

[FROM DISSERTATION: EXCERPT OF 1<sup>ST</sup> CHAPTER]

Italian Cowboy Songs: *I cantautori* and Bob Dylan's Myth of the Frontier West

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In the years encompassing the social unrest in Italy in the 1970s, the most popular countercultural *cantautori* (singer-songwriters) of the long-generation produced a considerable amount of American-cowboy music. These songs and albums, while not necessarily country-western in style, featured gunslingers on horseback, 'indians',<sup>1</sup> prairies, bison, and trains. In a countercultural climate that was anti-capitalist, anti-individualist, and against a postwar establishment that was greatly influenced by the US, the songs stand out as apparently incongruous, and from their singular position, they provide a font of information about Italian *cantautori*, the US musical paragon, Bob Dylan, who acted as a guiding voice, and the counterculture itself. Popular music can be revealing,<sup>2</sup> particularly during the 1960-70s, because it played an enormous role in the formation of youths' political and social beliefs, and, in turn, reflects those beliefs. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan argued in 1970, beginning with the second postwar generation, contemporary youths educated themselves, outside of the classroom, on music. McLuhan claimed that the education-through-literacy model that had dominated in the west for 2,500 years was ending and concluded: this "is the meaning of rock music" (3).

If rock music's meaning (with 'rock' music we must include folk music and other groundbreaking popular youth genres that would come to distinguish themselves in the 60s and 70s) is, at least in part, the extracurricular education of youths outside of normative State structures, then the substance of popular songs is crucial to conceiving of the beliefs and actions

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<sup>1</sup> 'Indians' will be used here to refer to myth, whereas 'Native Americans' will refer to history.

<sup>2</sup> Ilaria Serra argued as much from a pedagogical perspective (2011).

of the generation itself. This is true, it seems, not only for the countercultural generation, but will prove to be increasingly the case. As Bob Dylan's 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature demonstrates, singer-songwriters are coming to be judged, once again, as poets, the aural is gaining ground on the written, just as McLuhan suspected. This is one of a growing number of pioneer studies in a burgeoning field.

It appears that for two reasons the myth of the North American West, known in Italian as *il Far-West*, was extremely popular despite the fact that it was apparently antithetical to Italian countercultural values. Firstly, the myth had become a nearly empty vessel for diverse content after years of the excavation of meaning, in a process witnessed and analyzed by Roland Barthes in his 1957 treatise on modern media and mythology. Secondly, the myth was sanctioned for the public by a chain of grace that departed from Bob Dylan to the Italian *cantautori* Francesco Guccini and Francesco De Gregori and to the Italian public.<sup>3</sup> Another *cantautore*, Fabrizio De André, took a critical stance against the foreign myth in his music, but perhaps too late, as the counterculture itself had already begun to break apart into factions that conspicuously mimicked the cowboys and indians of the myth.

The Italian artists treated here, Francesco Guccini, Francesco De Gregori, and Fabrizio De André, are arguably the three most influential *cantautori* of the era. All three were considered then, and are today, to be narrators and interpreters of those tumultuous revolutionary years. Guccini and De André were a decade older than De Gregori. Both were born in 1940 and they came out with their first LPs in 1966 and 1968, respectively. De Gregori was born in 1951 and released his first solo LP in 1973. Bob Dylan, as we will see, was almost

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<sup>3</sup> The tradition of so-called *Far-West* tales in Italy did not begin with Bob Dylan or the counterculture. Rather, Pierpaolo Polzinetti argues that as early as 1700s Neapolitan operas there are examples of 'outlaw' heroes whose adventures are staged on the American frontier (23). This tradition culminated in Giacomo Puccini's 1911 opera, *La fanciulla del West*, which was apparently inspired by Puccini's attendance in Milan of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* touring show (Laegreid 416). At the turn of the century, furthermore, Emilio Salgari's adventure series were popular and included his *Ciclo del Far West*, 1908-1910.

certainly the most influential international singer-songwriter during the period and each of the Italians interacts with and responds to his oeuvre in ways that, as I argue, are impactful to and demonstrative of their narrative imaginations.

*Modern Mythology and Mass Media*

In order to treat the conception of *il Far-West* in Italy, one must first conceive of how the mythical space relates to and departs from the historical space and how myth itself functions in the individual and communal imagination. Historian Richard Slotkin offers a concise definition of myth in his *Gunfighter Nation*, when he states that myths “are offered in a form that disarms critical analysis by their appeal to the structures and traditions of story-telling and the clichés of historical memory” (6). This gets to the abbreviated crux of what cultural theorist, Roland Barthes, describes in semiological terms in his *Mythologies*, where he argues that modern myth is the collusion of form and content that seeks to hide ideology in its message, while embedding it in our minds, from whence it can emanate seemingly naturally as our own dreams and ideals. Because Barthes's analysis of modern myth focuses on the centrality of form, it is particularly useful here, for as pointed out by McLuhan, the means of communication becomes particularly important to youths by 1970, as the musical form, which includes the musician's persona, is itself swathed in legendary importance and seems to imply, in and of itself, a departure from certain mainstream ideologies.

Myth, Barthes states, is part semiology and part ideology, the semiological part postulates a relationship between a signified and a signifier to create a sign, which represents a system of ideas. Modern myth adds another layer, that of form, which is a lateral move that further distances the original signified from its new output. Barthes calls this a ‘signification’ and describes it as a layered and complex communication that appears, on the contrary, flat and unified (225). The language of the myth, itself, no longer refers back to a signified, but to

another linguistically constructed sign. Because of this distance, Barthes argues, myth can empty the signification; it does not suppress historicized meaning, but distances and distorts it, allowing cultural producers to manipulate that space between the signification and historical meaning. Myths, then, act essentially as predetermined short-cuts or short-circuits to meaning that persistently route individuals to conclusions that appear to them inductive, or natural. Barthes underlines, however, that myths are 'values' that do not guarantee truth, but which are often used as "a perpetual alibi" (233) for the structures and norms of society.

