later it was Elvis Presley who covered this song with the title ‘Surrender’ (#6, 1961), and another pair from the classic Neapolitan songbook: ‘O’ sole mio’ (‘It’s Now or Never’, #1, 1960) and ‘Santa Lucia’ (in *Viva Las Vegas*, 1964). ‘O’ sole mio’ was also covered by Dean Martin as ‘There’s No Tomorrow’ and by Lou Monte as ‘Don’t Say Forever’. But its first cover version to reach the US chart was that by Alan Turner, which in 1914 went to #9. Reed Miller’s cover of ‘Santa Lucia’ went to #10 in 1913, even before Caruso’s recording. ‘O’ marinariello’, covered by Vic Damone and Frank Sinatra as ‘I Have But One Heart’, entered the US Top 20s in 1947. ‘The Ferry Boat Serenade’ (‘La piccinina’), by Eldo Di Lazzaro, was a tremendous hit in 1940, with four versions in the charts: The Andrews Sisters (#1), Gray Gordon (#7), Frankie Masters (#12) and Leo Reisman (#22). The year after, Kay Kyser’s version went to #6. Other versions were by Al Bowlly and The Adams Singers. ‘Mama’ (‘Mamma’) was a hit a year after it was launched in Italy (1941) also for Horace Heidt & His Orchestra (#14). It was then covered in 1955 by David Whitfield (#13) and in 1960 by Connie Francis (#9 in UK, #10 in USA). ‘Oh What A Surprise for the Duce’ (‘Evviva la torre di Pisa’), a novelty song in a waltz tempo, was covered in 1940 by Florence Desmond, Bertha Wilmot and Billy Cotton & His Band. ‘Vivere’, launched by the great tenor Tito Schipa in 1937, was covered as ‘Romany’ by Joe Loss & His Band, Kick Harris & His Orchestra and Lew Stone & His Band. ‘Serenade in the Night’, adapted from ‘Violino tzigano’ (a hit by Bixio-Cherubini), was recorded in 1936 by Roy Fox & His Orchestra, Tino Rossi, Vic Damone, Mantovani (#7) and Jan Garber (#12). ‘The Woodpecker Song’ (‘Reginella campagnola’) was a big American hit in 1940: it was recorded by Glenn Miller (#1 – on top for 7 weeks), the Andrews Sisters (#6), Will Glabe (#12), Kate Smith (#14) and Joe Loss & His Orchestra.

1950s

In the 1950s, Italian song became more international in style and arrangement and this is proved by a few titles that sold abroad, such as two hits launched by Tony Dallara – ‘Come prima’ (1958) and ‘Ti dirò’ (1959) – covered respectively by both Malcolm Vaughan and Eve Boswell as ‘More than Ever’, and by Marlon Ryan, Kevin Scott and Malcolm Vaughan (#15 UK, 1958) as ‘Wait for Me’. ‘Italian Theme’ (‘Mambo caliente’, 1956), by Angelo Giacomazzi, was recorded by both Cyril Stapleton & His Orchestra and Dorothy Collins. ‘Little Serenade’ (‘Piccolissima serenata’, 1957), by Amurri and Ferrio, had covers by Percy Faith and Eddie Calvert, and the same
trumpeter/orchestra leader recorded ‘Mandy’ (#20, UK, 1958) (‘La pansé’, 1957), following the examples of Edmundo Ros & His Orchestra and The Gaylords, both of whom maintained the original title. In the genre of the slow ballad, ‘Non dimenticar’ (‘Th’o voluto bene’), by Redi and Galdieri, was a hit for Nat King Cole and Connie Francis, but had several more recordings, whereas ‘Souvenir d’Italie’ (1956) was covered by Bob Sharples & His Orchestra. These songs all came from Neapolitan writers and composers, as did a long string of hits originally written in dialect like ‘Blushing Moon’ (‘Luna rossa’, 1952), covered by Alan Dean and Tony Martin, ‘The Donkey Song’ (‘O’ciucciariello’), recorded by Jane Morgan and David Carey and ‘Torero’, covered by Julius La Rosa (#21 USA, 1958) and the Andrews Sisters. Its author and original interpreter, Renato Carosone, was one of the few to make it overseas, even if for a ‘one hit wonder’ that went to #18 in 1958. Another few songs were launched by the movies, such as ‘Guaglione’ (‘The Man Who Plays the Mandolin’), sung by Dean Martin in Ten Thousand Bedrooms in 1956; ‘Stars Shine in Your Eyes’, from Fellini’s La strada, recorded by both Ronnie Hilton (#14 UK, 1955) and Eddie Barclay & His Orchestra; ‘Arrivederci Darling’ (‘Arrivederci Roma’, 1956), with cover versions by Lys Assia, Anne Shelton, Nat ‘King’ Cole, Abbe Lane with Xavier Cugat and finally Mario Lanza singing in The Seven Hills of Rome; ‘Anna’, from the eponymous film, sung by Silvana Mangano (#5, 1953) and covered by Jane Morgan, Ray Bloch (#22) and Perez Prado (#29). Anna was the first Italian blockbuster, totalling more than a billion liras and the first foreign movie to be overdubbed in the USA. In the cast there was a young Sofia Lazzaro, later known as Sofia Loren. A new, flourishing record industry was started up by the Sanremo Festival in 1951, and the decade saw the triumphs of ‘typical’ Sanremo-style songs such as ‘Poppa Piccolino’ (‘Papaveri e papere’, 1953), covered by Diana Decker, Billy Cotton & His Band, David Whitfield, The Beverly Sisters and Allan Jones; ‘Chee Chee-Oo-Chee’ (‘Ci ciu ci cantava un usignol’, 1955), covered in thirty-six languages, including Chinese, and a hit for Alma Cogan, the Johnston Brothers, Dean Martin and Perry Como. Its composer, Saverio Seracini, wrote the music of ‘L’edera’ too, recorded as ‘Constantly’ by Frank Sinatra, Yves Montand, Caterina Valente, Doris Day, Sarah Vaughan, Lys Assia and Cliff Richard (1964).

