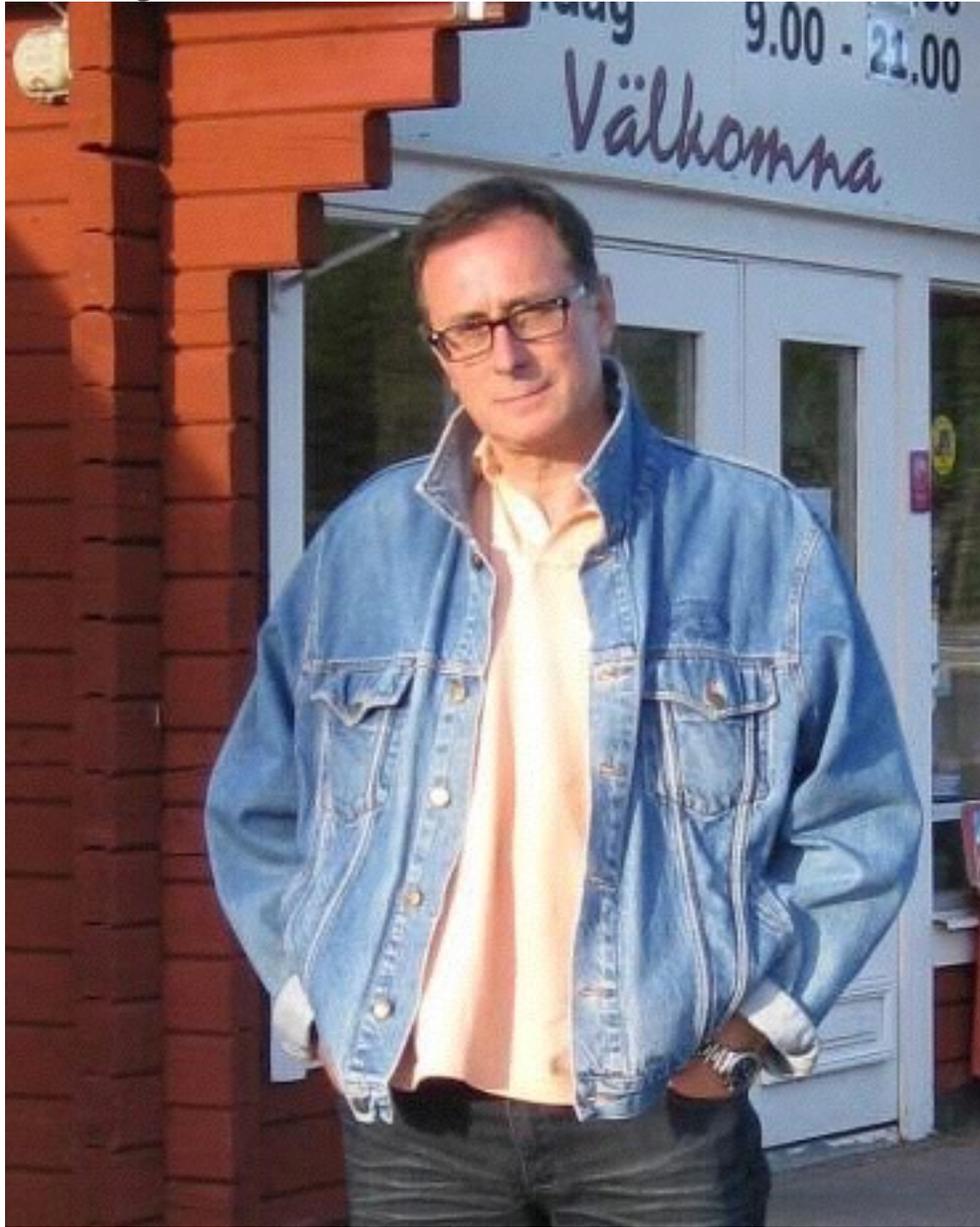


American Roots Music in Italy



Massimo Ferro

The Journal of Roots Music- No Depression

It truly fascinates me that there are music fans and from all over the world who know so much about American roots music. Massimo Ferro is an Italian DJ and writer who reminds us that there is also a lot of great music being made in other countries.

Bill Frater: Where and when did you start in radio, and what other stations have you worked at?

Massimo Ferro: I started working for a very small radio station back in 1976, my first show was in May of that year. It was a period in Italy when the movement of the so-called "free radios" started – they were small local stations run by young guys who wanted to break the monopoly of Italian national public radio and TV (RAI). In those days there was incredible enthusiasm and people wanted to play and hear the music RAI didn't play, like folk, blues, jazz, and so on. Unfortunately, after ten years or so the movement collapsed, most of the small stations closed their doors and, with a few exceptions, local radio stations were absorbed by big networks, destroying the dream of those pioneers who tried to create a new approach to broadcasting.

In my first radio days I only played American and British rock music of the '60s and '70s on my show, but at the same time I was discovering the work of American and English singer-songwriters, bluegrass and country music (especially country-rock), British folk, and Celtic music. Slowly but constantly, my musical interests took a different way.