*Mythologies* offers a number of methods for a so-called 'mythologist' to decode myth, so as to unmask its functionality. One method is to re-politicize, or re-historicize, mythical media that has been depoliticized so as to appear to "purify" it (255). While fellow semiotician and popular-culture theorist, Umberto Eco, does not speak in terms of 'myth', his 'semiological guerrilla', proposed in 1967, has a similar duty to Barthes's mythologist. Barthes and Eco both argue that mass media covertly circulate ideology in messages that appear unbiased, natural, or pure; and they argue for the importance of those in society who would, as Eco puts it, 'decode' these ideological messages. In Eco's "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla" the cultural theorist discusses the contemporary atmosphere of dissent, and taking Marshall McLuhan as a jumping off point, he argues that contemporary mass protest refutes the method/form and content of societal hegemonic control—to put it in Gramscian terms—yet it most often does not successfully act as the semiological guerrilla he calls for. He concludes, rather, that in their own productions, dissenters do not "manage to leave the circle, and thus re-enter it without wanting to. Revolutions," he says, "often resolve themselves in the most picturesque forms of integration" (298). I argue that it is a lack of critical decoding, or de-mythifying, which causes some of the singer-songwriters analyzed here to create and disseminate narratives with obscured but extant ideological messages that are still in line with mainstream ideologies. As

we will see, these cowboy songs are purified of the political but manage to present, formally, as subversive. Yet, just as Eco predicts, upon scrutiny they are picturesque forms of integration, as Barthes says they are 'alibis' for various State structures.

*Bufalo Bill and Amerigo, Mythical Cowboy Heroes*

1966 and 1985 are the binding years for the songs dealt with here. These years, significantly, encircle both those of cultural revolution and civil terror in Italy (roughly 1967 through the first half of the 1980s) and of Francesco Guccini's and Francesco De Gregori's greatest production of cowboy songs and albums. In Guccini's and De Gregori's work, there is a marked nostalgia for the mythical landscape. It is associated with the cowboys-and-indians games of their youths and the loss of an ineffable something—enchantment, innocence, promise—in adulthood.<sup>4</sup> Guccini conveys their sense of the myth well on the inside cover of his 1984 live album *Between Emilia Street and the Wild West*:

Those fields were like our domesticated 'West', with just a couple of steps and crossing a street there were suddenly cowboys and indians, horses and arrows; [...] Then, Emilia Street went on cutting Modena in two, but the West had a different face, and the 'American Myth', [...] spoke a different language, that of rock, of vinyl covers [...] But the two references always existed, one foot here and the other there, the dream (better, the utopia) and the reality.

The same sense is conveyed in the 1972 song, "Little City," from which the album title is taken, as the narrator remembers school days of his youth when he daydreamed: "my eyes watched [the nuns], but they dreamed of heroes, arms, and billiards, / my imagination ran towards the prairie that separated Emilia Street and the Wild West" (ll. 17-18). De Gregori and Guccini engage with the myth as a yearned for and internalized utopia, as De Gregori sings in his

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<sup>4</sup> This is not only the case in Italy, Janne Lahti's recent scholarly edition begins with his memories of playing 'cowboys and indians' and reading Western comics, then considers "the European fascination with the West" (Kindle loc. 82) and argues for the frontier as a space of 'Global History' (Kindle loc. 61). As a Finnish boy growing up in the 1980s, he still cites the French-Belgian *Lucky Luke* (first appearing in 1946) and Italian *Tex Willer* as the most influential European comics of his youth (Kindle loc. 62).

"Cowboys" of 1985: "Cowboys go on horseback, in the Arizona of our hearts" (l. 12).

The nostalgic tone demonstrates the lack of decoding of a national foundational myth built on a historical period of conquest and genocide. Guccini and De Gregori trace the origins of the frontier West back, not to a historical source, not even to its mythical source, but, rather, to personal memory, which can be proffered as communal memory since it originates, to a great degree, in the most popular Italian comic of their childhoods, the cowboy-ranger comic *Tex Willer*. In this conception of the myth, the *cantautori*'s protagonists act as both the heroes and the victims of the landscape; heroes because of their cowboy status in a promised land of adventure, and victims because they grow up to find out that that land is either gone or never existed. Two examples of this hero/victim cowboy exist in the titular songs from De Gregori's 1976 *Bufalo Bill* and Guccini's 1978 *Amerigo*.

According to De Gregori, the guiding concept in his *Bufalo Bill* is America, a setting he returns to in 1985 with his "Cowboys" and in his 1993 "Adelante! Adelante!". The titular hero has a long history in Italy, beginning with his Wild West tours of Europe. Adventure-novelist Emilio Salgari dedicated an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel to him<sup>5</sup> and in 1939 the Fascist regime introduced the comic series "Buffalo Bill, the Italian Hero of the Prairie" in *Il piccolo corriere*, which, as historian Renee Laegreid remarks, was produced "in the service of Italian nationalism, appropriating [Buffalo Bill's] contributions to the US colonization of the frontier West and applying them to further the Italian imperialist agenda" ("Buffalo Bill, the Italian Hero of the Prairies" 255). Indeed, Buffalo Bill was himself a key figure in creating the myth of the cowboy and did so by painting them in his show as instrumental to the colonial mission, as helping to "extend American civilization" across the Western frontier (Reddin 69).

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<sup>5</sup> *The Sovereign of the Gold Field*, published serially in 1904 and as a novel in 1905 (*La Sovrana del Campo d'Oro*, Genova, Donath, 1905).

De Gregori's misspelling of 'bufalo' in the title was meant to show the implicit contradictions of the U.S. myth and its Italian adoption (Piferi 69),<sup>6</sup> yet the song's relationship with the American West, rather than contradictory and problematic, is sentimental and romantic. The cover image depicts a sexualized American cowgirl. Her wide smile and smoking gun, miss the mark of irony or critique, while the title track, itself, was inspired by a U.S. Western film and does not manage to demonstrate a significant lacuna between the American and Italian versions of the myth (69). Nor does it manage, for that manner, to demonstrate an altogether different figure from the expansionist-hero created by Cody and reutilized by Fascism to encourage militaristic and colonial-settler support at the frontier in Ethiopia. While De Gregori attempts to depoliticize the man and depict him as a simple hunter and adventurer, his reputation in Italy was one closely associated with expansionism, both during the Scramble for Africa and Fascism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Laegreid argues that his memory was "codified" in Italy, "reifying themes of imperial conquest" (262) across decades of publications of dime and adventure novels.

