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Realities in Dialogue: Independent Sounds in Italy, 1975-1990

Saverio **Beccaccioli**
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4127-3218
Conservatoire "Giulio Briccialdi" in Terni and Conservatoire "Giuseppe Verdi" in Ravenna/Terni-TR, Ravenna-RA, Italy

Abstract: In the 1975 municipal elections, the steadily growing Italian Communist Party (PCI), together with the country's other leftist forces, reached nearly half of the electorate (47%), trailing the Christian Democrats (DC) by only two percentage points and raising hopes that overtaking them was becoming less of a utopian dream. At the same time, in public squares, city streets, and occupied spaces, a fervent youth political movement was generating unprecedented cultural agitation. The underground circuits of the *Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti* (CSOA), the Circoli Arci, and the *Feste dell'Unità* (Unity Festivals) became the preferred stages for emerging figures in independent music. Meanwhile, institutional and civic initiatives—from specialized music and cultural magazines to free radio stations—were enabling the flourishing and experimental diffusion of music. The analysis begins with a study of music and cultural magazines in Italy (*Muzak, Gong, Rockerilla*) and is then complemented by a historical examination that converges into a geography of names, things, and cities. The aim is to demonstrate how the independent and underground scenes of left-wing popular music in Italy, which emerged between 1975 and 1990, engaged with and developed the concept of experimentation in a multidisciplinary way. Bologna, Rome, Turin, and Milan, seen from unusual angles, emerge as the cradle of counterculture.

Keywords: Independent music. Underground circuits. Counterculture. Italian left. Authenticity.

Realidades em diálogo: a Itália soa independente 1975-1990

Resumo: O sempre crescente Partido Comunista Italiano (PCI), nas eleições autárquicas de 1975, unido às outras forças de esquerda do país, atingiu o limiar de metade dos eleitores (47%), ficando atrás dos Democratas Cristãos (DC) por apenas dois pontos percentuais e dando esperança de uma ultrapassagem cada vez menos utópica. Entretanto, nas praças, nas ruas das cidades e nos locais ocupados, o fervoroso e contestatário movimento político juvenil cria uma agitação cultural sem precedentes. Os circuitos clandestinos dos Centros Sociais Autogeridos Ocupados (CSOA), dos Circoli Arci e da Festa dell'Unità (Festivais da Unidade) tornam-se os palcos de eleição dos novos nomes da música independente. Ao mesmo tempo, nasceram realidades institucionais ou cívicas, desde revistas do sector a estações de rádio livres, que permitiram uma difusão experimental e florescente da música. A análise passará primeiro pelo estudo das revistas do sector musical e cultural no território italiano (*Muzak, Gong, Rockerilla*), e depois será complementada por uma análise histórica que convergirá para uma geografia de nomes, coisas e cidades. O objetivo será apresentar como as realidades independentes e underground da música popular de esquerda na Itália, nascidas no período de 1975-1990, dialogaram e trabalharam o conceito de experimentação de forma multidisciplinar. Bolonha, Roma, Turim e Milão, vistas de ângulos inusitados, tornam-se o berço da contracultura.

Palavras-chave: Música independente. Circuitos underground. Contracultura. Esquerda italiana. Autenticidade.

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This paper analyzes how the various facets of *experimentalism* in Italy between 1975 and 1990 manifested themselves through counterculture, underground, independent, avant-garde, experimental, and futuristic forms. The narrative is framed within the socio-cultural and political context of those years, marked by repression, demonstrations, clashes, and fervent youth movements. The year 1975 is identified as a particularly significant turning point, when institutions, collectives, music groups, and events converged.

The phenomena discussed here can also be read in light of shifts in historiographic practice and what Carlotta Sorba and Federico Mazzini have called "the cultural turn". In the 1960s, England played an instrumental role in establishing a crucial context for understanding the precedents of this turn in historiography. During this period, a generation of postwar, Marxist-trained historians reconsidered historical materialism (Sorba & Mazzini, 2021, p. 17). As a result, people's actions and capacity to intervene in history gained increasing weight when compared to the large-scale structures that, in classical Marxist thought, had represented the only concrete articulations of society.

The phenomenon of independent music can be interpreted through the lens of these historiographic reflections, as it embodies a form of expression "from below" that resists the dominant narratives imposed by the traditional music industry. Italian independent music between 1975 and 1990 represented a creative and authentic response to the needs of artists and listeners who felt marginalized within the mainstream cultural landscape. Its ability to reflect everyday experiences, social struggles, and individual aspirations resonates with the idea of history emerging from the voices of those traditionally ignored. Thus, the independent music phenomenon not only enriched the contemporary artistic landscape but also entered into a broader debate on the power of narrative and the importance of opening space for alternative perspectives, thereby contributing to a more inclusive understanding of culture.

The analysis begins with a study of specialized music and cultural magazines in Italy (*Muzak, Gong, Rockerilla*)[1], and is then complemented by a historical examination that converges into a geography of names, things, and cities. The aim is to show how the independent and underground scenes of Italian left-wing popular music that emerged in this period engaged with the concept of experimentation in a multidisciplinary way, shaped by a strong DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos.

The DIY ethos primarily refers to a desire to resist consumerism through self-sufficient practices and to promote the idea that anyone who acquires the necessary knowledge can carry out a wide range of tasks independently, without relying on technicians or specialists. *(Music for Misfits: The Story of Indie*, 2015, min. 0.54). In the Italian context, however, DIY extends beyond self-production; it becomes a form of community, a symbolic practice, and a politics of cultural resistance. It functions as a subterranean grammar that shapes independent aesthetics, fuels new narratives, and makes it possible—even today—to imagine the alternative as real.

[1] *Muzak* was an Italian music magazine founded in Rome in 1973 within the circles of the extra-parliamentary left, with Gaime Pintor as its first editor. *Gong* was a monthly magazine devoted to progressive music and culture, launched in Milan in 1974 by a group previously associated with *Muzak* and edited by Antonino Antonucci Ferrara. *Rockerilla*, founded in 1978 in Cairo Montenotte (Liguria), soon became one of the most influential Italian publications covering alternative rock, new wave, and punk.

