



## DANIELE BALDELLI

By Bill Brewster

Imagine circling the planet in a spaceship—weight-less, far from home, listening to music on your gravity-modified iPod. Or imagine trying to sprint through a field of corn wearing flippers. Imagine even—indulge me a moment—trying to swim through a vat of black molasses in your trunks and goggles. This dislocating slowness, this...chugging gloop is not unlike the Afro Cosmic sound of Italy.

Interest in this peculiar yet compelling scene started with a faint hum about three years ago, when British journalist Louise Oldfield wrote a piece about some-thing called Afro Cosmic. That hum has since become a murmur and, with the recent May sale of the rare Cosmic classic "This Man" (by Phil 6 His Friend's Band) for \$400, a clamor.

Afro Cosmic was the Italian club equivalent of garage music or Ibiza's Balearic sound. It was what happened after disco crashed and burned. In Italy (and, later, in Austria and Switzerland), they took a strange turn and, instead of embracing either rap (confusingly verbose for non-English-speaking DJs) or the burgeoning electronic soul of D-Train and Peech Boys, went off into Brazilian, African, and, particularly, German sounds.

At its peak, it was a phenomenon, with scores of clubs embracing the sound and thousands of kids attending the clubs, wearing the clothes, and buying the raves. Even an Italian youth's choice of vehicle (Cirro:n Dianes and Diesses, and Renault 4s) was a giveaway as to their musical preference. Afro Cosmic's influence on Italy's dance scene was marked, particularly among the subsequent generation of house DJs.

Our story begins in the early '70s—1974, to be precise—with the arrival in Italy of Bob Day and Tom Sison, a pair of New Yorkers on the make. Just as acid house provided underemployed and wannabe British DJs with a chance to export a new product worldwide, so did disco. There were far more DJs in New York than there were clubs, so it was natural that they went where the work was. Bob and Tom, the former White, the latter mixed-race, both gay, began a residency at a beautiful new club opened by Giancarlo Tirotti called Baia degli Angeli (Bay of Angels) at the Adriatic resort of Gaiacce Montemare.

Tirotti was one of the Beautiful People. He hung out with Grace Jones and was friendly with Fiorucci and Armani. When he saw the amazing clubs sprouting in Manhattan like crazed daisies, he decided to bring the concept to Italy. Built on a cliff front, the club had a four-thousand-person capacity (much of it open-air), and the uJs played in a glass booth that doubled as elevator so they could go up and down to the different dance floors in the club.

What Bob and Tom played would not have turned heads in New York, but in provincial Italy, where imports were still rare, it was notable. They played Philly soul, they played proto-disco, they played funk, they played early 12-inch promos; and they employed new mixing techniques and blew everybody's minds. They didn't stay for long, eventually merging back into the subterranean growth from whence they'd sprung.

By the end of 1976, Bob and Tom were gone, and have never been heard of since. Everybody believed that they were big njs in New York. Nobody I've spoken to in New York has ever heard of them. The mythology of Bob and Tom in Italy thus remains perfect.

As luck would have it, Bob and Tom trained up a couple of local uJs to replace them. One was a sixteen-year-old wunderkind named Claudio Rispoli, aka DJ Mozart, the other a self-effacing jock from nearby Cattolica named Daniele Baldelli. They played together at Baia for the next year or so, until the authorities closed the club down because of continuing problems with drugs. Shortly thereafter, Baldelli was lured to a new club, Cosmic, by Lake Garda, just south of

Verona. (Mozart played at the reopened Baia for another year or so before moving to a series of clubs around Italy.) During the latter part of their tenure at Baia, the music began to shift as the disco records that had been Bob and Tom's staples dried up. Mozart favored crazy Afrobeat and Latin percussion, while Baldelli began on his strange path away from disco and towards a distinctly European electronic sound (his favorite label is Sky and he loves fusion keyboardist Klaus Doldinger of Passport).