De Gregori's narrator is unnamed until the final line when he says "My name was Bufalo Bill" (l. 32). Until that point, his identity fuses with the singer-songwriter's as the narrative 'I' remembers his childhood in an idyllic landscape: "At that time," he sings, "I was a boy / gullible and romantic [...] with a mustache like a man's" (l. 6, 8), and "the country was very young, / soldiers on horseback were its only defense. / The sparkling green of the prairie / demonstrated glaringly the existence of God, / of the God who designs the frontier and constructs the railway" (ll. 1-5). Without alluding to the genocide on the plains during the

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<sup>6</sup> A *bufalo* in Italian is a water buffalo, connoted with mozzarella. While the North American bison is a *bisonte*.

<sup>7</sup> During the years of Francesco Crispi's push for the creation of the first Italian colonies in Africa, Renee Laegreid remembers that "anti-imperialist critics depicted Cody and Crispi together in political cartoons, lampooning both men and the supposed benefits of expansion" (260; from the William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody Collection, MS 6, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Center of the West).

historical "Buffalo" Bill Cody's life, the song takes a light tone, folding Buffalo Bill's famous bison hunts into the games of cowboys-and-indians played in backyards. The narrator sings that there are those who kill for love or money, but I, a hunter, "always killed as a game [...]" and I was an only child, blonde a bit like Jesus" (ll. 18, 22). De Gregori's narrator is a nostalgic and tragic hero; he is telling the story of his 20-year-old self, from the point of view of an old man, who has lost the frontier. Buffalo Bill's idyllic prairie gives way in the end to highways and he sits on the side of the road "one sad afternoon" (l. 5) to contemplate it; then, at fifty, we understand that his idyllic Eden is gone, so he goes on tour in Europe. This is at once "Buffalo" Bill Cody's tale and the singer-songwriter's. He too must grow up and leave the prairies and games of the Far-West behind him to tour Europe and perform, apparently nostalgic for the utopian games of his youth.

Francesco Guccini, some ten years prior to De Gregori, folds his own mental map of the world to superimpose the myth of the West on his childhood.<sup>8</sup> In 1972's "Little City", Guccini remembers his hometown of Modena vividly, with its signs of bombings and its smell of postwar, which he differentiates from his daydreams about prairies in the West. Then, as he had distinguished the reality of Modena from the utopian *Far-West*, he distinguishes nostalgic memory from unsentimental recollection: "Silly adolescence, false and stupid innocence, / continence, empty third-hand American myth" (ll. 19-20). As in De Gregori, there is friction between myth/reality, youth/adulthood, that revolves around the myth of the West, and more broadly, the myth of America. Indeed, Guccini eventually writes: "There is continual confrontation between his America—marginalized, backbreaking, defeating—and mine, made of myths, imaginations, and flights of fancy" (Guccini, *Un altro giorno è andato* 101). The 'he'

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<sup>8</sup> The cover of 1978's *Amerigo* is quite literally a superimposition of the two, as Guccini's face overlays an Age-of-Exploration era map of the Americas.



of "his America" in this quote was Guccini's great uncle, Enrico Guccini, who becomes the titular Amerigo character in the long introductory and title track for his 1978 *Amerigo* album. His uncle had emigrated to the United States and his experience of the American Dream when he returned to Modena differed tremendously from Guccini's childhood ideal. Yet in the end, for all of his awareness of the problems of the myth, Guccini treats *il Far-West* as representing nothing more and nothing less than a beautiful promise that becomes a personal loss, and a loss for other potential Italian immigrants, when the lie at the crux of it is exposed.

Guccini's Amerigo is 20-years-old, like De Gregori's Bufalo Bill, when he takes off for America—"He had the unlined face of a twenty-year-old, / with anger and adventure and still vague ideas of socialism" (ll. 9-10)—and returns to Europe, like Bufalo Bill, when he is old and worn. Guccini remembers meeting him when he is young, he is still like a cowboy to the boy whose ideas of America are of Atlantis, the heart, destiny, paradise-lost and Fort Apache (ll. 18, 22-23). Amerigo's cowboy status is emphasized by a strange apparatus that "seems a pistol holster" (l. 8) to the young Guccini, but that was, in reality, a hernia belt. The image of the hernia belt cum pistol holder tells the entire narrative of Amerigo's heroism and victimhood. As the song recounts, Amerigo had left as a hopeful immigrant and came back a tired old man, crucially contextualized within the rhetoric of immigrant rather than settler-colonizer,<sup>9</sup> both hero and victim of the tale. In the final lines Guccini, like De Gregori, mirrors himself onto the narrative. Indeed, Guccini's own experience of and fixation with the US was extremely personal to him and he too emigrated in his twenties for a few months. The narrator, Guccini himself, sings: "I didn't understand then that that man was my face, he was my mirror" (l. 39). There is a final, complex conflation here that is vital to understanding how the cowboy hero

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<sup>9</sup> As Lahti points out, Patrick Wolfe argues that the goals of settler-colonialism are different from those of other forms. It "destroys to replace" and is a "zero-sum contest over land" that is characterized by [the] "logic of elimination" (Lahti Kindle loc. 84; Wolfe 868; Wolfe 388).

gained traction outside of mainstream culture, and it involves the folding of the singer himself, counterculture hero, into the convoluted mythical signification of victim/hero/cowboy/singer-songwriter. De Gregori did the same in "Bufalo Bill" and we will see Bob Dylan do it as well. The tones of the songs are all the same, with a marked sense of personal loss, epitomized in the landscape of the mythical West.

The personal layer helps these songs to purify themselves of the historical and politic and allows them, in turn, to dwell in a love the narrators nurture for the memory of the myth in their youths. As Barthes states, however, myths cannot suppress historicized meaning, they can only distance it. Thus, in these songs' nostalgic tone there is an implied nostalgia, as well, for the original ideological values of the American foundational myth as well as for the historical period. It is in this implied nostalgia that the songs become problematic, as it regards both the mythical and historical underpinnings. It is problematic, in the first instance, in light of the apparent beliefs and goals of the Italian 1968 counterculture, of which historian Paul Ginsborg said the "values of solidarity, collective action and the fight against social injustice [as] counterposed to the individualism and consumerism of 'neo-capitalism' were the main characteristics of a movement that, at its heart, was marxist" (301, 306). By contrast, the historical frontier was physically founded on colonial land grabs and largely built via the labor exploitation of unregulated capitalism, while the original mythical values include individualism and a rags-to-riches capitalist promise.