The biggest Italian hit ever was the song that won the Sanremo Festival in 1958, ‘Nel blu dipinto di blu’, better known as ‘Volare’. Along with its domestic success (it topped the charts for five weeks and was in the Top 40 for sixteen weeks), Modugno’s tune entered almost any of the major world markets, including the US one, traditionally inaccessible to foreign music. The case of ‘Volare’ is unique in the whole of Italian pop history: the original recording topped the US charts for six weeks – from April to May 1958 – and stayed in the Top 40 for a total of thirteen weeks, becoming the top song of the entire year. But with the cover versions the fame of the song grew bigger and bigger: on July 21, Billboard reviewed seven recordings of ‘Volare’ by different artists such as Dean Martin (#12 in the US, #2 in the UK), Nelson Riddle, Jesse Belvi, Alan Dale, Linda Ross and two Italians, Umberto Marcato and its originator Domenico Modugno (also #10 in the UK), who that year won three Grammys: for Best Male Vocal Performance, Song of the Year and Record of the Year. Later came other cover versions including Charlie Drake’s (#28 in the UK, 1958), Marino Marini and his Quartet’s (#13 in the UK, 1958), Bobby Rydell’s (who took the song to #4 in the US in 1960) and Al Martino’s who charted with it in 1975. A year after, at Sanremo 1959, Modugno did it over again with ‘Ciao ciao bambina (Piove)’, which was covered by Connie Francis and the Four Aces but with less success.
In the 1960s the Italian music industry became adult and experienced a real record boom, due to the new 45 rpm format. Many domestic songs entered the international repertoire and in a few cases became classics. The United Kingdom was the first and most important market for Italian covers, beginning with adult pop songs that were appropriated by adult pop interpreters such as Engelbert Humperdinck, Tom Jones and the like. Sanremo was a hit source for Pat Boone and Joe Loss & His Orchestra, who in 1962 covered Tony Renis’ ‘Quando quando quando’, for Humperdinck who reached #3 with ‘A Man Without Love’ (originally recorded as ‘Quando m’innamoro’ both by Anna Identici and the Sandpipers in 1968) and for Tom Jones with ‘Help Yourself’ (‘Gli occhi miei’, both by Dino and Wilma Goich, 1968) and ‘Love Me Tonight’ (‘Alla fine della strada’, both by Junior Magli and the Casuals, 1969) that went to #15 in the UK and USA as well. From Sanremo came ‘The River’ (‘Le colline sono in fiore’, both by Wilma Goich and the New Christy Minstrels), a British hit for Ken Dodd (#5, 1966) and the winning song of the 1964 festival, ‘This Is My Prayer’ (‘Non ho l’età’, by Gigliola Cinquetti), recorded by Dana Valery and Vera Lynn. In the same vein the Tremeloes covered Orietta Berti’s ‘Non illuderti mai’ which in 1967 reached #6 in the UK as ‘My Little Lady’. A more international flavour came from a slow ballad such as ‘Softly, As I Leave You’ which was a hit for Matt Monro (#13 in the UK), Doris Day and Frank Sinatra (#27 in the USA, 1964), but never reached the domestic