

“Le facce nere del festival”: Black Musicians at Sanremo in the 1960s

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In late January 1968, Louis Armstrong arrived in Italy to perform at the country’s legendary Sanremo Music Festival. At 66 years old, Armstrong was certainly in the latter stage of his career (he would pass only three years later in 1971), but Italy was still extremely excited to host once again the venerable jazz musician, often referred to as “il re del jazz” (the king of jazz).¹ Armstrong had previously performed in Italy several times, both before and after World War Two,² but this was his first time at *the* Sanremo Music Festival, putting him directly in dialogue with the Italian song tradition. Armstrong even sang in Italian his designated song, “Mi va di cantare” (“I Feel Like Singing”), with what musicologists Serena Facci and Paolo Soddu have described as a “vistoso” (garish) American accent, reading the lyrics from phonetically transcribed cue cards.³ Sanremo, a touchstone of Italian popular culture, was going international.⁴

Founded in 1951, the Sanremo Music Festival (officially known as *Il Festival della canzone italiana*, hereafter “Sanremo”) is Italy’s most popular contest dedicated to *canzone italiana* (Italian song) and the world’s longest-running annual TV music competition. In fact, Sanremo was the inspiration and model for the international Eurovision Song Contest, founded in 1956. At Sanremo,

Early versions of this research were presented at the Columbia Seminar in Modern Italian Studies (2024), as well as at the annual meetings of the American Association for Italian Studies (2025) and the Society for American Music (2025). I am especially grateful to Anna Harwell Celenza, my respondent at the Columbia seminar, for her thorough and generous feedback. I would also like to thank Giulia Accornero, Nicola Cipani, Jade Conlee, Allison DiBianca Fasoli, Andrew Flory, Brett Gary, Jonathan A. Gómez, Fanny Gribenski, Marc Hannaford, Jaime Oliver La Rosa, Ann Morning, Silvana Patriarca, Eugenio Refini, Giulia Riccò, Molly Tambor, and Anna Yu Wang for their feedback on this work at various stages of development. I am also grateful to Camilla Hawthorne, Angelica Pesarini, the journal’s editors, and the anonymous reviewers, whose insights and suggestions significantly strengthened the final version. A special thanks to Isabella Livorni for her steadfast support from the very beginning. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹ For example, see Adriano Mazzeletti, “Deve al riformario se divenne il re del jazz,” *Radiocorriere TV*, February 4–10, 1968, 30–31; and Remo Lugli, “La canzone ‘Deborah,’ quarta a Sanremo al primo posto nella vendita dei dischi,” *La Stampa*, February 6, 1968, 9, in which Lugli remarked that “Armstrong è avanti con l’età ma continua a rimanere il re del jazz e anche in Italia ha un suo pubblico molto fedele” (Armstrong is getting on in years, but he remains the king of jazz and has a very loyal following even in Italy).

² Armstrong’s first visit to Italy was in 1935 for two concerts at the Teatro Chiarella in Turin on January 15 and 16. See Anna Harwell Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 106–08, 216n138. Armstrong performed in Italy several more times after World War Two, most notably at *Il Festival dei Due Mondi* (The Festival of the Two Worlds) in June 1959 in Spoleto, though a case of pneumonia (or perhaps a heart attack) left him hospitalized for a few days. See “Satchmo Rallies, Jokes,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 26, 1959, 1; and “Louis Armstrong Back: Trumpeter Says He Feels Fine After Pneumonia in Italy,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1959, 6.

³ “Per chi aveva sentito Louis Armstrong nel 1968 costretto a canticchiare simpaticamente con vistoso accento americano ‘Ciao, stasera son qui / mi va di cantareiiii, ballareiiii, con te’” (For those who had heard Louis Armstrong in 1968 forced to sing softly in a flashy American accent, “Hi, I’m here tonight / I feel like singinggg, dancinggg, with you”). Serena Facci and Paolo Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo: parole e suoni raccontano la nazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), 237. Armstrong also sang in Italian on his earlier visits to Italy.

⁴ See Roberto Agostini, “The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival: Change and Continuity in Italian Mainstream Pop of the 1960s,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 3 (2007): 389–408; and “Sanremo Effects: The Festival and the Italian *Canzone* (1950s–1960s),” in *Made in Italy: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Franco Fabbri and Goffredo Plastino (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28–40. Agostini identifies 1964–1967 as the period of “internationalization of the Festival” (“Sanremo Effects,” 28; see also “The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival,” 390). However, as is shown by Armstrong’s participation post-1967, I would argue that 1968 was also a year of active internationalization.

given its focus on promoting the tradition of *canzone italiana*, a group of Italian composers and lyricists wrote roughly two dozen new songs each year specifically for the festival.⁵

The songs were (and continue to be) performed by some of Italy's most famous singers; but, in 1964, in an effort to reach international markets and bolster Italy's recording and publishing industries, the festival began to invite international musicians to perform as well.⁶ Moreover, in both 1964 and 1965, all songs entered into the competition were required to be performed once by an Italian musician and once by an international musician (rather than twice by two different Italian musicians, as was the case beginning in 1953, and as was allowed again beginning in 1966). Though this "italiano-straniero" (Italian-foreigner) pairing regulation was short lived, the practice remained standard fare until Sanremo did away with pairings altogether in 1972, after which international musicians were a much sparser presence.⁷ Among the most famous international musicians to participate in Sanremo from 1964 to 1971 were Louis Armstrong, Connie Francis, Pat Boone, Dusty Springfield, Sonny & Cher, and Dionne Warwick, to mention only a few.

What remains underexplored in the secondary literature on Sanremo, however, is the racial discourse that the festival's international period facilitated,⁸ given that a number of the international musicians that participated were nonwhite / people of color. I am most interested in the Black artists, who hailed mostly from the U.S. but also included Africans (from Eritrea and Madagascar) and members of the African diaspora beyond the U.S. What were these Black musicians doing at a music festival dedicated to *canzone italiana*? How were they heard in relation to this Italian popular song tradition? And what can their presence tell us about Italy's complicated relationship with Blackness in the mid-twentieth century and beyond?

In this article I explore the history of the participation of Black musicians at Sanremo, focusing on the 1960s, a period marked by internationalism. The Blackness of these musicians was certainly not lost on the Italian press, who almost invariably referred to them by their race (i.e. "negro" [Negro] or "nero" [Black]), as opposed to by just their nationality, as was the case for white international musicians.⁹ More importantly, however, I argue that through this period in Sanremo's history we can better understand how the festival has historically functioned as a cultural venue where racial categories and hierarchies in Italy are constructed and negotiated. Sanremo's goal of promoting and preserving *canzone italiana* is complicated by the seemingly oppositional relationship between whiteness and Blackness in both in musical and sociocultural contexts. I contend that this led the Italian public to theorize a Black musicality that was aesthetically unique (sonically, visually, and otherwise) from a (white) Italian musicality—though,

⁵ See Agostini, "Sanremo Effects," 29.

⁶ See Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 121–22.

⁷ Dual performances came back briefly in 1990 and 1991 in an attempt to revitalize the festival and to recapture some of the "old Sanremo." See Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 237.

⁸ Brief mentions of Black musicians and race at Sanremo in the 1960s appear in Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 167; and Cecilia Brioni and Simone Brioni, "Transnational 'Italian' Stardom: Lara Saint Paul and the Performativity of Race," *Italian Studies* 73, no. 4 (2018): 351–64 (though with a focus on Lara). Contemporary scholarship on Sanremo's early decades, namely Agostini's "The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival" and "Sanremo Effects," do not discuss race or Blackness explicitly. An exception is Jacopo Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2019), though an in-depth study of Black musicians at Sanremo is beyond the scope of Tomatis's otherwise comprehensive and ambitious project.

⁹ In fact, the title of this article, "Le facce nere del festival" (The Black Faces of the Festival), is adapted from a 1968 article, "La faccia nera del festival," *Sorrisi e Canzoni TV*, January 14, 1968, 18–19; cited in Brioni and Brioni, "Transnational 'Italian' Stardom," 356. I would also note that in the mid-twentieth century the Italian use of the word "negro" paralleled the English/American use of the word "Negro," a neutral term used to refer to Black Americans. The Italian term "negro" would become a racial slur only later.

as I will show, this did not stop Italians from seeking to tap into this Black musicality for themselves. Crucially, the venue of Sanremo provided Italians with a space to discuss issues of race and racial difference even though, in the postwar era, these topics were largely considered taboo in light of Italy’s (downplayed or overlooked) history of colonialism and Fascism.¹⁰ To this day, the festival continues to serve as a discursive space for ideas of race and belonging, particularly as it concerns Blackness.

The primary scope of this article includes the seven festivals in which Black musicians performed at Sanremo during the 1960s (1962, 1964–1969), beginning with Tanya’s (also known as Lara Saint Paul) appearance in 1962 as the first nonwhite, mixed-race Italian to participate at Sanremo.¹¹ Table 1 lists all of the musicians, as well as their nationalities, the years they performed, the songs they sang, their final rankings in the competition, and the (Italian) artists they were paired with. As the table demonstrates, the majority of these musicians were extremely high profile (e.g., Armstrong, Dionne Warwick, and Wilson Pickett). Of these Black musicians, only three musical acts came from outside of the U.S.: Les Surfs (Madagascar), Shirley Bassey (Wales, U.K.), and Lara Saint Paul (Italy, by way of Eritrea). As such, much of the article will focus primarily on Black Americanness (or American Blackness) as it was perceived in Italy, though, as I show below, Italians’ hyper-focus musically and culturally on American Blackness meant that they often did not consider how Blackness might look different in other national and cultural contexts. Additionally, I focus above all on the 1968 edition of the festival, given that more than half of the Black musicians who performed at Sanremo in the 1960s did so in that year. (One journalist even went so far as to refer to it as “l’anno dei cantanti negri” [the year of the Negro singers].¹²)

Table 1: Black Artists that Performed at Sanremo in the 1960s

Artist	Nationality	Year	Song	Rank	Pairing
Tanya ¹³	Italy; Eritrea	1962	“I colori della felicità”	Eliminated	Wilma De Angelis
Ben E. King	USA	1964	“Around the Corner” (“Come potrei dimenticarti”)	Finalist	Tony Dallara

¹⁰ For more on Italians’ distaste for and avoidance of the word “razza” (race), see Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri, *An Ugly Word: Rethinking Race in Italy and the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2022). For more on Italy’s “colonial amnesia” and conscious distancing from its Fascist past, see Claudio Fogu, “*Italiani brava gente*: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory,” in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Ned Lebow, and Wulf Kansteiner (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 147–76.

¹¹ A substantial number of Black artists did perform at Sanremo after the 1960s, particularly at the 1990 and 1991 editions of the festival, including: Rocky Roberts (1970), Lara Saint Paul (1972, 1973), Dee Dee Bridgewater (1990, 1991), and Ray Charles (1990). However, given the steep drop in Black artists at Sanremo after 1968 (i.e., after Sanremo’s internationalization phase), these performances lie beyond the scope of this article.

¹² Remo Lugli, “Il cantautore Sergio Endrigo vince il Festival di Sanremo,” *La Stampa*, February 4, 1968, 7.

¹³ Tanya (sometimes spelled “Tanja” in the press and born as Silvana Areggasc Savorelli) began to perform under the name Lara Saint Paul from 1967 on. As Lara, she performed at Sanremo in 1968, 1972, and 1973. She also served as a producer and host in 1988. See Brioni and Brioni, “Transnational ‘Italian’ Stardom.”