Baldelli also began to experiment with tempos, irreverently switching records from 45 CO 33 RPM and vice versa. Thus "Enola Gay" by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark became a druggy, heavy-legged anthem at 33, instead of the perky pop record at normal speed. Ditto Visage's "Frequency 7." At Chicago's Music Box, it sounded like a tech no record, as Ronnie 1-lardy pitched it to +8. Played at 33 RPM at Cosmic, it sounded bizarre and brilliant, dislocating and

Baldelli. "And from these tapes, they became thousands and thousands. Some fans come to me and say, 'You see this, my Citroen Pallas? I buy this selling your tapes!'" The popularity of the Cosmic scene became some-thing of a problem, with kids hanging outside clubs and, moreover, drugs (heroin in particular) being used inside. Clubs were closed by anxious local authorities if DJs like Mozart, Ruhens, and Meo were on the bill. Promoters also tried to capitalize on the marquee value of the leading DJs by putting their names on posters when they were never hooked to play. Chaos followed, as clubbers would gather in clusters outside clubs refusing to pay until they'd seen the billed DJs arrive.

By the mid-'80s, the scene had peaked and has subsequently continued as a tribute scene with regular reunions (Baldelli performs once a year in front of five thousand



Baldelli on the, dance floor, 1972

weightless. By contrast, they regularly played reggae at 45 (Yellowman's "Strong Mi Strong," for example).

These changes also coincided with a shift in clientele that began at Baia when Tirotti sold the club and continued at Cosmic and elsewhere. The new crowd—younger, poorer—did not even know who Grace Jones was, much less hang out with her. Word spread across borders as holi-

daymakers from Austria and Switzerland discovered the music and imported it across the Alps. The music became so popular that thousands of kids, often too broke to go inside the clubs, would gather on the hillsides outside on Saturdays, listening to tapes in their trendy cars. Often there would be more people outside than in. "Every Saturday, I sold about 150 tapes," chuckles people at the Palasporr in Innsbruck.). The modern version of Afro sound is bloody awful, though. Terrible world music dressed in drippy hippy nonsense, it's in stark contrast to the amazing mixes whizzing round the Web, a whirl of digitized ones and twos, a sound that is absolutely unique (and very, very druggy).

So how did a scene so huge remain a mystery to the English-speaking world for so long? The answer lies most obviously in the music's failure to translate to vinyl. While IV; in the U.S. and Britain consolidated their skills in the booth by moving into the studio, Italian DJs did not. Louise Oldfield believes the Italian music industry is to blame. "The music industry in Italy is very static, very classical, very bureaucratic," she claims. "If you wanted to make a

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record, you had to be a member of the Italian PRS [Performing Right Society, like ASCAP], which meant going to Rome and sitting an exam, doing an interview in front of the commissioner and a panel of musicians, and then paying one million lire [uss670], which would've been more than a month's wages. Posh people made music."

Thus the Afro Cosmic sound remained a secret among a generation of Italian kids, although its influence seeped out in small yet measurable ways. On the Italian house scene, the immediate benefactor of the Cosmic scene, tunes such as "Sueno Latino," which samples Manuel Gottsching's "E2-E4," and the Heartists's Airto-sampling "Belo Horizonte" are both direct descendants of Baldelli, Mozart, et al.

Their influence is also felt in other, less direct ways. "I remember playing at a really hard techno after-hours club and Leo Mas came on and he plays 'Treehouse' by Indian Ocean!" remembers Liam J. Nabb, an English DJ who was raised in Florence. "I was like, 'How can you play that here?' The thing is, he could mix that with an Rats [Records] record and really make it work."

Culturally speaking, the Afro Cosmic scene's nearest relative is northern soul in the U.K. It has a similarly mystical quality and a purity that has lasted precisely because it was never anything other than a cultish club phenomenon. There was no radio exposure. There was no newspaper coverage, other than to bemoan the drug menace it posed. For twenty years it has remained a hidden treasure to the English world, but now we're fully realizing how innovative its DJs were, and their credit is high.

Daniele Baldelli is still actively DJing every weekend in Italy. Last spring, he spoke at a lecture on Afro Cosmic at the Electronic Music Festival, Distorsonie, in Bologna. In the evening, he played at a party just down the road. In between, we managed to corner him in a restaurant and talk about his life over a plate of anti-pasto and industrial-strength coffee.

**BILL BREWSTER:** Where and when were you born? **DANIELE BALDELLI:** Cattolica, 1952.

Is that a town or a religion?

[laughs] It's a town near Rimini on the Adriatic Coast, a tourist resort.

When did you start DJing and where?

Nineteen sixty-nine in Cattolica. Tana Club was a little club for three hundred people.

