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Giuseppe Bortone talks to RootsWorld's George De Stefano about his still developing music label, Zero Nove Nove

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Zero Nove Nove (099) is the telephone prefix for Taranto, a coastal city in the Puglia region of southern Italy. It is also the name of a boutique music firm founded in 2017 by **Giuseppe Bortone**, a native of Taranto and a former freelance tour manager and booking agent.

Based in Lecce, the center of the Salento music scene, Zero Nove Nove began as a management and booking company and continues to offer these services. In 2022, Bortone branched out into recording and publishing with the release of *Maresia* by the Pugliese composer, singer, and multi-instrumentalist Fabrizio Piepoli.

Maresia, with its mix of styles—southern Italian, Arbëresh (Italo-Albanian), and Portuguese fado—was an early indication of the Zero Nove Nove aesthetic.

I talked with Bortone about the label and some of its artists. He told me, *“We are oriented towards so-called world and global sounds.”*

The young label’s catalog includes seven albums (two are available on vinyl), one digital EP, and numerous singles. Zero Nove Nove represents Faraualla, a four-woman vocal group from Puglia with a multicultural repertoire; Yarākā, a band from Taranto whose sound incorporates southern Italian, other Mediterranean flavors, and African influences; La Cantiga de la Serena, a trio that mixes Salentine, Greek, and Spanish Sephardic sounds;

Fabrizio Piepoli; Cristiana Verardo, a singer, songwriter, and guitarist from Lecce; and Dal:um, a South Korean duo that fuses traditional and contemporary Korean music.

Besides the records by artists that Zero Nove Nove represents as a management and booking company, the label has released *Talassa* by the Salentine folk singer Dario Muci and *Gathering of Enchanted Herbs*, the debut EP of Sekvoya, a project by Serbian composer and multi-instrumentalist Ivan Krstić. By the end of 2025, Bortone will release four new works, including the first album by the Cypriot trio Nābu Pēra

But the artist who has brought the label the most visibility and generated the most sales is Maria Mazzotta. Besides being the label's leading artist, she is also married to Bortone.

For 15 years, from 2000 to 2015, Mazzotta was a featured vocalist in Canzoniere Greco Salentino (CGS), the band from Lecce that brought Salentine pizzica and other local styles to international audiences. She released two post-CGS albums as a soloist: *Amoreamaro* (2020) and *Grifone*, with the French band Pulcinella (2021). Mazzotta also collaborated on two albums with the Albanian bassist and cellist Redi Hasa: *Finisterre* (2014) and *Novilunio* (2017).



All of these recordings were well-crafted and distinctive, garnering critical acclaim and solidifying Mazzotta's reputation as a powerful and versatile vocalist rooted in Salentine and southern Italian styles but not limited to them. (She has studied Greek, Albanian, Croatian, and other Eastern European music, as well as Dhrupad, classical Hindustani vocal music.)

Her breakthrough, however, came with *Onde* in 2024. That album's sound was a marked departure from her previous solo and duo recordings, as well as her work with CGS. *Onde* is a southern Italian rock album, visceral, raw, and passionate. "Onde" means waves, and the record's currents of sound evoke movements of the sea, sometimes calm, sometimes agitated, and at their most intense, raging tempests. The power trio of a band comprises Mazzotta, accompanying herself on tamburello and other percussion, Cristiano Della Monica on drums, percussion, and electronics, and Ernesto Nobili on electric guitar and baritone guitar. The Tuareg electric guitarist Bombino and the German trumpeter Volker Goetze make notable contributions to two tracks.

The album comprises original compositions co-written by Mazzotta ("Libro D'Amore," "Sula Nu Puei Stare," "Canto e Sogno," "Nanna Core," "Pizzica De Core") and traditional material ("La Fortuna," "Viestesana," "Navigar Non Posso...Senza di Te," "Damme La Manu"). Mazzotta pays homage to two leading figures of southern Italian music, Sicilian folk singer Rosa Balistreri ("Terra Ca Nun Senti") and the Neapolitan composer and musicologist Roberto De Simone ("Marinesca").

Critics praised the album, *Le Monde* singling out its "punk rock tarantellas" and Mazzotta's "powerful voice." *Jazz News* hailed its "deep and original fusion" and *World Music Central* its "fresh lineup" and "novel sound." *Rootsworld's* Chris Nickson lauded *Onde* for breaking "new ground...with incredible assurance and majesty" and pronounced it "a triumph."