charts in the original version, ‘Piano’ (written by De Vita and Calabrese in 1962). In the same vein, ‘How Wonderful to Know’ (‘Anema e core’), a Neapolitan standard from the early 1950s, was covered by Joan Regan, Teddy Johnson & Pearl Carr and Andy Williams. Another song written by Tony Renis, this time for Mina – ‘Grande grande grande’ – became a hit for Shirley Bassey (#19 in the UK in 1973) as ‘Never Never Never’, and was recorded again by Celine Dion in the 1990s. The swinging melodies of composer Pino Massara made it to the USA thanks to Nat King Cole, who used to open his European tours with ‘Cappuccina’ (‘Permettete signorina’, 1962), and Dean Martin, who recorded his tango song ‘Grazie prego scusi’, a hit for Adriano Celentano in 1963.30 In the tradition of slow romantic songs, one of the biggest Italian hits abroad was ‘Io che non vivo’, by singer-songwriter Pino Donaggio, which was covered as ‘You Don’t Have To Say You Love Me’ by Dusty Springfield (#4 in the UK; #5 in the US in 1965) and Elvis Presley (#11 in USA in 1970), and was later recorded by Jerry Vale and by Guys ‘n’ Dolls in 1976. In the same vein, ‘I (Who Have Nothing)’ (‘Uno dei tanti’, by composer Carlo Donida)31 was a modest hit for Ben E. King in 1963 (#29) with English words by Leiber and Stoller; it never entered the domestic charts. British female act Cilla Black had a long love affair with Italian songs, culminating in her recording of ‘You’re My World’ (‘Il mio mondo’, by the singer-songwriter Umberto Bindi), her biggest hit ever (#1 in the UK, 1964).32 Another British act who gained their maximum exposure thanks to an Italian song was the group Amen Corner, whose ‘Half As Nice’ (‘Il paradiso’, by Lucio Battisti, 1969) was their only #1, returning to the Top 40 in 1976 as a re-issue. Talking about British pop and its bands, Herman’s Hermits had a #8 in the UK in 1969 with ‘Something’s Happening’ (‘Luglio’, by Riccardo del Turco) and a #16 in 1970 with ‘Lady Barbara’ (music by Giancarlo Bigazzi, original recording by Renato), whereas the Tremeloes reached #7 in 1968 with ‘Suddenly You Love Me’ (‘Uno tranquillo’), totally absent from the domestic charts. Finally, there are a few covers from the world of soundtrack, such as the Sanremo song ‘Al di là’ (1962) by Frankie Fanelli (from the movie Rome
‘The Legion’s Last Patrol’ (‘Concerto disperato’, 1962), by Nini Rosso and Angelo Francesco Lavagnino, which was included in the soundtrack of the eponymous film and was a British hit for by Ken Thorne & His Orchestra (#10, 1963) and, most significantly, ‘More’ (music by Oliviero and Ortolani, 1963), one of the biggest Italian hits ever, from the movie Mondo cane. This theme song gained a nomination for the Academy Award, sold more than four million records all over the world and was recorded (either as instrumental or as sung version) by tens of artists, among whom are Danny Williams, The Mantovani Orchestra, Andy Williams, Nancy Wilson, Perry Como (#5 UK, #4 USA), Robert Earl, Jerry Vale, Kai Winding (#9 USA) and Lena Horne.