Dionne Warwick ¹⁴	USA	1965	“Di fronte all’amore”	n/a	Gianni Mascolo
Hoagy Lands	USA	1965	“Io non volevo”	Eliminated	Giordano Colombo
Les Surfs	Madagascar	1965	“Si vedrà”	Finalist	Vittorio Inzaina
Les Surfs	Madagascar	1966	“In un fiore”; “Così come viene”	3 rd ; 11 th	Wilma Goich; Remo Germani
Dionne Warwick	USA	1967	“Dedicato all’amore”	Eliminated	Peppino di Capri
Les Surfs	Madagascar	1967	“Quando dico che ti amo”	2 nd	Annarita Spinaci
Dionne Warwick	USA	1968	“La voce del silenzio”	14 th	Tony Del Monaco
Louis Armstrong	USA	1968	“Mi va di cantare”	13 th	Lara Saint Paul
Shirley Bassey	Wales	1968	“La vita”	Eliminated	Elio Gandolfi
Lionel Hampton ¹⁵	USA	1968	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lara Saint Paul	Italy; Eritrea	1968	“Mi va di cantare”	13 th	Louis Armstrong
Sarah Vaughan ¹⁶	USA	1968	“Che vale per me”	n/a	Peppino Gagliardi
Eartha Kitt	USA	1968	“Che vale per me”	Eliminated	Peppino Gagliardi
Wilson Pickett	USA	1968	“Deborah”	4 th	Fausto Leali
Wilson Pickett	USA	1969	“Un’avventura”	9 th	Lucio Battisti
Rocky Roberts ¹⁷	USA	1969	“Le belle donne”	Eliminated	Robertino

¹⁴ Warwick was slated to perform at Sanremo in 1965 but withdrew days before the festival began, for reasons that were not disclosed in the press. Warwick was replaced by British singer Dusty Springfield (“Stabilito il programma del Festival di Sanremo,” *La Stampa*, January 15, 1965, 4).

¹⁵ Given that Lionel Hampton was a vibraphonist and not a singer, he did not compete at Sanremo but rather performed a medley of the melodies from the songs in the competition. “Nell’attesa del responso delle 26 giurie sparse per l’Italia, l’ospite d’onore Lionel Hampton ha dato un ampio saggio della sua eccezionale bravura riassumendo al vibrafono i dodici motivi della serata, su arrangiamento del maestro Boneschi” (While awaiting the decision of the 26 juries scattered throughout Italy, guest of honor Lionel Hampton gave ample demonstration of his exceptional talent by summarizing the evening’s twelve musical motifs on the vibraphone, arranged by maestro Boneschi). Remo Lugli, “Ornella Vanoni in testa dopo la prima sera,” *La Stampa*, February 2, 1968, 9.

¹⁶ Vaughan was slated to perform at Sanremo in 1968 but withdrew days before the festival began due to illness; she was replaced by Eartha Kitt.

¹⁷ Roberts was American but lived full-time in Italy and was popular on the Italian music scene from 1965 on. Thus he was not viewed as a foreigner, unlike other Americans participating at Sanremo.

Stevie Wonder	USA	1969	“Se tu ragazzo mio”	Eliminated	Gabriella Ferri
Brenton Wood	USA	1969	“Il treno”	Eliminated	Rosanna Fratello
The Sweet Inspirations	USA	1969	“Baci baci baci”	Eliminated	Wilma Goich

Methodologically, I draw from archives of some of Italy’s most prominent newspapers and magazines, including *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera*, *l’Unità*, *Radiocorriere TV*, *Oggi*, *Ciao Amici*, and *Sorrisi e Canzoni TV*. These sources published articles that both captured and shaped the Italian public’s response to discovering which musicians would perform at Sanremo, the public’s anticipation of the festival (and the arrival of the musicians) in the days before the festival’s start, and the reception of the musicians’ performances. As I show below, the journalists often wrote about the Black musicians in ways that highlighted their Blackness and their difference musically, visually, and sexually, while the racial identity of their white (Italian and non-Italian) counterparts often went unremarked. I also analyze audiovisual recordings of these Black musicians’ performances at Sanremo, with an ear for the sonic (vocal, instrumental, etc.) markers of Blackness that Italian audiences heard and sometimes called attention to, and with an eye for the ways in which Black musicians were captured visually and portrayed on television and broadcast directly into Italian homes.

In the remainder of the article, I begin by establishing Sanremo as a space that has mirrored and influenced evolving conceptions of race in Italian society, with a particular focus on *canzone italiana*. I then examine how the festival’s practice of dual performances enabled acts of translation that went beyond language and extended into music and race. Building on Eric Lott’s concept of “love and theft,” next I demonstrate how Italy’s fascination with Black musicality both shaped the reception of Black musicians at Sanremo and informed the performance styles of (white) Italian musicians. I then turn my attention to the unique experiences of Black women at Sanremo, particularly the ways in which they were hypersexualized through the cultural trope of the *Venere nera* (Black Venus), which extends back to Italy’s long history of colonial sexual politics. Following this, I contextualize these racial dynamics within the primary motivations that brought these Black musicians to Italy—a desire to advance Italy’s recording and publishing industries through internationally acclaimed musicians (whose Blackness was not a coincidence, I argue). In conclusion, I link the legacy of these Black artists at Sanremo to the cultural politics of Black Italian music today. Are Italians now willing to let *canzone italiana* embrace Blackness?

Sanremo, Race, and Canzone Italiana

Since its inception in 1951, Sanremo has been a site of racial formation. Long considered to be a “specchio della nazione” (mirror of the nation), the festival has not only reflected the musical tastes and cultural values of Italy but has also played an active role in shaping them, often along national and racial lines.¹⁸ As several scholars of Sanremo have noted,¹⁹ it is crucial to take into consideration the festival’s roots in Fascism, a result of Sanremo’s intertwined history with that of RAI (then known as Radio Audizioni Italiane), Italy’s national public broadcasting company and

¹⁸ For more on Sanremo as a “specchio della nazione” see Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 48–50.

¹⁹ See, for example, Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 38–48; and Agostini, “Sanremo Effects,” 28–29.

the organizer and broadcaster of Sanremo. For its first four years (1951–54), Sanremo was broadcast (only) on the radio by RAI; from 1955 on, after RAI officially became Radiotelevisione Italiana the previous year, all editions of the festival have been broadcast live on state television.

Founded in 1924 during the Fascist regime as the *Unione Radiofonica Italiana* (URI) and known as the *Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche* (EIAR) from 1928 to 1944, the Italian broadcasting service today known as RAI has historically been invested in curating the musical and sonic atmospheres of the Italian public. In fact, the majority of radio programming during Fascism was devoted not to blatant government propaganda, but rather to music.²⁰ Fascist racial ideology nevertheless remained at the fore of musical discourse and criticism, especially concerning jazz—which, perhaps surprisingly, thrived on the radio under Mussolini.²¹ As musicologist Anna Harwell Celenza notes, discussions of popular music under Fascism often pitted “Black America” against “White Italy.”²² For example, EIAR endorsed jazz (performed by all races, including Black Americans) through its radio program *EIAR-Jazz*, launched in 1929, which supported Mussolini’s vision of youth, modernization, and revolution for the Italian state.²³ Despite this endorsement, some government officials and cultural critics opposed jazz and imbued their musical sentiments with anti-Black racism, rejecting “il predominio della musica selvaggia dei negri” (“the dominance of the Negroes’ wild music”),²⁴ condemning the “the devilishness of the American Negro,”²⁵ and asserting the priority to “crearle noi le nostre forme di vita, d’arte e di bellezza” (create for ourselves our ways of life, of art, and of beauty).²⁶ In essence, a sizable and vocal contingent of Italian high society “considered the arrival of jazz a threat to native Italian culture.”²⁷ Radio played a central role in these cultural debates, and given the continuity between EIAR and RAI, both in terms of leadership and vision, Sanremo provided a venue in the postwar era to pursue further these questions of music, race, and nation.²⁸

Most central to Sanremo’s cultural impact was its creation and propagation of the concept of Italian song or *canzone italiana*. Musicologist Roberto Agostini considers the first several years of Sanremo, 1951–1957, to be the period during which the festival established this concept and tradition.²⁹ Musically, Agostini observes that “[t]he songs from Sanremo in the 1950s hark back to the vocal, melodic and orchestral mechanisms of the *bel canto* tradition, with traces of various local urban traditions”; lyrically, they feature an escapism “rooted in a pre-World War II musical past.”³⁰ This musical “formula,” as Agostini describes it, ultimately established Sanremo as the

²⁰ Philip Cannistraro, “The Radio in Fascist Italy,” *Journal of European Studies* 2, no. 2 (1972): 129.

²¹ Celenza remarks: “In the past, many scholars have assumed that the Italian government’s takeover of radio broadcasting led to an inevitable rejection of jazz, especially jazz performed by non-Italians. But in truth, just the opposite occurred” (*Jazz Italian Style*, 90–91).

²² Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 94.

²³ See *ibid.*, 69–75.

²⁴ Guido Carlo Visconti, “Fuori i Barbari!,” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, September 13, 1929, cited in Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 94–95; and Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 40.

²⁵ Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Jazz Band* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1929), 38; cited and translated in Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 96.

²⁶ Carlo Ravasio, “Fascismo e tradizione,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, March 30, 1928; cited in Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 88, 90; and in Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 39.

²⁷ Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 96.

²⁸ Concerning the continuity between EIAR, RAI, and Sanremo, Agostini finds “[p]articularly significant . . . the figure of Giulio Razzi, director of programming at EIAR, who was re-employed by RAI in the same position and was artistic director of the initial editions of the Sanremo Festival” (“Sanremo Effects,” 29).

²⁹ Agostini, “Sanremo Effects,” 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

true home of the “authentic” tradition of canzone italiana.³¹ However, Sanremo was not only the preeminent institution of Italian song—in many ways, it was also its originator. As musicologist Jacopo Tomatis contends,

Nel seguire i cambiamenti (o l’immobilismo) della società italiana in rapporto alle canzoni di Sanremo, gli studiosi hanno sovente usato come termine di paragone un’idea di “canzone italiana” assoluta, stabile, essenzializzata. Ma è lo stesso Festival di Sanremo che ha “inventato” quell’idea di canzone. Ne ha cristallizzato gli elementi formali e tematici e la ha associata stabilmente a una rete di significati, primo fra tutti, proprio la sua italianità, l’idea che la canzone possa contenere lo spirito nazionale e che possa quindi “rispecchiare” qualcosa che succede nella società.³²

(In tracking the changes [or stagnation] of Italian society in relation to Sanremo songs, scholars have often used an absolute, stable, essentialized idea of “Italian song” as a term of comparison. But it is Sanremo itself that “invented” that idea of song. It crystallized its formal and thematic elements and permanently associated it with a network of meanings, first and foremost, precisely its Italianness, the idea that song can contain the national spirit and can therefore “reflect” something happening in society.)

Tomatis’s argument regarding the invention of Italian song resonates with historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s concept of “invented tradition,” that some traditions (like canzone italiana) are made to seem as if they are drawn from a distant past, while in reality they are being invented and propagated in the present.³³ It is through this claim to pastness that, through canzone italiana, Sanremo has come to be considered the “mirror of the nation,” both within Italy and on the international stage. (After all, the winner of Sanremo goes on to represent Italy at Eurovision.) In this way, Sanremo was a major arm in the nation’s efforts to (re)define Italianness in the postwar era.