Onde placed in the top ten of the World Music Europe and Transglobal World Music charts and was *BlogFoolk*'s "record of the year." In June 2025, it won the *Premio Loano per la Musica Tradizionale Italiana come miglior album 2024* (Loano Prize for the Best Italian Traditional Music Album), a prestigious award conferred by a jury of critics, music journalists, and musicologists. Mazzotta has performed the album at major festivals and theaters throughout Italy, as well as in France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark.

"We are really proud of Onde. It is a carefully crafted and much-loved album. It was created in the rehearsal room by Maria Mazzotta, Cristiano Della Monica, and Ernesto Nobili. I am honored to have supported every stage of its creation, and I am a witness to their quest to make a genuine album, without compromise and without seeking the approval of the public, critics, and promoters. I can also say that we did not expect this response."

"This sound has its roots in Maria Mazzotta's past. Rock is an integral part of her listening and was even more so during her teenage years. In the more than twenty years of her career, she never believed she could combine her passion for rock with her ethnic musics."

The Loano jury also recognized two other Zero Nove Nove productions as among the best albums of 2024: Farualla's *Culla e tempesta* (second place) and Dario Muci's *Talassa* (third place). Though very different stylistically, both are inventive, even exploratory works that blend traditional forms and global styles. *Culla e tempesta*, called "a joy to discover" by *Rootsworld*'s Lisa Sahulka, ranges far and wide, from Puglia and southern Italy to reggaeton, jazz, and Siberian folk music.

Talassa (Greek for "sea") enchants with its mix of Salentine folk music, reggae, jazz, Arabic, and European classical influences. Dario Muci is a *cantastorie*, a singing storyteller, and his poetic lyrics, in Salentino, Griko, Italian, and Arabic, narrate tales of the sea, migration, exploited migrant labor, and struggles to protect the environment.

Guests include Muci's longtime collaborator and one of the most eminent figures in Salentine music, Enza Pagliara ("A Li Furisi," "Mohammed," "Sant'Asili"), vocalist Nabil Salameh (aka Nabil Bey, of the trio Radio Dervish) on "Ommmuammare," a lament in Arabic and Griko for migrants lost in the sea, and rappers Treble and Rocky G. Vox ("Sant'Asili").



Further recognition of Zero Nove Nove came from the Worldwide Music Expo, the largest conference of the global music scene. In 2024, WOMEX selected Zero Nove Nove as one of its top 20 labels in the world.

The company's success is all the more remarkable given that it is a three-person operation—Bortone, Mazzotta, and their colleague Silvia Calogiuri.

Like all independent music companies, Zero Nove Nove must survive in a market dominated by major international corporations.

"We work in a niche market and have to contend with limited finances. Currently, we are managing to survive by producing only things we believe in and working hard to achieve our goals. We want to continue to focus on internationalization because it is a cornerstone of our vision. Another goal is to expand the team so that we have time to develop all the creative ideas we have in mind. However, our most important goal is to continue to produce music that aims to be enduring."

Zero Nove Nove specializes primarily in contemporary interpretations of traditional southern Italian music. But Salentine pizzica and other folk idioms were not his first love.

"I discovered traditional music late, about fifteen years ago. My past is tied to other types of sound, particularly hip-hop. I think that discovering it later in life has led me to experience it with great respect but not as a purist; to experience it as something that is constantly changing but at the same time deeply rooted in places and people."

"Traditional music is something I love today, and I love discovering more deeply. I'm not just talking about Puglia, but also traditional music from many parts of the world. For example, Turkish music has captivated me in recent years."

Bortone says that Sekvoya's *Gathering of Enchanted Herbs* had a similar effect when he first heard it.

"We receive emails every week with new music to listen to, and when we opened the email from Ivan Krstić, the creator of the Sekvoya project, we made up our minds after we listened to the first track."

The EP's five selections, all original compositions by Krstić, reflect his various influences, the desert blues of Tinariwen and Mdou Moctar, psychedelia, Serbian rock, and traditional Balkan melodies and rhythms. Each song is symbolically associated with a medicinal plant or spice. The music, Bortone says, *"is like a sound forest: dense, vibrant, full of chiaroscuro and sudden openings."*

The Sekvoya EP and the forthcoming release by Nābu Pēra attest to Giuseppe Bortone's search for new and adventurous music from beyond Italy, a commitment to what he calls "internationalization." But he says there's still much to discover in the traditional music of Puglia and his native Salento. Although pizzica is Puglia's best-known style, appreciated and enjoyed by audiences worldwide, Bortone recommends that listeners explore *"the rest of the folk music of Salento and Puglia, which is full of lyrics that, as Maria Mazzotta says, would make any poet jealous."*

[Find out more about Zero Nove Nove's projects.](#)

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