Our analysis will not restrict DIY ethics to an alternative mode of operation vis-à-vis mainstream cultural production. Instead, we aim to configure it as an ethical-political stance: an expressive and organizational device that traverses the history of Italian countercultures. From the earliest forms of radical, self-managed publishing (cyclostyled magazines, fanzines, fringe publications) to the emergence of genuine hubs of grassroots cultural production, DIY has established itself as a founding principle of resistant, situated creativity.[2]

1. Rethinking

Thanks to years of effective campaigning around the electorate's shift to the right and the success of the Social Movement, in 1974 the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) consolidated its position as the majority party, standing in opposition to the fervent street mobilizations of the extra-parliamentary left in the lead-up to the 1975 municipal elections. On that occasion, the steadily growing *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI), together with the other forces of the united left, secured nearly half of the vote (47%), trailing the *Democrazia Cristiana* by only two percentage points and raising hopes that an overtaking was becoming less of a utopian dream—now possible and tangible (Tomatis, 2019, p. 429).

Many music historians warn against seeking an automatic cause-and-effect relationship between historical events and the history of music. Yet, as musicologist Jacopo Tomatis also argues, "more than a specific context, then, it is necessary to look at those practices, those expectations, those discourses connected with the full-time political activation of thousands of young people, which very often have music at their center"[3] (Tomatis, 2019, p. 429, translated by the author).

1975 was also an important year because of the Club Tenco's Congress of the New Song, in which the very notion of "new" carried a range of connotations that marked a significant shift both in the music market and in the music itself. In the November 1975 issue of *Muzak* (no. 7), Gino Castaldo contributed an article on alternative and political circuits—such as the *Feste dell'Unità* (Unity Festivals, organized by the Italian Communist Party)—highlighting how the PCI was experiencing moments of weakness due to disorganization and the absence of clear guidelines. That same year, the PCI circuit had been involved in numerous village music festivals, but in many cases lacked the capacity to manage them effectively. "If you think of the national festival that year in Florence," noted Riccardo Donnini, secretary of the Arci in Florence

[2] Some of the paradigmatic examples explored in greater detail throughout this paper are found in the scenes of the four cities under examination. The bands in these contexts subverted aesthetic and performative conventions with rudimentary instruments, improvised stage sets, derisory and provocative lyrics, and a conscious break from the singer-songwriter tradition. Equally significant were the experiences of free radio stations, which contributed to the diffusion of new discursive, sonic, and organizational practices through a collective language capable of connecting territories, voices, and struggles. For years, collective studio-houses, experimental centers, artistic residencies, and hybrid productions have served as spaces where the arts coexist without hierarchy, in a continuous flow of contamination and assembly. Here, DIY is not merely a means but an end: a way of inhabiting culture, of experiencing it, and of bringing it to life without delegation (Bennett; Guerra, 2019).

[3] Original: "[...] più che a un contesto specifico, allora, è necessario guardare a quelle pratiche, a quelle aspettative, a quei discorsi connessi con l'attivazione politica a tempo pieno di migliaia di giovani, che molto spesso hanno al centro proprio la musica" (Tomatis, 2019, p. 429).

> The mammoth size of this year's *Nazionale* calls for an organizational rethinking: an event of such magnitude risks becoming a reality that is difficult to control. It poses, for example, serious problems of territoriality—that is, of relations with the people and the places where the festival is held[4] (Castaldo, 1975, p. 10, translated by the author).

Similar problems were noted that same year by Gianni Borgna, provincial secretary of the Rome FGCI, who commented:

> the Unity festivals very often turn out to be very important occasions for meeting and intervention, but they are disorganized, with structures filled more or less at random. Nor is the so-called "policy of quality"—the proposal of first-rate performers and shows, in place of the old festivals that closely resembled village fairs—any longer sufficient[5] (Borgna *apud* Castaldo, 1975, p. 10, translated by the author).

The PCI was facing a cultural situation that restricted the spaces of expression of singer-songwriters, while favoring new independent artists, jazz, and even classical music. The Unity-PCI Festivals were only some of the many occasions that bore witness to a profound cultural shift, but also revealed—above all—the party's inability to organize the new forms of political, social, musical, and more broadly cultural thinking that were emerging at the time.

The critic Peppo del Conte, who published an article titled "Enough with Minority Praxis" in *Gong* (no. 301, 1976), identified three central problems confronting cultural organizations, and especially politicized organizers. Musical language, he argued, was constantly evolving in its meanings and evaluative models, and this required a series of rather complex practical decisions. This was due to:

> [...] 1) [from] the cultural and ideological confusion that prevailed among the youth masses thus concentrated; 2) the fact that no precise parameters existed for consistently establishing a proper relationship between organizers, artists, and audiences; 3) the very nature of such events, which were typical occasions of concentration rather than decentralization[6] (Del Conte, 1976, p. 19-21).

But this also stemmed from the increasing difficulty of overcoming the practical challenges of implementation: securing financial resources and finding alternative venues (ranging from occupied houses and warehouses to theatres, neighborhood halls, squares, and other spaces). Peppo del Conte, however, drew readers' attention to the dramatic situation in which the music circuits were struggling, while at the same time highlighting certain steps forward:

[4] Original: "La dimensione mastodontica del Nazionale di questo anno richiede un ripensamento organizzativo: una manifestazione di quella portata rischia di diventare una realtà difficilmente controllabile. Pone, per esempio, dei gravi problemi di territorialità, cioè di rapporti con la gente e i luoghi in cui si svolge il festival" (Castaldo, 1975, p. 10).
[5] Original: "[...] i festival dell'Unità risultano molto spesso momenti di incontro e di intervento molto importanti, ma disorganici, strutture riempite in modo più o meno casuale. E non basta più neppure la così detta politica di qualità, il proporre nomi e spettacoli di prima grandezza, al posto dei vecchi festival molto simili alla sagra di paese" (Borgna *apud* Castaldo, 1975, p. 10).
[6] Original version: […] 1) [dalla] la confusione culturale e ideologica che regnava tra masse giovanili in tal modo concentrate; 2) il fatto che non esistevano dei parametri precisi per poter creare sempre un rapporto corretto organizzatori / artisti / masse; 3) la natura stessa di tali manifestazioni, tipici eventi di concentramento e non di decentramento (Del Conte, 1976, p. 19-21). The English translation in the text is mine.