What kinds of records were you playing?

Mostly rhythm and blues: Aretha Franklin, Ann Peebles, Rufus Thomas, Joe Tex; and also the White music; also 7-inches; Atomic Rooster, the Stooges—I play these two different kinds of music. After six months in Tana Club, then I go to Tabu Club where I stay until September 1977.

When did you see the first mixers?

I was doing this, putting one record over another, but not mixing. When Baia degli Angeli was born, near Cattolica, two New York DJs come to play in this club: Bob Day and Tom Sison.

When did the club open? Did they come when the club opened?

They opened in 1974 and with these two DJs, because the man who opened Baia traveled all over the world, and so he knew everybody.

What was his name?

Giancarlo Tirrotti. I was working in my club Saturday night, Sunday afternoon, and Sunday night. One after-noon, Bob Day and Tom Sison come to me, and I was like, "Oh my God, the DJ of Baia!" And at the end, they came to me and said, "Hey, you are very good. But why don't you take away the rubber from the top of the turntable and replace it?" I said, "I don't know what you mean." They said, "Why don't you come to us in Baia and we show you." But they don't use felt. They used to put one 7-inch with the paper, because I don't think the slipmat was invented then. So when you do this, you can make the mixing.

Do you remember when Bob and Tom first came to the club to see you?

Nineteen seventy-five, I think. Then I became friend of them. In fact, when they go away from Baia in '76, they speak to the boss of the club to take me. And another one say to take Mozart, so they also take Mozart and we go together. We were together in Baia from 1977 to '78.

Where did Tom and Bob go?

They go back to the States. We always ask if they were important DJs, but we don't think so. We just think they were just two guys who find America in Italy. The important thing was they had a lot of records, that's the important difference. They had records one year before Italians. There was no import/export at this time. It was very difficult to find this music. When they leave Italy, they give me a present, the 12-inch of "Hit & Run" by Loleatta Holloway with Bob Day and Tom Sison autograph.

Did you see them play? What was it like watching them, because they were mixing records, weren't they?

At that time, watching them was very exciting, because all of the records they play I didn't know. It was really new and different music from what we had. So that's the first thing. Also, to see the mixing at that time was incredible. I have some tapes by them—it's something simple: just two beats, boom boom, finished. Very short. But to think I could do this with two records then was incredible.

Where were you buying your records in 1976?

Only in Cattolica to start with, then there was a big shop in Rimini where you could find a lot of albums from America and U.K., but you couldn't listen. So you had to look at cover and think, "Okay, this could be nice!" [laughs] And at that time, I take the train from Rimini and go to Lugano in Switzerland where there was a shop Radio Columbia. Then in '77—'78 when I was in Baia, the shop for DJs started to grow. Before, the shop was for everybody. You find the hit parade of Italian songs, Rolling Stones, everything. Then they started to make shop only for DJs, they had 12-inch and everything about clubs. And this shop in Rimini, called Disco Piu, every strange record he received he used to say to all the other DJs, "Oh this record is strange, it's no good. We give to Baldelli." You know, before the business, the music was not made for the club, and so the music I used to play in Cosmic was exactly this. I play Steve Winwood ["Span-



ish Dancer"], I play Mike Oldfield ["Foreign Affair"], not people who make music for the disco. [I played Car Stevens] "Was Dog a Doughnut" and Lee Ritenour "Countdown."

What was the crowd like in Baia?

Before me, when it was Bob and Tom, the crowd was very VIP people, some gay, some beautiful women, actresses, people with a lot of money.

The jet set?

Yes. Because of this, all the people wanted to go to Baia, so it became more popular. In 1977, when I go there, the owner sell the club to somebody else. This new boss make the club more popular for everybody—younger people, not so elegant, normal people, a for of young people—and they start to understand this new type of music. And they want to know about Baia, because it was a beautiful club. You know, I was u)ing in a glass elevator, so it was something beautiful.

How big was the DJ booth?

Like an elevator!

So quite small then?

Yes, because all you need is two turntable, one mixer, a little space for records. It's enough.

When the younger crowd started coming, had the music you were playing changed at all from before?

