



Urban Musical words for a city of water and stone: Genoa's waterfront as it has been told by singer- songwriters

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The city of Genoa has been a great source of inspiration for any kind of artist during the century. Through a close analysis of a corpus made out the lyrics of about thirty singer-songwriters, this essay aims to trace a “musical geography” of its cultural and territorial identity, focussing on the waterfront and its surroundings.

Keywords

Genoa; Waterfront; Singer-songwriter; Lyrics: Cultural identity; Territory

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Introduction

Genoa's *genius loci* seems to urge on Genoese 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, multifaceted, powerful and pressing landscape, which demands that its inhabitants be supple and flexible, and that its travellers be willing and adaptable. It is a landscape which demands visibility within any artistic field, as it had an intrinsic cultural meaning which is so strong as to be unable to hold the urgency to be expressed, narrated, re-founded through artistic creation. This essay is going to explore that urgency analysing a corpus made out the lyrics of about thirty singer-songwriters. Some of them are nationally famous, some are locally well-known. Most of them are from Genoa, some of them have lived there for a while, and someone brings the traveller's perspective. The whole city of Genoa has been a great source of inspiration, but I will focus the waterfront, trying to trace a "musical geography" of its cultural and territorial identity. The songs will be considered as tools of cultural foundation, of sharing and of identification, and mainly as tools of narration. I will only examine the lyrics, of course bearing in mind that separating them from their music and arrangements and from the singers' voices means to cut out the sound body and its codes.¹

Perspectives: from the open sea to the inner city

Genoa seems to free itself from the categories of continent and terra firma.² This city baffles the landfall and the eye which overflies it, as it lies along a shore made of major and minor arches and bays as if it were the skeleton of an enormous beast,³ the Moby Dick of the quest of countless writers and artists who have followed her through the centuries. The sea, the shore, the Riviera, the wharf, the landing and the leaving, they all are mirrors where singer-songwriters reflect their tales of the city of Genoa, giving voice to the waterfront and to its backgrounds. That voice is what this essay aims to define, through words sang by «gente di Riviera / dove passano i cuori d'avventura», in Ivano Fossati's words (*Questi posti davanti al mare, La pianta del tè*, CBS, 1988).

In order to look at Genoa as a whole, the favoured point of view is the access from the sea, as Fossati stresses. This artist, great navigator of words and scores, in his *Chi guarda Genova (La pianta del tè*, CBS, 1988) holds a clear and conscious portrait of the city, of its atmosphere, its singularities and its colours, as it can be told from the perspective of someone who really lives among the people and the streets, connected to the *genius loci* by a bunch of love and water, of tension and desire, of a little illusion and some gloom: «Chi guarda Genova sa 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». Fossati sings Genoa from the inside, with no concessions nor reductions, and his narration tells also about its slowness, its mistakes, and its restrictions.⁴

¹ Cfr. G. CASTALDO, in F. LIPERI, *Storia della canzone italiana* cit., Roma, RAI-ERI, 1999, pp. 9-10.

² Cfr. G. BERTONE, *Letteratura e paesaggio. Liguri e no. Montale, Caproni, Calvino, Ortese, Biamonti, Primo Levi, Yehoshua*, Lecce, Manni, 2001, p. 8.

³ Cfr. H. HEINE, *Reisebilder*, introd. Trad. e note a cura di A. BURGER CORI, Torino, 1960, p. 358.

⁴ Cfr. M. COTTO, *Di acqua e di respiro. Ivano Fossati si racconta a Massimo Cotto*, Milano, Arcana, 2005, p. 87.