Sanremo: where covers return to sender

In the mid-1960s, the Sanremo Festival of Canzone Italiana entered its most international phase, by hosting a legion of foreign artists who took part in the competition. They came to sing in Italian the new songs that were tailored for them and their Italian partners by Italy’s most acclaimed writers and composers. The list is impressive and says a lot about the extent to which Italy, at the time, was taken seriously by the global music business. The five festivals from 1964 to 1969 were an interesting experiment in linguistic and musical exchange, which tested and questioned some central issues of pop culture – such as the relationship between centre and periphery, exoticism and national identity, irony and romance.

All this was perceived essentially as a TV show, enlivened by the idea of a competition in which two singers – one Italian, one a foreigner – would sing the same song in Italian. But its value as a social experiment is still to be studied. Beginning with 1964, Italian TV audiences became familiar with Frankie Laine, Ben E. King, Antonio Prieto, Los Hermanos Rigual, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, Gene Pitney and Paul Anka. In 1965 the winners were the New Christy Minstrels (including Barry McGuire), Dusty Springfield, Connie Francis, Petula Clark, Kiki Dee, Udo Jurgens and Timi Yuro. In 1966 it was Pat Boone’s turn, together with Richard Anthony, Bobby Vinton, the Yardbirds, Chad & Jeremy, Les Surfs, Françoise Hardy, P.J. Proby and Los Paraguayos. The year after the Festival included the new sounds of beat and folk-rock, inviting the Hollies, Marianne Faithfull, Sonny & Cher, Dalida, the Bachelors (who came third), the Happenings and Los Bravos, plus mainstream singers such as Dionne Warwick, Les Compagnons de la Chanson and Bobby Goldsboro.

1968 was the year of rhythm & blues, with people like Wilson Pickett, Eartha Kitt, Shirley Bassey and Louis Armstrong, plus a good number of other artists such as Bobby Gentry, the Sandpipers, the Cowsills, Sacha Distel and Roberto Carlos, who won the competition. In 1969 we could admire Stevie Wonder, Brenton Wood, the Sweet Inspiration (with Cissy Houston) and Mary Hopkin, who came second. This was the last time that foreign artists were in the competition, save for a few exceptions in the early 1970s (the Wallace Collection and Mungo Jerry). Twenty years later, however, the idea was revived for the 1990 and 1991 festivals, but this time the guests from abroad would sing in their own languages. It was nonetheless an exciting test that further proved how a poor song can be rendered by a great performer, as Ray Charles did with Toto Cutugno’s ‘Gli amori’. Among the stars that took part in those competitions and sang brand new Italian songs were Miriam Makeba, the Village People, Jorge Ben, Kid Creole & the Coconuts, Nicolette Larson, the America, Leo Sayer, Dee Dee Bridgewater, La Toya Jackson, Phil Manzanera, Howard Jones,
In the 1970s the number of cover versions diminished to the lowest ever level. The reason for their decline was primarily due to major changes occurring in the aesthetics and geo-politics of pop. In Italy – as in many other countries – local musicians began to create and play their own pop/rock without the need to imitate or simply remake Anglo-American records. Foreign artists could therefore have an absolute monopoly of their own songs in a country such as Italy, since competitors in the local language had almost disappeared. But in Italy another important factor needs to be considered: that of SIAE, the public organisation responsible for collecting and redistributing copyright revenue to authors and publishers. SIAE changed the rules that assigned Italian translators a large share of the total revenue and reduced it dramatically, so that recording a foreign song in Italian was not big business anymore. An increasing familiarity with the English language also made redundant the need to have translations of English and American hits. It was better to buy the original. The same applied to foreign versions of Italian songs, whose number also shrunk, but in this case the explanation is different: nobody started to buy Italian records outside of Italy. The reasons are various: first, the average quality of the songs was lower; second, the songs were not promoted abroad; and third, even if certain cantautori were valued internationally (e.g. Riccardo Cocciante and Paolo Conte were stars in France much...
more than in Italy; a record by Fabrizio De André was deemed by David Byrne as one of the most influential of the 1990s), their songbooks do not belong to the category of ‘coverable’ records, being in a sense ‘unique’ in their original recording. There are indeed many Italian covers of these and other cantautori, but no covers in a foreign language, as far as I know.36

However, among the few songs that stood out in the last three decades are ‘Aria’ (1976) by Baldan Bembo, which was covered as an instrumental by Acker Bilk; ‘Broken Hearted’ (‘Cuore Cuore’, 1971) recorded by Ken Dodd; ‘Lonely Girl’ (‘Non sei tu’, 1974) by Adamo, covered by Eddie Holman; ‘Ma cosa hai messo nel caffè’ (1969), covered in 2001 by Lisa Ono, a Brazilian-Japanese singer; the ‘cult’ instrumental ‘Mah Na Mah Na’ (1977) by Piero Umiliani, #13 in the UK, thanks to its being included in the Muppets’ soundtrack; the dance hit ‘Self-Control’, by Raf, covered by Laura Branigan (#6 in the US; #9 in the UK in 1984) and the instrumental ‘When a Child Is Born’ (‘Soleado’, 1974), recorded by Daniel Sentacruz Ensemble, which sold 5 million copies in Italy and all over the world, thanks to Johnny Mathis’ version (#5, 1976).

