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MUSIC

MUSIC; An Italian Crooner Of Restless Songs Is All Over the Map

By BARRY SINGER

Correction Appended

ROME— WEATHERED and savage and festive all at once, Paolo Conte's face is a virtual Italian cultural caricature -- part Florentine fresco, part Venetian carnevale mask, with a nose straight out of Dante. When he opens his mouth to sing, though, Mr. Conte both embodies Italy and transcends it. His songs, redolent of vintage American jazz and South American tangos, German cabaret and French chanson, conjure voices from all over the map as channeled through the ancient soul of an Italian poet. Horace, Virgil and no doubt Dante himself probably had faces like Paolo Conte's. But Mr. Conte's music is his own.

Comparisons only serve to emphasize his individuality and his contradictions. Imagine Randy Newman on a Fellini soundtrack. Imagine Sade or David Bowie crooning Neopolitan folks songs. Imagine gutbucket New Orleans jazz crossing with the tarantella. At different moments, Mr. Conte's music suggests each of these things.

Mr. Conte, 64, has been a hit throughout Europe for at least a decade. His alluringly off-center tunes are heard on the radio and even used as Muzak in supermarkets; his concerts sell out in Paris, Amsterdam, London and, of course, Rome. None of this was predictable. American popular culture may be very big in Europe today, but that interest hardly extends to music before Elvis. And despite the Italianate grace and Continental savoir-faire of his songs, Mr. Conte is at heart an American vaudevillian.

Three years ago the American label Nonesuch Records brought out a handsome CD compilation, "The Best of Paolo Conte," culled from his dozen or so European releases. Since then Mr. Conte has visited the United States for a handful of concerts. Now, however, he has embarked on a full-fledged tour, one that has already taken him to Boston and Washington and that will come to the Beacon Theater in Manhattan tomorrow night before going on to Montreal, Toronto, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Where contemporary pop music idolizes the adolescent, world music still prizes old folks. On the surface, Mr. Conte might seem just another representative of the current vogue in world music for "elders," among them the Cape Verdian Morna singer Cesaria Evora and, most significantly, the

veteran Cuban musicians of the Buena Vista Social Club, a number of whom are over 80. Talent aside, the world music industry is marketing authenticity -- ethnic, cultural, historic -- and older performers simply appear more authentic.

Authenticity, however, seems to be just about the last thing on Mr. Conte's mind. His restless compositions traverse a universe of musical cultures, often imitating them so idiosyncratically that they are virtually reimagined. Yet his music is nothing if not Italian. The reconciliation of these disparate influences is the essence of his inscrutable artistry.

The oldest son of a notary public in the northern Italian town of Asti (best known for its sparkling wine), Mr. Conte discovered music through his parents, in particular his father, an amateur pianist. "My father and mother both had a passion for American music, especially jazz," Mr. Conte, with the help of a translator, recently recalled here, where he was winding down an eight-night, sold-out run at the 2,000-seat Teatro Sistina. "My parents actually had some Duke Ellington piano scores in the house. That was a very big thing, because the Fascists had banned American music. We got our records on the black market. Fats Waller was the first 78 I heard."

As a boy, Mr. Conte also loved to make music -- first on the piano and later on the vibraphone. But a music career was out of the question. "I couldn't allow myself to think of wanting to be a musician," he said. "The practical side dictated otherwise. I became a lawyer. For the family. To work with my father and help in the office."

Little by little, though, Mr. Conte began writing songs on his own time, often in collaboration with his younger brother, Giorgio. Eventually, he said, he worked up the nerve "to send some of my songs to a music publisher in Milan." Miraculously, the publisher bought them.

From the beginning, Mr. Conte wrote strange, haunting songs -- fragmentary and impressionistic -- as if constructed melodically from bits of older, half-remembered refrains and lyrically from incidents nearly forgotten or perhaps dreamed. Yet there was an immediacy to everything he wrote, a droll, insurrectionist's wit, and a sense of form that was downright painterly. Each song seemed utterly new yet timeless.

All of them were initially sung by other singers, often Italy's biggest pop stars. Many of them were hits, beginning in 1967 with "La Coppia Piú Bella del Mondo" ("The Most Beautiful Couple in the World") sung by Adriano Celentano and his wife, Caterina Caselli.

Then, in 1974, an executive at RCA records had an idea. "I had been making demos, for other singers to learn my songs," Mr. Conte said. "And this guy decided he wanted to release my demos, as an album. They were beautiful, he believed. I wasn't so happy about this. I'd never thought I could be a singer. I had no voice, not a singer's voice. But this was the 70's, you know? And I saw that the world was changing. Singer-songwriters were the thing. No more interpreters. A direct contact between composer and listener."