Inspired by the Italian government’s nationalist aims, discourses surrounding canzone italiana centered largely around a desire to ensure that Italian music was unique and distinctive—and, by extension, free from foreign influences. In a 1951 article in *Radiocorriere*, one journalist lamented that “la canzone italiana...è andata particolarmente soggetta [all’influsso della musica popolare afro-americana e ispano-americana] ed è venuta a mancare, negli ultimi anni, di un carattere originale e vivo” (Italian song...has been particularly subject to [the influence of popular Afro-American and Hispano-American music] and has lacked, in recent years, an original and living character).³⁴ The journalist then assured the reader that “la Rai cerca appunto di promuovere la rinascita di uno spirito veramente attivo nella canzone italiana e l’acquisizione di una individualità spiccata” (RAI seeks precisely to promote the revival of a truly active spirit in Italian song and the acquisition of a distinct individuality).³⁵ Of note is how, for RAI and Sanremo, the definition of

³¹ Ibid., 31.

³² Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 50.

³³ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³⁴ “Il festival della canzone italiana a Sanremo,” *Radiocorriere*, January 28–February 3, 1951, 16–17; cited in Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 51.

³⁵ Ibid.

canzone italiana was bound up with the erection of musical, racial, and national borders. This is not lost on Tomatis, who recognizes in Sanremo a “lessico e ambizioni simili a quelli dell’epoca fascista” (lexicon and ambitions similar to those of the Fascist era).³⁶ As a result, many believed that canzone italiana could only truly be Italian if it defined itself in opposition to Black and American music.

Sanremo’s relationship to non-Italian music shifted when, under the direction of its new organizer Gianni Ravera, the festival went international in 1964. Though the desire to promote a uniquely Italian musical style remained, producers, publishers, and recording executives recognized the potential of tapping into international markets by engaging with non-Italian musicians at Sanremo. In particular, the double performance was “pensata come confronto tra interpreti italiani e stranieri” (conceived as a comparison between Italian and foreign performers),³⁷ meaning that the competition’s structure was already well positioned to incorporate this international musical exchange. However, as many scholars of race and whiteness have demonstrated, whiteness (and, in this case, a white Italian musicality) is often defined in opposition to a racially/ethnically marked other;³⁸ therefore, Sanremo’s push toward internationalization helped to clarify the delineation between canzone italiana and non-Italian popular musics. Still, given that Italian and foreign artists were tasked with singing the same songs, there was a fundamental element of translation at play that went beyond language and spoke to Italy’s racial politics at the time.

“In edizione di colore”: Musical and Racial Translations

I use the term “translation” here quite broadly as encompassing the realms of language, music, culture, and, perhaps most notably, race.³⁹ Concerning language, while most foreign artists at Sanremo performed completely in Italian, a number of artists (primarily Anglophones) sang in a mix of Italian and their native tongue, if not completely in English.⁴⁰ Often, shifts in language would mark formal boundaries: for example, in her performance of “La vita” (1968), Shirley Bassey switches from English to Italian when transitioning from the verse to the chorus. The notion

³⁶ Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, 51.

³⁷ Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 121.

³⁸ See, for example, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008); Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man: Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Achille Mbembe, trans. Laurent Dubois, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁹ See, for example, Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Cecilia Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth: Young People’s Identity and Style in Italian Popular Culture, 1958–75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023). In her discussion of translation regarding music in 1960s Italian youth culture, Brioni states that “‘translation’ here not only refers to language but also to the translation of cultural practices, music and fashion” (76).

⁴⁰ On one hand, in “The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival,” Agostini writes that foreign performers sang in Italian (393). On the other, an article in *La Stampa* noted, or predicted, that “[gli] interpreti dei vari Paesi... canteranno le stesse canzoni di Sanremo nelle loro lingue” (performers from different countries... will sing in their own languages). See also Antonio Antonucci, “Milva, Modugno e Claudio Villa a Sanremo i più favoriti dalle preferenze del pubblico,” *La Stampa*, January 25, 1964, 10. My research finds that most foreigners (or at least Americans) sang in Italian, or perhaps in a mix of English and Italian. Beyond Sanremo, a number of U.S. artists dubbed their own songs in other languages (including Italian) in order to appeal to international markets; see Andrew Flory and Harry Weinger, “The Sound of Young America,” liner notes for Various Artists, *Motown Around the World: The Classic Singles*, Hop-O-Select B0013187–02 (2010).

of translation can also be applied to the orchestration: since each song was performed twice, once by an Italian and once by a foreigner, this allowed for “one performance ... closer to ‘tradition,’ the other to ‘modernity,’”⁴¹ with modernity often being associated with American musical culture. In extremely rare instances, even the formal structure of the song would vary between the two performances.⁴² We can also see acts of translation taking place outside of Sanremo, when non-Italian songs are covered by Italian artists: for example, when Ben E. King’s 1961 “Stand by Me,” a song with gospel undertones, was covered by Adriano Celentano the following year as “Pregherò” (“I Will Pray”), Celentano created a “clerical version” that was deeply and explicitly Catholic in order to better suit Italian audiences.⁴³ (This is a particularly clear example of how, as translation theorist Lawrence Venuti argues, translation “entails the creative reproduction of values.”⁴⁴) Sanremo, however, offers the ideal venue for this sort of musical and cultural translation, allowing it to take place both simultaneously (i.e., on the same evening) and on the largest national stage.

With the presence of non-Italian, and particularly Black, musicians at Sanremo, there is also at times an element of racial translation at play. The case of soul and R&B singer Ben E. King, the only Black singer to participate in Sanremo in 1964, is particularly telling.⁴⁵ In addition to being known for his hit song “Stand By Me,” King was also famous for his work as part of the doo-wop and R&B/soul vocal group The Drifters from 1958–1960. Additionally, likely due to the Italian covers of his songs “Stand by Me” and “Don’t Play that Song” (1962), he was referred to by one journalist as “il ‘Celentano d’America’” (“America’s Celentano”).⁴⁶ While most foreign singers at Sanremo in 1964 chose to sing in Italian, they were also allowed to sing in their native tongue. As such, King chose to sing his song, “Come potrei dimenticarti” (“How Could I Forget You”), completely in English, with the alternative title “Around the Corner.” Because of King’s performance in English, and because of the novelty of the dual Italian-foreigner song performances at Sanremo, journalists often noted the act of translation taking place between King and Tony Dallara, a singer and television personality who was King’s Italian counterpart at the festival.⁴⁷ Notably, however, journalists believed that the translation took place not just in terms of language (Italian to English), but also in terms of nationality (Italian to American) and race (white to Black

⁴¹ Agostini, “Sanremo Effects,” 29. From 1953 to 1963, these different arrangements would even be performed by two separate orchestras. See Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 29, 51–59.

⁴² See Agostini, “The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival,” 395, where he discusses Equipe 84’s and The Renegades’ versions of “Un giorno tu mi cercherai” (1966).

⁴³ Stephen Gundle, “Adriano Celentano and the Origins of Rock and Roll in Italy,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2006): 379. See also Jacopo Tomatis, “‘This Is Our Music’: Italian Teen Pop Press and Genres in the 1960s,” *IASPM@Journal* 4, no. 3 (2014): 31. Tomatis, in *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, writes that “il soggetto della versione italiana è fuori di ogni dubbio di ispirazione cattolica” (299, the subject of the Italian version [of “Stand by Me”] is undoubtedly inspired by Catholicism). For more examples of U.S. (specifically Motown) hits covered by Italian artists, see Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2017), 199–200.

⁴⁴ Venuti, *Scandals of Translation*, 1.

⁴⁵ Though King was the only Black (American) singer invited that year, there were many Italian Americans invited to perform (Frankie Laine, Frankie Avalon, Nino Tempo and April Stevens, and Bobby Rydell), as well as several non-Italian Americans. This is all to say that while the Black American presence at the 1964 edition of Sanremo was sparse, Americans at large did have a significant presence at the festival.

⁴⁶ “Sono quasi tutti ‘oriundi’ d’America i grossi calibri del Festival di Sanremo,” *Stampa Sera*, January 4–5, 1964, 9.

⁴⁷ The notion of translation can also be applied to the orchestration of each song. Roberto Agostini notes that “each song was performed twice, with different orchestras and singers: one performance was closer to ‘tradition,’ the other to ‘modernity.’” Agostini, “Sanremo Effects,” 29. For the majority of the songs that I discuss in this article, however, orchestration is not a major factor in hearing (racial) difference in the Italian versus foreigner arrangements.

/Negro). One critic described King as “il negro che tradurrà [la canzone] in americano” (the Negro who will translate [the song] into American [sic]);⁴⁸ another wrote that King performed “Around the Corner” “in edizione di colore” (in its colored version).⁴⁹

Moreover, the translation between the Italian and foreign versions of the song went beyond superficial recognition of racial identity. The lyrics for the two versions of the song, shown in Table 2, tell notably different stories, each seemingly shaped to correspond with the social and romantic experiences of white (Italian) and Black (American) men, respectively.⁵⁰ In Dallara’s version of “Come potrei dimenticarti,” the protagonist continually asks how could he could forget his love interest, the kisses they shared (“i baci tuoi che davi a me”), their long walks along the beach (“le lunghe sere vicino al mare”)—the standard fare of love songs. In King’s version, however, the protagonist stands “around the corner” from a woman that he is forbidden from seeing. As a Black man, very possibly interacting with an “unattainable” white woman, the protagonist in King’s version sheds light on a very different narrative of love and longing. Although there is no explicit mention of race in the song, the fact that the protagonist’s love interest is literally above him implies at the very least a difference in social class (King also sings that she “has pretty dresses, a fancy car”). Additionally, it is never made clear why the protagonist is “not allowed to join the crowd around the corner,” but he does go on to state that “I should know my place and keep in line,” echoing the notion in the U.S. that Black Americans should accept their place in the Jim Crow racial hierarchy. (King performed this song in 1964, the same year in which Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act, so tensions surrounding racial segregation were certainly well known at the time, both in the U.S. and internationally.⁵¹) To be clear, the divergence in lyrics between “Come potrei dimenticarti” and “Around the Corner” was an anomaly at Sanremo, and the motivation behind this decision was never publicly communicated. Nonetheless, this case demonstrates that at Sanremo composers and lyricists were open to the idea of translating not just the text of a song, but its very meaning to match the (racialized) experience of its performer. What’s more, King’s performance complicates the typical practice of “rewriting the foreign text in domestic cultural terms”⁵²—instead, given that this Black American rendition was targeted toward an Italian audience, it potentially offers insights into Italian perceptions and stereotypes of the Black American experience. In this sense, King’s performance of “Around the Corner” is not merely a linguistic translation but a cultural reimagining that exposes the layered dynamics of race, nation, and representation between the U.S. and Italy.

⁴⁸ Antonucci, “Milva, Modugno e Claudio Villa a Sanremo.”

⁴⁹ Gigi Ghirotti, “Grandi applausi agli urlatori di Sanremo,” *La Stampa*, February 1, 1968, 5.

⁵⁰ I thank Anna Harwell Celenza for bringing this difference in the lyrics to my attention.

