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# Corsica Bulltinu

December 2009

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## Greetings!

As we approach yet another  
 Christmas, I have been on the  
 lookout for suitable presents for  
 you to give your loved ones. This  
 year, consider giving them a copy  
 of Trevor Jones' new album  
*Hopeland*. The album's first song  
 is called *Speloncato* (the Balagne  
 village of that name is pictured  
 right) - need I say more? See  
 Trevor's short article below.



Another possibility would be to  
 send some lucky person on a  
 short course to learn a very different kind of music - Corsican polyphony. This is  
 what Mo Collins did earlier this year, and she has kindly written a short account of  
 her experiences for us.

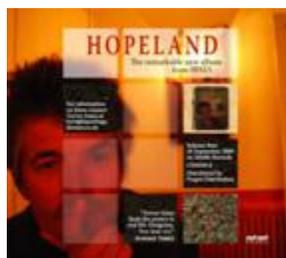
Robert Sharp has introduced us to some intriguing and varied Corsicans over the  
 past few years from history, show business and literature. In a meticulously  
 researched article below, he takes us through the numerous cinematographic  
 interpretations of Alexandre Dumas' novel *Les Frères Corses* (The Corsican  
 Brothers).

Finally, I have included an opinion piece by Julia Gasper about Propriano - a little  
 town that holds special memories for me: it was the first town we stayed at when  
 we discovered Corsica in 1986.

Enjoy the December *Corsica Bulltinu*!

Mac

## Corsica is Hopeland



**Trevor Jones**, British songwriter, lyricist and  
 Corsophile, launched his new album *Hopeland*  
 in September. In this brief introduction, Trevor  
 tells us how Corsica inspired his latest solo  
 work.

I wonder how many of you recognise the  
 Corsica-inspired emotions which Trevor  
 describes below? When I read that the first

song was entitled *Speloncato* (a village in the Balagne) I knew that I'd find the  
 album intriguing...

*There is a house on a hill that sits beneath a mountain that overlooks the sea.*

Buy the new Granite Island edition

*Over the course of a year I wrote 'Hopeland' in that house. I retreated there more in hope than expectation. The hope was that I could integrate with an environment, have a daily purpose, however mundane, and to somehow reflect that in my writing.*

*The ripe confusions of London had rendered me emotionally barren; I needed to simplify, to connect with something real, something fine. In dark times we all need to see a light, even if it is a shadowy bliss, and the authenticity of that blissful Corsican village, with no more than sixty inhabitants, and the austere beauty of the surroundings, captured me immediately. It became me. There was no 'time', I was 'of the moment' and at that moment there was no place on earth I'd rather have been. I learnt to inhabit my days without resenting the past or fearing the future.*

*Unburdened, the words and the songs came flooding forth.*

## Learning to sing Corsican and Georgian polyphony



by Mo Collins

"Don't try to fill the space around you but just to fill your own body space" and "Cela vient de la terre" ("That comes from the earth").

These were two bits of advice made on the Corsican and Georgian polyphonic singing course I attended recently, via a notice in *Corsica Bullitinu*. The setting was a Polish convent, which doubles as a hotel, in the hills above Bastia, a beautiful place set among olive groves and dedicated to the delicately named St Hyacinthe.

Our group of 12, from the UK, Ireland, Corsica, and the United States, had the good fortune to have two outstanding tutors: Frank Kane, an American living in Paris, experienced and much sought-after teacher of the Georgian style of singing, founder of three Georgian ensembles (Kartuli in the US and Irinola and Marani in France) and Jean Etienne Langianni, member of the esteemed groups Tavagna and Ensemble Organum and composer of a Mass (*Messa Corsa per i tempi novi*) and the well-known paghjella, *So le muntagne d'Orezza*.

### A shared polyphonic tradition

Whilst the two styles share a polyphonic tradition, they are also strikingly different: Georgian songs for the most part are non-rhyming, often strikingly dissonant, pulsing with energy and constructed in vertical blocks of harmony; Corsican songs are highly ornamented, with a rhyming structure, modal, and in the case of laments and sacred music, hauntingly melancholic. Both traditions use what is known in Corsican as *chjama e rispondi* (appeal and response) and give scope for considerable vocal improvisation. In both, the middle part carries the tune whilst the other two harmonise, drone (lower part) or soar above (upper part). Georgian songs are often linked to an occupation or activity, Corsican to celebration, religion or to mourning the loss of national freedom.