After that first experience I moved to Radio Alessandria International (that was one of the first 30 local stations emerging), and there I met other DJs interested in folk and roots music, so I started to play more and more of stuff like that in my radio shows. I stayed there for a couple of years and then I was called by another radio station, named Radio Cosmo 101 (all the Italian local radios had very weird names, in fact, following the example of the legendary Radio Veronica), where I could have more opportunities to increase my experience and meet many important performers in the Italian music scene. My latest job with them was fully devoted to folk and roots music, but unfortunately the times of experiments were over. Things were quickly changing with the arrival of the big national networks, and Radio Cosmo choose a more commercial musical line.

I realized it was time to leave, and in the next two years I concentrated on my job as a journalist for some music magazines like "Hi, Folks!", "Il Blues," and "Folk Bulletin" and occasionally for daily papers. I was also emceeing at the concerts of Italian and foreign artists and bands in my town (an activity I still do when I can). For some time I also worked as foreign correspondent and promoter for an Italian folk music band, I Tre Martelli, and arranged their first tour in England and Wales in 1986. I also started my own band, Dulcamara, where I played dulcimer, acoustic and bass guitar. The music was a particular mixture of traditional and classical music with a slight pop-rock attitude.

Where do you work now?

In 1990, a friend of mine told me about another small but brave station interested in my musical experiences, **Radio Voce Spazio**, one of the few survivors of the '70s movement, where I still work today. They assured me I could have complete control on my work and the chance to do everything I like in my program, something quite rare to find. It was there that I finally devoted myself to roots music and, eventually, a few years later, started my radio show called *Highway 61*.

Highway 61 has changed hours and days several times, but in the last three years it has been on air every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 11 to 12 p.m. on FM 93.800 MHz and also streaming.

In the last two years I also started working for a web radio station called **RWMS**. At present the radio show is broadcasted not only at night (11 to 12 p.m.) but also in the afternoon, the same days, from 5 to 6 p.m. (Italian time, obviously). Apart from my job as a DJ, I am also among the founders of this project and the musical director.

How do you describe your show?

Highway 61 is a sort of "journey to roots of American music," as I play every kind of roots stuff including roots rock, alternative country, blues, country music, bluegrass, and old-time music, contemporary folk and guitar music, Cajun and western swing, and, of course, the work of American singer-songwriters. My philosophy is to play everything I receive, at least once, even also when the quality is not very high: I like to think about my show as a

sort of radio magazine informing the audience about new releases.

How do you prepare for your shows?

I always intended my radio show as a sort of magazine; I use it to air only new or recent releases (with some exceptions of course). I try to avoid playing the same song from an album in different programs, and I include all the musical genres listed above in order to offer a varied selection of American roots music. Also I seldom play the same album the same week. There is so much great American music these days that I'd like to give the best possible exposure to the albums I think really deserve it. Anyhow, nearly every CD passes at least three or four times in my radio shows if possible.

How much new releases and independent artists do you play?

I play some old stuff, as I want people to not forget how much great music was released in the past, but especially because both in Europe and the US many labels (such like Rhino, Real Gone Music, BGO, Ace Records, Omnivore, Raven, etc.) are doing an excellent job reissuing material from the past. To be frank I'm not particularly interested in all those anniversary reissues with dozens of alternative recordings; I prefer to play the original tracks from historical and more obscure records of the past (most of them are still in my musical archive in LP version). I'm especially interested in independent music and artists, and nearly 90% of the stuff I air comes from indie labels and artists or bands.

This doesn't mean I don't play music from the major labels! I can't ignore a new effort from such icons as Neil Young, Bob Dylan, or Leonard Cohen. These are always great news, after all, and I grew up with their music and these guys are still in my heart.

What was the first artist or album that got you into roots music?

Well, if I remember well, the first artists I heard on the radio were Bob Dylan and Paul Simon. It was at the time when *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid* and *There Goes Rhymin' Simon* were released, in 1973! Then came *Parcel Of Rogues* by the Steeleye Span and *Blondel* by the Amazing Blondel. The first bluegrass album I heard was *Don't Give Up Your Day Job* by the Country Gazette.! I heard those LPs in one of the few Italian programs broadcasting very good music! Then came the albums of Jackson Browne, the Byrds, Flying Burrito Brothers, Fairport Convention, the Eagles, Tom Waits, the Chieftains, and too many others to be listed here.

Who are your favorite artists from any genre?

It's not that easy to say who are my all-time favorite artists; they are too many indeed. Possibly Bob Dylan is always on top, but I'm still also a big appraiser of artists and bands like the one quoted before (except for the Eagles), and there are many more, for example, Clannad, Woody Guthrie, Allman Brothers Band, Muddy Waters, Mississippi John Hurt, The Band, Townes Van Zandt, Little Feat, Eric Andersen, Fabrizio De André, Pete Seeger, Albion Band, Richard Thompson, David Bromberg, Ry Cooder, etc., etc.