There are some shared values, namely the anti-authoritarianism and rebirth-and-potential apparent in the values systems of both the frontier West and the counterculture. Yet, in the face of even the shared, subjectively positive values, there are conspicuous, objectively negative aspects of the frontier West that make it an untenable ideal in the 1970s. Indeed, the historical, as well as the original and countercultural mythical, which presents as the cleanslate

of 'wilderness',<sup>10</sup> share a landscape that witnesses the final act of a long genocide of native people, the abuse and refusal of agency and identity to people of color and women,<sup>11</sup> and the ecological devastation wrought by the progress and activity of the frontier. Seen in this rehistoricized and repoliticized light, the *cantautori's* affinity for cowboys, while ostensibly seditious in its anti-authoritarianism, and critical of contemporary society, appears rather reactionary. The first-person narrators in "Bufalo Bill" and "Amerigo" exult in and exist precisely within the constructs of dominant culture, in a retrograde mythical landscape that sentimentalizes a time when men of European descent roamed free and, with violence, claimed what they wanted whenever they wanted it.

This idealized roaming hero is nothing new and not unique to the cowboy. It can be seen in historical tropes that precede him, both the erring knight and the wandering minstrel. I argue that, together with the victim and hero conflation, it is, precisely, the conflation of the violent-wanderer and musician-wanderer in the countercultural cowboy hero that makes him such an enchanting figure to singer-songwriters. De Gregori and Guccini certainly see themselves, or at least their protagonists, as erring heroes. The narrative-I of "Bufalo Bill" leaves the prairie to "girare l'Europa" (l. 30), to travel around or wander Europe, and Francesco Guccini implies the centrality of 'wandering' or 'roaming' from the start of his career. On his first album, 1966's *Folk beat n. 1*, in "Talkin' Milano", an Italian take on Bob Dylan's 1962 "Talkin' New York", Guccini sings: "Late at night, sleeping I dreamed that I had become Bob Dylan, / I wandered [*giravo*] the world with my guitar" (l. 32-33). Dylan, for his part, in "Talkin' New York", is definitively wandering. The memoir-song begins with a false origin

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<sup>10</sup> This has been increasingly recognized with the rise of post-colonial theory, in both the U.S. and Italy. Particularly, since the early 2000s there has been a change in thinking about 'wilderness'. Cf: "L'idea di wilderness [è ...] L'idea di una natura vergine, senza traccia di occupazione umana, acquista, inoltre, una connotazione di tipo politico e sociale in quanto implicitamente 'disumanizza' le popolazioni indigene che [ci] vivono." (Rosso 2008, 105).

<sup>11</sup> This has been increasingly underlined by New Western History since the 1980s. (See Lahti Kindle loc. 130)

story for the Minnesotan musician—"I rambled out of the Wild West, / Leaving the towns I loved the best" (ll. 1-2)—and ends with his return to that origin: "I rambled out of New York town / Pulled my cap down over my eyes / And headed out for the western skies" (ll. 43-45). From this starting point with Guccini's "Talkin' Milano" and Dylan's original "Talkin' New York", we can trace the relay of grace from the American myth, through Dylan, to the Italian *cantautori*. These musicians' adoption of the myth, was made possible, as we shall see, by mutations it underwent across the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*A National Foundation Myth Transformed for a Dissenting Generation*

As previously mentioned, Barthes argues that myth can empty itself as language and history evaporates and it becomes form (226-7). The emptiness makes modern myths highly mutable. Cultural producers can wield the same forms variously, thus mythical heroes can simultaneously convey shifting sets of ideological values. I propose that this mutating and excavating is, in part, what made the myth so popular in Italy during years that saw the nation so divided: all sorts of people, artists and audiences, could stamp their own narrative and ideals on that of the chameleon hero in the West. The first, significant, permanent mutation was in the conflation of the Cowboy and the Indian. From historical enemies, cowboys and indians become friends, and from friends they fuse into one. Early and crucial examples of this are the popular postwar US television show *The Lone Ranger* (debuting on radio in 1933 and television in 1949) and Italian comic book *Tex Willer* (debuting in 1948), which feature virtually the same dual hero. Both are white men associated with official US authority, as well as with Native Americans and their alternative value sets. The Lone Ranger is accompanied by the Comanche, Tonto, who renames him 'Kemo Sabe', or 'faithful friend', while Tex adventures with the Navajo, Tiger Jack, who calls him Night Eagle. Tex Willer, furthermore, is a Texas Ranger as

well as chief of the Navajo Nation, and he often refers to the Navajo as 'his Navajo'.<sup>12</sup> Both men absorb part of the myth of the indian to make the cowboy/indian relationship less oppositional for a contemporary public that no longer saw native people as a threat. This movement of associating the white hero with his Native American counterpart is not a new one,<sup>13</sup> but in the postwar period it becomes increasingly an imperative, and the legendary characters of The Lone Ranger and Tex Willer set the stage for innumerable stories to come.

The integration is slick and important, as it takes heroism and victimhood from the native people, while lending a new sort of native heroism and victimhood to the cowboy. The hero/victim conflation is seen in a heightened form when the Native American disappears completely and only the white man remains. This is the case, for example, in Sergio Leone's *western all'italiana* films,<sup>14</sup> as well as in "Bufalo Bill", "Amerigo", and, as we will see, Dylan's "Romance in Durango". However, the essential, formational prairie hero for the Italian countercultural generation is the classic cowboy/indian conflation found in Tex Willer, with his silent-subaltern native sidekick.<sup>15</sup> The white Texas Ranger adventures in the West, protecting 'his navajo' (Bonelli 23, 30) and taking up causes with half-measures that maintain the status quo and keep Navajos pacified and marginalized, without threatening the general power structure or the ruling class's right to power. Despite the relatively conservative content, comics were seen as a subversive medium in postwar Italy, prohibited or discouraged in most

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<sup>12</sup> To take just one example from a story cycle *cantautori* would have read in their youths, the 1958-1959 cycle *Tex: Sangue navajo*, in which Tex refers to the Navajo people with the possessive as he attempts to 'defend' them while also keeping them from taking revenge two business men who kill four warrior Navajos on horseback as they travel by train (Bonelli 23, 30).

<sup>13</sup> James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) feature the dual figure, Natty Bumppo / Hawkeye.

<sup>14</sup> Leone regarding the erasure of native people from his films: "I could not conceive of fake indians like they use in Hollywood [...] Indians fit perfectly into my Western canvas, but not into my cinematic vision: if I had to include them in a film, I would want them to be authentic, and today they are almost impossible to find" (Minninni 7).

