

Introduction

Welcome to “The Greatest Hits Explained”. My name is Michael Winter and I’m the host and editor of the show. I’m a German American passionate music lover and if you’re one, too, - a passionate music lover, I mean - ready to dive deep into the world of music history with me, perfect.

No matter where you are right now and what you’re doing while you’re listening to this, I’m glad you’re here and I’m really looking forward to this journey together.

It would be great if you dropped me a note from one music lover to another – I hope to hear from all of you. Always remember that music is one of the major positive forces that connects us all as it doesn’t know any borders.

Today, we’re gonna talk about one of the most iconic Italian popular songs that conquered not only Italy but the whole world: “Nel blu, dipinto di blu” better known as – especially in the US – “Volare” by Domenico Modugno who, by some – especially in the US – was and still is also called “Mr. Volare”. At one point, an advertising agency even listed the song as a candidate to replace the current Italian national anthem.

“Nel blu, dipinto di blu” is a song that meant a lot to a lot of people. And it is a song that still means a lot to a lot of people. People sang and heard it when they were kids. They sang and danced to it at birthdays and other celebrations. And they played it for their loved ones at funerals. It is by far one of the greatest hits the world has ever seen. And this is no exaggeration.

By the way, I’m gonna use the song titles “Nel blu, dipinto di blu” and “Volare” interchangeably during this show. Whatever title I’m using, I’m talking about one and the same song.

And while the song “Volare” itself is at the core of this episode, I will also explore Domenico Modugno’s very interesting life. That’s how I usually approach things – by picking an unforgettable song that made music history and then I analyze both the song and also everything around it. And all of this with a noticeable German accent. I hope this works for you. Also, being a music lover and not a historian, I always do my best to provide you with the most accurate information I find on the web and other sources and if there should ever be any mistakes, they are not intentional and please point them out to me.

You’re gonna hear *some* music and sound effects in this show – that is music and sound effects that I purchased the reasonably priced licenses for. But, unfortunately, I’m not able to actually play Domenico Modugno’s “Volare” for you. We’re gonna discuss the song a lot, yes, but since the song is considered copyrighted material, I would need to spend astronomical dollar amounts on licensing to be able to play it here which is impossible from a budgetary perspective. Nevertheless, I can promise that discussing and exploring the song together with me will be almost as exciting as listening to it. This, by the way, is a common challenge for a lot of podcasters and one that will hopefully soon be solved in a creative and effective way by the music industry. Maybe it has already been solved by the time you’re listening to this episode.

Well, so let us now travel to the Italy of the late 1950s and discuss a lot of interesting details about Domenico Modugno’s classic “Nel blu, dipinto di blu” also known as “Volare”. I’m really excited about this

episode as I love Italy and the Italian people. I have been to Italy many, many times and I can't wait to go there again. Maybe I'll see you there.

First, we're gonna shine a light on the political and cultural situation the world and especially Italy was in when the song was released before we focus on the music by discussing the song, its production, success and reception. After that, we'll get to know the artist, Domenico Modugno, a lot better and we'll also explore more of the musical aspects related to "Volare" and its music genre per se. The grand finale will then be a quick exploration of the song's legacy.

The Times

"Volare", as the song is popularly known as by many, was released on February 1st, 1958.

If you're wondering what the world and Italy were like in 1958 then you and I are having the same thoughts. Let's find out together.

Here are some of the birthdays of well-known people:

January 1st: Grandmaster Flash, an African American hip-hop/rap DJ legend.

January 26th: Ellen DeGeneres, a very popular American actress, comedian, and television host.

February 16th: Ice-T, an American rapper, songwriter, and actor.

July 31st: Mark Cuban, an American entrepreneur and basketball team owner.

August 16th: Madonna, an American-born singer, songwriter, and actress.

August 29th: Michael Jackson, an African American singer, songwriter and dancer (he died in 2009).

October 5th: Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist and science communicator.

1958 was an important year for Europe as the "Treaty of Rome" which was signed on March 25th, 1957 by Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany became effective on January 1st, 1958. As of the recording of this episode, the treaty is still one of the two most important treaties in the European Union also known as EU under the name "Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union". The "Treaty of Rome" is officially called "The Treaty establishing the European Economic Community" or – short – "EEC Treaty" and it established the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC).