⁵¹ See Silvana Patriarca, “Vorrei la pelle nera’: cultura giovanile e sensibilità antirazziste nell’Italia degli anni Sessanta e Settanta,” *Italia contemporanea* 297 (2021): 80–99, who notes that “la lotta dei neri [negli Stati Uniti] raggiunse punte altissime negli anni Sessanta e nei primi anni Settanta e conobbe un’ampia risonanza in Italia” (82, the black struggle [in the United States] reached its peak in the 1960s and early 1970s and had a wide resonance in Italy). In *Fashioning Italian Youth*, Brioni contends that Italians were familiar (at least superficially) with developments in the American Civil Rights Movement, as is evidenced by Italians’ use of the word “razzismo” (“racism”) to describe non race-based forms of discrimination. Brioni argues that “the misuse of the term shows that vocabulary used to describe discrimination came not only from the political discourse of the Italian student movements, but was also borrowed from foreign movements such as the American civil rights movement” (175).

⁵² Venuti, *Scandals of Translation*, 82.

Table 2: Lyrics of “Come potrei dimenticarti” and “Around the Corner” (excerpts)

“Come potrei dimenticarti” (Tony Dallara)		“Around the Corner” (Ben E. King)
Come potrei dimenticarti dopo quei giorni passati insieme, come potrei dimenticare i baci tuoi che davi a me con quelle labbra innamorate.	[How could I forget you after those days spent together, how could I forget your kisses that you gave to me with those loving lips.]	Around the corner ten stories high There lives an angel who caught my eye I want to know her but me oh my I’m not allowed to join the crowd around the corner...
Come potrei dimenticare le lunghe sere vicino al mare quando perduta tra le mie braccia donavi a me, soltanto a me, i tuoi vent’anni pieni d’amor.	[How could I forget the long evenings near the sea when lost in my arms you gave to me, only to me, your twenty years full of love.]	Around the corner, my shining star has pretty dresses, a fancy car But I’m in trouble the way things are Because I know I shouldn’t go around the corner...
Hai cambiato la mia vita e lo sapevi che avrei sofferto lontan da te, anche a te qualunque cosa, dovunque sia, ricorderà quel nostro amor che non c’è più.	[You changed my life and you knew that I would suffer far from you, even for you anything, wherever you are, will remind you of our love that is no longer there.]	Everybody tells me to my face to just forget her That I should know my place and keep in line But there’s something deep inside of me that tells me better... I’ll make her mine...

Love and Theft of Black Musicality

What fascinated Italian journalists and critics most about Black musicians’ performances at Sanremo was their supposed inherent Black musicality. In this regard, no one captivated audiences more than soul and R&B singer Wilson Pickett at the 1968 edition of Sanremo. Pickett was widely known to be a staple of American music, with hits such as “In the Midnight Hour” (1965) and “Land of 1000 Dances” (1966). One Italian journalist recognized him as the “astro del ‘rhythm and blues’” (the star of “rhythm and blues”).⁵³ From the moment they stepped onstage at Sanremo, Pickett and his band captivated the audience—for what was likely the first time in the festival’s history, a band composed almost entirely of Black musicians stood on the Sanremo Casino stage. (Pickett opted to perform with his touring band instead of performing with the resident Sanremo orchestra.⁵⁴) Visually, audiences witnessed this historic moment and prepared themselves for the sounds that a majority-Black ensemble could offer.

In his rendition of the song “Deborah,” Pickett sings in Italian for the slower, more melancholy opening, composed in a style consistent with the Italian melodic tradition. (The protagonist begs his lover Deborah to listen to him, despite the fact that she says she no longer loves him—“Deborah, mia Deborah, ascoltami, ti prego.”) After the verse, however, the mode (minor to major), time signature, tempo, and mood shift to an upbeat, soulful groove for the chorus about “good times walkin’ down Broadway” and reminiscing about the highlights of the relationship with the protagonist’s love interest. Moreover, Pickett sings the chorus in English to fully inhabit

⁵³ Lugli, “La canzone ‘Deborah.’”

⁵⁴ In addition to his band (comprised of Black musicians), Pickett performed with two (white) Italian musicians. For more information on the members of Pickett’s band and their performance at Sanremo, see Tony Fletcher, *In the Midnight Hour: The Life & Soul of Wilson Pickett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 128–29.

his typical soul/R&B performance style, achieving what historian Tony Fletcher describes as “a pronounced swagger.”⁵⁵

Pickett brought to his performance a dynamic stage presence and physicality. As one Italian journalist noted,

“Deborah” di Pallavicini-Conte [gli autori della canzone] ha consentito a Wilson Pickett, che ha cantato con il suo complesso personale, di scaricare sull’uditorio la sua elettrizzante carica: si arcuava, batteva le mani, si piegava all’indietro, scuoteva la testa, girava su se stesso e cantava con quella voce che, negli Stati Uniti, è considerata insuperata nel campo del “rhythm and blues.”⁵⁶

([Songwriters] Pallavicini-Conte’s “Deborah” allowed Wilson Pickett, who sang with his own band, to unload his electrifying charge on the audience: he arched, clapped his hands, leaned back, shook his head, spun around and sang with the voice that, in the U.S., is considered unsurpassed in the field of R&B.)

Indeed, Fletcher concurs that Pickett “was dynamite on stage.”⁵⁷ In this performance, both Pickett and his band had an electric energy, dancing as they sang and played. (In particular, the band’s movements stood in stark contrast to the comparatively reserved resident orchestra.) During the instrumental coda, Pickett goes into a brief dance break that encapsulates the infectious energy that critics describe. Pickett’s performance earned him and the song fourth place overall at Sanremo, the highest placement of any non-Italian singer. Furthermore, his recording of “Deborah” was the best-selling record to come out of the festival that year.⁵⁸

While the Italian press found Pickett in particular to be uniquely talented, the press also made a number of comments regarding Black musicians more broadly and their purported ability to be consummate performers:

Ha vinto una canzone italiana cantata da italiani. Ciò non toglie che sia stato l’anno dei cantanti negri: una partecipazione decisamente positiva per la nostra musica leggera, per il nostro pubblico. Ci hanno portato una ventata di brio, di forza musicale, della carica che è nel loro Rhythm and blues il quale, già da molti anni di moda negli Stati Uniti, prende soltanto ora i primi faticosi contatti con l’Europa... Wilson Pickett è tutta elettricità...oltre ad avere una voce bellissima, sa muoversi con un dinamismo e un ritmo nel quale c’è tutta l’essenza del jazz. Donne e uomini, questi negri, che sanno fare spettacolo, che possono sostenere da soli una serata.⁵⁹

(An Italian song sung by Italians won Sanremo. But this doesn’t take away from the fact that it was the year of the Negro singers: a decidedly positive participation for our popular music, for our public. They brought us a breath of verve, of musical force, of the charge that is in their R&B which, already popular for many years in the United States, is only now getting better known in Europe...Wilson Pickett is

⁵⁵ Ibid., 128. By contrast, Fausto Leali sang “Deborah” almost completely in Italian.

⁵⁶ Lugli, “Ornella Vanoni in testa dopo la prima sera.”

⁵⁷ Elbert “Woody” Woodson (drummer), in Fletcher, *In the Midnight Hour*, 129.

⁵⁸ Lugli, “La canzone ‘Deborah.’”

⁵⁹ Lugli, “Il cantautore Sergio Endrigo vince il Festival di Sanremo.”

sheer electricity...besides having a beautiful voice, he can move with a dynamism and rhythm in which there is all the essence of jazz. Women and men, these Negroes, who can put on a show, who can sustain an evening by themselves.)

Here, the journalist goes beyond making claims about the specific musicians and begins to essentialize them, stating that their Blackness was a, if not *the*, determining factor in their musical and performative ability. These Black musicians, described here often in the aggregate, “sanno fare spettacolo” (know how to put on a show), with the implication that this talent is beyond that of what Italians find to be “natural” to their race and nationality. The focus lies largely on the Black body: the voice, the body’s rhythmic movements, its dynamism. Additionally, the musicians are (always already) associated with the genres of R&B and jazz—genres certainly borne out of Black American culture, to be sure, but also boxes within Black musicians often find themselves constrained and categorized regardless of their musical production. This essentialization of Black musicality is not unique—it is quite a widespread phenomenon, particularly across Europe and the Americas; extending as far back as the nineteenth century, it continues to this day.⁶⁰ However, in line with recent scholarship in voice studies and sound studies, particularly that of Jennifer Lynn Stoever and Nina Sun Eidsheim, it is useful to consider how these descriptions tell us much more about the listener/viewer than they do about the Black artists.⁶¹ The fulsome praise speaks to an othering relationship with Blackness that become more apparent when considering more fully the implications of Italians’ fascination with Black musicality.

Broadly speaking, (Black) American music and culture played a significant role in the development of Italian popular music in the mid-twentieth century. For example, *urlatori* (yellers or screamers), singers popular from the late 1950s into the early 1960s (e.g. Tony Dallara, Adriano Celentano, Mina), sought to translate American rock ‘n’ roll into the Italian context. (In fact, due to its American influence and break from the Italian bel canto tradition, *urlare* [to yell/scream] “came to be a synonym of not singing *all’italiana*,”⁶² speaking to its association with a sonic other.) In some instances, however, the fascination with Black musicality is much more explicit. Fausto Leali, the Italian singer paired with Pickett in singing “Deborah,” developed a reputation over his career for trying to sound like a Black musician, to the point that he became known as “il negro bianco” (the white Negro). Though Leali sang his version of “Deborah” almost completely in Italian, in the chorus (the more “American” section, compared to the verse) he leans into his “Black” singing style, adding a level of grit, particularly in his upper range. In the final chorus, as Leali riffs on and fragments the line “fa che il cielo stasera ritorni sereno intorno a me” (let the sky tonight become clear again around me), he twice screams the lyric “cielo,” going all in on this vocal aesthetic reminiscent of James Brown. Interspersed are brief interjections of “alright,” the only word he sings in English. Evidence suggests that most spectators found Leali’s performance to be less compelling, or authentic, than Pickett’s, with one critic writing that “Leali...è apparso molto meno convincente [di Pickett] e molto piu ‘casereccio” (Leali...appeared much less convincing [than Pickett] and much more “homemade”).⁶³ Nonetheless, critics took note of the

⁶⁰ For example, Celenza writes with regard to Louis Armstrong’s first visit to Italy in 1935 that reporters believed that “through his music, [Armstrong] offered audiences a vision of the universal ‘Negro’” (*Jazz Italian Style*, 107).

⁶¹ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁶² Rachel Haworth, *The Many Meanings of Mina: Popular Music Stardom in Post-War Italy* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2022), 32. See also Gundle, “Adriano Celentano and the Origins of Rock and Roll in Italy.”

⁶³ Daniele Ionio, “Rientrate due ‘grane’ liscio il primo round,” *L’Unità*, February 2, 1968, 9.

cultural exchange taking place between Pickett and Leali, remarking that “uno [Pickett] tenta di fare l’italiano, l’altro [Leali] tenta di fare il negro” (one [Pickett] tries to be Italian, the other [Leali] tries to be Black).⁶⁴ The song “Deborah” went on to be included on Leali’s 1968 album *Il negro bianco*, further solidifying Leali’s brand and demonstrating the mainstream appeal of white Italians claiming Blackness through their musical practice.