<sup>15</sup> Brunetto Salvarini remembers: "When we played no one wanted to be Tiger Jack. [He was ...] too silent, too absent in his omnipresence, too perturbing in his being 'other' to be able to be part of the game" (Salvarani 138).

households. So while Tex is substantially upholding the status quo, his heroism, formally, takes on an aspect of dissent, and he becomes a powerful icon, perhaps the most powerful icon, for Italian boys growing up in the postwar. Not least of all because, as Scott McCloud points out in his *Understanding Comics*, "Cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled," and for this reason stories expressed through comics are particularly fit to imprint themselves on young minds.<sup>16</sup>

In this setting, the myth begins to blossom and it undergoes a second alteration in the 1960s that marks the crucial move by which the Wild West becomes iconic for contemporary youth culture: The Conflation of the Cowboy and Musician, the Gunslinger and Guitar-Singer. Revisionist Westerns of the 1960s, which include Italian *western all'italiana* (or, as they are widely known, Spaghetti Westerns), sought to disrupt classical narratives and traditional Western ideals. They sought to increase realism, in the violence they portray, for example. But they most often do not manage to disentangle their heroes from their cowboy/indian conflation, indeed, they sometimes become further entangled. Take for example *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Sergio Leone's 1968 masterpiece. In a crucial scene that reveals the hero's origin story and the foundational moment of his identity, we see a memory through the green-gold eyes of the fair-haired Charles Bronson who plays the hero. Yet the hero remembers himself as a young boy of obviously native origin. The drastic physical difference in the memory is a jarring example of the sewing together of the two narratives into a single smooth history, as the cowboy *becomes* the native. And another crucial conflation has taken place. The hero is nameless and nearly voiceless, he is called by the name of the instrument whose melancholy melody often announces his arrival: Harmonica. Barthes's mythical excavation is apparent here,

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<sup>16</sup> McCloud explains this by stating: "comics have a more direct relationship with iconography than other forms of verbal or written storytelling." Cartoons, he claims, are "form[s] of amplification through simplification," which allow us to see ourselves in representations (34).

as language is supplanted by form in the silent figure of Harmonica. The hero has no name, hardly any voice, and is almost iconographic, *a la* Clint Eastwood, as Leone sought actors who could turn their faces into masks. Harmonica is an empty container for a set of fundamentally incongruent symbols: natives, colonizers, hero, victim, art (instrument), violence (weapon).

Harmonica is a conflation of the medieval knight and minstrel, the conflation of the Domingo Sarmiento Faustino's *gaucho malo* and *gaucho cantor*, which he defines in his 1845 *Facundo* as two distinct types of Argentinian cowboys.<sup>17</sup> In the U.S. and Italy in the 1970s, the two sometimes blend into one, allowing their heroism to mix: the symbols of violence and pacifism, war and art, of militated subversion and of poetic subversion, are one. And a fascinating reversal simultaneously occurs, as seen in Sam Peckinpah's 1973 *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, which stars the folk musicians Kris Kristofferson and Bob Dylan as Billy the Kid and his sidekick Alias, respectively. Alias is an outlaw-minstrel; he is nameless and almost voiceless, in the film, like Harmonica. Alias carries a knife in the film, not an instrument, but Dylan's real-life persona enshrouds him, as does the music he created for the soundtrack that plays behind the action. Peckinpah's heroes are contemporary, counterculture cowboys, dressed in slightly bell-bottomed pants and cowboy boots, living on a sort of frontier commune that is reminiscent of both hippy and Native American communities. Yet, what is most interesting is not that Peckinpah's cowboys have become native/hippy/folk star mash ups, but that the singer-songwriters themselves dress up as cowboys. To look at Kristofferson as himself in the 70s or as Billy the Kid, to look at Dylan as Alias or himself, it is hard to distinguish the line between reality and fiction.<sup>18</sup> Kristofferson is from Texas so this shouldn't perhaps surprise us. But Dylan is from a Minnesota coal town and when he appeared on the music scene in 1961,

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<sup>17</sup> Domingo Fausto Sarmiento's momentous work details the history of Argentina's development via the life of historical *gaucho* Juan Facundo Quiroga.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the cover of Kristofferson's 1971 album *Silver Tongued Devil and I* (a country album, to be fair) and the covers of Dylan's 1976 *Desire* and 1978 *Masterpieces*.

he was a beatnik hipster in tight jeans, a Greek fisherman's hat, and sunglasses.

Dylan's music featured the frontier since as early as "Talkin' New York" and his early interest in the setting as well as the cowboy archetype could be seen as related to his adoration of Woody Guthrie and his folk-music revival. Indeed, scholars have argued that the figure of the 'outlaw,' which includes but is not limited to the cowboy, is a central figure across Dylan's career (Carpenter). However, when he leaves the folk-music scene in 1965, his relationship to the West alters slightly, in that it is no longer pivoting on a relationship to the folk tradition and appears rather to be taken up, personally, as a part of her own persona. Indeed, around the early 1970s, Dylan's style changed to move towards a western-music look, and he picked up a cowboy hat that would become nearly synonymous with him as an artist for years. Dylan's persona, in fact, as seen on the cover of his 1976 *Desire*, begins to resemble that of the cowboy hero in the album's song "Romance in Durango", which he wrote while shooting *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* in Durango, Mexico, and which has a feel similar to the film's. The first-person narrator of the song is a cowboy and outlaw in the southwestern US; he has killed a man, and together with his love, Magdalena, is fleeing the country. He had to sell his guitar for bread, but he promises Magdalena that he will buy another and play for her while they ride. However, his dreams of the future and reassurances end when he is shot down, leaving Magdalena his gun to defend herself.

There is a clear conflation of the gunslinger and musician as the narrator makes central both his guitar (l. 5) and his gun (ll. 20, 51). Additionally, there is the conflation of the hero/victim in the tragic role of the outlaw and, crucially, in the narrator's status as both colonizer and colonized, which is spotlighted when he distinctly traces his roots as native Aztec-Mexican. Using the first-person plural possessive, he sings: We'll ride "past the Aztec ruins and the ghosts of our people" (l. 15), promising Magdalena: "We'll drink tequila where



our grandfathers stayed / When they rode with Villa into Torreón" (ll. 31-32). In the reference to Pancho Villa, the narrator reveals a crucial detail of the timeline that suggests he is not simply an Aztec cowboy at the historical frontier. Villa captured Torreón in 1912, which means that, as grandson of a Mexican revolutionary, the narrator must be living in or around present-day 1973, when the song was written. Thus, the narration appears less a historical romance and more a fantasy of the singer, himself, perhaps in his role as the white cowboy, Alias, or perhaps simply as Robert Zimmerman whose own grandfather immigrated to the US from Lithuania in 1902.