In early 1958, the United Arab Republic was established – it was a sovereign state in the Middle East that existed from 1958 to 1971. Initially, it was a political union between Egypt (including the occupied Gaza Strip) and Syria which left the union after the 1961 Syrian coup d'état leaving only a rump state. Egypt continued to be known officially as the United Arab Republic until 1971.

In 1958, the U.S. National Space Agency, better known as NASA, was established and the US launched their first satellite, named Explorer I, into space. That was an appropriate name, wasn't it? The Explorer I mission was the USA's answer to the first two satellites launched by the Soviet Union the year before Sputnik 1 and 2 which started the Cold War Space Race between the two nations.

Also, Vice President Richard Nixon went on a goodwill tour of South America which sparked open protests and rioting.

What else happened? Let's see....

The U.S. Marines intervened in Lebanon to bolster the local government, Nikita Khrushchev became Premier of the Soviet Union and General Charles de Gaulle was elected president of France with 78.5% of the votes.

An economic slowdown in the U.S. caused a sharp rise in unemployment. Detroit, for example, saw an unemployment rate of 20%. This was later dubbed the Recession of 1958. On the sports side, the New York Yankees won the baseball world series with a 4-to-3 win over Milwaukee, the Baltimore Colts beat the New York Giants 23-to-17 to win the NFL Championship Game – the first to go into sudden death overtime – and in what is called "The Greatest Game Ever Played" Brazil beat Sweden 5-to-2 in the final game of the soccer World Cup in Sweden to win the trophy.

Godtfred Kirk Christiansen filed a patent for the iconic plastic Lego brick. The rest is history.

The "Cha Cha" became a dance craze, "Hula Hoops" became a national craze, the "Bossa Nova" was born in Rio de Janeiro and the Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, opened its doors in New York City.

And I've got a few more for you:

Five days after "Volare" was released, on February 6th, seven Manchester United soccer players were among the 21 people killed in the Munich air disaster in West Germany, on the return flight from a European Cup game in Yugoslavia. The Munich air disaster occurred when British European Airways Flight 609 crashed on its third attempt to take off from a slush-covered runway at Munich-Riem Airport, West Germany.

On a lighter note, stereo recordings became available, the "Barbie" doll was introduced becoming an instant success, Pizza Hut was founded in Wichita, Kansas and instant noodles went on sale for the first time.

Elvis Presley joined the U.S. Army, transforming The King Of Rock & Roll into U.S. Private #53310761 and the Beatles had their first recording session.

Let's focus on Italy real quick:

In 1958, Italy had since the mid-1950s been on its way towards what English-speaking journalists referred to as the "economic miracle" or "economic boom" of the country. It is important to mention that Domenico Modugno's hit "Nel blu dipinto di blu", released in 1958, emerged in the middle of this optimistic phase.

Also in 1958 in Italy, the Merlin law named after the promoter and first signatory of the law, Senator Lina Merlin, was approved which prohibited the activity of "prostitution houses", punished both the exploitation and the facilitation of prostitution, in particular "anyone who in any way favors or exploits the prostitution of others" to name only a few major aspects of the law.

The "Christian Democracy" – or short "DC" – party won the Italian elections and Amintore Fanfani formed his second government.

In Rome, Pope John the 23rd (XXIII) succeeded Pope Pius the 12th (XII), as the 261st pope.

1958 – what a year. Please note that this was just a quick overview of a subset of the most important events of that year and in no way am I claiming this to be a complete review of 1958.

The Song & Production

"Nel blu, dipinto di blu" popularly known as "Volare" was recorded by Italian singer-songwriter Domenico Modugno and written by himself and Franco Migliacci.

The song was released on the 1st of February in 1958. Actually, this is more than a song. It is an anthem. It is a soaring paean to freedom and love.

Franco Migliacci had already started working on the lyrics in June of the previous year.

He later said that what had actually inspired him to write the lyrics were two paintings by famous Russian-French painter Marc Chagall who lived from 1887 until 1985 and was as a pioneer of modernism.