Figure 1. A view from the Porto Antico



With its blunders and dazzles, the misunderstandings, the unsaid, the abandoned, Genoa seems to be motionless and – apparently – quiet. This is the way Gino Paoli tells it too, even if he underlines its role of case of family memories, relationships, dreams and friendships. And, above all, the fake stillness of the sea, which overwhelms, drives back and attracts at the same time.⁵ Flights and returns combine the texture of the territory with the temperament of a woman, the last one, repository of feelings, roots and bounds, the one who waits at the balcony, holding in one single image the eternal feminine and the city's soul. And Paoli sings «se lo sguardo del suo mare / non finisce sul tuo corpo / se non dondola il tuo sonno / sulla samba delle onde / Genova non è la mia città» (*Genova non è la mia città*, *Averti addosso*, Five Records, 1984). In Paoli's vision, the city is humoral and the woman is complementary, a marine and maternal way to knowledge. They both are the bridge towards that fourth wall which is the sea, and of which Paoli cannot do without, as for him it represents the essence of freedom.⁶ The relationship with the land is equally fundamental, twith hat shore so old and slow and at the same time so rich in movement and future. That is how Paoli describes this dichotomy and his being fond of it, in his *L'ufficio delle cose perdute* (*L'ufficio delle cose perdute*, Ricordi, 1988): «Sulla strada che va al porto dopo un arco c'è una piazza / sempre piena di bambini qualche gatto e un vù cumprà / tra un negozio di bottoni e un tizio che si fa / c'è un ufficio senza targa e senza età / Ed è l'ufficio delle cose perdute quelle / che son sparite in fondo a qualche momento chiuso».

The second biggest Italian old town centre after Venice, Genoa's inner city is a sort of labyrinth to explore through all sensory codes in a synergic way. Any kind of experience is equally useful to negotiate and re-create the relationship between memories and knowledge of the city's light and shade effects, as Fabrizio De André recalls, talking about

⁵ Cfr. C.G. ROMANA, *Il mio fantasma blu*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 1995, p. 165.

⁶ Cfr. A. BAGNASCO, *Paoli*, Padova, Franco Muzzio Editore, 1989, 189, p. 85, and ROMANA, *Il mio fantasma blu* cit., p. 167.

the smells and the faces he found in the narrow streets close to the waterfront: «E poi ti attacchi anche a fatti fisici, sapori, odori. Magari i cattivi odori che trovi solo nei porti e che ti seguono dall'infanzia, il refrescume, il puzzo delle fogne scoperte che finiscono in mare, quello del pesce marcio. Genova è anche il profumo e il sapore della sua cucina. [...] A me pare che Genova abbia la faccia di tutti i poveri diavoli che ho conosciuto nei carruggi, gli esclusi [...] che ho conosciuto per la prima volta nelle riserve della città vecchia».⁷

Figure 2. The inner city's roofs from the Castelletto



De André explores the inner city, its alleys – the typical Ligurian *carrugi* – the waterfront and its surroundings, and he fixes their memories through unforgettable sketches. He tells the losers' space: the «graziosa» waiting for her clients on the threshold of her room in *Via del Campo*, the old professor and his «pubblica moglie», the «quattro pensionati mezzo avvelenati», «i ladri gli assassini e il tipo strano» you can meet walking along the old wharfs «in quell'aria spesso carica di sale, gonfia di odori». De André offers everyone a sympathetic look: «ma se capirai, se li cercherai fino in fondo / se non sono gigli son pur sempre figli / vittime di questo mondo.» There is a secret beauty in the vertical stratification of the Genoese *carrugi* 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, sometimes against the wind, crawlingly, or meditating against the sun, maybe alone or maybe together with someone else, «in quelle notti a Genova / giù lungo il porto, dentro quei bar / sogni cambiati in spiccioli». In one of those nights, Cristiano De André sings to his father «ci sentivamo invincibili / ci sentivamo così» (*Invincibili, Canzoni col naso lungo*, WEA, 1992). Genoa holds family histories, echoes of the alleys, relationships among arts and crafts and passions, but also allegories of the present time, of the caducity of our days and of the harshness of despair.