The confluences of various identities within a single hero allow for him to take on nuances of contemporary values (for example, a new countercultural affinity for Native American values), which, in turn, renews the validity of the outdated, stereotypical John-Wayne cowboy of the American foundation and Hollywood myth. The traditional cowboy was square, an enemy of native people, defender of the establishment and the rule of law, while Dylan's new cowboy hero is hip, one with the native people, and an outlaw. Yet, when the formal aspects of the myth are removed, the underlying ideologies remain the same; underneath it all, Dylan's cowboy persona, on album covers, in films, and in song, is much like the historical and mythical original: a colonizer with a gun who fancies himself a vigilante.

In the face of a claim that Bob Dylan, in this instance, is at least performing socio-political evasion (Carpenter, VitalSource), and at most retrograde and reactionary, one may argue that Dylan, from early on, never claimed to be anything else (Carpenter). After 1965, in fact, he distanced himself from his previous association with the folk and protest movements, and by his mid-twenties he'd left songs like "Times They Are A-Changin'" and "Blowin' in the Wind" behind him, resisting any particular stance vis-à-vis the cultural movement. However, a few points are valid whether Dylan claims them to be or not. Firstly, regardless of

his view of the counterculture specifically, his narratives of the West are crucially non-progressive in their treatment (or lack thereof) of natives, women, and nature. Indeed, in Damian Carpenter's recent chapter on the redemptive figure of the outlaw in Dylan's work, he focuses on too less likely songs from *Desire* and elides mention of "Romance in Durango" all together. For Dylan's cowboy dress and horseback ride are an escape, not from the law, but rather into the realm of a white-male-colonial utopia during the very years that saw the US battle for civil, Native American, and women's rights is troubling. Especially in the case of the fight for Civil Rights, as Dylan, himself, had come up in the New York music scene playing with the likes of John Lee Hooker, and two of his early influences are cited on his debut album as blues and African American spiritual. With only two original songs, the self-titled album featured covers of originals by the African American musicians Jesse Fuller, Curtis Jones, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Bukka White.

It should not, perhaps, surprise us that Bob Dylan was the first singer-songwriter to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, recognized for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," when he founded his style and reputation on the innovations of black musicians. It is, unfortunately and unfairly, often this way with awards and recognition. Indeed, Dylan's own fantasized heroism, as a white Nobel Laureate recognized for largely black innovations, is eerily similar to that of his romantic cowboy hero, a white man who derives his heroic status by claiming native roots. However, the additional fact that he won the award despite his artistic sympathy with an American myth structured on genocide and slavery, during the very years America struggled for greater racial inclusion, seems to demonstrates just how uncritical the West has become with regards to non-written forms. It highlights McLuhan's claim that a generation self-educated on this music, without guidance or critical assessment, as it highlights Barthes's claim that mythology quite effectively obscures

history beneath the veneers of certain formal presentations, such as popular music.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Dylan may have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in part, due to a seldom-discussed fact: that the Nobel Committee is European, not American. Dylan's cowboy film, his cowboy dress, his cowboy songs appear, on the surface, quite differently to Europeans and Americans. Indeed, the myth of the West alters when it is translated, it distances itself more completely from its historical truths, from the values that make up the original U.S. foundation myth and the underpinnings of the American Dream that follows. So does the myth of the singer-songwriter. They both take on additional meanings unique to each culture and language they are translated into. In the case of Italy, if the American dream of the 1950s was fracturing for the 1960s and 70s generations, it was, according to historian Paul Ginsborg, only to be replaced by a new American dream represented in the counterculture: its music scene, with Dylan as its icon, its campus protests, and its west-coast commune lifestyle (302). Though Bob Dylan distanced himself from the American protest movement in the U.S., he and his music came across the Atlantic as still strictly aligned with the movement in the 1970s. Thus, while Dylan's retreat to the mythical West appears domestically as reactionary, his cowboy songs come to Italy with all of the progressive associations he had had in 1962. Dylan, indeed, began to have an immense influence on the Italian folk music scene beginning, mainly, after he had declared his break from the US scene by appearing with an electric guitar at the Newport Musical Festival in 1965, and at just about the time he was transitioning to a cowboy aesthetic,<sup>19</sup> and from the late-1960s on, he is the paradigm against which the great Italian singer-songwriters of the era are most often compared.

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<sup>19</sup> There are other international examples of Dylan's translation as a subversive cowboy figure. See for example the song "John, el Cowboy" by the Argentinian León Gieco, known as 'El Bob de las pampas' (on the 1974 album *La banda de caballos cansados*).

As mentioned, Francesco Guccini's first album, *Folk beat n. 1*, in 1966 finds the *cantautore* creating a Dylan-inspired song, sung in English and Italian and replete with harmonica, in which he fantasizes about being Dylan as he travels the world with his guitar. Francesco De Gregori, too, openly styled himself after Dylan, imitating his dress and use of harmonica holster, and playing covers of his songs regularly.<sup>20</sup> In 2015, De Gregori came out with a tribute album, *De Gregori Sings Bob Dylan: Love and Theft*, of Dylan songs translated into Italian by De Gregori himself.<sup>21</sup> There is a third *cantautore*, however, Fabrizio De André, who is equally important during the counterculture years. Significantly, De André distances himself from Dylan and engages very differently with the myth of *il Far West*.

*An Unsung Mythologist for the Countercultural Cowboy*

Fabrizio De André is the mythologist Barthes called for to re-historicize and re-politicize modern mythologies. His songs, generally, are non-personal, they tell the tales of others and if they are nostalgic it is for something lost by another, not by De André himself. The genovese *cantautore* is brutally critical of the treatment of Native Americans and his frontier West songs reflect this. While they depict a lost utopia, it is one that is lost to the native people, not to the cowboys, who appear in his music as antagonists rather than heroes. De André's opinion of Dylan, as opposed to his contemporaries, is ambivalent across his life, and at the beginning of his career, in 1969, it is outright dismissive. When asked if he is inspired by American folk singers, he replies: "I don't think there is any relationship. I would say that my songs come from a folk, if you can call it that, which is western-European, above all French, while all of Dylan's and Baez's songs, rather, come from a folk that is of the 'Western' type.

