
Bread, Wine, and Soul: Jazzman Joe Lovano

By George de Stefano

There was rejoicing in Cleveland, Ohio when the Grammy nominations for Best Jazz Recording of 1994 were announced in January of this year, for among the nominees was Joe Lovano, the forty-two-year-old hometown boy who is widely considered the leading saxophonist of his era.

Lovano, a third-generation Sicilian American, is a superb artist who possesses technical virtuosity, a restless creative spirit, and uncommon soulfulness. His mastery as a saxophonist, composer, and band leader has earned him universal critical acclaim. "A dream player for the Nineties who mixes romance and risk," noted Rolling Stone. "Ceaseless creativity," observed the New York Times. And the Village Voice's Gary Giddins, one of the nation's leading jazz critics, wrote, "One of the most admired tenor saxophonists to step out of the shadows and into the limelight of leadership in the past decade, Lovano has everything . . ."

Unlike most of the younger musicians who have followed in the wake of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, Joe Lovano encompasses virtually the entire history of jazz in his playing. He began his career in the 70s with the big bands of Woody Herman and Mel Lewis, but he also has absorbed the radical innovations of saxophonist John Coltrane, bassist/composer Charles Mingus, and a host of other 60s-era experimentalists. His up-tempo pieces bristle with rhythmic excitement but he's also a master balladeer, a gift he attributes to his Italian heritage.

When the following interview was conducted in late January, Lovano was on a roll. He'd just gotten word of the Grammy nomination for his album *Tenor Legacy*. He was nearing the end of a successful week-long engagement at New York's legendary Village Vanguard. And, he had just released his latest, and most ambitious recording, *Rush Hour*, a brilliant collaboration with composer/arranger Gunther Schuller that features Lovano in a variety of settings, from full orchestra with strings to a *capella* solo pieces.

I interviewed Lovano at the Manhattan loft he shares with his wife, Judi Silvano (the surname combines Silverman, her family name, and her husband's); a singer whose soprano voice is an integral element of Universal Language, one of several bands Lovano leads. A big, burly man with a goatee and a broad *faccia siciliana*, Lovano looks formidable, but his manner is gentle, thoughtful, and soft-spoken.

During our two-hour conversation it became evident that the two major influences on his life and art have been the contributions of the great jazz innovators, most of whom are African American, and his close-knit Sicilian American family. Both currents converged in the person of his father, Tony "Big T" Lovano, who was also a jazz saxophonist and a local legend in Cleveland until his death in 1987. Lovano Sr., who worked regularly with black musicians, not only taught his celebrated son to play jazz; he also gave him invaluable life lessons in "openness to different peoples and cultures."

Q: You're now 42, and you're really hitting your stride, both in terms of critical recognition and your artistic expression. Why now?

A: I'm at my most expressive because of my experiences in the last twenty, twenty-five years. I come from a musical family in Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up with jazz, and with classical music, though mostly opera. My grandmother used to sing opera around the house, and her brother and my father's uncle Jim played mandolin. I just always had music around my whole life. And my dad played saxophone. He was a really great player named Tony Lovano. And he would practice and play around the house when he wasn't working as a barber. So from when I was a kid I was involved with music and the saxophone. Once I really started working and making music my profession, I was a teenager. I was already deep into it. So at this point in my early forties I feel I have a lot of musical experience to draw on. Even before I came to New York and started playing with some really celebrated bands, Woody Herman, and the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. I had a lot of experience just playing songs. And that comes from my Italian roots, and the melodic, lyrical music from Italy that I always heard around my house. I think a lot of things are coming together for me now, and I'm reaching back into my earlier days to draw material and to put concepts together.

Q: How did the Lovano and Verzi families come to Cleveland?

A: My relatives are from the areas around Messina and Taormina, in Sicily, and it seems there were a lot of people from that region in Cleveland. I never knew my grandfathers—they both died before I was born. But I knew my grandmothers really well. My grandfather Lovano I think got a gig on the railroad. He came from New York first, and then to Cleveland where he had a grocery store. My Mom's family, I'm not exactly sure why they came to Cleveland. On my Mom's side I have a lot of uncles, and I grew up around her family more.

My Dad's family was real musical. My uncle Nick, his oldest brother, played the saxophone. He's still playing today. My Uncle Joe plays saxophone. My Uncle Carl plays trumpet. My Uncle Carl and my Dad were more the jazz players. They were involved much more with the multicultural community in Cleveland. Cleveland is a very ethnic town, a lot of Eastern Europeans, Italians, and a big black community.