At that rime, we were playing exactly Bob and Tom style. Disco music. Philadelphia. Maybe something strangewe started to play—at the end of the evening [at 5 A.M.], I started to play Ravel's "Bolero," which lasted twelve minutes, I play Pink Floyd, jean-Luc Ponty, electronic effects or African chant a cappellas over the top. Also, maybe I started to play something electronic in between and things like Eddy Grant "Time Warp."

Were there particular records that you started to play there?

For sure. Some beautiful records that I like very much. "Ju Ju Man" by Passport. This song was perfect. "New York" by Miroslav Vitous. Also Rose Royce.

How long did you play at Baia?

October '77 to end of August '78. Baia closed because of the drugs. Then in 1979 I receive a call from this person and he said he wanted to open a club in Lake Garda: "We're going to call it Cosmic, and I want you to come and play." Cosmic start in April 1979.

What did it look like?

It was simply a big room, rectangular; it was really strange for Italy. It was the first club with no place to sit down and no alcohol. And big equipment for Italy: All the amplifiers were



Mackintosh, and all the speakers were JBL. And the dance floor was all the club, just a little place to walk around. All dance floor, and like Saturday Night Fever with the lights. There were also columns with the lights going up and down. The ceiling, a lot of neon effects, like laser. It was for seven hundred people. But one thousand people were inside usually.

When was it open from and until?

It opened at nine, at ten it was crowded, and at one it finished. The first year, 1979, the music was the same as Baia, funky disco. the first year it was very nice, nice girls, nice people. But around 1980, Verona became a big distribution center for drugs, especially heroin. So a lot of people that do heroin came to Cosmic. At the same time, the music changed. Not because the

people coming were doing heroin. I stopped [playing] dance music—it was dying—and I came to play the music I told you about. And the beat was very slow, from 90 BPM to 105 BPM at the most. A lot of people smoke, and a lot of people were doing heroin. So they had to dance slowly, you know! ]laughs]

The pictures of the booth in Cosmic look crazy.

The first booth was like a space helmet with two hands around it, like Thank God It's Friday. This for two years. Then they make a new booth like a spaceship cockpit.

You were the only DJ there?

I am the only one who stayed all five years, '79-'84. Then after one year I call my friend TBC and he play with me for two or three years.

When you were at Cosmic, where were you buying your records?

Disco Piu in Rimini. That was the shop that say, "Every-thing we can't sell give to Baldelli." It was a joke, of course, but I was looking for everything strange. And not only at that period. Also some boys—because they know I like different music—some of them that traveled to Germany quite often, [one of them] came back with a lot of records he thought I would like, and so I listen to them and buy them from him. He was like a musical pusher!

When did you start experimenting with playing records at 45 and 33?

[I think in 1980. I think this happened accidentally. Most of the tracks that I play at 45 are instrumental, of course. Sometimes also with the voice, but the voice became like Mickey Mouse, you know. But we don't care, Italian people can't understand the words, so this kind of voice is just music, because I can't understand what he's saying. This sound—the sound of the voice—became music to me. But I also play Depeche Mode at 33 instead of 45.

Which one?

"Shout." One song of [Andy] Summers and Robert [Fripp] ["Train"], I play at 45 instead of 33; it's electronic sound. I used to play "Enola Gay" at 33, SO this was a good sound for us! But in the summer a lot of German people come to Lake Garda for the holidays and they were shouting, "What are you doing, fucking Italian!?" when I played this at 33!

How did it spread to Austria and Germany?

Because people were coming on holiday there. First it was only Austria, Innsbruck exactly, because a lot of people come from Austria on holiday. Then some people from Innsbruck became DJs and so they organize these parties and they call Italian DJs from the Afro scene. Then from Innsbruck it is not far from Munich, so after ten years Munich also became a big situation for here.

Had it ever been closed because of drugs before it finally closed?

It was closed a couple of times, but for little technical issues, only for one week or so. It was closed for drugs in '84, but then after one year he could open again because he won his appeal, but then the boss decided he didn't want to open again because the rules would only be broken again. It never opened again.

Who was the person who opened Cosmic?

His name was Enzo Longo. He was a dentist. Very young. Thirty years old when he opened, but he was from a rich family. His wife had two Fiorucci boutiques. So he was always into fashion and style and music. His idea was to take the logo from Commodores to use as Cosmic style of logo.

What did you do after Cosmic closed?

After Cosmic closed—and also some other important clubs for Afro scene like Chicago, Mecca, and Typhoon—all the other clubs who usually play commercial sounds started to call us and ask if we can play Afro night, because they know people like this kind of music.