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<sup>20</sup> De Gregori performing Dylan songs across his career, participated in Dylan's film, *Masked and Anonymous* in 2003, and is considered the Italian folk musician most closely patterned on Dylan, culminating in his 2005 album *Pezzi*.

<sup>21</sup> The title (*Amore e furto*) is a translation of Dylan's 2001 album title, but it is also a pun on and allusion to the contents of De Gregori's album and career; the Italian word 'furto' translates literally as 'theft' and figuratively as 'plagiarism.'

There's a huge difference!" (Sassi 93-94). When asked in the same interview of his opinion of Dylan, he replies that he doesn't know his work well enough to comment. Indeed, De André claims he only came to know of Dylan's music via De Gregori leading up to their collaboration on the album *Volume 8* in 1975 (Sassi 391), when they worked together to translate a version of "Desolation Row" for De André's 1974 album *Canzoni*. Importantly, aside from the influence De Gregori had on the first of De André's two Dylan-inspired songs, there is the additional fact that De André, singular amongst his colleagues, points out that, in his opinion, Bob Dylan used to have a meaningful voice in regards to youth audiences, but that it isn't any longer the case by 1974.<sup>22</sup>

Twenty years later, De André had not changed his tune, even as interviewers continued to insist on the importance of Dylan's influence on Italian *canzoni d'autore* (Sassi 405). He affirms again in 1997 that his own music and Dylan's have nothing in common at all. His view of Dylan, I argue, is a correlative of his view of *il Far-West*, as across three songs, De André unpacks the myth to reveal its underlying ideologies and to, in turn, critique those who attempt to repurpose it for their own ends. In his "Sand Creek" he re-historicizes the frontier by turning the cowboy hero into a villain; in "Wolf Tail" he wields the myth to critique the Italian counterculture itself; in his version of "Romance in Durango", his second and final Dylan cover, he satirizes cowboy songs to mock singer-songwriters' self-depictions as outlaw heroes.

De André's "Sand Creek" is the third song on his 1981 self-titled concept album. The album alternates Sardinian and Native American tales, as De André felt, upon moving to Sardinia, there were strong parallels between the Italian colonialism of Sardinia and the European colonialism of the Americas. The album cover features a Native American, ostensibly

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<sup>22</sup> Interviewer: "Maybe you don't realize the dynamite you have inside and how important you could be for youths. Don't you feel the weight of this?" De André: "If I felt that I was a Bob Dylan (Dylan before, not Dylan now), if I thought I had a useful voice and something to say, I wouldn't have any doubts. I'd go on tour immediately" (Sassi 139).

alone on a pristine prairie, but bearing the signs of colonialism (his horse) and the struggle against it (his rifle). The narrator/hero of "Sand Creek", unlike in the previous songs analyzed here, is not a cowboy victim/hero narrative 'I' who lives in the mythical West of conflated signification. The narrator is a young Cheyenne boy who recounts the adventures of his enemy and the song's villain, who "was a 20-year-old general, turquoise eyes and turquoise jacket. / He was a 20-year-old general, / Son of a storm" (ll. 3-6). The general is the historical Colonel John Chivington, who felt it was his Christian duty to kill native people,<sup>23</sup> and who in 1864 led a group of 700 militia men, dressed in Union army uniforms, to massacre a group of more than one hundred unarmed and peaceful Cheyenne. Chivington was 43 when the event occurred, but De André makes him 20. He could have been associating him with his contemporaries' Buffalo Bill and Amerigo, who were both notably 20 years old, or with the more famous General Custer who massacred his own group of Cheyenne at Washita River when he was 29. Or, perhaps, he is playing on the age, which in de Gregori and Guccini appears to be associated with a certain rebelliousness, vigorous intrepidity, and self-assured idealism.

The defiance and daring are clear, but the idealism becomes a thorny issue and a sticking point for De André. Three Europeans (or European Americans) go West—Buffalo Bill, Amerigo, Chivington—all with the same youthful idealism of securing riches and glory in their futures. Yet only one is portrayed as a threat to indigenous life in the West. Only one re-connects the causal relationship between the gained riches of one and the loss of the other. There is an arrival, a new valuation near the song's start: "There was a silver dollar on the Sand Creek riverbed" (l. 7). It is followed near the end by a departure, a devaluation: "Now our children sleep on the Sand Creek riverbed" (l. 21). The implication is clear, the desire for gold

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<sup>23</sup> "I have come to kill Indians, and believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God's heaven to kill Indians. ... Kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice." General Chivington in (Brown 86–87).

and silver caused a genocide in North America. De André reimagines the lost paradise, the mythical ideal of the West in historical terms: "When the sun came up between the night's shoulders / There were only dogs and smoke and upturned tents" (ll. 22-23) as "Sand Creek" rigorously re-historicizes the colonial frontier. From the narrator's point of view, we see the so-called utopia, which De Gregori, Guccini, and Dylan yearn for, as a devastated landscape, where cowboys trade beads for land and Native American lives for gold. A decade later, in 1991, De André took a more direct stand, refusing to partake in Genoa's quincentennial of Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas. He wrote in his journals and reiterated at concerts that he would not celebrate his fellow Genoan but instead would "remember together with [Native Americans] that which they remember as the day of greatest national mourning" (Giuffrida 63).<sup>24</sup> While De André defended and remembered the suffering of the indigenous people of the Americas, he, importantly, does not conflate his own personality with theirs. The Cheyenne boy in "Sand Creek" is not symbolic of an Italian boy, the boy is only himself and his suffering is his alone; his people's heroism is not symbolic of some other local heroism, it is theirs alone.

