

# Italian and Portuguese Village Bands in Massachusetts

by Mary Jo Sanna

In 1802, well before the American love affair with bands had flowered and American ships carried their own bands, the crew of the USS Boston tried to kidnap members of an Italian band playing a shipboard concert by sailing away before the musicians had disembarked. A century later there would have been no need. Arriving at the height of the American band movement, Italian and Portuguese immigrants brought with them their own strong village band tradition, which survives today in Italian-American and Portuguese-American communities.

For each village in southern Italy and Portugal, the most important religious and social event of the year is the celebration of its patron saint's feast. The local band, a large wind and percussion ensemble, serves a central role: performing while marching in procession with the statue of the saint as it is carried through the streets on the final day. It plays as well on several other occasions during the celebration. Additional bands from surrounding villages also participate, contributing to the joyous atmosphere.

Italian immigrants coming to Massachusetts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries settled largely in the North End of Boston on particular streets according to their village of origin, truly creating a "Little Italy." To live in Boston, however, necessitated certain changes. In Italy the church is the center of the life of the village. In the North End each "village" of immigrants could not build its own church, so societies were formed – named for the patron saints of various villages and dedicated to continuing the yearly patronal feast. Likewise, Portuguese immigrants to Massachusetts in the 19th and 20th centuries found themselves in communities with people from many other villages. They generally did not form saints' societies but rather chose to consolidate themselves around the parish.

Bands were soon formed from within the Italian and Portuguese communities. Where there was a large population, such as in the North End or in the New Bedford-Fall River Portuguese community, several bands could be supported. Gradually, however, the decline of the critically important fishing and whaling industries led to shifts in occupational and housing patterns. The assimilation of the immigrant population served to weaken group identity and, consequently, the cultural traditions brought from the Old World. Reflecting this

was a decline in the numbers of bands. Then, in the early 1960s, responding to societal disruption caused by severe volcanic activity on one of Portugal's Azorean Islands, President Kennedy relaxed immigration regulations for Portuguese citizens. A new wave of immigrants, primarily from the Azores, poured into Massachusetts and revitalized the Portuguese feasts. The effect of this influx is reflected in the present conditions of the Portuguese and Italian bands.

Massachusetts currently has ten Portuguese bands (in Cambridge, Peabody, Lowell, Stoughton, Hudson, New Bedford and Fall River). Nine of them have been formed within the last twenty years; only one of the four Fall River bands survives from the earlier period of immigration. This abundance of bands is lovingly recalled by older members of the Italian community, band members and feast participants alike. "Once we even had a band come from California," one of them recalled. This past summer the St. Anthony's Band proudly helped to bring a band from California for one of the Portuguese feasts.

The lack of community bands forces the Italian feast committees to hire outside professional bands. Succumbing to a number of pressures this past year, the sole surviving Italian Band, the Roma Band, was disbanded. Taking its place within the last few months is the North End Italian Band, formed by a well-respected past conductor of the Roma Band. This new band includes some members of the old Roma Band and will undoubtedly be very successful, but the tradition is clearly threatened.

The make-up of the bands themselves is also indicative of their history and experience. At the time of its dissolution the Roma Band counted on its roster twenty players, a conductor and a manager. The Portuguese band ranges in size from forty to sixty players, corresponding to the Roma Band of the 1930s, as seen in the accompanying photograph. In recent years the Roma Band's membership necessarily included women and approximately one-third non-Italians, with rehearsals conducted in English. Although they do not refuse musicians of other backgrounds, St. Anthony's Band currently has almost exclusively male Portuguese members, with business and rehearsals conducted in Portuguese.

St. Anthony's Band includes among its membership





Roma Band, circa 1928. Photo courtesy David Bailey

many for whom the band is their sole avocation. Their hall, which they own and have recently renovated, serves as their social club. Any money made at the feasts is contributed to the band as a whole. Rehearsals are held on both Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons and include dinner. Families are involved in a number of ways, with fathers and sons playing in the band and wives and daughters attending rehearsals and various social functions throughout the year.

The repertoire of the band includes music almost exclusively from the Portuguese tradition, and the training of the musicians duplicates that of the Old World. Formal solfege instruction (sight-singing and ear-training) is briefly provided by an instructor hired by the band. After this, learning the instrument itself takes place through the apprenticeship system of informal tutoring between father and son, uncle and nephew or among members of a particular section and the aspiring young player.

The large number of bands promotes good-natured rivalry – each band striving for excellence – so that the particular community will be represented favorably. Competition for band members is keen, and good players emigrating from Portugal are sometimes met at the airport in an attempt to recruit them. As one

member's wife said, "Out there [in the Azores], the band is the thing." That feeling continues here.

This is the way it used to be for the Italian bands as well. Remembering his time with one of the many bands of the past, one of the oldest members of the Roma Band said, "We were all one clique. We had a lot of fun." He talked of the socializing and traveling to other Italian communities for their feasts – even as far as New York. Although the training process was largely informal, the repertoire included primarily stately Italian marches and lengthy operatic excerpts.

The members of the North End Italian Band are dedicated, but they do get paid individually for playing the grueling summer schedule of feast after feast. Although the compensation is little compared to the hours invested and everyone plays in the band for the love of it, this does alter a fundamental aspect of the village band tradition. Other changes, such as incorporating non-Italian repertoire and formal schooling for the players, are indicative of adaptation to the New World.

The band's situation reflects the larger picture of the Italian feasts themselves. Although these celebrations appear to be highly successful because of the many tourists they now attract, tourists return little to the community; the funds they generate go primarily to





Filarmónica Santo Antonio, 1987. Photo courtesy John Feitor

commercial vendors. The burden of mounting the feasts year after year falls on a small group of dedicated leaders among the saints societies' members. Without this continued leadership the traditions may not be carried on in the next generation.

The feasts are still beautiful and meaningful for those Italians who contribute to and participate in them. Not all of the changes affecting both band and feast are detrimental. It is possible that revitalization will come from increased awareness within the community itself and need not rely on a new influx of immigrants, as in the Portuguese case. The leaders of the saints societies in cooperation with the Italian community must determine what in the feast should be continued and what changed in order for this tradition to remain vital in its contemporary American environment.

---

*Mary Jo Sanna is an ethnomusicologist and a doctoral candidate in Musicology at Harvard University.*