My Dad was really involved with the African American musicians in Cleveland. He had a real open and beautiful attitude about combinations of peoples. He always had mixed groups, with blacks and different peoples. I was the firstborn, so I was right on his coattails all the time and really learned from him.

When I was a kid I was always going to jam sessions with my Dad and meeting musicians from everywhere. He played mainly jazz gigs, but he also played a lot of weddings and he played with accordion players and everything. And it was great because it gave me a focus about life, and an openness to different peoples and cultures. I spent a lot of time when I was a teenager playing different kinds of gigs, and also playing with musicians of my father's generation. So I learned how to play from studying with him and all his friends, everybody he played with, who were the best musicians around the area. When I left Cleveland and came to New York I was really comfortable playing with older musicians. Those were the cats I wanted to play with! They were my favorite players. And through the years I've had the chance to play with a lot of them, and tour, too.

Q: The New York Times recent profile on you [January 1995], while full of praise for your musicianship, kept harping on the supposed anomaly of you being a white man who's achieved eminence in a so-called black man's field. Moreover, the article talked about you as if you were some generic Caucasian, but if the writer had any sense of jazz history he'd have known that Italians, and particularly Sicilians, have been involved with jazz from its inception, in New Orleans.

A: Yeah, that's true. That was the first major article about me to appear in the Times, and I was really flattered by it. I think a lot of it was really good, but there were points like that that were unnecessary. It showed that the writer was almost shocked that someone like me would come on the scene. Look, jazz is a combination of rhythms from Africa, and harmonies and melodies and scales from Europe. But that's going back to the dark ages. We're talking about jazz today, which is about the synthesis of different cultures with your own personal expression.

Q: There have always been important Italian and Italian American jazz musicians, going back to Nick La Rocca, Eddie Lang [Salvatore Massaro], and Louis Prima in New Orleans, through Louie Bellson [Balassoni], Lennie Tristano, Joe Venuti . . .

A: I had a chance to play with Joe Venuti once when I played with the Woody Herman band. He sat in with us. He was a trip! Oh yeah, there've been great Italian players in

jazz, some of the most beautiful, lyrical players, too. Vido Musso, Charlie Ventura, a beautiful saxophone player, Flip Phillips . . .

Q: I didn't know Phillips was Italian . . .

A: Yeah, I forget what his family name is, but he was one of the most famous saxophone players during the period when Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, and Lester Young were on the scene. He was right there with them. He played at Jazz at the Philharmonic [a legendary 1940s concert] and was the star of the Woody Herman band in the late 30s, early 40s. He's still alive, he lives in Florida now. He was one of the pioneers in swing, and pre-bebop. I played with the Woody Herman band in 1976. I was 23 at the time. We did a concert at Carnegie Hall that was recorded on RCA for Woody's 40th anniversary. He had all the big stars that had played with him -- Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Al Cohn, Flip Phillips, Jimmy Giuffre, just to name some saxophone players. The Condoli brothers, Pete and Conte Candoli, great trumpet players from California. And I had a chance to play with all those guys, me, just a kid. It really gave me a lot of confidence about finding my voice.

There are some other great Italian saxophone players-- Sal Nistico, who just passed away recently. He played with the Woody Herman band in the 60s. In a way I followed in his chair, playing in the band ten years later. Right now in New York there are some cats, too -- Ralph Alama, from Aliquippa, Pennsylvania -- he's a great saxophone player.

Q: In 1993, you participated in a concert at New York's Town Hall called the Milan -- New York Festival, which featured Italian American and Italian jazz musicians.

A: It was mainly musicians from Italy who came. I had a chance to play with a great pianist, Salvatore Bonafede from Palermo. He and I played some duets at that concert.

Q: Downbeat magazine's review of that concert was largely negative. It said the musicians from Italy tended to be older men who played dated styles of jazz. The reviewer also claimed that Salvatore Bonafede's playing didn't swing.

A: I think Sal is a beautiful player. We played duets -- just piano and saxophone. We didn't try to swing -- we played ballads. I thought it was one of the most expressive parts of the evening. Most of the other groups did play a more mainstream kind of swing style. Most of the musicians came from the Torino area, some beautiful players, but they were trying to play like American musicians. I thought they could've played something more original. That particular generation of musicians, from around the world, all tried to copy the great jazz players from the States. But the younger Italian musicians are trying to find their own voices, play their own music.