> The recognition of a general backwardness in musical culture […]; the indication of a new programmatic line that rejects the political instrumentalization of music, in favor of a sound management of cultural choices and of relations with artists and suppliers. The affirmation of the priority of a strategy of decentralization over that of the *Superfeste popolari* and the *Palasport,* in line with a prudent 'policy of a hundred flowers' well suited to the current intermediate phase and carried out through an effective dialectic between experimentation and dissemination. The recent awareness of the problem of spaces (necessary and suitable for events) and of the 'political' struggle for their appropriation: in this sense, the directions to be taken may be multiple and complementary, and many solutions could emerge through imagination and initiative based on particular environmental situations. Schools, local radio stations, factories, and occupied houses are only some of these 'occasions,' but they cannot be the only basis on which to build the development of an alternative form of management—one that will certainly pass through further politico-cultural battles and further reappropriations of structures now in the hands of bourgeois power[7] (Del Conte, 1976, p. 19–21).

To address the issue of popular culture effectively, it was considered essential to adopt a strategy that would bring together and involve the various cultural producers already active in traditional circuits. Such a process would not only combine forces and resources but also seek to ensure control over the media and communication channels needed to give life and voice to an authentically alternative culture. At the core, the aim was to establish a solid network among artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers, fostering exchanges and collaborations capable of enriching the cultural landscape. This approach made possible—or rather, would have made possible—the integration of diverse experiences, creating a sense of community and mutual support through open and formative dialogue. In this way, cultural practices could be developed that reflected the real needs and aspirations of the community, placing citizens' active participation at the center.

Remaining in 1975 and still in Florence, one event in particular attracted the attention of both institutions and the public and was widely discussed in the press: the First National Conference of Free Radios, held under the theme "*Experiences of Radio Communication in Italy*." The meeting focused initially on the growing conviction that information could and should be free and independent of RAI-TV, envisioning the consumer — that is, the user of information — as someone who also produces and becomes a protagonist. In this sense, people could — and wanted to — participate directly in the activities of free radio, because they felt keenly "the meaning of dignity and its political weight."[8] (Brunelli, 1975, p. 20-23).

However, the purpose of the conference was to take stock of all the free and independent radio stations: to identify who they were, where they were located, what they were doing, and—more

[7] Original version: la presa di coscienza di una generale arretratezza della cultura musicale […]; l'accenno ad una nuova linea programmatica che rifiuti la strumentalizzazione politica della musica, secondo una gestione corretta delle scelte culturali e dei rapporti con artisti e fornitori. Affermazione della priorità di una strategia del decentramento su quella delle Superfeste popolari e dei Palasport, secondo un'accorta "politica dei cento fiori" che ben si adatta alla attuale fase intermedia e attraverso un'efficace dialettica tra sperimentazione e divulgazione. Recente scoperta del problema degli spazi (necessari e adatti alle manifestazioni) e della lotta "politica" per la loro appropriazione: in questo senso le direzioni da prendere possono essere molteplici e complementari e molte soluzioni potrebbero svilupparsi attraverso la fantasia e lo spirito d'iniziativa sulla base di particolari situazioni ambientali. Le scuole, le radio locali, le fabbriche, le case occupate non sono forse che alcune di queste "occasioni", ma non possono essere le uniche su cui basare lo sviluppo di una gestione alternativa che passerà certamente attraverso altre battaglie politico-culturali e altre riappropriazioni di strutture oggi in mano al potere borghese (Del Conte, 1976, p. 19-21). The English translation in the text is mine.

[8] Original version: il significato della dignità e del suo peso politico (Brunelli, 1975, p. 20-23). The English translation in the text is mine.

generally—to get to know one another. Free radio stations were beginning to revolutionize the Italian music scene, offering space to genres and artists often neglected by official broadcasters and record companies.[9] These stations facilitated the spread of independent rock and pop, helping to create a more diverse and accessible musical culture. A central aspect of free radio was its impact on the political sphere: in a period of intense social and political turmoil, it offered a platform for voices and ideologies that were often excluded from the mainstream media[10]. In doing so, it enabled a broader debate on crucial issues such as civil rights, social injustices, and political struggles. Free radio thus became a means of contestation and critical information, supporting the protest movements of the time and serving as a tool for social mobilization and the dissemination of alternative ideas (Altri Media, 1976, p. 70). Musically, this moment also witnessed the rise of singer-songwriters and the emergence of new generations of artists.

2. Bologna, Rome, Turin, and Milan: Names, things, and cities

Bologna has long been a city attuned to listening and, perhaps more than any other Italian city, represented the most vital musical and creative center of the country's underground and independent scene (Arabia & Turra, 2010). It was also the city where the academic program DAMS (*Discipline delle Arti, della Musica e dello Spettacolo* [Degree program in Art, Music, and Performing Arts]) had served as an important cultural and academic reference point since its foundation in 1971. The presence of Umberto Eco — distinguished semiologist, writer, and academic — was central in shaping its identity and subsequent development, not only on a theoretical level but also on a practical and social one. Eco's interdisciplinary approach fostered critical reflection on how different art forms — from literature to cinema, from music to theater—interact and influence society. As he observed, "avant-garde presupposes a kind of violent attack; experimentalism is a slow work on the page" (Filoni, 2016).[11]

In 1975, a group of DAMS students—later to become known as *Skiantos*, pioneers of Italian demential rock—began rehearsing in the cellar of singer Roberto "Freak" Antoni. The group's early concerts were marked by provocative performances that drew on the legacy of the Futurist avant-garde—the same Futurist avant-garde that Francesco Balilla Pratella had outlined in his *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music*.

> Free verse is the only suitable form, since it is not constrained by the limitations of rhythms and accents monotonously repeated in narrow and inadequate patterns. The polyphonic wave of human poetry finds in free verse all the rhythms, all the accents, and all the modes through which it can exuberantly express itself, like a fascinating symphony of words. This rhythmic freedom is proper to Futurist music. Man, and the multitude of men on stage, must no longer imitate ordinary speech with ease, but must sing—as when

[9] These broadcasters, often born in militant, student, or marginal environments, established themselves as forms of cultural resistance. The vanguard of this experience is to be found in their ability to deconstruct the institutional languages of traditional radio, experimenting with new modes of narration, often fragmentary, improvised, and horizontal. The microphone was transformed into an instrument of self-determination: anyone could speak, tell, broadcast. In this sense, free radios were spaces of democratic and unmediated access to the public word.