⁷ F. DE ANDRÉ, *Come un'anomalia*, Torino, 1999, cit. in E. CAPASSO, *Andare lontano* cit., p. 17

The waterfront and the Porto Antico

Figure 3. A view of the waterfront from the Righi hill



«Sudore, salsedine / martello, incudine» (Max Manfredi, *Tabarka, Live in blue*, Storie di Note, 2004). Sweat and salt, hammer and anvil, but that amphibian Genoese unit, symbol of centuries of history and culture, has been broken when the docks in the Porto Antico were abandoned. The maritime workers left the area and the citizens recovered the territory, finally freed from those gates once separating the sea from the city. In 1992, for the Colombian celebrations, the waterfront has been renovated, re-functionalizing that area from the wharf to the Stazione Doria, opening it to people, movement, trade, shows. Bruno Lauzi, detaching himself from the classical poetics which sings the old quays as a site of adventure, solitude and isolation, declares his affection for the new aspect of the waterfront, which looks modern, occidental and impudently false: «Io amo il Porto Antico, la sua falsità hollywoodiana, la sua smaccata funzione di trappola commerciale. Sa di California. Credo al Bigo ed alla sua indifferenza dinnanzi al panorama, quello sì superbo, della città che ho scelto fosse la mia. [...] Lontani dalla nafta, viva Albaro e corso Italia, viva la luna sul mare...».⁸ And Lauzi sings: «Genova e la luna, / la vita è come un viaggio di fortuna / che pagheremo di persona/ finché avremo dentro al cuore / questa voglia d'andar via...» (*Genova e la luna, Il dorso della balena*, Pincopallo, 1992).

⁸ B. LAUZI, *Quando si vive in riva al mare*, in *Genova città narrata*, edited by S. ROLF MARENGO e B. MANZITTI, Milano, 2003, p. 8.

Figura 4. The Bigo



In the *sestiere della Maddalena*, 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. The look is dominated by the openness of the sea on one side and by the painted façade of Palazzo San Giorgio, with its knights and dragons on the other. In this way, regaining space, air and colours, the historical area has progressively lost its look of steel and coal. At the same time, Genoa, as a sea city, has lost the binary rhythm which opposes sails to furnaces, as Cristiano De André sings in his *Notti di Genova (Sul confine, WAE, 1995)*: «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».

The waterfront has gained a new life, notwithstanding the changes and transformations of economics and industry. But not every Genoese artist has been conquered by the new look of the waterfront, as Lauzi has. Ivano Fossati laments that the city has lost a great part of its beauty with the new Sopraelevata, which has made of Piazza Caricamento a hugely place where one would never stop, if not obliged.⁹ In Cristiano De André's lyrics, on the contrary, the square remains the metaphor of a hard living, industrial archaeology, smoke of drugs, chimneys and funnels, and fogs of memories: «perché è la vita intera che grida dentro / o forse è il fumo di Caricamento» (*Notti di Genova, Sul confine, WEA, 1995*). In those Genoese nights, one can meet with Cristiano De André «donne di madreperla / con la ruggine sulla voce / e ognuna porta in spalla la sua croce», or, with Lauzi, women like Anna the Red, waiting on the Molo C for someone who takes her away, while she stares for hours «chiatte e barconi fasciati dai raggi di luna» (*Anna la Rossa, Kabaret n. 2, Ariston, s.d.*).

The waterfront and its castaways

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. This seduction also affects music and lyrics, as for example in *Onde clandestine* by Federico Sirianni, where he sings the contemporary waterfront castaways: «Alla luce di un lampione storto, degli scheletri sul mare / delle navi abbandonate in porto e delle

⁹ I. FOSSATI, *Per niente facile*, Milano, Arcana, 1994, p. 19.

pallide lampare / alla luce di una luna opaca galleggiano a stento / in questa melma nera di cloaca presto mi addormenterò» (*Onde clandestine*, Great Machine Pistole, 2002). A seduction which comes from very far both in terms of distance and time, as in Cristiano Angelini's *L'ombra della mosca* (Gutemberg Music, 2011), where his modern anti-hero lives «coperto di frasche e di alghe del mare / e ci vogliono occhi di storia / per poterlo sopportare».

