

PAOLO FRESU

Fresu is one of those musicians who come from time to time to remind us why jazz is so special and unique"
(*Buenos Aires Herald*)

Winner of a wide array of awards, professor, and director of various Italian and international institutions, Paolo Fresu has performed around the world with the most important names of Afro-American music over the past 30 years. He has participated in over 350 recordings, some as a leader, others as a sideman, and still other projects mixing ethnic, jazz, world music, contemporary, and ancient music. Mr. Fresu is artistic director of the Berchidda Festival Time In Jazz and - as teacher - led for 25 years the Jazz Seminars in Nuoro (Sardinia). He is also involved in the production of numerous multimedia projects, cooperating with actors, dancers, painters, sculptors, and poets, as well as writing music for film, documentary, video, ballet, and theater pieces. Mr. Fresu lives between Paris, Bologna and Sardinia. His unique trumpet sound is recognized as one of the most distinctive in the contemporary jazz scene. In 2013 he was honored with the important *honoris causa* degree in Social Psychology at Università Bicocca of Milano, Italy.

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From Sardinia to the World Paolo Fresu's Sounds of Color



Paolo Fresu © Roberto Chiovitti
by

[ALMA REYES](#) (october 2016)

"Sometimes, in order to be perfect in your art, you must be imperfect in life."
(*Paolo Fresu*)

Like the timid whispers of unruffled waves on the turquoise Sea of Sardinia surrounding the spectacular San Giovanni di Sinis; the fearless rolling uplands of the Gennargentu gouached in thick oaks and junipers; and the secret hush of southern winds blowing bravely from Cagliari to up north Berchidda, Paolo Fresu's trumpet and flugelhorn sounds vibrate so delicately with fervent longing—in the same fragile intensity that



his breath could hold for the longest measure, as though the echoes swim across the entire coastline of his Sardinian roots and beyond the horizons of the universe without hesitation and distraction.

If there is any silence felt in Paolo's sounds, it exists because he delivers immense power to translate the quiet into a magical fusion of lyrical sensations that orchestrate the marriage of the guitar, piano, percussions, bandoneon and just about any other instrument imaginable—all encapsulating one colorful harmony. Onstage, Paolo and his instruments are one as though not a single thread separates them from each other. At the Bulgari Hotels & Resorts Tokyo Restaurants and Italian Cultural Institute of Tokyo last September, together in duo with the captivating bandoneonista Daniele di Bonaventura, he exuded these colors, receiving vigorous response from the audience.

One of the greatest and most valuable jazz artists from Italy, spanning a thriving career of over 30 years, Paolo owes much of his admirable success to the memories of the marching bands that used to tread bouncily outside his native home in Berchidda, Sardinia. Since then, the sound of the trumpet became second skin to his ears. For him, only jazz could embrace musical diversity, which pulled him to explore various cultural inspirations from Africa, South America, Europe, Asia and the rest of the globe.

"The lesson of jazz in the history of music is that this genre is completely open; we can go everywhere. This is the unique concept. I can play bop or mix jazz with the music of different cultures. The philosophy of this music is when jazz rose in the first years of the last century, the mixtures of styles could capture completely different inspirations—Africa and Europe, black and white, and others. That is why this music is not black or white. It's just jazz. If somebody would say that jazz is completely black music, that perception is entirely idiotic. Similarly, people who used to say jazz belonged to the 'white' culture, or could be European or American now think differently. Today, we travel around the world. If someone comes along, we can play with him. Jazz is this way; it is freedom. We also play different kinds of music—jazz is not only standard music from the '50s. In my repertoire, I include classics like Bach, opera like Puccini, a bit of Spanish, Italian and French chansons, and old Argentina and Uruguay songs. Daniele and I have prepared these Argentina tunes, but no tango. As for my Sardinian roots, surely I bring those flavors into my music. I have projects with some Sardinians involving traditional polyphonic music with vocals and percussions. I have two projects especially—one called 'Sonos 'e Memoria' (Sounds of Memory) comprised of about 14 traditional or classical musicians. I try to mix jazz and classic traditional players. The other project is 'Il Rito e la Memoria' where I put together polyphonic groups playing sacré music—string quartet and piano."