[10] From a technical point of view, the use of hand-crafted transmitters, the absence of fixed programming rules, the overlapping of genres and roles - speaker, sound engineer, editor - contributed to constructing an aesthetic of discontinuity, of discard, of freedom. It was, to all intents and purposes, experimental communication, challenging the forms and hierarchies of culture.

[11] Original version: l'avanguardia presuppone una sorta di attacco violento, lo sperimentalismo è un lento lavoro sulla pagina (Filoni, 2016). The English translation in the text is mine.

> we, unaware of place and time, seized by an inner will to expand and to dominate, instinctively burst forth into the essential and fascinating human language. A natural song, spontaneous, without the measure of rhythms or of intervals—an artificial limitation of expression that makes us regret the true effectiveness of the word"[12] (Pratella, 1911).

Applied to the demential rock of *Skiantos*, this aesthetic translated into terse metrical phrases, surreal, ironic, and provocative lyrics delivered in eccentric ways, with exaggerated gestures and performances that highlighted the comic and irreverent side of their music: musicians hurling vegetables at the audience, cooking pasta on stage, and other extramusical oddities.

One of the first independent record labels in Bologna was Harpo's Music, initially established as a producer of music cassettes (Gherardi et al., 2014). Its two founders, Capelli and Rubini, met in the electronic music course at the Bologna Conservatory. Capelli, together with his roommates—students at DAMS in Bologna — then founded a cooperative that worked across music, cinema, and graphics, with the initial aim of filming the 1977 anti-repression conference (Rubini, 2011, p. 27).

That year proved decisive: it began with the police killing of Lotta Continua[13] militant Francesco Lorusso and ended with a concert by *the Centro d'Urto Metropolitano* (later to become *Gaznevada*), which had emerged from the *Traumfabrik* — an illegally occupied flat in central Bologna that shifted in function while maintaining the same appearance: at times a residence, at times an art studio, at times a club. The *Centro d'Urto Metropolitano* anticipated the turning point toward demential rock, later crystallized by Skiantos, as noted above. They, too, became known for comical or absurd incidents outside the setlist, such as the famous paper-ball fight between audience and performers at the concert of 25 September 1977.

In these same years, another key venue in Bologna was the record shop *Disco d'Oro* (founded in 1976), which served as a meeting point for bands such as *Gaznevada* and *Skiantos* as well as for comic artists like Andrea Pazienza and Filippo Scozzari. *Disco d'Oro* became a breeding ground for creative listening practices: it was the place where people discovered what was happening abroad and gathered to discuss new projects (Papa, 2016). Originally located on Via Marconi in central Bologna, the shop specialized in punk and new wave, supplying its stock through regular trips to London and New York. During those years, *Disco d'Oro* also supported the most important free radio station in Emilia-Romagna: *Radio Alice*. Bologna thus increasingly came to embody the image of a city symbolic of a leftist wave that showed little sign of receding — a dynamic reflected in the rise of new bands such as *Nabat* and *CCCP*.

[12] Original version: il verso libero è il solo adatto, non essendo obbligato a limitazioni di ritmi e di accenti monotonamente ripetentesi in forme ristrette ed insufficienti. L'onda polifonica della poesia umana trova nel verso libero tutti i ritmi, tutti gli accenti e tutti i modi per potersi esuberantemente esprimere, come in una affascinante sinfonia di parole. Tale libertà di espressione ritmica e propria della musica futurista. L'uomo e la moltitudine degli uomini sulla scena non debbono più imitare facilmente il comune parlare, ma debbono cantare, come quando noi, inconsci del luogo e dell'ora, presi da un'intima volontà di espansione e di dominio, prorompiamo istintivamente nell'essenziale ed affascinante linguaggio umano. Canto naturale, spontaneo, senza la misura dei ritmi o degl'intervalli, artificiosa limitazione dell'espressione, che ci fa rimpiangere l'efficacia della parola (Pratella, 1911). The English translation in the text is mine.

[13] Lotta Continua, of revolutionary communist, workerist and radical leftist orientation, was one of the largest formations of the Italian extra-parliamentary left that emerged in the late 1960s.

> Alongside the complex progressive music of PFM, Banco, and Le Orme, the late wave of English and American punk from 1976–77 also reached Italy, albeit with a few years' delay, exerting an influence that was not only aesthetic but also political and economic. Out of this emerged the phenomenon of self-production, or DIY (*do it yourself*), that is, independent production. Groups, labels, and artists came together and developed forms of distribution independent of the majors, that is, the main record companies [14] (Spaziante, 2011, p. 5).

In Rome's Monteverde neighborhood, around 1975, four young laborers — David, Angelo (known as Sigaro), Pasquale, and Giampaolo (Picchio) — first met while working on construction sites. By 1981, at a building site on Via Palmiro Togliatti, the four were working together as bricklayers when some comrades asked them to help build a stage for a concert at the Cinema Alfieri in Rome. Among the scheduled performers were *Nabat* from Bologna and *Klaxon* from Rome. The concert, however, was cut short by a brawl instigated by fascists attempting to provoke a clash with left-wing comrades; as a result, the last two groups were unable to perform. David and Picchio recall scenes of violence, with beatings and police everywhere. The work of stage-building became increasingly frequent for David, Sigaro, Pasquale, and Picchio—so much so that within the underground scene they came to be known as *Banda Bassotti* [from Disney's *Beagle Boys* comics][15]. The nickname reflected their appearance: "Bald, with suspenders and boots, we looked like the cartoon beagles who stole from the rich and never got anything done—and, in fact, for a while, that was us"[16] (Beccaccioli, 2023). While the four were the core of *Banda Bassotti*, they were often joined by a circle of friends who helped them load and unload the van. Eventually, however, the four themselves stepped onto the stage — and thus began the story of *Banda Bassotti* as a band.

Banda Bassotti also engaged in political activism by organizing solidarity initiatives in favor of Palestinian fighters, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua and the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation in El Salvador. A few years later, the Roman communist collectives founded the Work Brigade and left for those Central American countries, where they built schools and held concerts. David remembers: "We were in a bar watching the *Roma* football match and bombs were exploding outside"[17] (Beccaccioli, 2023); they understood that the time had come to act, but to act in their way: with music.