Our two teachers shared the task of coaxing harmonies from our keen but untutored throats. For seven hours a day for five days we learned how to breathe to support our voices, to feel the vibrations generated while we sang; to project, to enunciate while both maintaining energy balance and staying aware of the spirit of the song. We sang in a large group sitting in a circle amongst the olive trees, the occasional kite wheeling and squealing overhead, (sometimes to the accompaniment of a trimmer or chain saw!) We also sang in smaller groups in turn, holding an ear and keeping close eye contact in a tight circle,

as some of us had seen Corsican groups doing. (The photo shows an unusual grouping where eye contact is difficult!)

So high on singing were we that after the evening meal we sang on into the night, jamming wildly in the bar. The night of the full moon, distant dogs joined the cicadas (and us) in celebration. On the final evening we gave a performance of our 10 songs in the 18th century church to a small but highly appreciative audience. It was for us an emotional finale.

There is something about Corsica - the beauty of its landscape, the pride and generosity of spirit of its people - that arouses powerful emotions. Add to this the energy generated by song and something marvelous happens: musical harmony transcends the individual and creates a unity of spirit. It felt as if, by singing for all we were worth, we were giving back to our surroundings what it had given us. The songs still resonate in me and no doubt live on as ghostly echoes in the olive groves.

*If, like Mo Collins, you have had an experience in Corsica that you'd like to share with other readers, please contact me (mac @ corsicaholiday.com).*

*And if you'd like to go on a course such as the one that Mo attended, I suggest you contact Frank Kane. He can be reached at kane.frank @ gmail.com. Frank tells me there is likely to be another such course in September 2010.*

### Watch out - it's the Corsican Brothers!



**by Robert Sharp**

Poster from the 1941 United Artists film "The Corsican Brothers".

Anyone who has flipped through the wonderfully informative and lavishly illustrated book by Jean-Pierre Mattei - *La Corse, Les Corses et le Cinéma: 50 ans de cinéma parlant, 1929/1980* - may be surprised at just how richly Corsica has fed the imagination of film makers. And anyone with any knowledge of nineteenth century French literature will know how much the output of Alexandre Dumas père has been tapped (e.g. *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*). Put these two lines of thought together and we get a story which has been filmed many times: *Les frères Corses*/The Corsican brothers.

Of course, with a few exceptions, it is virtually impossible to see the English language versions today. I say 'English language', but amazingly, silent versions were made in England in 1898 and 1902.

These were hardly feature films. Indeed, the former chiefly consisted of a trick shot of the ghost of a man's twin who shows him a vision of how he was killed in a duel. This was the first ever double exposure on film, one of the patented inventions of its director George Albert Smith who seemingly invented it before Georges Méliès. The 1902 film was directed by Dicky Winslow.

There were several silent US versions, in 1912 (with George Lessey portraying the brothers), 1915 (with King Baggott) and in 1920 (with western star Dustin Farnum).

It is not until 1941, though, and the United Artists version that we have an opportunity to place Hollywood interpretation alongside Dumas actualité! Douglas Fairbanks played the Siamese twins, Louis and Mario Franchi, who are amazingly separated at birth. They are brought up apart, yet have a physical telepathy so that when one is hurt the other feels the same pain. Unfortunately, they also feel the same love for Isabella (Ruth Warrick). Nevertheless, they unite to wreak vengeance upon Baron Callona (Akim Tamiroff) the villain who stole their parents' estate and who now runs Corsica with an iron hand.

### Swashbuckling

Naturally, there was lots of action - swordfighting, knife-throwing, kidnapping and torture. Putting it generously, it was a fairly free adaptation, with director Gregory Ratoff treating it all too heavily and elaborately. The poster emphasised the film's 'slashing to the very peak of adventure thrills!' whilst asking the question on all our lips: 'Why does each brother love with the power of two hearts - his own and his brother's?' But whereas one critic felt Fairbanks could have done with more of his father's humour, no less a critic than Leonard Maltin called it an 'entertaining swashbuckler', with Fairbanks 'excellent' and with 'ingenious' photographic effects. At least Dimitri Tiomkin's music was Oscar-nominated.

In 1953 United Artists, and director Ray Nazarro, gave us *The Bandits of Corsica* (titled *The Return of the Corsican Brothers* in Britain). This version was deemed to be even further removed from the original novel, with Richard Greene as Mario (good) and Lucien (bad). The former, championing the cause of the righteous, fights to free 1830s Corsica from tyrant Jonatto (Raymond Burr). Mario gets Lucien to impersonate him while he leads a band against the enemy. However, Lucien makes love to his brother's wife (Paula Raymond) and plots against Mario whose mental and physical pains are felt by him at a distance. One critic felt there was 'more apathy than empathy in the proceedings', adding 'nobody owned up to being producer'. The poster perhaps said it all: Greene buckled his swash with the words 'I'll take the island by storm ... and the woman with it!' whilst below read 'No man could match his daring when a woman like this was the prize!'

