

INTERVIEW: Lidia Bastianich Talks!

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**Peppino di Capri** launched his musical career singing for American troops in WWII.



# MUSIC MAN

Thanks to an uncle who was a hotel chef, Peppino di Capri made his musical debut at age four singing for American troops stationed on the island during World War II.

*Story and Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*



## NATIVE SON

**I**n 1943, when he was only four years old, Peppino di Capri began singing to the American troops who were stationed in Italy during World War II. He was *un bambino prodigio*, a child prodigy, born Giuseppe Faiella on Capri. Singer, songwriter and pianist, he is still one of Italy's most famous musical performers. It all started when his uncle, a chef in a hotel on Capri, let him sing in his restaurant.

I was always curious to meet Signor Peppino. I grew up in an American-Italian family where my mom played his music continuously while she cooked. At big Italian family weddings, his songs, including *Le Canzoni di Amore* and *Saint Tropez Twist*, brought everyone to the dance floor.

When I moved to Italy, I saw Peppino often on Capri. My husband Rino and I attended many of his outdoor summer concerts at Certosa di San Giacomo, the landmark Carthusian monastery on the island. A couple of years ago, we sat up close as he serenaded a private dinner party at Capri Palace. I've even crossed paths with him a few times at il Piccolo Bar in la Piazzetta, where he was reading a Repubblica newspaper. Still, I had never met him.

Thanks to my dear friend, AnnaChiara, and her aunt, Annamarie Boniello, who own Capri Press – *news e gossip locali, con informazioni turistiche, numeri utili e guida vacanze* – I had the chance to meet him. It was a dream come true.

It started this past summer when my husband and I attended a special concert at the Certosa in honor of Peppino's 77th birthday. He played his grand piano and sang every one of his songs, from "Luna Caprese" to "Roberta," "E Tu Ci Sei" and "Champagne." The concert lasted over two hours with Peppino, his full orchestra and three beautiful Italian female singers. Although Peppino conversed between songs as he always does, this concert was different. That night, he touched upon his life story. The audience clapped, sang and gave a standing ovation. I did, too. Some songs brought tears to my eyes. At the end of the concert, Peppino gave each of us an autographed CD of his new song, Capri.

The next day, I met AnnaChiara for an early morning caffè at the Hotel Marina Piccola, as I often do, and told her about the concert. She said, "You know, my aunt knows him well. Would you like to meet him?" The next thing I knew, an appointment was made.

A few days later, I met Signor Peppino at the Bar Funicular amid caffè chairs filled with suntanned Italians sipping Campari. Gentlemanly and handsome, he stood up and greeted me saying, "Buonasera." As he pulled out my chair, his pearly white hair caught a wing of bright sunlight. He was impeccably dressed head to toe in Caprese white.

When I said, "*Buona sera e grazie. Dimmi tutto*," a warm Neapolitan way of saying, tell your story, he eloquently began his tale.

"I performed for the very first time when I was four years old at the Morgan Tiberio Hotel on the island. This was a flashback that I will always remember. I was with my sister and cousin. They often took me by my hands, left and right. I was wearing my white school uniform. We climbed these big stairs to the first floor where there were many American soldiers. They sat me before the piano and had to put a box underneath my seat because I wasn't high enough and



Boats, both small and large, rest in the sea of Capri.





**Peppino di Capri** at his 77th birthday.



## NATIVE SON

couldn't reach the keyboard. Then, I played and sang all the American songs that I heard on the radio. I knew all of the songs by heart. At the end, the audience applauded. I played because my Zio Arturo was the chef of the hotel and he knew the American General Mark Clark.

"Zio Arturo told his friend, General Clark, 'I have a nephew who is four years old and loves to sing.' The General was curious and asked my uncle, 'How does he sing? Let's hear him.' So I sang. From this point on, the General was very impressed, and every weekend I sang and played at the hotel until the last truck left the island after World War II ended. At the time, I was just in kindergarten. I was attracted to music instinctively." He has a warm Neapolitan personality and laughs between sentences.

"At 12 years old, without my mother knowing, I would sneak out of the house at night and go to #2 Night Club in front of Hotel Quisisana. The owner would lecture me, and tell me to go home and study, saying I was too young to be in a nightclub. My mamma wanted me to study classical music, but I loved swing music, and loved to play the piano and sing. Thank God I did not listen to my mother, or I'd be in Milan right now at the Scala," he laughs, referring to the Italian opera house.

"My first group was Peppino di Capri and the Rockers in 1958. Our songs were "Malattia" (Sickness) and "Nun è Peccato" (It's Not A Sin), sung in Neapolitan. We were a hit! We were also the opening act for the Beatles when they toured Italy in 1965. Then, my first official show was the Bussola in Italy.

"At the time, my group opened for Caterina Valente. She was an Italian singer, guitarist, dancer and actress. After that television show, I returned to Capri and wrote the song "E' Sera" in 1968. In 1970, I created my own studio and label. I thought, if I make a mistake, it's my own fault and no one else's. That way I didn't have to produce songs I didn't like. Soon thereafter, I performed with my friend Gianni Nazzaro at the Festival di Napoli on Capri. We won the competition and things took a turn. From this point on, my professional career began," he says.

Peppino has performed several times at the Festival in San Remo singing "Un Grande Amore e Niente Più", and won twice. "In 1973, I wrote the song "Roberta", una bella canzone, for my first wife, and it's still a song everyone loves, especially in Brazil. I've also performed in different piano bars in South America, and in America, too," he adds.

"I've done many beautiful things in my life. In the golden years, I performed three concerts at the Olympia in Paris. I am older now and I don't travel the world any more to perform," he says.

He pauses, takes a sip of his lemonade, then Giuliana, his wife, arrives. She joins us in conversation. I give them gifts, including a bottle of my extra virgin lemon oil, a chef's apron and a Neapolitan ceramic woman wearing an apron over a popped belly used to store and hide the dishwashing sponge. Giuliana hugs me and laughs. "Grazie. You know I love to cook! I am always in the kitchen, while Peppino is always in his studio," she says.

"I love to eat," he adds. "Thank God Giuliana loves to cook," he says. Food and music go hand in hand.

"Buon appetito!" Peppino sings.



Capri's iconic clock tower stands in the bustling square.





**Top left: Peppino**, at left, with fellow musicians in an undated photo. **Top right:** Performing at one of many popular gatherings. **Right:** Peppino, in the front, with the Beatles (back row) and other musicians in the '60s.

Photos Courtesy of Peppino di Capri