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[14] Original version: con la complessa musica *progressive* italiana di PFM, Banco e Le Orme. Con qualche anno di ritardo era poi arrivata in Italia anche l'onda tardiva del punk inglese e americano del 1976-77, producendo un'influenza non solo estetica ma anche politico-economica. Fu così che emerse il fenomeno dell'auto-produzione, del DIY (*do it yourself*), ovvero della produzione indipendente. Gruppi, etichette, artisti si aggregavano e trovavano forme di distribuzione indipendenti dalle *major*, ovvero dalle case discografiche principali (Spaziante, 2011, p. 5). The English translation in the text is mine.

[15] Building one's stage, then climbing on it and making one's voice resound, is not only a practical gesture: it is a deeply symbolic act. It is fully in line with the DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophy, which is not limited to an operational mode, but embodies an ethic of autonomy, resistance, and collectivity. In the case of realities such as the Bassotti Band, this gesture takes on an even denser significance: building one's scene is not just a logistical necessity, but a way of reaffirming a sense of belonging, of affirming a non-negotiable identity. The distance between artist and structure, between subject and context, is thus broken down. You become, at the same time, workers and poets, technicians and performers, builders and narrators of your vision of the world.

[16] Original version: pelati, con le bretelle e gli scarponi, ricordavamo il look dei bassotti del cartone animato, che rubavano ai ricchi e non portavano mai a termine un cazzo; e, in effetti, per un certo periodo, questo ci somigliava (Beccaccioli, 2023). The English translation in the text is mine.

[17] Original version: eravamo in un bar a guardare la partita della Roma e fuori esplodevano le bombe (Beccaccioli,

Banda Bassotti is generally dated to 1987, but the group had already been active for a few years before that with songs supporting workers' struggles. David also founded an independent label, *Gridalo Forte*, which, with its 1991 production of *Balla e Difendi*, marked a break from what was being done in the underground scene. Unlike the Oi! and Punk records of that period, this production was distinguished by the clarity of its words and melodies, convincing many groups to abandon English in favor of Italian (Rotte Indipendenti Roma..., 2016, min. 12:04). This confirmed that experimentalism was pursued not only through music but also through the search for new expressive possibilities in language.

In the 1990s, the independent underground scene in Rome developed mainly around *Forte Prenestino* and *Radio Onda Rossa*, both of which played a significant role in promoting Italian musical creativity. Within this context, the Pantera movement emerged as a student protest that, like the *posse* phenomenon in music, also spread to the San Lorenzo district, reflecting a form of revolt that was both social and linguistic.

The music scene in Rome differed both geographically and by genre: the noise scene took root in Pigneto, while hip hop talents emerged in Monte Sacro; San Lorenzo, for its part, became a hotbed of ska and punk bands, contributing to a lively and multifaceted music scene (Rotte Indipendenti Roma..., 2016, min. 16:24). Between photocopied fanzines and small self-produced magazines, a new form of rock criticism — represented by publications such as Rockerilla — began to emerge within the underground music scene, giving voice and visibility to independent bands and alternative sounds rooted in political and social struggle.

Turin, once considered Italy's only true industrial city, was shaped by fervent trade unionism and by immigration, which left a lasting mark on its social and cultural fabric. Within this context, an independent and avant-garde music scene developed. In fact, more than a decade earlier, the *Cantacronache* group (1957) and later the *Nuovo Canzoniere* Italiano (1962) had already sought to reform the world of song through political commitment (Rotte Indipendenti Torino..., 2016, 2:36), anticipating the entire singer-songwriter season and perhaps even the independent productions of the 1970s and 1980s (Tomatis, 2024).

After 1977, Turin was devastated by terrorism, repression, and the industrial crisis. As music was evolving and reinterpreting its role, artists built networks of contacts and collaborations that kept self-production alive through the circulation of fanzines and cassette recordings. At the dawn of the 1980s, the city was marked by the decadent legacy of Mirafiori — a former symbol of industrial power now in decline — and by the historic occupation of Fiat. Music, too, confronted the loss of a working-class avant-garde. In this climate, the independent record label *Meccano* was founded—later transformed into *Toast Records* — becoming an icon for a scene that included groups such as *Statuto*, *Afterhours*, *No Strange*, and *Gang*. *Statuto*, born in Turin's bustling Piazza Statuto, a gathering place for the Mods, released their first official LP through *Toast Records* in 1988 (Rotte Indipendenti Torino..., 2016, min. 20:35). Their career

2023). The English translation in the text is mine.

took an even more significant turn when they attracted the attention of EMI and performed at the Sanremo Festival, bringing independent music from Turin to a wider audience.

From 1975 through the early 1990s, independence was once again expressed through a mixture of styles that crossed genres, evolving through rock, ska, psychedelia, folk, hardcore punk, and reggae. At this point, Turin became a melting pot of musical diversity, including the rise of *Africa Unite* — a reggae group positioned against the mainstream and the singer-songwriter traditions that dominated Italian radio.

Africa Unite brought reggae aesthetics and rhythms to the stage, addressing political themes as well as social struggles in Italy, particularly those rooted in Turin. Their music not only challenged the conventions of the Italian music scene but also offered an alternative cultural identity, imbuing their lyrics with messages of social justice, peace, and solidarity among peoples. This spirit of rebellion and authenticity made them a symbol of a generation that sought to break with predefined canons of mainstream Italian pop. Other notable groups include *Subsonica, Persiana Jones, Mau Mau*, and *Fratelli di Soledad*.

Beginning in the 1970s, Italy saw the rise of the *Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti* (CSOAs) — self-managed social centers established in squatted buildings such as abandoned factories, warehouses, or schools.[18] These centers quickly became vital hubs of resistance, creativity, and cultural expression, offering space for concerts, rehearsals, fanzine production, and activism. They provided young people, often excluded from official cultural venues and resources, with the opportunity to self-organize and create alternative cultural practices.

