

Sicilian Jazz Project brings world-class music to Penticton

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You wouldn't know it by the name of his band, the Sicilian Jazz Project, but for a long time Canadian musician [Michael Occhipinti](#) was not very interested in Italian music.

Occhipinti was born in Canada, but both his parents are from Sicily, immigrating to Canada in the early 1950s.

The eclectic musician who has been called "genre-resisting" had, up until that point, played everything from blues, to West African and Indian music.

"The one thing I was never at all interested in was Italian music, Sicilian music," Occhipinti said.

After having his first daughter in 2003, his young family took a trip to Italy to visit relatives and explore his parent's homeland.

"It kind of got me thinking, maybe I've been overlooking something. Maybe I should explore it a little bit," Occhipinti said.

He began researching Sicilian music and came across the Smithsonian collection American musicologist [Alan Lomax](#) created on a trip to Europe in the 1950s.

"These weren't pop songs, they were mining songs and fishing songs. Songs that were really particular to jobs or regions. His whole approach was 'hey we better document this stuff now because this music is going to die out,'" Occhipinti said. "That to me was really interesting. I just kind of liked the idea that he was there in 1954 and my parents left in 1953. I was so fascinated with the idea he recorded the place as it was when my parents left. That was kind of the starting point."

The original idea was to make an instrumental jazz album, but he came across Italian singer [Pilar](#) (Ilaria Patassini).

"I just thought she had a beautiful voice and great songwriting, so, you know very 21st century, I sent her a Facebook message," Occhipinti said.

The two began working together and toured Canada for a month last summer and another round of shows last fall.

"I just love the way she sings so this group is kind of centred around her and her voice and just what she can do," Occhipinti said.

The songs are sung in Italian, but the language barrier is not as strong as some might think, Occhipinti said.

"Something about the music transcends the language," Occhipinti said. "With us, a big part of the show is actually the introductions to the tunes."

Occhipinti prides himself on inviting the audience in with the stories behind the songs.

"Most of these songs have really interesting stories. In some ways they're stories that a lot of Canadians can kind of relate to in a sense. They're similar kinds of jobs, they're mining songs or fishing songs and there's a mix of comedy and tragedy as well," Occhipinti said. "It's amazing how the language doesn't matter. The music pulls at them very strongly and emotionally. People say 'that love song you did made me cry and I didn't even understand the words,' so it's actually quite inviting music."

While the songs and stories are older, musically they sound very North American. Funk, reggae, jazz and all sorts of different grooves make an appearance.

“We’re not trying to be a folklore group. I’m just trying to be a Canadian musician who happens to have access to this other thing and make it very much my music. I really want it to feel like something that can only be done by someone in Canada who’s kind of free to borrow from other cultures in a way,” Occhipinti said.

He said it is a very Canadian thing to do musically, encountering and exploring different cultures, bringing them together under one banner.

“I kind of took this group as something that could freely borrow from everything I like,” Occhipinti said. “The overriding and sort of connecting thing is the language.”

The Sicilian Jazz Project comes to St. Saviour’s Church, 150 Orchard Ave., on Nov. 23. Tickets are available at www.eventbrite.ca, or in person at the Leir House, 220 Manor Park Ave.