A useful lens through which to understand this co-option of (musical) Blackness in the Italian context is cultural historian Eric Lott’s concept of “love and theft.” Used to theorize the nineteenth-century practice of blackface minstrelsy in the U.S., “love and theft” describes the phenomenon in which “minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed—minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration [love] and exploitation [theft].”⁶⁵ Though Lott’s framework was designed primarily for the American context, I argue that it is particularly fitting to describe Italians’ fascination with Black musicality in the mid-twentieth century, their “love” of Blackness that leads them to “tenta[re] di fare il negro” (try to be Black), an act of cultural “theft” or emulation further “demonstrat[ing] the permeability of the color line”⁶⁶ for white performers.

The archetype of “love and theft” in twentieth-century Italian musical culture is arguably the 1967 song “La pelle nera” (“Black Skin”) by Italian-French singer-songwriter Nino Ferrer, who, coincidentally, also performed at Sanremo in 1968. In the song, Ferrer describes how he wishes he could sing like Wilson Pickett and James Brown, but bemoans the fact that, due to his white skin, he will never be able to achieve this sound:

<p>Eeh dimmi Wilson Pickett eeh dimmi tu James Brown questa voce dove la trovate ... io faccio tutto per poter cantar come voi ma non c’è niente da fare non ci riuscirò mai io penso che sia soltanto per il mio color che non va ecco perché io vorrei vorrei la pelle nera</p>	<p>(Eeh tell me Wilson Pickett eeh tell me James Brown where do you find this voice ... I do everything to be able to sing like you but there’s nothing to do I’ll never succeed I think it’s only because of my color that’s wrong that’s why I would like I would like to have black skin)</p>
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In her analysis, Silvana Patriarca describes how the song “trasmetteva principalmente una fascinazione, ma forse anche un sentimento di invidia, nei confronti dei musicisti afroamericani e di quanto veniva percepito come un’esperienza e modalità espressiva uniche” (mainly conveyed a fascination, but perhaps also a feeling of envy, toward African American musicians and what was perceived as a unique experience and mode of expression).⁶⁷ Notably, the distinctive sound that Ferrer references in “La pelle nera”—that of Pickett—was also heard as uniquely Black by the

⁶⁴ Vittorio Franchini, “Sorpresa: Hampton al Festival di Sanremo,” *Corriere della Sera*, December 29, 1967, 12.

⁶⁵ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6. As Matthew D. Morrison notes, “This conception presumes black (musical) ‘authenticity’ as the basis of its formulation” See *Blacksound: Making Race and Popular Music in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), 212n27.

⁶⁶ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

⁶⁷ Patriarca, ““Vorrei la pelle nera,”” 86–87.

music critic writing about “l’anno dei cantanti negri” (the year of the Negro singers),⁶⁸ demonstrating the widespread nature of this fascination, even if Ferrer was the only one to articulate it so boldly. Furthermore, as the song’s title suggests, several times throughout the song Ferrer declares that “vorrei la pelle nera” (I would like to have Black skin); in a sense, his envy of Black musicians justifies the imagined “theft” of Black physical (and sonic) characteristics.

Though most would not consider “La pelle nera” to be politically correct by today’s standards, at the time the song was meant to be heard as antiracist. (In the second verse, Ferrer rebukes racial segregation and cruelty toward Black people in the U.S.⁶⁹) Nonetheless, as Cecilia Brioni argues, the song relies heavily on racist, anti-Black stereotypes, “as it equates Black skin with an innate inclination to rhythm and musicality, as well as to violence.”⁷⁰ This is, in part, why instead of Lott’s “love and theft,” musicologist Matthew D. Morrison prefers Saidiya Hartman’s formulation of “terror and enjoyment” as an analytical framework for blackface minstrelsy and its outgrowths. Through “terror and enjoyment,” Hartman contends that “the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery.”⁷¹ That is, the (intentional or unintentional) anti-Blackness that is foundational to co-optations of Blackness such as Ferrer’s necessarily renders them harmful, if not violent, to the Black community.

Returning to Sanremo, other white Italian artists were also described as tapping into a Black musicality. For example, in the days leading up to her performance at the 1966 edition of the festival, Italian singer Iva Zanicchi was described as “la voce negra” (the Negro voice).⁷² Even Italian Americans were brought into the discourse: Timi Yuro, one of the first woman “blue-eyed soul” singers of the 1960s, was described by the Italian press as a “cantante bianca di pelle e negra di voce” (white-skinned singer with a Black voice).⁷³ Some Italian fans even expressed a desire for Blackness themselves, exclaiming “come mi piacerebbe essere una creola” (how I wish I were Creole) in response to Tanya’s 1962 Sanremo performance.⁷⁴ Beyond Sanremo and after the 1960s, Neapolitans (and Southerners more broadly) began to associate themselves with the notion of global Blackness; Patriarca has described this as “negritudine napoletana” (Neapolitan Negritude),⁷⁵ with singer-songwriter Pino Daniele and his 1980 album *Nero a metà* serving as a prime example.⁷⁶ Put simply, there are a variety of contexts in which Italians in Italy and across the diaspora have drawn on Black culture and identity, with an equally large variety of motivations and ethics.

⁶⁸ Lugli, “Il cantautore Sergio Endrigo vince il Festival di Sanremo.”

⁶⁹ See Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, 134. Patriarca writes at length in “Vorrei la pelle nera” about the rise of a “sensibilità antirazzista” (“antiracist sensibility”) in Italy at the time, in which Ferrer’s “Vorrei la pelle nera” participated.

⁷⁰ Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, 134.

⁷¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21; cited in Matthew D. Morrison, “The Sound(s) of Subjection: Constructing American Popular Music and Racial Identity through Blacksound,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 1 (2017): 16; and Morrison, *Blacksound*, 9.

⁷² “Iva, ‘la voce negra’ e il *Barbiere del Met*,” *Stampa Sera*, January 21–22, 1966, 9.

⁷³ Gigi Ghirelli, “Quasi tutti i favoriti in finale a Sanremo,” *La Stampa*, January 30, 1965, 5.

⁷⁴ “Qualche nota allegra nello spettacolo di ieri sera,” *Stampa Sera*, February 10–11, 1962, 11.

⁷⁵ Patriarca, “‘Vorrei la pelle nera,’” 94–97.

⁷⁶ This claim to “negritudine napoletana” (Neapolitan Negritude) may be understood in relation to Venuti’s concept of “mirroring,” in which “the foreign text”—in this case, Black (American) music—“becomes intelligible when the reader recognizes himself or herself in the translation”: in other words “self-recognition.” See Venuti, *Scandals of Translation*, 77. For more on “mirroring” in the context of 1960s popular media, see also Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, 76.

This cultural exchange, however, was not only one-sided: as cultural historian John Gennari observes, there has existed a “contact zone—the edge and the overlap—between Italian American and African American cultures.”⁷⁷ Legendary Black musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Marvin Gaye were influenced by Italian musicians Enrico Caruso and Perry Como, respectively;⁷⁸ and before Italians fully assimilated into whiteness they crossed Jim Crow color lines to join “[Italian] lyricism and [Black] rhythmic groove...[which] would become an essential feature of jazz, rhythm and blues, doo-wop, and soul.”⁷⁹ Still, these descriptions of musical exchange betray the same essentializing notions of Black (and white) musicality, such as those that undergird musical borrowings like Leali’s and Ferrer’s, that might be understood more easily as cultural appropriation. Moreover, unlike in the U.S., (white) Italians in Italy were not “white ethnics” but were “simply” Italian. Consequently, the country’s history of Fascism and colonialism facilitated a more extractive—and less reciprocal—relationship with Black culture than what was occurring in the U.S.

To be fair, despite the theoretical proposition that anti-Blackness is inherent to this fascination with Black musicality, many of the Black musicians visiting from abroad had a pleasant experience at Sanremo and in Italy. Comparing his time in Italy to his life in Jim Crow America, Ben E. King remarked, “Questo è un paese civile, son qui da dieci giorni e nessuno mi ha fatto sentire d’essere negro” (This is a civilized country, I’ve been here for ten days and no one has made me feel like I’m black).⁸⁰ King’s experience in Italy reflects the experience of many Black American artists who traveled to Europe to further their careers in ways not possible in the U.S. due to anti-Black racism and segregation. Similarly, regarding Pickett’s experience with his band, Fletcher notes that “the reaction in Europe was a cultural epiphany,” and “the fact that as black men, they were seen as exotic—kids reaching out to touch their unfamiliarly textured hair—rather than threatening or inferior was a welcome change from their home country.”⁸¹ On a more jovial note, Armstrong was quoted as having said that “Mi piace venire in Italia per mangiare chilometri di spaghetti” (I like coming to Italy to eat kilometers of spaghetti),⁸² showing that some traveled for simple pleasures. Anti-Black racism nonetheless followed them to Italy: King, with no notable ties to the African continent (he was born and raised in the U.S.), was described in a Genoese newspaper as “un africano molto triste per aver dovuto abbandonare i suoi amati anelli di naso” (an African man who was very sad for having to abandon his beloved nose rings);⁸³ and graffiti believed to be targeted at Shirley Bassey stated “Tornatene a casa tua, negra” (Go home, n****r).⁸⁴ In short, despite widespread fascination with Black musicality among Sanremo organizers, recording

⁷⁷ John Gennari, *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 8.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 31, 159.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁰ Maria Rossi, “I grandi sconfitti del Festival di Sanremo almeno in pubblico l’han presa con filosofia,” *Stampa Sera*, February 3–4, 1962, 11.

⁸¹ Fletcher, *In the Midnight Hour*, 130.

⁸² Gigi Ghirotti, “Armstrong: ‘Mi piace venire in Italia per mangiare chilometri di spaghetti,’” *La Stampa*, February 1, 1968, 6. This is not intended to minimize Armstrong’s role as an ambassador of jazz in U.S. cultural diplomacy; see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁸³ Quoted in Rossi, “I grandi sconfitti del Festival di Sanremo.”

⁸⁴ Daniele Ionio, “Canzoni su misura per i ‘nostri,’” *L’Unità*, February 3, 1968, 13. Bassey may have been targeted because she had recently married one of Italy’s most wealthy eligible bachelors, Sergio Novak, the assistant manager of the Excelsior Hotel in Venice.

companies, music publishers, and audience members alike, Black musicians remained subject to the pervasive anti-Black racism of Italian culture.

Veneri nere at Sanremo

Though I have offered a relatively thorough examination of how Black musicians at Sanremo were received by the Italian press and public, the majority of this discussion is, admittedly, male-centered. The most comprehensive account of Black musicality at Sanremo that I have found in the press—celebrating the success of the 1968 edition of the festival, “l’anno dei cantanti negri”—centers on Wilson Pickett, a Black man. Similarly, Ferrer’s “La pelle nera” refers to Pickett and James Brown and makes no explicit mention of the voice as it exists within the Black female body. Furthermore, sexism in the music industry has historically led musical innovation in both the U.S. and Italy to be associated with men, with women’s contributions often being overlooked, even in relation to the fascination with Black musicality. While all Black participants at Sanremo were racialized in ways that coupled their musicality with their Blackness, Black women in particular were subject to intersecting forms of marginalization along both racial and gendered lines, resulting in specific forms of racialization and sexualization that must be examined on their own terms.

