

Zuccherò Fornaciari, “You’ll Be One of a Kind”

Bianca Soria (April 15, 2014)



The origins, the first trip to America, and more. An exclusive interview with the artist before his Americana Tour.

We meet Zucchero at Eataly’s Birreria on the eve of his Americana Tour, which he will kick-off in New York at the end of April. Laidback, funny, Zucchero answers all of our questions, even the little frivolities, recounting memories of the past and weighing in on current events, shedding light on the sources of his inspiration, explaining his reasons for certain decisions he has made, and unveiling a man deeply rooted in his culture of origin, a man not unlike the international star we have all come to know.

Growing up 'zuccherino'

We start by talking about his professional name, Zucchero. It turns out the nickname zuccherino (Little Sugar) was given to him back in primary school by one of his teachers for being such a sweetheart.

Zuccherino grew up in the small town of Roncofiesi, in Emilia-Romagna, where he lives to this day. His house faced the town church. Every morning, before going to school, he was permitted to enter the church to learn how to play the organ in exchange for performing the duties of an altar boy. But his interest in sacred music soon gave way to rock ‘n’ roll, as, to his ear, the church was echoing the sounds of the English rock band Procol Harum. When he wasn’t playing the organ in church or attending school, Zucchero spent time at the Communist Party Cooperative.

It was an early lesson in the fine line between the sacred and profane so germane to the rural culture of his region. At the beginning of September every year, a celebration of the patron saint of



Roncofiesi, Saint Biagio, was held.

The little town was transformed into a fairground full of amusement park rides and, in the background, foreign music. The fair sowed the seeds of Zuccherò's passion for soul, gospel, and rhythm & blues music. He began listening to Wilson Pickett, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

He formed a band and for eight years travelled across Italy, playing private clubs with moderate success. But still, he earned little money and record companies didn't come knocking on his door. Zuccherò wanted to play soul, rhythm & blues, gospel. He wanted to break away from the melodic tradition of romantic Italian music popular at the time. Not surprisingly, Italian record labels dismissed him as having the "wrong kind of voice."

American Adventures

So in 1984 he decided to go to San Francisco and meet Corrado Rustici, a famous musician who had played with Aretha Franklin. "I was surprised," he says, "by the availability and generosity of great musicians who, no matter if you are no one yet, or have no money, can recognize good music when they hear it. Since then I've always had Afro- American members in my band, like Randy Jackson, since my music is a mix of Afro- American music with strains of Italian and Mediterranean melodies." When he returned to Italy with his newly recorded songs, the record companies suddenly became interested in his work. This marked the beginning of Zuccherò's success and popularity in Italy.

Over the last 25 years, Zuccherò has collaborated with the royalty of the international music scene. He has recorded and toured with Eric Clapton, Andrea Bocelli, Bono, Pavarotti, Miles Davis, John Lee Hooker, Sting, and Solomon Burke, among others— artists of a caliber that testifies to Zuccherò's unique talent. His first important encounter was with Miles Davis. While trying to save his marriage on vacation in the Maldives, Zuccherò received a call from Davis' promoter saying that Davis had heard his song "Dune Mosse" and wanted to play with him. As the then-incredulous Zuccherò laughs: "I had to choose between saving my marriage and going to New York to play with Miles Davis. Opting for the latter proved to be the right choice." Davis asked Zuccherò to tour with him, which they did. The tour would finally attract the attention of the Italian media.

"Eric Clapton and Miles Davis also gave me a valuable piece of advice," he adds. "To sing in Italian...Your music, they said, is already international. If you sing in Italian, you'll be one of a kind." And they were right. "You know," says Zuccherò, "music talks. Even if you don't understand the words, you feel the vibrations and what I'm talking about. Music has its own language."

Cuba!

Asked about his recent concert and album in Cuba, he remarks, "I had a long-held dream of recording and doing a concert in Cuba, to explore the native sounds of Havana, playing with the best local musicians. I was invited to the International Festival of Cigars, as important there as the Grammy Awards are here. I met members of the local government, and the Minister of Culture invited me to hold a concert in Cuba. I met with some of the famous Cuban artists and that's when the idea of mixing my band with them, of arranging my songs with their rhythm, was conceived. Before the concert I was anxious - a good sign that tells me that I am still real, that I'm not on autopilot. But there was something about that place... people coming up to me and offering to take the posters around the city in their private cars to advertise the concert, seeing people arriving on foot or by any means of transportation they could find... it all gave me the feeling they were really looking forward to something big happening."

2014 Americana Tour

On the long, exhausting Americana Tour Zuccherò will perform nearly 50 concerts between Canada and the US, playing major cities as well as smaller cities where "No one knows me," he says, laughing. "But I'll go anyway." To cut down on the expenses, the crew will live on their tour bus. "Like the artists of the Seventies," he says.

Zuccherò, with that unmistakable voice his friend Bono described as "an old oak-aged whisky," will perform in New York on April 23. He will present his latest album, *Sesion Cubana*, at Madison Square Garden. The album features seven new songs and six newly arranged old time favorites. Among the announced special guests on stage are Sting, Chris Botti, Dolores O'Riordan, Fher, Sam Moore, Elisa, Jovanotti, Fiorella Mannoia, Andrea Griminelli and more.



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