This hardline distinction, this aversion towards appropriating Native American identities to tell European tales, is clear in De André's oeuvre as early as 1978 in his concept album *Rimini*. De André claims in 1978 that *Rimini* is "a disc made by, and making fun of, the petite bourgeoisie" (Sassi 179). The cover depicts the seaside town of Rimini as an idealized bourgeois vacation spot and the majority of songs on the album are clearly bourgeois and petit-bourgeois tales, but two songs stand out as clearly countercultural tales. In "Wolf Tail" and "Avventura a Durango" De André depicts the countercultural left as it appears to imagine itself in 1977: split into two factions that bear a remarkable resemblance to prairie cowboy and indian

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<sup>24</sup> See also *Archivio DA* IV/09 (B.3; 1-36) agenda, 159.

icons. Between 1968 and 1977, the protest movement had slowly but drastically altered. After the initial dissent in 1968, it was under pressure from the economic downturn of the 1970s, the failure of the extra-parliamentary groups on the left to find traction within the government, and the civil terror of the Red and Black Brigades that had begun in 1969 with the bombing of Piazza Fontana in Milan. 1977 found youths tired, frustrated, and disillusioned, and when the 1977 movement manifested in Italy, it was as if the values of 1968 had been distilled and divided between the distinct groups that resurfaced nearly a decade later. There was a creative element that tended to make alternative structures rather than fight to overhaul prevailing structures, and there was a militaristic element that sought to organize a battle against the State.

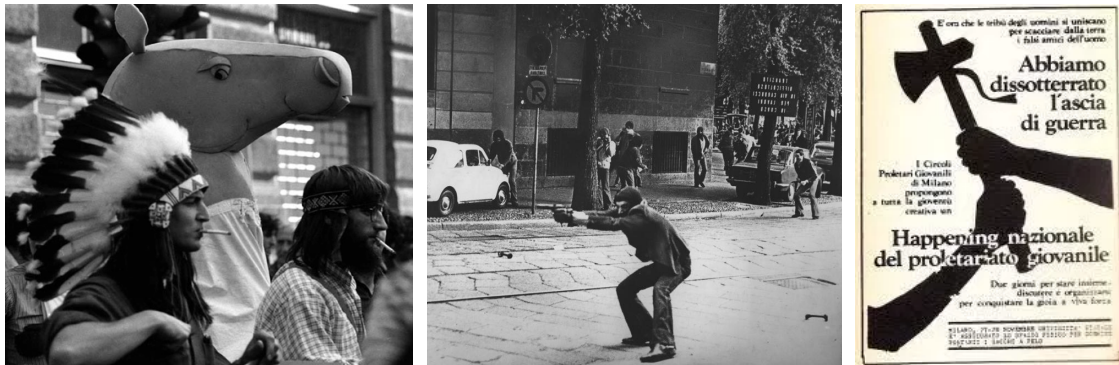
These two factions were known as the *Metropolitan Indians* (*gli indiani metropolitani*) and *autonomia operaia*, respectively. The prior group wore Native American paraphernalia to protests and the latter chanted slogans in praise of their pistol of choice, the Waltham p38 semi-automatic. A faction of *autonomia operaia* became infamous in a photo taken on May 14th, 1977 during a police assault in Milan. During the incident, within moments of the photo being taken, a 25-year-old policeman was shot and killed. The gunman's identity was unknown, but it was known that he was a member of an *autonomia operaia* faction, the Men of the p38. The photo hit the media stream and became an instant icon. In an article published soon after in *L'Espresso*, Umberto Eco stated: "This individual hero had the pose, the terrifying isolation [...] of the solitary shooters in the West—no longer dear to a generation that wants Indians." He went on to say that in Italy, rather, "when we introduce a solitary figure, he is always the victim" (*Sette anni di desiderio* 99). Eco is making an argument here for why the photo turned public opinion, quite suddenly, against leftist militancy.<sup>25</sup> But it also sums up why

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<sup>25</sup> Essayist and semiologist, Gianfranco Marrone's, insight gets more to the point decades later, when in his 2012 "One photo, a thousand things," (*Una foto, mille cose*) says of the P38: "the fact is that this violent deviation, as much as it was explicitly motivated by a thousand, sometimes quite sophisticated, post-Marxist analyses, was, in



the cowboy figure remains valid in *cantautori*'s songs, even after the incident in 1977. For, in fact, we have seen—in De Gregori and Dylan in the years leading up to the event, and in



question the validity of the youths' appropriation of Native American cultural symbols in their revolution.

The second *Far-West* song on the album, "Avventura a Durango", is a retelling of Dylan's original, with small but significant changes that render it an absurd caricature. Indeed, De André described the song as a "pretty pitiful *fumettone*<sup>26</sup>" soon after the album was released, and stated that it was included ironically (Sassi 197). De André's "Durango" tells essentially the same tale as the original, with two crucial differences. The first is that the narrator's native roots are erased; Dylan's "Past the Aztec ruins and the ghosts of our people," becomes De André's "Past the Aztec temples and the ruins" (l. 13), and gone is the mention of his Mexican-revolutionary grandfather: "We'll see the torero touch the sky / in the shade of the ancient podium / where Villa applauded the rodeo" (l. 26-28). De André, then, adds an element of satire to the tale, as his translation includes local elements that disrupt the continuity of the narrative and introduce an absurd tone. Dylan's cowboy, for example, had sold his guitar for some bread, while De André sings that he sold his for "some pizza" (l. 6). And where Dylan, in the refrain, evokes an imperfect and incomplete Spanish with the insertion of short lines like "no llores, mi querida", De André invents a non-existent dialect, close to the *abruzzese* "Nun chiagne Maddalena Dio ci guarderà," to underline the untranslatability of the story.

*Rimini*, as a whole, is poking fun at petit-bourgeois culture, not just on the beaches, but dressed up in a foreign myth: as vigilantes on the streets, as Indians on campuses, and as singer-songwriters who imagine themselves on horseback with their guitars. Perhaps it's even poking some fun at a coal town boy from Minnesota, dressed up as a Mexican cowboy. De André's songs are surprisingly similar to the very example Barthes gives of a myth whose functionality

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<sup>26</sup> 'Fumettone' is a pejorative variant of 'fumetto' (comic). It implies a story (usually a novel or film) that is highly popular but has little inherent value.

has been unmasked through re-politicizing. He describes the image of a black soldier saluting a French flag, which acts as an alibi for French imperialism. He instructs that one must look past the surface patriotism by viewing the image from the point of view of the black soldier, thus one cannot help but remember the actual events of colonialism that have been distorted and purified by mythification. In "Sand Creek" De André does just this and he is singular amongst his colleagues, the only singer-songwriter who does not reproduce the imperialist alibi. In his version of "Durango," he goes a step further, de-purifying the myth of the singer-songwriter himself, in a move that will become increasingly important for teachers and scholars to reproduce, it seems, as these artists take up the standard of poets for new generations.