Franco had planned to go to the sea with Domenico, but while waiting for him to show up, Franco started drinking wine and eventually fell asleep. He said that he had vivid dreams, and that when he woke up, he looked at the reproductions of the Chagall paintings on the wall and right there it hit him.

"Le coq rouge" features a yellow man suspended in midair, while in "Le peintre et la modelle", half the painter's face was colored blue. Based on this, Franco started to write a song about a man who dreams of painting himself blue and being able to fly. What a combination. I looked the paintings up online, by the way, and I must say that I would have never been able to come up with such an idea upon just looking at those paintings. Seriously. Not even after some wine. I mean, you could argue that exactly this is the reason that I'm not a world-famous songwriter and I would give you that. But really, the paintings are very "modern" and so – wow – it takes quite some imagination to then say "let me now write lyrics about a man who dreams of painting himself blue and being able to fly".

Later that same night, Franco was able to discuss his lyrics with Domenico who liked what he heard and so the two started to work on the song together which took them a couple of days.

At first, the song was tentatively titled "Sogno in blu" which means "Dream in Blue".

Franca Gandolfi, Domenico's widow later recalled that, one day, after a storm forced open his window, Domenico had the idea of modifying the chorus of the song, introducing the word "Volare", with "Volare" being the popular title of the song these days. One of the sources I found said that Domenico had the idea of the liberating gesture of the arms wide open as if they were wings, that he made whenever he performed the song live, right along with his idea to use the word "Volare".

"Nel blu, dipinto di blu" was released as a single from the EP "La strada dei successi" in a 7-inch 45 rpm record format with a length of 3 minutes and 34 seconds. The B side was the song "Vecchio frac" which translates to "old tailcoat". In Italy, it was released on the Fonit label, in the US on Decca and in the UK on Oriole international. What's remarkable is that Fonit released the single four times with different B sides each: The first version with number SP 30222 had, as I mentioned earlier, "Vecchio frac" on the B side. Release number 15948 had "Nisciuno po' sapè" on the B side. SP 30208 had "Strada 'nfosa" on the B side and SP 30223 had "Lazzarella" on the B side.

The Fonit record label, by the way, had been founded in 1911 in Milano, Italy and its name was an acronym for Fonodisco Italiano Trevisan. In 1957, the label was merged with the Cetra label which stood for “Compagnia per edizioni, teatro, registrazioni ed affini” to Fonit Cetra, in 1987 the label name was changed to “Nuova Fonit Cetra”, in 1997 it became part of RAI Trade and in 1998 the Warner Music Group bought it acquiring the catalog along the way.

As soon as “Volare” was released, a gentleman – I assume that he was one – named Antonio De Marco claimed that Domenico and Franco copied his 1956 song “Il castello dei sogni” and that, therefore, “Volare” was the result of plagiarism. De Marco was fighting an uphill battle there. One of his major challenges was that his song had never been recorded; it had only been played during a couple of concerts De Marco had given. Domenico eventually sued De Marco for defamation and, in July of 1958, a court in Italy absolved Domenico and Franco convicting De Marco. Back then, the court asked an expert to compare the two songs and this expert wasn’t able to find any relevant similarity. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to find any online version of the De Marco song. But that’s probably not worth the time anyway as his allegations were based on dubious claims anyway. For example, De Marco claimed that he had lost his sheet music in Rome while he was registering the song with the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers and that Domenico must have found and used it for his own song. That’s not impossible, I would say, but combined with the fact that the expert couldn’t find any relevant similarity. between the songs, I guess we have to arrive at the conclusion that De Marco was lying and that he just wanted to have a piece of the Volare pie.

Success & Reception

“Volare” was a huge success right away when it was released and it has continued to be one to this day.

The title’s success is usually summarized in saying that it sold more than 22 million copies worldwide, that it won the Sanremo Music Festival as well as two Grammy Awards and that it represented Italy at the 1958 Eurovision Song Contest where it came in third.