In 1985 Ian Sharp directed a tv movie version, British-made for an American company, with Trevor Eve as Louis and Lucien de Franchi, Siamese twins separated at birth. Gentle Louis wants no part in the feud between his family and the de Guidice family, not helped by both twins being in love with Annamaria de Guidice (Olivia Hussey) who loves Lucien. Louis goes to Paris hoping to work with the government to stop such feuds; Lucien continues it. Louis looks after the wife of a friend who is at sea, but cannot save her reputation being ruined by cad Count Chateau-Renaud (Simon Ward). Renaud challenges Louis to a duel and kills him. Lucien senses this and sets out from Corsica to Paris to find the killer. He does, and kills Renaud on the spot where Louis died. Affected by his brother dying in the cause of peace, Lucien too now seeks to end the family feud with the de Guidice. This version concentrates a little more on both the feud and the relationship between the two brothers, but we are probably still waiting for the version which is both completely faithful to the book and actually feels as though it is capturing the essence of the Corsican feud in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### Feuding and banditry

This article is, of course, more about Hollywood film-making than about Corsica, but for those interested in the subject the book which will explain all is Stephen Wilson's excellent *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (CUP, 1988). At over 560 pages long, with a hugely informative 'Sources and bibliography' section over twenty pages long, it is the only book you will need to read on the subject. It may take you a few days, but it's better than waiting for the perfect film!

### Propriano - a point of view



by Julia Gasper

Earlier this year we had a two-week holiday in Propriano, and I wonder if any fellow-Corsophile wants to share my reflections on it.

Propriano has an enviable setting, in the middle of the gulf of Valinco. The bay is peaceful and the beaches are surrounded by all those greeney-blue mountains. As you drive round it from Porto-Pollo to Campo-Moro, you have to be grateful to the Genoese overlords who dotted the coastline with so many defensive towers which are now landmarks and - if you are very lucky - idyllic holiday homes. I have been there three times and have taken friends there to share the experience.

Propriano is very fortunate in that, considering the number of beaches and their quality, it has not been over-developed with high-rise hotels or intensive apartment blocks. It is still a small town with all the attractions that entails. Yet, this year, I felt that there was something a little run-down, a little tired about it, and I wondered if it was just that after several visits I have got more observant. There were a lot of wilted, neglected flowers and plants that needed to be either watered or taken away. Some houses are beautifully cared-for, but others are not. The streets seemed dirty, strewn with litter and there were too many places where the road surface was cracked, potholed or botched together with bad repairs.

I found myself wondering what I would do if I were Mayor of Propriano. Assuming that I had the power to do so, I would first of all ban cars and motorbikes from the main street along the sea-front, and also from the very steep little road that goes down there from the church, a ski-slope of a road which is downright dangerous. Maybe they should be allowed for one hour per day, just for deliveries or rubbish collection, but excluding them the rest of the time would make the atmosphere in the shops, restaurants and cafés far more pleasant. It is annoying if you are trying to browse while cars or motorbikes are whizzing past at 40 mph, or if you are trying to relax in a café and someone comes and parks right in front of it. I would also make the beaches a car-free zone, and require all vehicles to park some way back, not visible from the beach.

### Shabby chic?

Secondly, assuming I had a little bit of money in the municipal kitty, I would use it to get a lot of the old planks and rubbish cleared away from the beaches and then plant a lot more tamarisk trees all along them to provide shade and adornment. If I had some cash left, I would offer subsidies to get some of the facades of buildings along the central streets repainted. I love shabby-chic as a style, but there is a point where shabby goes too far and you need a bit more chic in the picture. Come on, it can't be that expensive. What about hosing down the streets more often and watering flowers in tubs and pots? Corsica is not a place where water is expensive. It flows down from the mountains in abundance, and what a godsend that is. Oleanders, bougainvillea, bright red geraniums, are all part of what a visitor expects in the Med in summer.

Finally as mayor, I would issue a request to people with tubs of dead plants to replace or dispose of them. Anybody who ignored it would find that they were not invited to my mayoral party and did not get a Christmas card with my signature on it!

*If you have an opinion about Propriano (or about this article), you can share your views on [Corsica Lista](#), our discussion forum. If you feel like writing an opinion piece about somewhere in Corsica (positive, negative, or somewhere in between) I'll always be happy to consider it for inclusion.*

And that's all for 2009.

I'd like to say a special thank you to Trevor Jones, Mo Collins, Robert Sharp and Julia Gasper for their contributions this time.

If you have a picture, an idea for an article or some other contribution for *Corsica Bulltinu*, do please get in touch with me.

All that remains now is for me to wish all of you a very Happy Christmas and a Great New Year. I hope to meet some of you in Corsica in 2010.

All the best,

Mac

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