Consequently, Turin witnessed the proliferation of occupied social centers dedicated to independent music. Among them, *CSOA El Paso* — founded in 1987 — became a crucial hub of the city's cultural life, hosting important concerts and events (Rotte Indipendenti Torino..., 2016, min. 38:30). It was not uncommon for international bands, such as *The Offspring* and *Mano Negra*, to record live performances in venues like *El Paso*, underscoring its role as a hub of cultural aggregation.

This period of expansion and innovation was also marked by the emergence of another important cultural model in Turin: the *Giancarlo*. Named after its owner, the *Giancarlo* was one of the most emblematic historical venues in the Murazzi district, located along the Po River. Founded at the end of the 1980s, it soon became a key reference point for Turin's musical and cultural scene, hosting concerts, events, and artistic performances. Initially operating as a *Circolo Arci*, the *Giancarlo* stood out for its social vocation and its commitment to promoting independent culture. Its programming was eclectically open to diverse musical genres, ranging from rock to reggae, punk to electronic (Rotte Indipendenti Torino..., 2016, 40:36).

[18] The *Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti* (CSOAs) can be defined as urban spaces removed from institutional logic and returned to alternative forms of collective management. Far from being mere containers for activities, social centres are devices for producing sociality and active citizenship, where mutualistic practices, non-mainstream forms of artistic expression, and radical criticism of the dominant order intertwine. The services, initiatives, and projects that take shape there are the direct result of the needs expressed by local communities and the skills brought to bear by those involved, with a view to horizontal and non-hierarchical cooperation.

Milan, a city long steeped in creative and cultural fervor and historically tied to a strong tradition of industrial innovation, emerged as a vibrant center of musical development. The evolution of independent music in this context can be traced back to the 1960s, with the founding of *Clan Celentano*.[19] But it was around 1975 that a truly independent culture began to flourish, sustained by the cooperative *L'Orchestra*, a communist-led entity that promoted equal pay among all its members—from the van driver to the lyricist, from the recording engineer to the artist. Performances took place mainly at the Unity Festivals, political rallies, in occupied schools and factories, and in cultural circles (Carrera, 1977, pp. 86–105). Some groups (or individual musicians) were professionals or semi-professionals, while others were essentially amateurs acting as political militants. All, however, faced similar difficulties arising from the undervaluation of their work by the organizations that promoted the concerts—namely, the parliamentary left (PCI and PSI), trade unions, and recreational-cultural associations (Fabbri, 1981, 2007). This dynamic environment led to the production of works that defined an era, including a masterpiece by *Stormy Six*, which became a landmark of 1970s independent music. Beyond its record-label activity, the *L'Orchestra* cooperative also operated in education and research under the leadership of its founder Franco Fabbri and vice-president Moni Ovada.

In the same decade, marked by intense social struggles and political protests, the city also witnessed the emergence of new autonomous cultural spaces. Among them, CSOA Santa Marta became a crucial site for independent music. Within its walls, Cramps Records—founded under the visionary direction of Gianni Sassi, a graphic designer and active member of *Arci*—helped shape the national scene, notably producing *Area*, the rock band of Demetrio Stratos. Santa Marta also provided rehearsal space for groups such as *Candeggina Gang* and *Caos Rock*, leading figures of demential rock alongside *Gaznevada* and the Bologna-based *Skiantos*.

Within this melting pot of experiences and artistic inclinations, Milan stood as a symbol of creative vitality in the Italian musical and cultural scene, infused with fervent political commitment.

The tumultuous events of those years also culminated in the proliferation of mutual aid societies, which took root in Milan as elsewhere. These organizations emerged in response to changes in the production system and to the rise of extra-parliamentary movements that, though initially strong, gradually collapsed under pressure from the authorities. According to the website of the *Italian Federation of Voluntary Integrative Mutuality (FIMIV)*, mutual aid societies are associations of individuals who, without profit motive, contribute economically with the primary aim of obtaining assistance and subsidies in times of need. They also promote a culture of mutuality, understood as a universal value inherent to community life, fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

In that same year — 1975, a fateful turning point — the CSOA Leoncavallo was founded. It did not limit itself to hosting music but promoted a synergistic practice of cultural production, supporting

[19] The Clan Celentano is a kind of artistic commune, record label, and collective founded by singer Adriano Celentano.

the creation of fanzines and comics and weaving a rich alternative fabric that reflected the challenges and aspirations of a constantly evolving Milan (Ibba, 1995).

In 1982, also in Milan, *Virus*, another squatted and self-managed warehouse came to life. Within three years, it had become a key reference point for musicians from all over the world, admired for its ability to bring together huge crowds. This popularity inevitably led to its eviction, motivated by fears of a possible resurgence of the autonomous movement of 1977 (*Movimento del '77*; a wave of radical student and worker mobilizations marked by occupations, free radios, and violent clashes with authorities). The members expelled from the *Virus* social center took refuge in the more politically oriented CSOA Leoncavallo, which — although not explicitly cultural in its vocation, as opposed to political — became an important hub of collaborative activity. The tensions between the cultural aspirations of the newcomers and the rigid ideological frameworks of Leoncavallo led to the founding of Helter Skelter, a large basement under the main hall of the CSOA, where a wide variety of artistic and scientific initiatives — very much in the spirit of *Virus* — were established.

Leoncavallo, a symbol of Milanese counterculture, also embodied a history steeped in conflicts with the authorities, criminal prosecutions and struggles for the legitimization of autonomous cultural space. Beginning in 1977, Leoncavallo became home to many artists, including *Casino Royal and, later, Punkreas in the 1990s,* who played a crucial role in reshaping the Italian music scene. These pioneers, together with bands such as *CCCP* and *Litfiba*, foresightedly defined their place in the record market, accepting contracts with major labels but on one fundamental condition: freedom of artistic choice had to be guaranteed. This agreement represented an innovative rethinking of the concept of independence: the groups sought to maintain creative control over their works, imposing on the majors a purely distributive role. In the face of a constantly changing music industry, their prerogative was simple but audacious: to record their albums in venues most attuned to their artistic vision and to decide freely on modes and content. The majors were seen not as potential censors, but as outsiders able to convey their music to the widest possible audience.