The headline of a *Stampa Sera* article, published days before the 1968 edition of Sanremo, encapsulates how Black women were viewed in relation to the Italian colonial imaginary: “Le ‘Veneri del jazz’ al Festival: tre cantanti negre a Sanremo terranno la tv col fiato sospeso” (“The ‘Venuses of Jazz’ at the Festival: Three Negro Women Singers at Sanremo Will Keep TV Holding its Breath”).⁸⁵ Here the author is alluding to the cultural trope of the “beautiful, docile and sexually available” *Venere nera* (Black Venus).⁸⁶ This stereotype can be traced back to a southern African (Khoisan, or “Hottentot”) woman with enlarged buttocks, Saartjie Baartman, who was labeled “The Hottentot Venus” and exhibited in freak shows and ethnographic displays by European colonizers during the early nineteenth century.⁸⁷ After a lull in interest at the turn of the century, Baartman was reinserted into Italian discourse in 1938 via an issue of the official Fascist magazine *La difesa della razza* (*The Defense of the Race*), which sought to promote Italian racial purity and prevent miscegenation. Therefore, as Sandra Ponzanesi writes, the Black Venus trope and the (Italian) white male gaze that sustains it are “always bound up with power, domination and eroticisation.”⁸⁸ Here, unlike the fascination with Black male artists such as Pickett, the connection to Fascist and colonialist rhetoric and ideology is much more overt. And although few of the Black women participating at Sanremo were directly tied to Italy’s history of colonialism, the shadow of the *Venere nera* trope loomed over them nonetheless.

The (Italian) white male gaze is made manifest through the image chosen to accompany the article—a photo of Eartha Kitt in a sleeveless, form-fitting dress, singing with a sultry expression. This imagery tapped into the sexual anxiety that some Italians felt about the arrival of Dionne

⁸⁵ Emio Donaggio, “Le ‘Veneri del jazz’ al Festival,” *Stampa Sera*, January 27–28, 1968, 7. It is worth noting that Josephine Baker was perhaps the first “venere [nera] del jazz” to perform in Italy, as early as the 1930s and ’40s.

⁸⁶ Sandra Ponzanesi, “Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices,” in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 173. See also Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, for related terms used to describe Black American singer Tina Turner by the Italian teen magazines: “leonessa” (“lionness”), and “pantera nera” (“black panther”) (192).

⁸⁷ See Barbara Sòrgoni, “‘Defending the Race’: The Italian Reinvention of the Hottentot Venus during Fascism,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8 no. 3 (2003): 411–24.

⁸⁸ Ponzanesi, “Beyond the Black Venus,” 170.

Warwick, Shirley Bassey, and Eartha Kitt, who the article sensationalized as “le dive più ‘censurate’ d’America” (the most ‘censored’ female stars in America).⁸⁹ Despite the article’s headline, Warwick was not typically hypersexualized in the Italian press. For this reason, here I focus on the reception of Bassey and Kitt, as well as that of Lara Saint Paul, to explore how the stereotypes built into the *Venere nera* trope shaped, if not predetermined, the Italian public’s response to their presence in Italy and to their performances at Sanremo. I also consider how these stereotypes bolstered the notion that Black and Italian femininity were mutually exclusive.

Shirley Bassey, one of Britain’s most popular singers and best known at the time for the 1964 *Goldfinger* theme song,⁹⁰ was recognized in 1968 by the Italian press as “una delle cantanti più sexy del mondo” (one of the sexiest [female] singers in the world).⁹¹ However, Bassey’s sex appeal was often framed as a threat to Italian culture: newspapers and magazines expressed their concern, on behalf of Italy’s TV organizations and moderators, that she might undress during her performance at Sanremo. Journalists claimed that over the years Bassey had developed “l’abitudine di cantare quasi svestita” (the habit of singing almost undressed), and that the singer “perde la gonna sul palcoscenico, finisce a gambe levate con indosso solo uno straccetto di vestito” (loses her skirt on stage, ends with her legs lifted up, with only a little rag of a dress on).⁹² One Italian journalist went so far as to remark that “anche se per le negre è ammessa, la tv [italiana] non accetterebbe mai” (even if Black women find it acceptable, it would never be acceptable for [Italian] TV).⁹³ To be sure, Bassey did begin her career on the cabaret scene and had a penchant for wearing risqué outfits (by the standards of the time), but I have been hard-pressed to find newspaper or magazine articles with such alarm outside of Italy. In the end, Bassey dressed in a relatively conservative manner for Sanremo: she wore a full-length gown with sleeves, and, most importantly, she did not in any way attempt to undress during the performance. It may be impossible to know how much of this was Bassey’s choice and how much her style of dress was dictated to her by the organizers of Sanremo (the festival was, after all, largely a family affair). Many viewers found her performance of “La vita” to be one of the most compelling of the evening. Nonetheless, Bassey was eliminated in the first round of the competition. One journalist wondered if she lost was because she was “troppo sexy per essere votata dalle donne” (too sexy to be voted for by women).⁹⁴ Another critic anticipated that “[la] voteranno solo gli scapoli” (only bachelors would vote for her), primarily due to her “prepotente femminilità” (powerful femininity) as opposed to her musical talents; and that husbands would only vote for her in secret.⁹⁵ In sum, Bassey’s presence first and foremost was filtered through her sexuality that was deemed to be too much for Italian men and women alike.

⁸⁹ Donaggio, “Le ‘Veneri del jazz’ al Festival.” Note that Bassey is Welsh (not American, as the article implies), which highlights how Blackness in Italy was so strongly associated with Americanness, and how these non-American musicians’ nationalities would be overridden, in a sense, by their Blackness.

⁹⁰ Bassey also sang the theme songs for the James Bond films *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) and *Moonraker* (1979). She also recorded the Italian version of “Diamonds are Forever,” “Vivo di diamanti,” for the end credits of the Italian version of the film.

⁹¹ Furio Fasolo, “Suspense per il ‘favorito’: Al Bano canta con la febbre?” *Stampa Sera*, February 2–3, 1968, 3. Similarly, in *Oggi*, February 1, 1968, 57, she is referred to as “la cantante più sexy.”

⁹² Donaggio, “Le ‘Veneri del jazz’ al Festival.” The quote continues: “la sarta scopre più pelle del previsto provocando le ire dei moralisti di tutto il mondo” (the seamstress uncovers more skin than expected, provoking the ire of moralists all over the world).

⁹³ Daniele Ionio, “Incertezza nei pronostici ma sicurezza negli incassi,” *L’Unità*, February 1, 1968, 9; cited in Facci and Soddu, *Il Festival di Sanremo*, 167.

⁹⁴ Fasolo, “Suspense per il ‘favorito,’” 3.

⁹⁵ Mino Durand, “Come si perde la ‘Tramontina,’” *Corriere della Sera*, January 31–February 1, 1968, 3.

Eartha Kitt was arguably the most sexualized woman of the 1968 edition of Sanremo, considered by some to be “la negra più ‘sexy’ che l’America potesse mandarci” (the sexiest Negro woman that the U.S. could have sent us).⁹⁶ Kitt’s reputation as a sensual performer was well-established, rooted in her 1953 songs “C’est si bon” and “Santa Baby” (both with sexual innuendo-laden lyrics), as well as her iconic role as Catwoman in the television series *Batman* (1967–1968).⁹⁷ Weeks before Sanremo, however, Kitt became a subject of controversy for a different reason: her verbal altercation with Lady Bird Johnson, then the U.S. first lady, over the U.S.’s involvement in the Vietnam War reportedly caused Johnson to burst into tears. The scandal led to Kitt being blacklisted in the U.S., but because Sarah Vaughan needed to undergo an urgent surgical procedure, Kitt was asked to be her substitute at Sanremo.

Despite (or because of) the short notice, Italian journalists quickly latched onto Kitt’s sexuality. Unlike Bassey and the other Black women performers, Kitt was not only seen, but also *heard*, as deeply sexual. With regard to Kitt’s rendition of “C’est ci bon,” one critic wrote: “L’incisione di quella ‘testa calda’ rappresenta il massimo dell’impudicizia, la quintessenza dello stile sexy, il non plus ultra della canzone erotica: un continuo fremere, sospirare, ansimare; un ammiccamento preciso ed inequivocabile che deve aver fatto fare un salto sulla sedia a quei funzionari radiofonici che avevano la radio accesa” (The recording of that “hothead” represents the height of immodesty, the quintessence of the sexy style, the ultimate in erotic song: a continuous quivering, sighing, panting; a precise and unequivocal wink that must have made radio officials listening jump out of their chairs).⁹⁸ This critique suggests that simply the sound of Kitt’s voice brought to mind images of her sexualized physical body, a body that would overwhelm all those who listen.⁹⁹ This intense physical reaction echoes the subtitle of the “Veneri del jazz” article: the Black women’s ability to keep TV viewers with “fiato sospeso” (bated breath) speaks to their supposed ability to evoke physical responses from their audiences.¹⁰⁰ The narrative of “funzionari radiofonici” (radio officials) also mirrors the policing of Bassey’s performance, framing Black female sexuality as something that must be monitored and controlled by officials. To be sure, Kitt did often strive to evoke a sensual persona in her music and acting, but the extent to which the Italian press highlighted her sexuality speaks to the potency of the *Venere nera* trope.

One critic also paid close attention to the ways in which the Black women participants moved their bodies while performing, labeling their movements as “gesticolazione sexy” (sexy gesticulation), which he contrasted with “gesticolazione all’italiana” (Italian-style gesticulation):

Le artiste negre hanno introdotto un modo insolito di gestire. Si ragiona, in questi giorni, di “gesticolazione all’italiana,” che sarebbe la classica posa del tenore strappalacrime, con primi piani di cavità orale, e di “gesticolazione sexy,” caposcuola quell’Eartha Kitt...mentre l’ascoltatore è lì che sogna...trac: sul più bello compare sul video un ginocchio, un cosciotto, un fuggevole ancheggiare, una tumultuosa esultanza corporea. Le nostre Berti, Identici, Spinaci sono in pensiero:

⁹⁶ Remo Lugli, “Si apre stasera il Festival di Sanremo,” *La Stampa*, February 1, 1968, 6.

⁹⁷ For more on Kitt’s reputation and reception in the U.S., see Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 34–59.

⁹⁸ Cited in Donaggio, “Le ‘Veneri del jazz’ al Festival.”

⁹⁹ See Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.

¹⁰⁰ See also Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, who notes how Tina Turner was similarly seen by the Italian press as having “power over the audience” (191) and possessing a “dangerous allure” (192). For more on Tina Turner’s performance of sexuality, see also Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 241–43.

debbono slanciarsi anche loro sullo scivolo della competitività anatomica? Di questo passo, eccepiscono, le belle voci non contano più; si va rapidamente verso lo spogliarello.¹⁰¹

(Negro female artists have introduced an unusual way of gesticulating. These days there is “Italian-style gesticulation,” which would be the classic pose of the tear-jerking tenor, with close-ups of the oral cavity, and “sexy gesticulation,” exemplified by Eartha Kitt.... [W]hile the listener is there dreaming ...bam: at the most beautiful moment, what appears on screen is a knee, a thigh, a fleeting sway of the hips, a tumultuous bodily exultation. Our own Berti, Identici, Spinaci [esteemed Italian female singers] wonder: should they also throw themselves on the slippery slope of anatomical competitiveness? At this rate, they object, the beauty of one’s voice doesn’t count anymore; we are rapidly moving toward striptease.)