After listening to everything in a career spanning more than 40 years, I'm not looking for something absolutely original, unconventional, and especially eccentric (the three usually come together), I'm just looking for good songs, arrangements, singing, and playing. We all know it's hard to invent something new, and every artist has their influences, but it's still possible to do very good music in these days, even mixing different musical styles in a smart and appealing way. I am therefore lucky because I still find a lot of very good stuff coming out from American roots these days!

How do you define what Americana music is?

I like to think about American roots music as a sort of circle, something continuing to embrace itself, where it's often impossible to define a song as it could be interchangably called rock and roll or blues, rockabilly or country, folk or old-time, blues or rhythm and blues, and all the things in between.

I love American music because, in every moment of the history of these last two centuries, you never forget your roots; even in the hardest days, folk, blues, country, and other related stuff survived and kept being prolific, perpetuating and reinventing itself in every field. That's still a great example for every other place in the world!

Where do you see Americana radio going in the future?

It seems to me the movement is growing bigger and bigger, even in Europe there are very interesting radio shows dealing with Americana music and we also have, as

you may know, the EuroAmerican Chart. Web radio is also giving an important platform to spread music you could not easily hear before, there is more accessibility as well choice and proposals. Although in these days the charts are dominated by boy bands, rap, pop, and club music, the interest in American roots music is strong and can only be stronger in the future. Many young musicians are rediscovering their roots so that blues, folk, bluegrass, stringband music, etc. are now an important part of their musical diet. New bands and artists are always around, there is enthusiasm, knowledge, bravery, and skill. My only regret is that here in Europe things are going much more slower, but to me the future of Americana is surely very bright!

What are your most memorable experiences from working in the music industry?

I remember well my first time in England touring with the Italian folk band: I never went outside my country before. I was pretty shy then but I had to introduce the band to the audience, be present during with the interviews, and eventually I had the chance to meet a lot of wonderful artists and bands.

During my life as a presenter I also had the chance to introduce a number of talented and well-known personalities from both the European and American music scene performing here in live concerts. The list is too long to mention someone particularly, but since I still consider myself not only as a professional but also a music fan, you may imagine my satisfaction!

What projects are you working on next?

I'll keep on being on air in FM but the future is the web. Unfortunately in Italy there are really few radio shows dealing with American music today, and most of all just blues or country music. The national public radio has some programs devoted to high quality music, but they are more interested in indie rock, jazz, classical, and stuff like that.

I want to see my web radio station passing from an experiment to a concrete and stable project.

Unfortunately in Italy everything having to do with art and culture is not particularly encouraged, if not obstructed, at present, but I want to be optimistic as I see there are some very fine musical blogs and magazines around and many interesting artists and bands touring here, especially from the independent music scene.

What keeps you going?

There is only one answer: the love of music and especially roots music. In fact, apart from American music, I'm also involved in the Italian music scene and I contribute to some important awards relative to Italian traditional folk music and singer-songwriters (respectively called "Premio Città di Loano" and "Targhe Tenco"). After many years as a DJ, I must confess I sometimes think the time for retirement has arrived, but then I discover a new songwriter or a band, I listen to their songs and they touch my heart and soul. Then I think other people should listen to them and the only way is obviously through my radio job.

What recent albums or artists are you excited about?

Here is a short list: Tim Gimm & The Family Band - *A Stranger in This Time*, Boris McCutcheon - *I'm Here, Let Me In*, Chris Hillman - *Bidin' My Time*, Sarah Jane Scouten - *When The Bloom Falls From The Rose*, Danny O'Keefe - *Home*, Eliot Bronson - *James*, Gregg Allman - *Southern Blood*, Susan Cattaneo - *The Hammer And The Heart*, Guy Davis & Fabrizio Poggi - *Sonny's and Brownie's Last Train*.

But there are also many artists and bands to mention such like Harpeth Rising, the Cherokee Maidens, Eden Brant, Courtney Mary Andrews, Matt Harlan, Vincent Cross, Sam Baker, Wendy Webb, Randy Thompson, Lisa Biales, Shannon McNally, Rhiannon Giddens, Brad Davis, Caleb Klauder, etc.

Do you have any other interesting hobbies or interests or anything else you wish to share?

I like football (or soccer, as you call it there). I don't follow it now as in the past (when I also was a player, but it was a long time ago), but I have my favorite team and enjoy watching their matches when I can. Since my adolescence I have been a science fiction fan, I usually go to the cinema, read several books a month (well, not only SF ones but also about music, history, and other themes), and follow some TV series (actually in the USA you are producing some very good stuff).

If there's is anything I would really like to share, I'd like people to know that in Italy we don't only produce the worst pop music in the world. We also have many young

and less-young very good musicians and bands playing blues and other American roots music, and above all we have a lot of very fine singer-songwriters and a rich and prosperous musical tradition with very interesting and good folk music bands!