In the 1980s, Milan also saw the rise of bands and collectives that would mark a decisive turning point in the country's musical panorama, such as *Ritmo Tribale* — a group that, unlike bands such as *Afterhours*, chose to express their art in Italian rather than English. This linguistic choice was by no means accidental: it revealed the potential of singing in Italian as a powerful vehicle of artistic expression with strong impact and broad appeal. Thanks to this bold intuition, Manuel Agnelli, leader of *Afterhours*, began to perceive the enormous potential inherent in using Italian, realizing that it was possible to sing in one's language without sacrificing lyrical depth or artistic interest.

Meanwhile, in Milan's Navigli district, a recording studio called Jungle Sound — founded by the guitarist of *Ritmo Tribale* — became the center of the entire new Italian independent scene, hosting artists such as *Paolo Benvegnù*, *Bluvertigo*, *Afterhours*, *Ritmo Tribale*, and many others (Rotte Indipendenti Milano..., 2016, min. 28:56). Beautifully organized and fully equipped, Jungle Sound was not merely a recording studio but a creative workshop where the aspirations of many artists — even from the mainstream

industry, from Eros Ramazzotti to Vasco Rossi — converged and intertwined. These transversal collaborations provided a space in which established musicians began to dialogue and interact with the emerging generation, breaking down barriers between musical currents and record labels. In informal meetings, artists began to recognize that the music industry — often perceived as a hostile and oppressive entity — was not necessarily the enemy many had imagined. On the contrary, they came to see that capital was not inherently a curse but could serve as a catalyst for artistic projects, provided that creative freedom was preserved. Out of this climate of renewed dialogue and creative symbiosis, Vox Pop was born in Milan, a record label founded by Manuel Agnelli himself (Rotte Indipendenti Milano…, 2016, min. 31:40).

This ambitious project sought to promote new and innovative music, operating with rigor and professionalism. Vox Pop distinguished itself as one of the first independent labels to secure distribution support from a major while positioning itself with the seriousness and functionality of a production company. In doing so, it demonstrated that artistic independence could be pursued without sacrificing quality or professionalism. Among the groups under its wing were major names from the Italian music scene, including *Sottotono*, known for their iconic tracks; *Africa Unite*, pioneers of Italian reggae and consistent critics of the majors; and *Mau Mau*, who combined diverse sounds to articulate strong social messages.

3. *Back to Pier Paolo Pasolini*

While the independent musicians emerging from the underground circuits were attracting ever larger audiences, the themes addressed by the politically committed singer-songwriters, following the five-party agreement,[20] became "a denunciation of the cultural and ethical decline of the ruling classes and a close criticism of the unscrupulous use of the television medium by the political class"[21] (Carusi, 2018, p. 90). In an article published in *L'Espresso* in 1977, Umberto Eco and Paolo Fabbri observed that the words "class" and "mass" were becoming terms considered politically inelegant, particularly in contexts where social, musical, cultural, and political mutation seemed to align — as Jacopo Tomatis also suggests — with the category proposed by Pier Paolo Pasolini: *anthropological mutation* (Sollazzo, 2016).

This mutation likely had its roots in the fateful events of 1968, and what has by now become the famous occupation of the Faculty of Architecture at Sapienza University in Rome, housed in the Valle Giulia branch in the city center. Various counterculture events were organized there by far-left collectives, and on several occasions the campus was cleared by police, only to be reoccupied again on March 1. That tragic day still resonates painfully, with 148 people injured and 200 legal complaints filed (De Luna, 2018).

These events inspired Pasolini to compose the poem *Il PCI ai giovani!!! Brutti versi*, which did not appear in a poetry collection but rather only among the non-fiction pages of *Heretical Empiricism*

[20] Five-party agreement is the term used to define the coalition government in Italy from 1981 to 1991, formed by an agreement between the parties of the old organic centre-left (Christian Democracy (DC), Italian Socialist Party (PSI), Italian Democratic Socialist Party (PSDI), Italian Republican Party (PRI) and later joined by the Italian Liberal Party (PLI).
[21] Original version: la denuncia dello scadimento culturale ed etico dei ceti dirigenti ed una serrata critica dello spregiudicato uso del mezzo televisivo da parte della classe politica (Carusi, 2018, p. 90). The English translation in the text is mine.

(Pasolini, 1972). The text provoked a flurry of misunderstandings, most of them tending to interpret the poet as siding with the police against the bourgeois *figli di papa* (privileged children of the bourgeoisie).

4. The Weight of the Past: Identity and generational contradictions

On my mobile phone, I keep a valuable testimony from actor Pietro Benedetti, a member of the communist student collective active during the occupations of that period. In our conversation, one point emerged with striking clarity: amid the chaos of those turbulent years, even the young militants of the collectives struggled to identify a clear scapegoat for their discontent. Benedetti recalled how Pier Paolo Pasolini, caught in this turmoil, was deeply shaken and incredulous at the accusations leveled against him, particularly after the publication of his well-known article on the events (Beccaccioli, 2024).

Although Pasolini had already begun to conceive *Petrolio*, one of his most ambitious works, what embittered him the most was the reaction of many young activists from the Student Movement. They seized upon a passage in which he appeared to express solidarity with the police — arguing that the students themselves were children of the bourgeoisie — and, in their anger, reduced his broader argument to this single fragment. The consequences were devastating: the ruling elite exploited and instrumentalized those few lines, portraying Pasolini as aligned with the authorities.

In reality, the full text was a fervent and impassioned attack on the government, the Ministry of the Interior, and the police, even including sharp invective. At a later meeting, Pasolini invited Benedetti to the Torre di Chia, in the province of Viterbo, where he had withdrawn to reflect and write. In that intimate and evocative setting, the poet and filmmaker confided his deep disappointment that the younger generation had isolated one controversial phrase while ignoring the urgency and complexity of his broader critique. The episode underscores the profound difficulty faced by an entire generation in confronting its own contradictions and its relationship with the past.

5. Conclusion

This article has sought to shed light on a tortuous yet vibrant period that began in the late 1960s and paved the way for the experimentalism that, from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, flourished in circuits often considered illegitimate. Music — both a mirror and a refuge for these contrasts — emerged as a universal language through which the anxieties and aspirations of a generation were expressed. Music became a language that Italian culture recognized as a distinct unity. As Umberto Eco observed, "in every culture, a cultural unit is simply something that that culture has defined as a distinct unit; different from others, and thus it may be a person, a geographical location, a thing, a feeling, a hope, an idea, or a hallucination"[22] (Eco, 2016).