Q: Your connection to and reverence for your Sicilian heritage is evident in your original compositions, such as “Miss Etna” and “Bread and Wine” from your *Tenor Legacy* album. What about your background were you trying to evoke in those songs?

A: With “Bread and Wine” it was the festive attitude at an Italian dinner. Bread and wine together really relax people and put them in a good frame of mind. In the arrangement, the drums are the body, the tenor saxophone’s the spirit, or the tenor’s the body and the drums are the spirits . . . they kind of change roles. It was just a feeling for me, one of rejoicing and playing with solidity but also in a free-thinking way. We only used two saxophones and two drummers, so it was different kind of piece. We didn’t use the piano or the bass to give a foundation, we just played the melody and rhythm, and to me that’s the heart and soul of the music. Lyrical melodies and the groove, the beat.

As for “Miss Etna,” well, all four of my grandparents came from two villages on the mountain. I haven’t visited those places yet, but I plan to. So I wrote this tune thinking of those roots. And also of the volcano, its power, and the varied cultural winds that blow through Sicily. The tune has a feeling of swing, but it’s also explosive.

Q: The musical exchange and collaboration that occurred between blacks and Italians in New Orleans didn’t occur only there. For example, it also happened in Latin America.

A: Yes. If you go to Argentina and hear the tango music that developed there . . . Argentina has a huge Italian population because at the same time Italians immigrated to the United States they were also leaving for Buenos Aires. The tango is Italian melodies and harmonies, and African rhythms. So there’s definitely always been a collaboration of different elements. I’m going to experience this when I go to Buenos Aires in April [1995] to do a series of concerts with Argentinean musicians: bandoneon [a type of accordion] players, acoustic guitar, bass, drums, trumpet, and saxophone.

Q: The late Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla, who was of Italian background, gained international acclaim for his innovations with the tango.

A: That’s right. If you listen to even some of his early recordings you’ll hear really modern music that’s technically advanced yet with deep feeling and expression. A lot like jazz. I’ve learned a lot about the Italian world in Argentina, and I haven’t even been there yet. But I do have cousins there. My grandmother Lovano had some cousins, who went from Sicily to Buenos Aires, and they visited Cleveland one time in the late 70s, and I met these cats. I met four of my father’s first cousins, and they looked like all my uncles. So I’m hoping to see them when I go there. Their name is Di Torre.

Q: Since you are, as the New York Times informed us, a “white man in a black man’s field,” have you ever experienced any resentment or hostility from African American jazz musicians?

A: No, not at all. Especially not from ones of my generation. I think resentment might happen if you’re getting a lot of attention and you’re not really playing. I’ve had really beautiful experiences playing with black cats my whole life. I’ve played and toured with some bands where I was the only white musician. When I was doing my first gigs with Jack McDuff and Lonnie Smith [two organists popular for their rhythm and blues-influenced styles] in the mid 70s, I was in my early twenties and I was on the road on the chitlin circuit [a network of African American venues], playing in a lot of small clubs and touring lots of cities: Indianapolis; Cincinnati; Dayton; Detroit; Pittsburgh; Chicago; Gary, Indiana; Champagne, Illinois. I was always accepted and I think it was because of the way I played. I was involved with the music, and I wasn’t a copy cat. I think in jazz it’s really easy to copy other players. And a lot of the negativity you might hear about some white players . . . even Stan Getz, who early in his career wasn’t taken seriously because he sounded like Lester Young. He was copying someone else and he became more famous than the cat he was playing like. That’s something I always tried to avoid. In fact, if I copied anybody, it was my Dad’s playing!

Q: Your acceptance notwithstanding, black nationalist feeling, for lack of a better term, has been a strong current in jazz. This was especially so in the 60s.

A: You can listen to those records [from the 60s], and they’re very political recordings. [Charles] Mingus, and Max Roach, and most of the great composers and players -- black Americans definitely have been some of the most innovative, and most dedicated to finding their own voice. Those players inspired me to be myself, to find my own way. Most of my main inspirations are African American musicians. Not that I copied what they played or how they played, but the attitude of being your own man . . . that horn is in your hands, now tell a story. But a lot of the music was very radical in the 60s, and it was really about the struggles of black people.