**Cultural mediators**

Apart from opera, Italian music has never penetrated foreign markets. The number of records (i.e. cover versions and original Italian songs) that have entered the British and American Top 40s does not exceed a hundred. The only significant case in popular music is represented by the diaspora artists, from Enrico Caruso to Ray Gelato, from
Gilda Mignonette to Lou Monte; artists who migrated abroad or were born in a foreign
country from Italian parents. They represent an important section in the cross-cultural
dynamics I am trying to map out, for they not only covered foreign songs in Italian and
vice versa, but, most importantly, they were the first real ambassadors of a musical
culture.

Even though Europe played its role in this respect with, for example, French
mother tongue artists such as Adamo (Salvatore Adamo), Nino Ferrer (Agostino
Ferrari), Herbert Pagani and Dalida (Jolanda Gigliotti) – to quote just the most famous,
the diaspora story is mainly an American one, from North to South. In South America,
immigrants from Italy contributed to the birth of tango but were soon assimilated by
a new cultural mix. In North America, along with a majority of immigrant artists who
assimilated local costumes, there has always been a minority which has maintained
strong relationships with its country of origin and perpetuated its traditions.

Singers such as Jimmy Roselli, Dean Martin (Dino Crocetti), Perry Como
(Pierino Como), Frank Sinatra, Louis Prima, Connie Francis (Concetta Maria Rosa
Franconero), Mario Lanza (Alfred Arnold Cocozza), Jerry Vale (Gennaro Louis
Vitaliano), Julius La Rosa and Lou Monte (Louis Scaglione), ‘the king of Italian-
American hit records’, recorded a good number of Italian and Italian-style songs,
sometimes in English, sometimes in Italian or Neapolitan, sometimes in all of these
languages.

By contrast, the presence of foreign songs covered in Italian is huge. British and
American music hold the biggest share, but a substantial number are French, and
Latin-American and Spanish songs. In this final part of the article I would like to focus
on a few recordings that are more than simple ‘cover versions’ and end up with being
real ‘remakes’ of the original, an original which is sometimes a mediocre song
destined to be forgotten or which does not succeed with its first public, but can seduce
a second public in a foreign country.

Cover bands had an easy job in the 1960s, when many English and American
records arrived in Italy: it was enough just to pick up a hit record and translate it to be
successful. And this was the rule for hundreds of meteors who did not leave any signs
of their passage. In a few cases, however, the job required a higher level of sophistici-
ation and risk, when the band would choose from a minor songbook and succeed in
transforming a minor track into a hit sung in a language different from the original.
This occurred with ‘Come potete giudicare’ by the Nomadi, which turned ‘The
Revolution Kind’ into a generational anthem. The protest ballad by Sonny Bono was
virtually unknown until Italy’s most enduring rock band picked it up in 1966. The
same occurred with the Rokes’ ‘E’ la pioggia che va’, the second cover version of a Bob
Lind song recorded by this band of British immigrants.37 Bob Lind was a twenty-year-
old folksinger from Baltimore who wrote nice songs, but never really made it at home.
He has to thank the Rokes, and especially lyricist Mogol, for making his ‘Remember
The Rain’ a #1 in Italy and a cult record of the Beat era. The song was also covered by
Caterina Caselli who, incidentally, recorded ‘Elusive Butterfly’, the only international
hit by Bob Lind, with the title ‘La farfalla’. Caterina had a special flair for picking up
obscure B-sides and turning them into gold,38 as happened in 1968 with ‘The Days of
Pearly Spencer’, a song penned by David McWilliams which was totally ignored at the
time. A typical product of the ‘flower power’ season, this song was restyled with
string arrangements and the voice treated with a megaphone-like filter, and the record
– titled ‘Il volto della vita’ – was given a classic psychedelic cover. The result was a
number two in the domestic charts. Curiously enough, the original song was revived
in 1992 thanks to a cover by Marc Almond (#5 in the UK) and that was the first time ‘The Days of Pearly Spencer’ had the honour of entering charts other than in Italian.

