

Nidi d'Arac

Traditional taranta pizzica from south east Italy meets the Clash and beyond. **Ian Anderson** hits the 'like' link.

Sitting in Womex's Copenhagen concert hall, I'm reminded of a post-gig dinner conversation with Alan Lomax back in the early '90s. He'd been enthusing about a band I was looking after, telling me that normally he didn't approve of artists who deliberately set out to mix up different traditions because it invariably didn't work, but in that band's case it did. And I'm watching Italy's Nidi d'Arac while having similar thoughts: I don't usually like bands who try to stretch from the traditional to the very modern in one set because it always seems contrived and the joins show, but in their case it works just fine and seems quite natural.

Nidi d'Arac's music grows out of the traditional *taranta pizzica* from the far south east 'heel' of Italy, where main man guitarist, singer and percussionist Alessandro Coppola was born in the baroque city of Lecce. Tonight, in a relatively short showcase, they'll stretch from bare bones acoustic, with just a guitar channelling the traditional *chitarra battente* and skittering *tamburello* tambourine, through electric guitar/ violin/ *organetto* (melodeon)/ bass/ drums post-folkrock which Oysterband fans would love, to workouts with a 'dub-master' DJ. Throughout, singer Vera Di Lecce twirls and skips in the elegant, skit-tish, seductive taranta pizzica dance, somewhat more frenetic than the statelier Neapolitan version.

The Italians use the term *contaminazioni*, which hardly needs translating but has a rather more benevolent meaning than the obvious English word might imply. Nidi d'Arac's clever trick is to blur the region in between traditional music 'contaminated' with punk rock, reggae and electronica, and vice versa.

Earlier in the day, with Mercedes Peon wailing in the distance and Danyel Waro giving forth on the other side of a thin wall, I'd sat talking with Coppola through

band manager Flaminia Vulcano. "I was born in Lecce, then moved to Rome", he starts. "But when I was young in Lecce, starting to be a musician, 25 years ago, there was a lot of attention to what was going on abroad, the new styles, especially from the UK – punk, new wave, psychedelia. It was a natural progression from The Clash to Nidi d'Arac. *Sandinista* was the album that changed my way of being a musician."

When they formed in the late '90s, Nidi d'Arac's early albums were made for Paulo Dossena's adventurous, pioneering Italian roots label CNI, state-of-the-art in their day with bands like Agricantus, Novalia and Almamegretta.

"He had the intuition as to how Italian music could be represented abroad. And that worked for a short period," says Coppola. But now, in common with other countries like Greece, Italian roots music gets little of the outside promotion that the French enjoy. "There is not an 'official' movement at the moment. Before, with CNI, it was the unique representative of the indie movement, world music, in Italy. The movement has started disappearing because the major labels have started absorbing all the independents, and as soon as a major would get an artist in their catalogue they would tell you how to do your album because otherwise they will not promote you."

They describe living in Italy as being in a "media dictatorship" where it's hard to get mainstream coverage. So where do they play? "The perfect places are the small village festivals with the big audiences, from the young people to their family, their grandparents. Also rock festivals, some world music festivals. People dance the traditional pizzica and the traditional pogo! We get people who go clubbing, and people who go to pizzica classes to learn how to dance it perfectly."

In the Salento region there has been a strong revival of the tradition, with really excellent bands like Aramire going out collecting, recording and releasing CDs of older traditional musicians and singers, some of whom even still sing in an ancient Greek dialect. Now there's a YouTube video of the graceful dancers with revival band BTQ with over a million hits.

Unsurprisingly, the first generation revivalists aren't great fans of the Nidi d'Arac approach. "They see themselves as the real tradition keepers. We are really fine with them, but they're not fine with us. We respect the tradition, of course, but they don't accept any kind of changes. One reason is that they live down there in Salento, but we were formed in Rome so have a totally different perspective. They see Nidi d'Arac as being too 'cool' and getting all the attention, but in fact Nidi d'Arac are not famous – except in the Salento region. Down there it's really like an island, tucked away."

"I am aware that they were doing what we're trying to do now back then, and I have lots of admiration for all the work that they've done – collecting all these old songs. I've studied all those recordings, the unique way of singing of the older people, which are like a bible."

Sadly, one of the most celebrated of those singers, Uccio Aloisi, recently died approaching 90. A few years back he and Nidi d'Arac did a tour together – *Taranta Tradition & Innovation*, in which they performed together on stage. So, far from unusually, the really old guys get it, but the revivalists don't. "Uccio was our grandfather, Aramire our parents," they say.

Nidi d'Arac will be at Womad and Sidmouth festivals this summer: watch out for them. www.myspace.com/nididarac 