But even Charles Mingus, as far out and political as he got, he played the bass, he didn’t just stand up there and scream, he played the bass, and wrote some beautiful songs that are very complex harmonically. Mingus’s music was really an outgrowth of Ellington and [Thelonius] Monk, with harmonies and structures that were really very different, and influenced by the more open-ended forms of classical music. So there were some players like [the late saxophonist] Albert Ayler who just played sounds, and screams, and raw emotion. And it had its place, too. That music influenced me, too. But I think the deeper music was always rich in harmony and rhythm.

Q: Your father’s colleagues and friends were African American musicians, and so are yours. When you came to New York, were you surprised by how much ethnic and racial conflict exists here? Did you experience anything like that in Cleveland?

A: The 60s, when I was in junior high school, was a really turbulent period. In Cleveland, and in all the Midwest cities, there were riots. I knew about it because my Dad was playing with black musicians, and playing all over town in clubs that were burned down [during the rioting]. Gone. And it turned my father's life around, I know that. He suddenly wasn't working like he had been. I noticed the big change. All of a sudden he had to work more in supper clubs, in the suburbs. He always had racially mixed groups, and he played a lot of clubs where [white] people would freak out when he showed up with his band. Then he would explode. He'd say look, 'You hire me, I play with the best musicians in town, and you don't tell me who to play with.' There were a lot of nights when he'd go to the gig and come home two hours later because he'd had a scene. Oh, yeah. He was playing in supper clubs where they didn't want black clientele. This was in suburban Cleveland. It all kind of cooled out after a while, but it was a real rough time there. And seeing that go down here in New York, in Bensonhurst, it didn't feel too good. A lot of young people who don't have experience with different types of people, who are real hotheads.

Q: Are Cleveland's Italians concentrated in a few areas or more dispersed throughout the city?

A: Now more dispersed. The inner city of Cleveland is now all black. When I was growing up there were big Polish, Yugoslavian, Croatian, Slovenian, Italian populations. Now they're all spread out, to the suburbs. It really changed a lot because of the riots in the 60s.

Q: Do you go back there?

A: Yeah, I get to Cleveland all the time. I play a lot of concerts there.

Q: Other than your father's being such a big influence, did your family support your choice of a career in music?

A: Well, my Mom, Josephine Verzi Lovano, and my Aunt Rose Verzi, were my first major critics. They came to all my concerts and they come to New York to hear me all the time. My Aunt Rose was a singer and loved jazz. She went to Jazz at the Philharmonic and saw Ella Fitzgerald. She heard Flip Phillips and Stan Getz play back in the early 50s. She's a real hip lady. She came to New York when I played in Woody Herman's fortieth anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall. She brought my sister to New York and came to the concert, had front row tickets.

And a lot of the tunes I play today are standards I heard her sing, tunes that she and my Mom knew. I'd be practicing in the basement, preparing my lessons for my Dad, but they heard me practicing and playing much more than he did until I actually started playing with him. When I was a kid my Mom and Aunt Rose heard me play everything,

and she [Rose] would say, 'Oh, I don't know, I don't think that's right,' and she'd sing it the way it was supposed to go. So they were both really involved in my music when I was a kid. They were, and still are, my biggest critics and my biggest fans.

Q: Italian American women of your mother's and your aunt's generation are often stereotyped as just homebound persons who defer to their husbands, but in my experience, and maybe yours too, I've often found them to be very strong.

A: Oh, yes, it's true. My Mom keeps everybody together. She and my aunt are two different sides of the coin, though. My Mom was a real home person, she took care of my Dad, she did everything. And my Aunt Rose never married and is a real hipster. But my Mom and Aunt Rose are really of their generation, they're both very, uh, how should I say, superstitious, and in certain ways very Old World.

Q: The malocchio . . .

A: Oh yeah, the whole thing. And I remember when my grandmother died, my Mom and Aunt Rose they wore black for maybe two years. Really! I learned a lot about my family from their superstitions.

Q: Do you think Aunt Rose was only able to enjoy that kind of unconventional life because she never married?

A: I think so. I remember her always having a new car. She took a cruise by herself on the Michelangelo and went to Naples. And she worked, too, all her life. She just recently retired, as a matter of fact. She just never had the desire to marry and have a family. And she and my Uncle Santo, her brother, they had a big house together. He was never married, either. So they stayed together and really had an amazing life together. He just passed away recently, which was real hard on everybody. He was a rock-solid person, just an amazing guy. Not involved with music, but he was one of my big teachers in life. Everything I learned when I wasn't playing my horn came from my Uncle Sandy. He had a big house with a lot of land, and I was always there working with him. I helped him build a fireplace. He knew everything about cars, about landscaping. He had fruit trees. He was always there for us. The close-knit family was really Uncle Sandy, my Mom, my Aunt Rose, and my Dad. The four of them were always together. On any given night they'd all be having dinner together. Now, without my Dad and my Uncle around, it's really different.