Figure 5. The singer-songwriter Cristiano Angelini (2005)



Similar castaways populate Manfredi's lyrics. His sailors of the sea of existence, stowaways to their own lives, his modern explorers are people full of troubles «come un pezzo di carne appesa», people who have nor sure landing or sure leaving, as in his *Le storie del Porto di Atene* (*L'intagliatore di santi*, Storie di Note, 2001): «E tu che disfi la tela e la fai come fossi la sposa di un eroe straniero / Io che seguo il mio filo sconnesso e chissà se mi perdo davvero». Manfredi does not get lost, especially because he retraces his own cartography in order to adapt the world to his individual vision. Genoa's waterfront has not a Grecian wharf, there is only Salita della Fava Greca in the sestiere del Molo, and a restaurant in Piazza Caricamento called Torre dei Greci. While building up his personal *Molo dei Greci*, Manfredi traces the parable of an immobile journey from the waiting of «San Giorgio a cavallo, nei bar della sera» to the «nebbia del porto a Milano». In this way, recreating a new topography, he re-founds identity through imaginary: «Questa sera qui a Molo dei Greci c'è un silenzio speciale / e nessuno scommette più un franco nemmeno da solo / se si trova qui a Molo dei greci e pensa d'essere in mare / o se invece si trova sul mare e sogna d'essere al molo».

Figure 6. The singer-songwriter Max Manfredi (2005)



Manfredi's heroes attend the wharf to fulfil any kind of need, moved by despair, hunger or desire of adventure, living the waterfront as if it were a sort of *en-plein-air* open house, without roofs nor gates, a house which has to become home in order to erase solitude: «E in questo bar del molo mi han dato da fumare / e mangio la focaccia rovente dello spaccio / questa mia solitudine a volte può pesare / come una ballerina che hai tenuto tanto in braccio» (*Le ultime ore del Capitano Blif, Porta dei Canti, CNR, 2005*). The wharf in the lyrics of singer-songwriters keeps its balance between imagination and reality. It is often a space both rejected and regained, attended by «muri de mainé», sail men's faces coming from nowhere and going anywhere in the world. Sometimes they simply seem to inhabit the waste land of a tavern where they once landed to sail more and more on the wine boat, «emigranti du rìe cu'i cìoi 'nt'i euggi»¹⁰ – migrants of a laugh with nails in their eyes – while they talk remembering journeys and homecomings.

The waterfront: pirates and Captains

In a certain way, the journey goes on even beyond the last departure. On the alleys along the Aquarium, in the Porto Antico, there is a sign reading «Via al Mare Fabrizio De André, cantautore genovese». On the 13th of January 1999, his funeral took place at Nostra Signora dell'Assunta, on Carignano hill, very close to the carrugi of the old town. Thousands of people from everywhere in Italy came to Genoa for a last farewell. Alessio Lega, in his *Funerali del pirata (Porta dei Canti, CNR, 2005)*, recalls a long day, spent in memories and meetings, comparisons and consolations, «in fondo a un'osteria» where «tre litri e poi la compagnia / era già meno disperata». Later, during a walk to the Porto Antico, he suddenly discovers a huge galleon. In the sadness and the tiredness of that long day, the vessel seems part of an alcoholic dream. Actually, it is the ship from the Roman Polanski

¹⁰ F. DE ANDRÉ, *Creuza de mă*, in *Creuza de mă*, Ricordi, 1984.

movie *Pirates*, left as a gift in the Porto Antico since the 1992 Expo. To Lega's eyes, the galleon appears as a last gift from the late singer-songwriter; waiting ashore for the right moment to sail away again: «E lì enorme nella sera / ed infinitamente bello / battente la bandiera nera / era ancorato il suo battello [...] prendemmo posto chi sul ponte, chi in cambusa, chi in vedetta / urlando i versi del poeta come se fossero vendetta / come se fossero l'amore che ti portiamo, contro il mare / pirata, manchi solo tu, noi siamo pronti per salpare!»