With ‘Cuore’, one of the biggest hits by Rita Pavone, and the sixth biggest selling record in 1963, the confrontation with the original was explicit. ‘Heart’ was a minor song from Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill. The writers passed it to Wayne Newton, an American teenager who was the same age as Pavone. While the song was a flop for Newton, Pavone also recorded an English version and her ‘Heart’ broke into the English charts at #26 in 1966. A similar story happened to Italy’s greatest female vocalist, Mina, who in 1964 covered ‘He Walks Like A Man’, a minor song recorded by Jody Miller that never entered any charts, whereas ‘E’ l’uomo per me’ (the Italian title) turned into a chartbuster that topped the domestic charts for four weeks.

Other significant cases are, at last, those of Ornella Vanoni and Milva, two sophisticated women of canzone, who in their careers recorded several foreign songs from Brazilian, French and German repertoires. Ornella’s collaboration with Toquinho and Vinicius De Moraes made her their muse in Europe, more or less as Dionne Warwick was Bacharach and David’s ideal interpreter. As to Milva, she started covering Edith Piaf’s songs in 1960, when her ‘Milord’ topped the charts in Italy. Then she devoted herself to art song, becoming a star in Germany where she regularly sings Brecht and Weill’s songbook – both in German and in Italian. A third female vocalist of the 1960s, Iva Zanicchi, recorded an album of Miki Theodorakis’ songs which had a tremendous success, so that a Greek author’s music also broke into the Italian collective musical consciousness.

The story stops here. Why are there no Japanese, no Scandinavian, no East-European songs covered in Italian? When this has happened, which is very rarely, the visibility and worldwide success of tunes coming from peripheral countries has been due to Hollywood or to a music business still based in the Anglo-Saxon world, and not from countries that have no power to mould international products. Therefore, the study of repertoire exchange – which includes the most diffused, and thus the most covered songs – is ultimately a study of the world music and culture market from a geopolitical perspective. Such a study can shed light on the persistence of influences and cultural patterns, which a country like Italy imported from abroad and assimilated in various ways. In particular, the study of Italian songs that have been covered in foreign languages can shed light on the capacity of the country to count in the international culture market. For example, it is more likely that a song originating in Italy ends up in South-America or Albania than in England.

**Conclusion**

Along with being a laboratory of aesthetic experimentation, cover versions play an important role in the economics and geopolitics of popular music. This role became crucial when the music industry shifted from a sheet-music-centred to a record-centred orientation. In the Tin Pan Alley era, as a matter of fact, many interpreters at the same time had the chance of appropriating a song that was originally made available in notational form, together with its arrangement, with the result that the various recorded versions of the song differed from one another only in the timbre and style of singing and playing. With the advent of Rock ‘n’ Roll, the writer tended more and more to coincide with the performer and his/her recorded performance was considered to be the original version of the song, so that a second artist who would want to record the same song did not simply make another version of a neutral ‘text’
available to anybody in an abstract form (i.e. as notation), but ‘covered’ that particular performance heard on record. In other words, the latter’s authority was such that any subsequent cover had to be confronted with the original version, whereas in the Tin Pan Alley tradition there were no originals in theory; all versions were legitimate. In the same vein I have looked at cover versions in another language (namely Italian), a case in which the original’s authority is even stronger, due to what has to be seen as a power relationship, that is a relationship between a dominant language (English, sometimes French and Spanish) and a peripheral one (Italian). Nevertheless, after testing the supposed validity of the ‘cultural imperialism thesis’, I have opted for a different kind of explanation, rooted in my generation’s direct experience: in those ‘second-hand’ versions, people did not feel a sense of cultural domination but, on the contrary, a new exciting drive. And for many it was even more: a message of liberation from the old schemas in which music and artistic expression were constrained. This ‘kind of magic’ occurred in a very narrow span of time: cover versions had indeed been recorded for a long time in Italy, but they never represented more than ‘just new songs’. On a broader level, I see the cover version as a cross-cultural device that puts into communication two or more cultures and creates a virtual international community tied together by the same songs. What happened in Italy in the 1960s had an added value that turned an ordinary practice in the music business into a social phenomenon: a thing that I have ironically tagged the ‘Big Cheat’, but a thing that paved the way to the modern Italian song. This phenomenon contained the very contradictory essence of modern popular culture: it was global and local, artificial and sincere, and it took over thanks to both cultural moves from below and economic/juridical rules from above.