Q: I heard that you have played with Tony Bennett.

A: I played with him a number of times, when I was with the Woody Herman Band, and also when I was with the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. I never played in a small group setting with him. It was always in big bands, and I was in the saxophone section. He's a really sweet, beautiful person, and someone who was always an inspiration to me, just

because of the tunes he sang. I tried to learn the tunes he sang, and the tunes Sinatra sang. And I still do.

I just got a bunch of Sinatra's old recordings on Capitol, and on every one there are amazing orchestrations and beautiful tunes. Some of the things on *Rush Hour*, in particular "Angel Eyes" and "Prelude to a Kiss," the orchestration, and the way we play really remind me of some of those things that Sinatra did, and Tony Bennett. Of course I'm improvising and playing more open-ended solos, but the whole feeling of the orchestration has the clarity of those classic recordings.

I also played with Sarah Vaughn. She was another great inspiration to me. My aunt had all her records, and the tunes that she sang were the tunes my Dad played and that I tried to learn as a kid. And I've recorded some of them. On Universal Language [1993] there's a tune called "This is Always," which I heard Sarah Vaughn's recording of when I was a kid.

Q: You're known for playing fast, rhythmic pieces, but you're also recognized for your wonderful ballad playing. Last night, at the Village Vanguard, when you played "This is All I Ask," a hush came over the club. It felt as if time stood still, and there was just the horn, your voice, telling a story.

A: That's a tune my Dad always played. The ballad playing really comes completely from my Italian roots, man. It comes from opera, from listening to Caruso. Ballads for me are really the heart and soul of my music. Rhythmic tunes are fun and they're exciting, you get into a groove. But the ballads. . . to mean what you play in a ballad is the whole thing. I'm just starting to find that now, and I'm realizing it's coming from my love of opera, from things like hearing Pavarotti sing "O Sole Mio," where you're almost not aware of the orchestration, the rhythm or anything else but his expressiveness. That's what I'm trying to get to in my music.

Q: What other goals do you have for your career?

A: I don't want to repeat myself. I want every one of my records to have its own personality. So that if you want to check out Joe Lovano's catalogue you could buy five of my records and each one of them will have a personal statement. I think that's the trap a lot of young musicians fall into -- once you make the same record twice, where are you gonna go from there? That's why I'm glad my recording career is at this point, right now, where I have a lot to draw from. I'm going to completely avoid repeating myself and not make another record like the last one.

Q: You have said that your playing used to be more of a technical affair, but now it's more like a meditation.

A: In your young life as a player everything is about technique: Can I play this faster, louder, in all keys. It's like you're always challenging yourself and your technique. Because for me the goal was to have proficiency, to be a virtuoso on my horn. That was an obsession. If you have that goal you really get yourself together faster as a musician. That was always there for me when I was a kid. But at a certain point when I started to feel I had control of my horn, and I was able to play what I heard, I just started naturally to slow down, to play less.

When I used to practice, I'd fly around my horn for an hour. Now I can play for an hour and play four different notes. Kind of meditate inside the sound. When that happened to me I think my sound started to become more personal, and I started to play with more intimacy.

Q: Why do so many young players of the post-Wynton [Marsalis] generation have such a limited vision of the jazz tradition, basically bebop and post-bop, and seem to be so allergic to the more experimental jazz of the 60s?

A: I think it's because you're hearing a lot of these young players prematurely. They're promoting a lot of young cats a year or two or three or four too early. They're not letting guys live around New York and hang out here and get some gigs, play the clubs, learn how it is to try to make a living from your playing. I spent my life doing gigs, doing this doing that. I always tried to play jazz. I played clarinet, I played flute, a lot of gigs where I played behind singers. You have to make a living.

A lot of these young cats today never did any of that. They go right from school, somehow get a record deal, and they're discovered by critics and the record people. And as a musician you're not going to turn anything down. Someone comes up to you and says we're gonna record, and you can have anybody you want in the rhythm section, you can have Herbie Hancock play piano, you're gonna jump at the opportunity. But you can only play as good as you play, and you can only play your experience.

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