Figure 7. Polanski's vessel in the Porto Antico



A real – even if fake – vessel for a ghost's voice, for a chorus of voices lost in the world, voices held in a single bunch by imaginary. This seems to be the Genoese power: they are 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, more than walked or lived. The trick is to find the right helmsman to talk to, in order to find those answers which can be solution and balm at the same time, as Manfredi does in his *Danza composta (L'intagliatore di santi)*: «Capitano di gran valore, ti sono venuto a trovare [...] Lo so lo so che tutti quanti hanno ferite da consolare / Lo so lo so che quasi tutti le conservano nel sale». In the end, the balm lies in the search itself, rooted into that old time of foundation when personal memories melt into collective imaginary, making the one part of a community. A traditional Genoese nursery rhyme begins with these words: «Capitan de gran valore, / gira la carta e se vedde lo fiore, / e o fiore o l'è bon pè ödoâ, / gira la carta e se vede o mâ».¹¹ De André's song where Madama Doré loses six daughters among the harbour taverns and wonders begins with these verses: «C'è una donna che semina il grano / volta la carta si vede il villano / il villano che zappa la terra / volta la carta si vede la guerra» (*Volta la carta, Rimini, Ricordi, 1978*). Roots come back, integrated and shared, as if they were a sort of bridge, a stair, a terrace from which facing the future becomes possible. In the examined corpus, the helmsmen, the Captains are numerous. The one sung by Paolo Cogorno is compared to an oracle to interrogate: «Capitano mio vecchio Capitano / mi dica se stiamo fermi oppure se andremo lontano» (*La nave Italia, Rumori di fondo, Devega Records, 1996*). Manfredi's hero brings in himself the

¹¹ *Capitan de gran valore*, in *Bôga Bilôga. Antiche filastrocche in genovese*, a cura di P. L. GARDELLA, Feguagiskia' Studios, Genova, 2000, p. 77.

ransom and redemption of the common people: «Il Capitano Blif è un duro, su questo non ci piove / Ne ha consumate tante, lui, di cotte e anche di crude [...] Ha un porto in ogni donna e un debito in ogni scalo / Parla coi vivi e i morti solo quando gira a lui. / Con gli occhi in un miraggio e una bussola nel culo / Lui ci porterà via da questi mari bui.» Quoting Walt Whitman, La Rosa Tatuata's *Tra le pagine di me (Bandiera genovese, La flotta, 2001)* begins in this way: «In piedi sul banco chiamo / capitano mio capitano / scrivi tutto ciò che è dentro me». This song is dedicated to Ivano Fossati, «nostro capitano», and it is part of the album called *Bandiera Genovese*, explicit homage to Fossati's *Passalento (Discanto, Epic, 1990)*: «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». That's how the building of a collective cultural identity is made also of shared, mutual words and notes. In this case, Fossati becomes both searcher and navigator within an internal circuit of writings where anyway – in a maze of references reflecting the labyrinth of Genoa's cartography – the wanderer meets his path, his landing, his confirmation: «O Capitano mio Capitano / è che non posso lasciare / che nemmeno un sogno scivoli via / sotto nuove bandiere / ancora giorni e sere / per il tempo che ha l'anima mia / e per me» (*L'amore con l'amore si paga, Fiorella Mannoia, Certe piccolo voci, BMG Ricordi. 1998*).

Conclusion

Genoa's personality manifests itself within a peculiar musical geography, in the choreography traced by the crossing of the *carrugi*, along the coordinates of the wharfs, in the variety of the references, in the intensity of memories, in the reconstruction of a strongly felt and cultivated cultural identity. Genoa is a microcosm, to put it with the poet Edoardo Sanguineti: «Posso dire che l'universo, che altrove si squaderna, è qui raccolto, in Genova, miniaturizzato come si deve. [...] Genova, in una poesia, è un'allegoria. È, nella mia poesia, probabilmente un'allegoria del mondo. E il mondo, anche quello è un'allegoria, per sé» (E. SANGUINETI, *Genova per me cit.*, pp. 74-75).

The only way out from this allegoric microcosm seems to be – as a chance – a look from far away, from the other side of the waterfront, from a distance where the biggest thrill becomes minuscule, and the minimum suggestion becomes a paradigm of humanity: «D'ă mæ riva / sulu u teu mandillu ciaèu / d'ă mæ riva [...] ti me perdunié u magún / ma te pensu cuntru su / e u so ben t'ammii u mă / 'n pò ciù au largu du dulú» (De André, *D'ă mæ riva, Creuza de ma, Ricordi, 1984*).

Figure 8. The vessel figurehead



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