Endnotes

1. The Festival, which has been taking place once a year since 1951, is one of the largest stages for Italian song; for one week between February and March, Italy is almost swept by a music craze, newspapers report on the competition on their front pages, TV news opens with Sanremo, radios change their playlists to allow room for the new songs. It is the only time in which a mass product rated traditionally as ‘low-brow’ crosses over for public debate, reaching people who are usually not interested in it. At the same time, Sanremo is first of all a TV show, whose impact on the record industry is relatively minimal (see Borgna 1998 and Prato 2005b).

2. ‘Cheryl’s Goin’ Home’ is the title of another different song written by Sonny Bono.

3. See Various Artists, O melhor da jovem guarda, Columbia 850·173/2–464314. Brazil.

4. I am grateful to Shuhei Hosokawa for this information on Brazil and Japan.

5. Laura Pausini is only the second Italian artist ever to win a Grammy Award, after Domenico Modugno in 1958, the year the Award was started. But her Grammy went to a Spanish cover of her own Italian album and not to the original version. Laura therefore owes her worldwide fame to the Latin culture and market: her Italianity would not have been enough to reach the same level of popularity.

6. Noah has long been flirting with Italian music, since she recorded the Grammy awarded song ‘La vita è bella’ (from Nicola Piovani) and tours regularly in the country, also as peace ambassador.

7. The centre-periphery dichotomy reflects the notion of an abstract imperial system where power and richness are distributed in a concentric fashion and gradually decrease from centre to periphery (Canclini 1990).

8. Deterritorialisation occurs when culture loses its natural relationships with its geographic and social origins. Reterritorialisation, on the contrary, is the (partial) refoundation of old and new symbolic practices. This distinction does not totally fit in the case of cover records: losing its original language – e.g. from English to Italian – does not mean to remove completely its original territory, for this remains part of the record intrinsically, but nevertheless it may cause confusion, a sense of displacement, as occurred to many music fans of my generation who thought that many of those cover records in the 1960s were Italian songs, born in Italy and written by Italian authors simply because they were recorded in Italian.

9. Campbell Robinson, D., Buck, E.B., Cuthbert, M., and the International Communication and Youth Consortium, 1991, p. 108 (text by Jody
Selling Italy by the sound

21. João Soeiro de Carvalho, Mozambique
22. Chris Stapleton, USA
23. Seyed Abdolhossein Mokthabad Amrei, Zimbabwe
24. Toru Mitsui, Japan
25. Risto Pekka Pennanen, Greece
26. Peter Wicke confirms this trend in what was once East Germany, where ‘the Anglo-American form of rock also took the GDR by storm in the 1960s, and its spontaneous adoption by young amateur groups coincided, just as in the US and Great Britain, with innovations in media technology and far-reaching changes in the social patterns of media use’ (Wicke 1985, p. 321).
27. For those who can read Italian, I would like to quote a book of mine (Prato 2001) which deals precisely with these more common covers.
28. Except when otherwise indicated, the # indicated between brackets stands for the highest position obtained by the record in the US charts.
29. In the disco era, the song was re-covered in English by the author as Disco Quando, and in 2005 it was recorded in English by Michael Bublé featuring Nelly Furtado.
30. ‘Cappuccina’ was also recorded by the Japanese acts Danny Lida & Paradise King in the same year as Nat King Cole.
31. In 1960, Donida had a hit in UK with ‘Mais qui’ (#19) recorded by the King Brothers.
32. Cilla Black covered a few minor hits as well, such as ‘A Fool Am I’ (‘Dimmelo parlamì’, 1966) and ‘Don’t Answer Me’ (‘Ti vedo uscire’, 1966).
33. Emilio Pericoli’s original recording of ‘Al di là’, also included in the same movie, reached #6 in the USA charts.
34. Another instrumental written by the trumpeter Nino Rosso called ‘Il silenzio’ (1965) was recorded by Eddie Calvert.
35. With a few exceptions: Wilson Pickett, for example, sang ‘Deborah’; s verse in Italian but the chorus in English.
36. A few cantautori, for example Franco Battiato, one who discovered and launched the career of Andrea Bocelli, among others.
37. The first was ‘Cheryl’s Going Home’, as already stated.
38. Once she stopped performing in the early 1970s, Caterina Caselli turned into a manager and talent scout, soon becoming the most important woman in the Italian record industry. She is the one who discovered and launched the career of Andrea Bocelli, among others.

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