Who were your influences?

Nobody else. Bob and Tom gave me technical inspiration, but that is all. Also, when I played at Cosmic, I lived in a little house by myself on the hill all day listening to music. I never went anywhere else to listen to other njs. I was influenced by myself. Without drugs.

Where did you find records like Codek and the Pool?

I find them all in Disco Piu. Because I was looking for different and strange music, when he go to buy records he take one copy—no more—of maybe fifty records to test or monitor in the shop. When you started playing these oddball records, did Disco Piu suddenly start selling loads of copies of them?

This happened in Disco Piu, the people go to Gianni with cassettes and say, "I want to buy this."

Then Gianni call me: "Fucking you! You play this at 45 and I can't understand anything!"

You used to sell tapes from the club, right?

I have a lot of trouble with these tapes from the police. One thing that was very important about Cosmic was that every Saturday people buy a lot of stickers and a lot of tapes. Every Saturday I sold about to tapes. And from these tapes, they became thousands and thousands. Some fans come to me and say, "You see this, my Citriien Pallas? I buy this selling your tapes!" [laughs]

I noticed on the mixes I've heard that halo-disco is not on there. Did it not get played at all?

I play some halo disco, but only the smaller tracks that people don't know. Because halo disco in that period, for me, was something stupid. I used to hear Sky Records from Germany, so I was playing Jean-Michel Jarre and Vangelis. Listening to halo disco at that time, it was like listening to real music and the shit. Now I like [it].

Did you have any idea what was going on in NYC and U.K. when you were playing at Cosmic?

No. For sure. Now I realize that some of the records I was playing came from USA and were not disco music, I means like punk and new wave.

Like B-52s?

They are American? Now I know! Front 242. is from England?

I thought they were Belgian.

Penguin Café Orchestra? English? Ah, nice. I have all of them!

Why did they not sell alcohol?

Only the first year, then they sell it. You know, the boss made this choice, I think, because he wanted to have a fresh club with young people. Also his philosophy was that his club must be a gymnasiums to dance in and not a beer hall. 0

Btt.t. Ba r•.ws rsis has been en/leering music for thirty five years, playing in public for over twenty years, and writing about it fur seventeen years. He is co-author of both Last Night a D) Saved My Life and I low to DJ Right. In his spare time be follows a terrible soccer team and looks /br records in dusty basements wherever his tears plays. Last week he found some German prog rock records in Bristol. Sadly, his team lost ;-o.

#### COSMIC CLASSICS CHART

Brian Eno/David Byrne - "Regiment" (E.G./1981)

The Monks - "I Can Dub Anything You Like" (Eagle/1981) Airtro - "Celebration Suite" (Warner Bros/1977) Visage - "We Move" (Polydor/1981)

Sparks - "Beat the Clock" (Elektra/1979)

Kissing the Pink - "Mr. Blunt" (played at 33 RPM) (Magnet/1982) Edwin Birdsong - "Rapper Dapper Snapper" (Salsoul/1980) Azymuth - "Young Embrace" (Milestone/1979) Monsoon - "Wings of the Dawn" (Mobile Suite/1982) XTC - "It's Nearly Africa" (Virgin/1982) Codek - "Tim Toun"

Roxy Music - "The Main Thing" (E.G./1982)  
Liaisons Dangereuses - "Los Ninos Del Parque" (Roadrunner/1981) Yellowman -  
"Zungguzungguzungguzeng" (played at 45 RPM) Gina X - "No G.D.M." (EMI/1981)  
John Gibbs Jam Band - "J'Ouvert" (TEC/1979) Plastic Bertrand - "Stop Ou Encore"  
(Vogue/1980) Rose Royce - "Fire in the Funk" (Epic/1982) Mad Dog Fire Dept. - "Cosmic  
Funk" (TK/1979) Rah Band - "Electric Fling" (Good Earth/1977)  
Peter Tosh - "Buk-In-Hamm Palace" (Rolling Stones/1979) John Tropea "Livin' in the Jungle"  
(Marlin/1979) Passport - "Juju Man" (Atco/1976)  
Allez Allez - "African Queen" (Kamera/1982) Richard Wahnfried - "Time Actor" (IC/1979)  
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