

ON TOUR

That's Italian

by Bob Parvin



Last summer El Paso, Texas got a foreign influence it won't forget. Twenty-five folk performers and musicians from villages around Genoa and Naples staged shows in El Paso and Juarez for two days. The group, representing the ancient folkways still practiced in remote northern and southern parts of Italy, stopped in El Paso as part of the On Tour program of the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife.

Folk performers from seven other foreign countries participated on such tours in 1975. Such appearances serve the dual purpose of improving our cultural ties with other nations and, perhaps more important, displaying to Americans the customs that time and modern change have not altered.

Most El Pasoans who attended the performances agreed that the Italians were the most spontaneous and eager performers to

Italian folk performers, shaded by 10-gallon hats presented by Texas hosts, demonstrate the dance steps used today in Southern and Northern Italy.

be billed in town for a long time. During lunch one afternoon in a Juarez restaurant, someone whispered that it would be nice to see the group do a short number. Before the waiters could clear the tables, the Italians had cordoned off a circle and had begun singing and dancing with gusto.

Formal appearances were held the day after their arrival at "El Corredor," a restored area of old business buildings in downtown El Paso. A stage was set up at a corner plaza and dining tables were arranged so spectators could watch the performance and enjoy Italian food catered from a nearby restaurant. In the evening a two-hour performance was offered at El

Paso's plush new Civic Center auditorium.

The Smithsonian makes a special effort to help Americans cultivate ties with the foreign folk. Wherever possible in cities in which the groups are booked, residents of corresponding nationalities are asked to provide after-hour entertainment, room and board in their homes for the performers. The Italian-American societies in El Paso couldn't wait to be hospitable to their kinsmen. For most it was like a trip back to the Old Country without leaving Texas.

Days before the group's arrival the women of DIANA, El Paso's 60-member chapter of the Daughters of Italian Ancestry in North America, a few of whom were recent arrivals in this country themselves, started cooking up a storm for the big welcoming banquet. Caldrons of steaming spaghetti, platter loads of lasagne and great dishes of spicy ravioli were carefully prepared. Gallons of Italian wine and loaves of garlic bread were ordered. And souvenir packages of macramed hanging baskets painted with Bicentennial seals were labeled with the visitors' names.

Troupe members were paired off with their Italian-speaking hosts, and taken on sight-seeing and shopping trips around the city. Relationships developed quickly. Mrs. Ettore De Santis, a first generation Italian Texan who housed three members of the Naples group said, "There were beautiful moments. We recalled songs we had heard in our youths and even my 86 year-old mother who came from the Old Country was nostalgic. She sang the boys some songs they had never heard before and they were so impressed they wrote down the words and used the piece in their performance."

Texas was the place the Italians wanted most to see. "Texas is very popular in Italy, probably because of all the Italian western movies made there," explains Mrs. Norman Haley, who grew up in Florence, married her American husband and immigrated after the war. "I think they were really im-

pressed to find Italian-speaking kinsmen here. They were very interested in everything and were so very appreciative that it was refreshing to us."

Goodbyes at the airport were emotional in the best Italian manner, even to the point of tears, bearhugs and cheek-kissing.

"Italy's a lot closer to us now" said Mrs. Haley. A few days after the group's departure, cards and letters began arriving in El Paso. Mrs. De Santis opened a letter from the three Italian boys she had housed. They had drawn a big heart on it and written warm words of thanks underneath.

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A special pride went into preparation of foods served to Italian guests which, along with the hospitality dished out by their Texas kinsmen, will leave a lasting impression.