This critique reveals several important implications. Most notably, it makes a clear racial distinction between a (white) “gesticolazione all’italiana” and a (Black) “gesticolazione sexy,” introduced by “le artiste negre.” To be sure, on rare occasions white Italian women at Sanremo were viewed as being overly sexual.¹⁰² However, this 1968 rhetoric expresses an anxiety that the Black female singers’ perceived sexuality might corrupt or negatively influence a more “wholesome” (white) Italian style. The critique also asserted that to be sexual is to distract from the “purity” of the voice, if not simply to be unmusical. While a white Italian woman’s voice could be divorced from her body, for Black women, their voices were inextricably linked to their (hyper)sexualized physicality. Finally, this passage raises a critical question about agency and mediation. The critic marveled at the “knees” and “thighs” appearing on screen, but who, exactly, chose to broadcast these specific images? The national broadcaster, RAI, held significant control over what its viewers saw. The visuals broadcast may therefore display the performances themselves but also to the fascination of the Italian public with the Black female body.¹⁰³

The Italian press’s hypersexualization of Black women musicians at Sanremo is particularly ironic when considering how Italian popular music itself was heavily indebted to Black American culture. A prime example is Mina, the famed *urlatrice* (yeller). As Paolo Prato notes, Mina’s first chart-topping record, “Tintarella di luna” (“Moon Tan”) (1960), was “a rock ‘n’ roll song written in Italian and built on typical blues chords,” conveying her indebtedness to Black musical origins of both genres.¹⁰⁴ Rather than weakening the status of the Italian female musical artist (as those who feared “la gesticolazione sexy” would lead one to believe), Black women actually bolstered the identity of the Italian woman musician by serving as a racialized other against which to be compared. Rachel Haworth, for example, writes about the dynamic between Mina and Lola Falana on the variety show *Sabato Sera* (1967):

¹⁰¹ Gigi Ghirotti, “Celentano canta per Don Backy poi gli farà bloccare tutti i dischi,” *La Stampa*, February 3, 1968, 9.

¹⁰² For example, in her 1959 performance of “Tua,” Jula De Palma was “accused of investing the song with such allusive and sensual overtones as to render it explicitly erotic.” See Agostini, “Sanremo Effects,” 32.

¹⁰³ For example, in *The Many Meanings of Mina*, Rachel Haworth notes with regard to Lola Falana that “the camera tends to capture her full body as she performs the routine, allowing the audience the opportunity to gaze at her, interspersed with different close-ups of her face as she sings, thus integrating different modes of eroticism into the spectacle” (121). See also Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, who observes how, for Tina Turner, the Italian press’s attention was “focused on her body and gestures, more than on her singing” (191).

¹⁰⁴ Prato, “Virtuosity and Populism,” 165. See also Chapter 1 of Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*.

It is thanks to Falana's presence on *Sabato Sera* that Mina's star status comes to be imbued with apparently domestic qualities: she becomes representative of Italian values and ideas of female sexuality, sex appeal, and sensuality, in contrast to the exotic and seemingly dangerous otherness of Falana. Mina's appeal and sexuality are rendered safe when placed in opposition to those of Falana. This constitutes a development in Mina's star significance more broadly: whilst sexuality had always been a part of her appeal, it is now rendered more acceptable when compared to the overt sex appeal and sensuality of a non-Italian star.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, as Cecilia Brioni observes in Italian media, "Italian young women were still largely de-sexualised, while sexuality in foreign women was often exaggerated, and represented as pornographic."¹⁰⁶ In the case of Mina and Falana, and as we see with Black women in Italy more broadly, purported Black female hypersexuality allows for a comparatively acceptable (white) Italian sexuality and womanhood.

The case of Lara Saint Paul offers a different perspective on the intersection of Blackness (or, at times more specifically Africanness) and *italianità* (Italianness). Lara was born as Silvana Areggasc Savorelli in Asmara to an Italian father and an Eritrean mother, and raised in Italy from the age of twelve. Under the name Tanya, she was the first nonwhite, mixed-race Italian to participate at Sanremo in 1962, where she was described as "la più esotica" (the most exotic) in relation to her fellow participants. Cecilia Brioni and Simone Brioni note how the song that Tanya was chosen to sing, "I colori della felicità" ("The Colors of Happiness"), was most likely not a coincidence but rather "underline[d] the fact that a 'white' and a 'colored' singer—Wilma De Angelis and Tanya—performed the same song,"¹⁰⁷ further emphasizing the racialization and exoticization of Tanya at this stage in her career. Brioni and Brioni describe this phenomenon as "colonial nostalgia," an eagerness to connect Tanya to "an objectified and sexualised image of colonised African women."¹⁰⁸

By 1968, however, under the name Lara Saint Paul, she was viewed as more in line with traditional notions of Italianness, especially when compared to the visiting, non-Italian Black musicians at Sanremo. One way in which Lara might have sought to "align to the glamour and beauty standards of Italian divas, and therefore to emphasise her Italianness," as Brioni and Brioni articulate, was to highlight her similarities with Mina, including beauty marks, hand gestures, and other bodily features.¹⁰⁹ Lara's new physicality "grant[ed] her respectability, against the stereotype of the sexually available Black Venus," and led her to be seen as less Black or exotic than she was in previous years.¹¹⁰ As a result, Lara was not put in conversation with the other Black musicians at Sanremo in 1968, contrary to what one might expect. As Brioni and Brioni note, "her name does

¹⁰⁵ Haworth, *The Many Meanings of Mina*, 122. See also Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy*.

¹⁰⁶ Brioni, *Fashioning Italian Youth*, 193.

¹⁰⁷ Brioni and Brioni, "Transnational 'Italian' Stardom," 353–54. See also Maria Rossi, "Commovente la storia della bella mulatta Tanja," *La Stampa*, February 7–8, 1962, 9, who knowingly references the song's title while drawing attention to Tanya's skin tone: "In un elegante abito bianco lungo o in uno verde pallido di Fercioni con frangette di perline o in rosso corallo di chiffon, in contrasto con la sua pelle bruna: i colori le piacciono in tutti i sensi" (In an elegant long white dress or in a pale green Fercioni dress with beaded fringes or in coral red chiffon, in contrast with her brown skin: she likes colors in every sense).

¹⁰⁸ Brioni and Brioni, "Transnational 'Italian' Stardom," 353.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 356–57.

not appear in an article entitled ‘La faccia nera del festival,’ in which all the black participants to the festival... were presented.”¹¹¹ Similarly, in a photo of Lara with Louis Armstrong, Eartha Kitt, and Lionel Hampton in *La Stampa*, the three Black Americans were identified as a unit (“tutti e tre i negri insieme” [all three Negroes together]), while Lara, despite being photographed with them and likely acknowledged as Black by the musicians, was not considered to belong to the group of foreigners.¹¹² Lara’s lighter skin tone further separated her visually from the Black American musicians, particularly her song partner Armstrong.¹¹³ Nonetheless, even in 1968 Lara was described at least once in the press as “terribilmente sexy” (terribly sexy).¹¹⁴ Thus, even as Lara Saint Paul’s persona(s) and racial identity allowed her to navigate a unique space between Blackness and *italianità*, she remained caught within the very trope of the *Venere nera* that defined and constrained all Black women at the festival.

Black Music, Record Sales, and Internationalization

The decision to invite so many Black musicians to participate at Sanremo was a conscious, and controversial, choice on the part of the organizers, driven by a desire for international expansion. Gianni Ravera, the organizer of Sanremo from 1962 to 1968, acknowledged the pushback, stating “I negri, i negri... Qualcuno mi ha criticato perché li ho portati” (The Negroes, the Negroes... Some people criticized me for bringing them). Ravera explained his strategy by noting a lack of participation from Italy’s biggest music stars (e.g., Mina, Rita Pavone, Gianni Morandi). He argued that relying solely on the domestic market was no longer viable: “Dobbiamo metterci in testa che il nostro mercato non basta più... dobbiamo lanciare canzoni che non vadano bene soltanto da noi, ma a una più vasta cerchia di paesi. Quindi, per lanciarle, dobbiamo servirci di nomi già internazionali” (We have to get it into our heads that our Italian market is no longer enough... we have to launch songs that are not only good enough for us, but to a wider circle of countries. So to launch them, we need to use names that are already international).¹¹⁵ In other words, the organizers of Sanremo and the Italian music industry sought to leverage Black musicality and the international appeal of these artists to expand their global reach.¹¹⁶

The organizers’ instinct was correct: while, as Michela Ardizzoni notes, “for decades these performances have been tailored to sate the palate of mainstream audiences, usually middle-aged or older citizens, who find reassurance in the traditional conformity of many Sanremo performances,”¹¹⁷ Tomatis shows how during Ravera’s tenure as festival organizer, Sanremo was particularly attentive to the tastes of younger audiences. This focus was driven by reliable record

¹¹¹ Ibid., 356. See also “La faccia nera del festival,” *Sorrisi e Canzoni TV*.

¹¹² Lugli, “Si apre il Festival di Sanremo.”

¹¹³ Brioni and Brioni, “Transnational ‘Italian’ Stardom,” 356.

¹¹⁴ Alfonso Madeo, “In finale Endrigo, Celentano, Milva, Antoine[,] la Identici, Armstrong, i Giganti e Al Bano,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 3, 1968, 13.

¹¹⁵ Gianni Ravera, as quoted in Lugli, “Il cantautore Sergio Endrigo vince il Festival di Sanremo.” Ravera was also a talented singer in his own right, having won a 1938 EIAR contest and performed at Sanremo in 1954, 1955, and 1957.

¹¹⁶ Several days prior, the same journalist, Remo Lugli, observed that “le Case discografiche...sperano di conquistare una buona fetta di mercato straniero appunto giovandosi di grossi nomi non italiani” (the record companies...hope to capture a good share of the foreign market precisely by taking advantage of big non-Italian names). Remo Lugli, “Già ‘tutto esaurito’ a Sanremo per il Festival della canzone,” *La Stampa*, January 28, 1968, 11. Similar efforts to capitalize on the musical talents of Black Americans took place in France; see Celeste Day Moore, *Soundscapes of Liberation: African American Music in Postwar France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 71–101.

¹¹⁷ Michela Ardizzoni, “On Rhythms and Rhymes: Poetics of Identity in Postcolonial Italy,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13 (2020): 2.

sales among the youth. As one writer for the Italian youth magazine *Ciao amici* wrote in 1964, near the beginning of Ravera's tenure:

Quando gli organizzatori di queste manifestazioni si renderanno conto che siamo noi gli acquirenti dei dischi? ...Quando Gianni Ravera cantava (almeno una decina di anni fa) non era niente male: fra la pletera dei gorgheggiatori con finale minimo da un minuto era quello che aveva cercato di imporre il ritmo. Senza dubbio è il primo che abbia intuito che i "giovani"...siamo un grande pubblico. Un pubblico importante perché nel gettito annuale della musica leggera rappresentiamo perlomeno il sessanta o settanta per cento.¹¹⁸

(When will the organizers of these events realize that we're the ones who buy records? ...When Gianni Ravera was singing [at least ten years ago] he wasn't bad at all: among the plethora of those warbling singers, with their one-minute-minimum finale, he was the guy who tried to bring rhythm into it....Surely, he was the first to understand that we 'young people'...are a big audience. An important audience, which represents at least sixty or seventy percent of the annual income of pop music.)

In exchange for their ability to stimulate record sales, the Black musicians at Sanremo were handsomely compensated. A January 1968 issue of the magazine *Oggi* reported—in a section with the blunt title, "Quanto costano i cantanti negri" (How much Negro musicians cost)—that Armstrong received as much as 30 million lire for his performance.¹¹⁹ The Sanremo organizers smartly tapped into Italy's fascination with Black musicality to stimulate sales that would benefit the country's national market, and they were clearly willing to pay top dollar for Black musicians.