While pop and rock genres struggle to survive in the current music market, Paolo believes that jazz has always maintained a stable position due to its flexibility in adapting to various demands and circumstances. *"Audiences in Europe are getting bigger, much more than in the past when jazz catered more to the intellectual and elite circles. Now, thankfully, this genre is becoming more popular, and Italian artists are also increasing and mixing more diversified styles: pop, opera, Mediterranean; therefore, the audiences also have become more open to eclectic themes in music. This is very important because they can discover what they prefer to hear. The jazz market is not at all on the same level with the pop market, although the quality of pop music today has been degrading. The needs of the pop market are wider because they require more structure and finance. I think that in the jazz world, the financial demands are not as crucial as in the pop market. Jazz can attain a high level of music quality for artists to produce albums and concerts without depending on a very high budget. In that sense, it is easier for jazz to float in the current crisis. Pop and rock cannot survive this way."*

Likewise, the steadiness of jazz appreciation can also be felt in the Japan music scene where, as Paolo observes, music lovers still purchase actual CDs or spend time in vinyl record shops, proving one part of the Japanese curiosity for world jazz music. *"I first came to Japan about 20 years ago when I performed in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Hiroshima with a French group, and continue to come frequently—having played at the Blue Note Tokyo two years ago. Over the years, I have observed how Japanese have always been meticulously attentive to jazz music. I always feel they come to a venue to truly listen to the musician. They are here for us, and this is very important for the musician to feel. For example, after our concert at the Bulgari, some man came to me with a pile of my CDs from decades ago—some of which even I have already forgotten. This is an important discovery for the artist because our world is small and quite 'artigianale' and we need to have a special relation with the audience."*

With eyes closed, one cannot help but rekindle the tingling sensations of Miles Davis or Chet Baker when surrounded by the timbre of Paolo Fresu's colorful notes. Paolo has always been identified with these two great masters, who contribute an immense influence to his musical preference. *"Miles and Chet are my absolute masters. I love them both. As starting young musicians, we need to decide the masters who inspire us most. It is not possible to play five minutes like Louis Armstrong, then ten minutes like Chet Baker, or a few more minutes like Clifford Brown or Dizzy Gillespie. We need to know the best master who feels closest*

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to us. For me, my masters were Chet and Miles, with more inclination towards Chet, I think—more melancholic, which is the sound and pace I like—to have this silence in music. I hope the sound I create now is myself. I did not really ‘decide’ on this particular style, but it was just how the inspiration came to me. Anyway, Chet was a fantastic model for the creation of sound and melody—the idea of construction of phrases. Miles was also important for this construction and I learned a lot from them. The dynamics of my projects largely come from their ideologies—choosing musicians and personalities, for example—starting a concert with something and being able to change everything into a different direction. This approach basically comes from Miles’ philosophy.

I first learned of Chet Baker in the ‘70s. The first record I bought was Chet’s album, ‘The Other Piano-less Quartet.’ Fundamentally, he was the first trumpet player that struck me deeply, then Miles Davis, who for me was the architect for the trumpet. I wrote a citation in the introduction of Chet Baker’s autobiography about how Chet could be so perfect in his every note, from first to the last—even more perfect than Miles’—wherein the wrong note was sometimes the best. Yet, this incredible perfection in his music was completely the opposite of his personal life that was composed of so much chaos and complications with his relations with women and himself as well, which was really strange. It is a nice lesson for all humans—that sometimes, to be perfect in your art, we also need to be imperfect in life. It could be yes or no to many people since everybody is different.”

The subject of difference is well manifested in the duo pairing of Paolo and Daniele di Bonaventura—two artists from the South and Northeast. While many bands correlate with band members hailing from the same region, Paolo’s choice of musicians goes beyond regional similarities. “Daniele and I not only come from totally different regions in Italy, but we also have different personalities. This difference precisely makes our music more dynamic and interesting, I believe, and it is because of this diversity that we can create good music. Even jazz itself is different today from the past because of the moment that has changed, the rise of technology that somehow we fuse into our music.”

Paolo is not only busy blowing his trumpet and flugelhorn, but also devotes equal passion to social, community and charity events, particularly for the cause for victims of the two colossal earthquakes that have hit Italy in seven years. He gathered musicians from all over Italy to participate in jazz concerts dedicated to families who have lost loved ones from the catastrophes in L’Aquila and Amatrice. “Last year we started this project for the L’Aquila earthquake, gathering over 100 musicians all over Italy, organizing 110 concerts and entertaining over 16,000 people in one single day. The goal was to rebuild the historical centre. It was a huge success, so this year after the Amatrice earthquake, we were ready to resume the project, this time pulling together 750 musicians spread around 28 towns in Italy, playing for over 100,000 people to rebuild the theatre in Amatrice. We will be in L’Aquila again next year, 2017 and 2018 to continue this big project.”

D. H. Lawrence wrote about Sardinia in his book, *Sea and Sardinia*: “Belonging to nowhere, never having belonged to anywhere. To Spain and the Arabs and the Phoenicians most. But as if it had never really had a fate. No fate. Left outside of time and history.”

Perhaps, in the attempt to retrieve time and history sunken beneath the Sardinian blue waters, Paolo Fresu’s ageless music should remind us that there are no borders to cross, no words defined by books, no past and tomorrow—but only colorful sounds and senses of today that fill the silence between notes.

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