His first two albums were, in Mr. Conte's words, "quite rough," but he said they enjoyed "a certain

niche popularity." The third, however, "Un Gelato al Limon" ("A Lemon Ice Cream"), was a breakthrough. "Not an explosion," Mr. Conte added. "But many people welcomed it with enthusiasm."

The title song remains a perfect study in the Conte style, kicking off as the most seductive of Italianate tangos, then downshifting into a hard-driving pop samba with an indelible melodic hook. The lyric is romantic, bittersweet, extravagant, yet cunningly concise.

A lemon ice cream, lemon ice cream,

Lemon ice cream

Hidden away at the end of the city.

It's real lemon,

D'you like it?

While another summer's about to end

It was not until he began singing his own songs that Mr. Conte finally gave up the law for good. With "Un Gelato al Limon" he also started writing his own musical arrangements. "I didn't do any specific study for arranging," he said. "I simply didn't follow the clichéd technique. I tried to translate my feelings into music. It's linked as much to the words as to the melody."

Today, Mr. Conte's arrangements are nearly as singular as his songwriting. Onstage at Teatro Sistina, he creates vibrant orchestral textures, marshalling an ensemble of 11 musicians, who blare and whisper with a brassy confidence that comes from years of performing under the direction of a demanding maestro.

The influences in Mr. Conte's arrangements are unmistakable: the circus-like accordion insouciance of Nino Rota's classic film scores for Fellini; the churning guitar of Django Reinhardt and his Quintet of the Hot Club of France; the surging bandoneon of classic tango composers like Astor Piazzolla as well as the more acid-tinged Berliner tangos of Kurt Weill; an occasional blast of klezmer, and, especially, the blustering soprano saxophone vibrato of the New Orleans jazz legend Sidney Bechet. Mr. Conte manages to coax the almost unmatched fire and spirit of Bechet's playing from his own bandmen, led by the soprano saxophonist Luca Velotti, a student of Bob Wilber, himself a disciple of Bechet.

"I have always loved the defiance in Bechet's music," Mr. Conte said. "And the phrasing, the syntax of his playing. And the expression he put into everything. His music is very poetical. I heard him perform once in Milan. It was like he was playing opera music, like he had a prima donna in his arms."

Mr. Conte himself performs with a reticence that is both enigmatic and commanding. He hides behind the piano or occasionally rises to curl himself against it while crooning at a standup microphone. His piano playing, which he supplements with sporadic obbligatos on the kazoo, is compelling, though hardly virtuosic. Like his songs, it is made up of echoes and whispers, all shaded with the most

exquisite dynamics. "I am a limited pianist," he said. "I'm aware of my limitations. In fact, I use them."

His voice, of course, remains his primary instrument -- a wistful, sometimes comic, eloquently expressive, conversational rasp. The sound, more Tom Waits than Louis Armstrong, is always effortlessly musical. He sings in Italian and at least three other languages: French, Spanish and English, which he claims not to speak. His Italian lyrics are nevertheless dotted with slangy English refrains: "I whisper I love you," in "Sotto le Stelle del Jazz" ("Under the Stars of Jazz") or "It's wonderful, it's wonderful/ It's wonderful/ Good luck, my babe" in "Via Con Me" ("Come Away With Me").

"My music has a cinematic quality, and the English language is more cinematic than Italian," he said. "Italian isn't musical like English; it doesn't swing. Plus, many of the words are too long."

Mr. Conte lives in Asti with his wife of more than 25 years, Egle, whom he met in court while he was still a lawyer. He says he has little social life: "I've got very few friends. I like being with my wife at home. I live in the country. I draw and paint."

He is, in fact, an accomplished painter, whose work was recently exhibited at the Barbican Center in London. It is now also the inspiration for his latest project, an elaborate performance piece entitled "Razmataz," an attempt, as he put it, "to tell the story of the meeting between old Europe and young black music during the 1920's in Paris." The multimedia piece, a mixture of narrative, live music and projections, uses more than 1,800 of Mr. Conte's works in pencil, gouache, oils and ink.

Still, it is music that consumes him. His onstage diffidence belies a driven creative intensity, one of the many contradictions that define Paolo Conte. "I always write on the piano at home," he said, his hooded eyes squinting into the near distance. "Usually at night, alone. Sometimes, very occasionally, I have an idea while traveling and I'll draw five lines and try to write down the music, but that's quite rare. The words, which always come first, can appear at any time; you get ideas everywhere, in the street, anywhere. I had a notebook once. Somebody gave it to me as a present."

He shrugged. "But I lost it."

Photos: Paolo Conte in Milan in 1999. He sings in New York tomorrow as part of a tour. (Guido Harari)(pg. 42); Paolo Conte, in a publicity photograph from last year. He continues to lives in Asti, the rural northern Italian town of his birth. (Guido Harari)(pg. 44)