Upon its release in 1958, “Nel blu, dipinto di blu” basically replaced “O sole Mio” – which was exactly 60 years old at the time and recorded by many people including Enrico Caruso and Luciano Pavarotti who won the 1980 Grammy Award for the Best Classical Performance for his rendition of it – as the most widely-known Italian song in the world. The Italian Society of Authors and Publishers claims that “Volare” is *the* most played Italian song in both Italy as well as in the world. And that seems reasonable.

Within the first 12 days after its release on the 1st of February in 1958, “Volare” already sold 20,000 copies in Italy where the song became an immediate, overnight success. Some sources say that the song must have sold between 800,000 and 1 million copies in Italy alone.

The song was then released in other European countries as well as the US and quickly became a worldwide hit and, over the years, one of the great classics.

There are a couple of reasons why Domenico had such a breakthrough with “Volare”. It was beautiful music, it had wonderful lyrics, the musical arrangement was top notch and Domenico was a new and passionate force on stage that was very different from how the average performer back then looked and behaved on stage. Also, he was at the right place at the right time. We’ll get into specifics related to this in chapters “The Artist”, “The Music” and “The Lyrics”.

On August 4th, 1958, the song entered the US Billboard Hot 100 charts at number 54 and jumped to the number two spot the following week which marked the biggest jump to the runner-up spot in the chart's history. One interesting fact here is that the Billboard Hot 100 charts that came out on August 4th 1958 and on which "Volare" was at number 54 were the first Billboard Hot 100 charts ever published.

It was a blessing when the US finally organized their official charts from several different ones into one unified Billboard charts – just like Britain had done earlier. Finally, there were consolidated charts everybody could use as the official charts.

In its third week on the charts, on August 18th, 1958, one day after performing "Volare" live in front of millions of viewers of the CBS program "The Ed Sullivan Show" on August 17th, 1958, the song reached the number one position which made it only the second record in the young history of the Billboard Hot 100 charts to reach the number one position – the first one was Ricky Nelson's "Poor Little Fool".

"Volare" held the number one spot for 5 non-consecutive weeks, stayed on the Billboard Hot 100 charts for 16 weeks and sold around 2 million copies in the US alone.

Domenico returned to "The Ed Sullivan Show" on September 14th, 1958 to perform "Volare" one more time there. During the same show, Tommy Edwards sang his song "It's All in the Game" which ended up bumping "Volare" from the top spot on September 29th, 1958. This goes to show how influential and important TV shows like "The Ed Sullivan Show" were back then when it came to deciding the fate of a song.

At the end of 1958, the song was Billboard's Song of the Year which qualified it as a "greatest hit" for this episode we're doing here. It would take another 36 years, until 1994, before another non-American song, it was "The Sign" by the Swedish group "Ace of Base", would become Billboard's Song of the Year. Despite all his success, Domenico was able to enter the Billboard Hot 100 charts only twice: the first time with "Volare" and then again with "Piove (Ciao, ciao bambina)" which peaked at number 97 – a rather disappointing position for such a great song that has also become a timeless classic over the years.

On September 6th, 1958, "Nel blu, dipinto di blu" entered the UK Singles Charts at number 15 and it settled for its peak position the following week when it landed on the number 10 spot.

The song was also a hit in other European countries such as Norway and the Netherlands, to mention only two examples, where it reached position two on the local charts.

The song's huge success was, at least in part, a result of Domenico presenting it at the 1958 Sanremo Music Festival on January 31st, 1958 to an excited Italian audience and him winning the contest with the song.

According to some sources, the song was actually going to be rejected in the selection process for this 8th Sanremo Music Festival but, for whatever reason, it made it onto the list of the 20 admitted songs. Wow. Phew. Can you imagine how Domenico's and – to some extent – all our lives would have been different if the song wouldn't have been chosen? Thanks to whoever gave their OK to including it!

"Volare" was performed at the festival during its second night and Domenico shared the performance of the song with Johnny Dorelli, an Italian singer, actor and television host. Domenico later told the story that Johnny was so nervous that he had to punch him to persuade him to go on stage with him.