The increasing presence of international musicians, particularly Black artists, at Sanremo was met with significant backlash from Italian artists. Ravera was criticized for having "aperto le porte agli stranieri in una misura che ai cantanti italiani sembra eccessiva" (opened the doors to foreigners to an extent that seems excessive to Italian singers).¹²⁰ This discontent culminated in an official protest from l'Unione italiana cantanti (the Union of Italian Singers), which published the following statement:

Si è riunito il direttivo dell'Unione italiana cantanti (Uic)...per discutere i problemi della categoria e per stabilire le modalità dell'azione che l'Unione intende svolgere per protestare contro la presenza di cantanti stranieri al Festival di Sanremo. In un documento approvato al termine della riunione, dopo aver ricordato che quest'anno sono presenti al festival diciotto artisti stranieri, il direttivo dell' "Uic" afferma che 'l'invasione dei cantanti stranieri non può non incontrare l'opposizione degli artisti italiani, anche perché agli italiani che si recano all'estero non è riconosciuto un uguale trattamento.' Ribadita la protesta dell'Unione cantanti, nel documento si mette in rilievo la decisione della stessa Uic di "prendere tutte quelle iniziative che si renderanno necessarie per difendere il lavoro di tutti gli artisti italiani contro la

¹¹⁸ S. Giampiero, "Qualcosa non funziona," *Ciao amici*, September 1964, 26–27; cited in Tomatis, "This Is Our Music," 33.

¹¹⁹ Antonio Lubrano, "Guerre, amori, e dramma a Sanremo," *Oggi*, January 25, 1968, 55.

¹²⁰ Lugli, "Già 'tutto esaurito' a Sanremo."

presenza troppo numerosa di artisti stranieri nei festival e nei programmi radiofonici e televisivi.”¹²¹

(The executive board of the Italian Union of Singers [Uic]...met to discuss the problems of the category and to determine the action that the union intends to take to protest the presence of foreign singers at the Sanremo Festival. In a document approved at the end of the meeting, after recalling that eighteen foreign artists are present at the festival this year, the “Uic” executive states that “the invasion of foreign singers cannot fail to meet with the opposition of Italian artists, also because Italian [artists] that travel abroad are not given similar treatment.” Reiterating the Union of Singers’ claim, the document highlights the Uic’s decision to “take all those initiatives necessary to defend the work of all Italian artists against the excessive presence of foreign artists in festivals and radio and television programs.”)

Because these Italian musicians did not feel that they were being treated nearly as well abroad as the international musicians were being treated in Italy, in their eyes there was no sense of fairness. Ultimately, the UIC was able to negotiate terms that dramatically shifted the roster of artists at Sanremo: in 1970, only four international artists participated at the festival, two of whom lived in Italy full-time and two of whom received the express approval of the union.¹²² After 1971, dual performances at Sanremo ended, further limiting the involvement of international musicians. While no Italian journalists expressed an explicit anti-Black sentiment, it is no coincidence that after a large influx of Black foreign artists in 1968, Sanremo soon thereafter closed its doors to international musicians. One critic noted in 1968 that “il festival della canzone sembra volersi trasformare in un festival del jazz” (The [Italian] song festival seems to want to turn into a jazz festival).¹²³ This connection between jazz and Black musicians—and the opposition to both—extends back to the Fascist era. Therefore, despite “a rapid dwindling of [Sanremo’s] role as the meeting place for Italian music,” as Agostini observes,¹²⁴ there nonetheless was a conscious effort to keep Sanremo Italian, as opposed to letting it become a meeting place for all musics.

Conclusion: Black Italian Music Today

The 1960s at Sanremo were a pivotal period for the negotiation of race and national identity in Italy. And, perhaps ironically, Black musicians played a key role in shaping evolving definitions of *italianità*. More than just a “specchio della nazione,” Sanremo acted as a cultural space where (white) Italian musicality was defined in opposition to an often singular, stereotypical Black musicality. This othering manifested in several ways: through linguistic, musical, and racial translations; the “love and theft” of Black performance styles by white Italian artists; and the hypersexualization of Black women through the *Venere nera* trope. While the festival’s organizers

¹²¹ “Troppi stranieri partecipano al ‘Festival di Sanremo,’” *Stampa Sera*, January 26–27, 1968, 9. The Union is also sometimes referred to as the Unione cantanti italiani (Uci).

¹²² “Sanremo: abbinamenti canzoni-cantanti per il festival,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 11, 1970, 13. The residents were Rocky Roberts (USA) and Mal (Wales); the union-approved musicians were Sandie Shaw (England) and Antioine (France). See also “Sanremo: per gli ‘stranieri’ e i compensi verso un accordo,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 4, 1970, 13.

¹²³ Franchini, “Sorpresa: Hampton al Festival di Sanremo.”

¹²⁴ Agostini, “The Italian *Canzone* and the Sanremo Festival,” 402.

sought to internationalize Italian music, nationalist backlash against the “invasion” of foreign singers resulted in the end of this era of international, and Black, musicians at Sanremo. Ultimately, the experience and reception of Black musicians at Sanremo in the 1960s and their reception offer a powerful lens into how Italian identity was constructed through music, and how the nation’s relationship with Blackness continues to be negotiated.

Since the end of the 1960s, the presence of Black musicians at Sanremo has been much sparser.¹²⁵ However, this began to change, as many things in Italian culture did, with the rise of immigration from the African continent to Italy and the birth of the so-called *seconda generazione* (second generation), the children who, while having immigrant parents, were born and raised in Italy. The *seconda generazione* has created a sort of crisis in the realm of Italian music, and at Sanremo in particular: instead of Black musicians simply being foreigners that visit Italy for several days and are uncontroversially labeled as “other” (due to their dual status as foreign participants at Sanremo and as Blacks), in recent years there have been more and more *seconda generazione* Black artists who are in Italy to stay—and they are laying claim to *italianità*. Take, for example, Egyptian Italian rapper Amir Issaa’s “Non sono un immigrato” (“I’m Not an Immigrant,” 2008), a song that speaks to the experience of the *seconda generazione*, addressing ways in which these young people are continually othered by the Italian public and denied fundamental rights by the Italian government, most notably an accessible path to Italian citizenship.¹²⁶ To a similar end, Nigerian Italian rapper Tommy Kuti’s “#AFROITALIANO” (2018) speaks to his exhaustion with being told “cosa sono e cosa non sono” (what I am and what I’m not). Feeling “troppo africano per essere solo italiano e troppo italiano per essere solo africano” (too African to be just Italian and too Italian to be just African), Kuti promotes the option of an Afro-Italian, or “afroitaliano,” identity. And at Sanremo, Italy’s racial politics have taken center stage with the controversy surrounding Egyptian Italian singer and rapper Mahmood, who won the 2019 edition of the festival with his song “Soldi” (“Money”). However, due to a line of the song being in Arabic, and Mahmood’s Egyptian heritage, many Italians expressed their frustration that he was selected to represent Italy at Eurovision, citing the supposed “implausibility of Mahmood’s background (and even his name) as a worthy representative of Italian music nationally and transnationally.”¹²⁷

We can read these musical and sonic acts as what Graziella Parati terms “talking back,” a low-level form of resistance that creates enough “‘disturbance,’ background noise, and talk to weaken dominant discourses,” thereby challenging “the hegemonic construction of an imagined Italian community.”¹²⁸ These Black Italian artists destabilize the idea that Italy is for white Italians only,

¹²⁵ An exception to this would be 1990–1991; see footnote 11.

¹²⁶ See Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Angelica Pesarini and Guido Tintori, “Mixed Identity in Italy: A Country in Denial,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, ed. Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 349–65; and Lizzie Davies, “Amir Issaa, Italian Hip-Hop Artist, Raps about Citizenship Law,” *Guardian*, January 21, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/21/amir-issaa-hiphop-italy-citizenship>.

¹²⁷ Ardizzoni, “On Rhythms and Rhymes,” 2; see also Luca Barra, Giacomo Manzoli, Marco Santoro, and Marco Solaroli, “Un marziano all’Ariston: Mahmood tra televisione, musica, politica e identità,” *Studi culturali* 16, no. 2 (2019): 329–43.

¹²⁸ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 31, 29. It cannot be assumed, however, that all performances by Black Italian artists are inherently anti-assimilationist; see, for example, Paul David Flood, “‘Everybody Wanna Move Like Us!’: Performing Afro-Sweden in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 37, no. 3 (2025): 21–42, who argues that Afro-Swedish artists served Sweden’s colorblind agenda through their performances at Eurovision.

making their political beliefs seen and heard on the largest stage possible. One particularly telling example of “talking back” at Sanremo is Tunisian Italian rapper Ghali’s performance at the 2024 edition of the festival. He performed a medley he called “Italiano vero” (“True Italian”) consisting of three songs: “Bayna” (2022), for which he sang in both Arabic and Italian (similar to Mahmood in “Soldi”); “Cara Italia” (“Dear Italy,” 2018), a lighthearted commentary on contemporary Italian (and global) politics; and “L’Italiano,” the 1983 smash hit by singer-songwriter Toto Cutugno about Italian identity. Audiences were struck by Ghali’s medley, particularly his rendition of “L’Italiano.” Loredana Polezzi’s perceptive analysis of the performance highlights the tensions at play: we witness the Tunisian Italian refer to himself as an “italiano vero” both figuratively and literally, as he points to himself at that moment in the song. Polezzi describes the moment as “un gesto impossibile da mancare o da fraintendere: un punto tirato, fissato nello spazio di un secondo, che non ammette replica” (a gesture impossible to miss or misinterpret: a gesture of finality, only for a second, a gesture that does not allow for a reply).¹²⁹ Such a gesture leads one to ask: “chi è, qui, adesso, ‘l’italiano’? E ‘l’alieno’?” (who is, here, now, the “Italian?” And who is the “alien?”).¹³⁰ Given the slippage between the terms “alieno” (alien) and “straniero” (foreigner), in Italian but particularly in English, Ghali invites the audience to reflect on a question that is at the heart of Sanremo’s relationship to non–white Italian musicians, particularly those of African descent.

Even in the present day, Sanremo remains a site of racial formation. The concept of *canzone italiana*, while it has in many ways been a culturally unifying force since Sanremo’s founding in 1951, has also served to gatekeep Italian identity, with serious consequences for the civil rights of the *seconda generazione* and others who fall outside of the normative definition of “Italian.” The cultural and racial dynamics of the 1960s that I have explored in this article—when Black musicians were simultaneously celebrated for their perceived musical exceptionality and constrained by racialized narratives—continue to echo in contemporary discussions of Black Italian artists and shape their reception. By examining this earlier period of internationalism in the 1960s, we can gain insight into the mechanisms through which racial difference has been and continues to be sonically encoded and publicly negotiated on the Italy’s largest national stage. And as we listen to these contemporary Black sounds and their acts of “talking back,” we can contextualize it within a larger history of Black musicality and the ways in which it has been embraced as a cultural asset in Italy, even while Black Italian musicians continue to have to fight for recognition of their Italian identity.

¹²⁹ Loredana Polezzi, “Tutto in uno sguardo,” *H-TransItalian Studies* (blog), February 15, 2024, <https://networks.h-net.org/group/blog/20024348/blog-tutto-uno-sguardo-loredana-polezzi>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*