[22] Original version: in ogni cultura una unità culturale è semplicemente qualcosa che quella cultura ha definito come unità distinta diversa da altre e dunque può essere una persona, una località geografica, una cosa, un sentimento, una speranza, una idea, una allucinazione (Eco, 2016). The English translation in the text is mine.

A change that deserves a few lines is the fact that, in the latter part of this period, many independent labels were no longer renouncing radio airplay and major distributions. It was recognized that even what was "popular" was not necessarily synonymous with simplicity and banality. This has always been the case in the history of music. Even more explicit is the exhortation — echoed by Dietrich Helms — not to forget the "so-called popular," addressed by Leopold Mozart to his son Wolfgang in 1780.

> In his letter, the father makes it unequivocally clear that the success of a piece of music—in this case *Idomeneo*—depends on being able to address not only the few musically prepared listeners, but also the many ignorant ones present in the audience. […] Leopold Mozart compares the consumers of the popular aspects of music to donkeys, whose long ears must be tickled in order to achieve success as a composer[23] (Helms, 2016).

Now, apart from the goliardic reference (if it can indeed be considered as such), this is not an extreme case. What is important, however, is that an opening toward channels considered unusual for the independent circuit has taken place, a fact that invites reflection on what it means to create *by* the people and *for* the people. For whom is music being written? For oneself or for others? Is it a matter of indulging artistic expression, or of pleasing the public?

Independent artists have been able to experiment more than pop or rock stars because they are not bound to a standardized product and imagery. First, they reject traditional canons and move beyond a mere statement of taste: their work becomes a matter of authenticity and experimentation. The search for an artistic identity that does not conform to market norms weakens the effectiveness of subcultural capital, since the value attached to genres and tastes is not necessarily linked to recognized prestige, but rather to genuine creative intention. Secondly, the independent music scene is characterized by an extraordinary diversity of sounds and styles, making a uniform codification of aesthetic preferences difficult. Drawing on a wide range of sonic influences, independent artists create a musical landscape that is as eclectic as it is constantly evolving. This dynamism undermines the possibility of defining clear and mutually exclusive tastes, thereby blurring the traditional boundaries between musical categories.

This view was shared in many parts of the world, such as in Brazil, where, as Vargas notes, artists and composers "did not have clear aesthetic affinities that could be collectively identified"[24] (Vargas, 2012, p. 15). What united them, however, was "the experimental profile of the songs, whether they achieved commercial success or not"[25] (Vargas, 2012, p. 15). In many cases, moreover, Mauceri observes that "the composer desires that the musical phenomenon be so experientially rich as to differentiate itself and resist generalizations" (Mauceri, 1997, p. 194). The result is an art form that privileges community and involvement over the individual.

[23] Original version: nella sua lettera il padre chiarisce in modo inequivoco che il successo di un brano di musica - in questo caso l'*Idomeneo* - dipende dal sapersi rivolgere non solo ai pochi ascoltatori preparati musicalmente, ma anche ai molti ignoranti presenti tra il pubblico. […] Leopold Mozart paragona i fruitori degli aspetti popolari della musica a dei somari, le cui lunghe orecchie vanno solleticate per raggiungere il successo come compositore (Helms, 2016). The English translation in the text is mine.
[24] Original version: não terem criado nenhum movimento e de não terem nítidas afinidades estéticas a ponto de serem identificados coletivamente (Vargas, 2012, p. 15). The English translation in the text is mine.
[25] Original version: O que em princípio os unia, além da época em que produziram, era o perfil experimental das canções, tivessem elas sucesso comercial ou não (Vargas, 2012, p. 15). The English translation in the text is mine.

Independent artists have been able to experiment thanks to the underground venues suited and designated for experimentation, research, and free expression. They have pursued this by consistently seeking to establish themselves as a vanguard and an alternative. Independent music culture is often characterized by active participation and by the creation of meaningful connections between artists and fans. This community-based approach blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers, creating a context in which connection becomes more relevant than the mere exchange of cultural products. In this case, the sharing of experiences and collective engagement replaces any attempt to distinguish based solely on aesthetic preferences. The idiosyncrasies of this music scene demonstrate how the relationships between taste, authenticity, and community can form a more intricate and interconnected web than the otherwise identified models of distinction.

In the 1990s, in Italy, the independent and major circuits began to weave increasingly complementary relationships, engaging in a dialogue that proved, in many cases, strategic and mutually beneficial. The two spheres established connections, developed shared projects, and outlined paths of continuity: one nurturing research and artistic experimentation; the other, providing broader structures, resources, and visibility. In some situations, "the cultural capital of independent music—that set of values, dispositions, and shared experiences in this sector—becomes at the same time a resource to be brought into play by the most dynamic actors in the field"[26] (Magaudda, 2009, p. 1045), acting as a creative laboratory within the logic of the mainstream, anticipating its languages, forms, and sensibilities.

I will conclude not with assertive closure but with a quotation that offers itself as an interrogative opening, hinting at the ultimate meaning of a trajectory that, in the 1990s, expanded and amplified until it became increasingly hybrid, codified, and systemic within the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century: "to learn to hear a unique thing as a categorical thing is a net loss for musical experience [?]" (Boretz, 1977, p. 130).

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[26] Original version: il capitale culturale della musica indipendente, quell'insieme di valori, disposizioni, esperienze condivise in questo settore, diventa al tempo stesso una risorsa da mettere in gioco da parte degli attori più dinamici del settore (Magaudda, 2009, p. 1045). The English translation in the text is mine.

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Saverio Beccaccioli is a PhD student at the Conservatoires of Terni and Ravenna in Popular Music. He graduated in Renaissance and Baroque Trombone at the Conservatorio "G. Briccialdi" in Terni with top marks, honors, and honorable mention. Saverio is a master's student in Musicology at La Sapienza University, Rome. He is the artistic director of the PalArte Theatre in Fabrica di Roma (VT) and has received awards for various projects in the fields of culture and creativity. Saverio has performed with symphonic, early, and modern ensembles in Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. He is currently devoting himself to Italian and independent Popular Music and studying 20th- and 21st-century youth cultures. **E-mail**: saverio.beccaccioli@briccialditerni.it

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