Dorelli, by the way, was a stage name created from the spelling of the Americanized pronunciation of Johnny's last name which was D'Aurelio. Johnny's father was Nino D'Aurelio, an Italian tenor that had great success in the US in the 1940s and 1950s and lived from 1908 until 1958. Johnny's son Gianluca, whom he had together with his wife, Italian actress Loretta Masiero who died in 2010 at the age of 82

from Alzheimer's disease, and who was born in 1967, is also a singer and in addition to that, an actor and theater director. Johnny had two more kids: A son named Gabriele from his partner Catherine Spaak, a French-Italian actress and singer, and a daughter named Guendalina from his partner Gloria Guida, an Italian actress and model. Oh boy, guess how much I would love to sit at the dinner table with this family.

Anyway, the two gentlemen Domenico and Johnny made it to the finals at Sanremo which took place at the Sanremo Casino on February 1st, 1958. Their performance was a huge success and so they finished the festival as the winners with "L'edera" by Nilla Pizzi and Tonina Torrielli ranking second. The jury consisted of 200 people including 100 people who were drawn from the public at the Sanremo Casino.

By the way, I wasn't able to find out why Domenico and Johnny performed "Volare" together at Sanremo. I mean, whose idea was it and what was the thinking behind it? If you happen to know, please drop me a note. I would really appreciate that.

"Volare" winning Sanremo in early 1958 was probably the basis of the song's huge success because it allowed Domenico to reach everyone in Italy who was able to afford a radio or TV set at the time and who watched or listened to the festival.

The timing of the record release was perfect as it went on sale on February 1st, 1958, on the day the song won the Sanremo Festival.

"Volare" has remained the most successful Sanremo Music Festival song and if you ever get to watch the video of the Sanremo performance of Domenico and Johnny – enjoy it. It's a piece of music history. While Johnny's performance was definitely OK, Domenico's was truly great. He performed the song – just like he always did later – with so much passion. It was beautiful. This must have made the difference at Sanremo. Not only was the song great and Domenico's voice wonderful – but rarely ever had neither the Italian public nor the critics seen or heard such a passionate performance by a singer.

Another boost for the song was the 1958 Eurovision Song Contest held on March 12th in Hilversum in the Netherlands. Because he and his song were the winner at the 1958 Sanremo Music Festival, Domenico was picked by RAI to present Italy with his young but already successful title "Nel blu, dipinto di blu" as the first song of the contest. He was chosen over Johnny Dorelli who had done Sanremo together with Domenico. But we don't need to feel sorry for Johnny – that guy went on to have an amazing career as one of Italy's finest entertainers. Back to the show: There was a transmission fault during the performance of the song though and so it could not initially be heard in all countries who were watching the show. As a result, Domenico was asked to perform the song at the end of the show again, right before the voting was about to kick off. This only happened one more time so far in the history of the contest when Spain had to repeat their song in 2010 because their first performance had been disturbed by a known pitch invader by the stage name of Jimmy Jump. "Volare" came in 3rd scoring 13 points. While this wasn't bad, it wasn't the ultimate success. Nevertheless, and despite its 3rd rank, "Volare" has become one of the most successful songs that were ever performed at the Eurovision Song Contest. For example, "Volare" is one of only three non-British and non-winning Eurovision songs ever to have reached the top 10 in the UK. Some say that it is the most successful and instantly recognizable song ever to have emerged from the Eurovision song contest together with "Waterloo" by "ABBA".

And then came the Grammy Awards on May 4th, 1959 to recognize accomplishments for the year 1958. Interestingly, there were two separate black-tie ceremonies held simultaneously that day: One in the Grand Ballroom of The Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, California and one in the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. These were the 1st Grammys ever held. Similar to the Billboard Hot 100 charts where "Volare" made it into the first ever published issue, it also made it to the first Grammy event ever. Frank Sinatra had an unbelievable six nominations – the most of all nominees – but the big winner that night was Domenico who won two Grammys with "Nel blu dipinto di blu" for "Record of the

Year“ and “Song of the Year“ further accelerating the song’s international success. It should be mentioned that “Volare” is the only foreign-language recording ever to accomplish this. Also, it has been the only song to receive a Grammy Award that also competed in the Eurovision Song Contest.

Frank Sinatra, by the way, ended up winning one Grammy at the event but not for singing – he got one as art director for his “Only the Lonely” album that won the “Best Album Cover” award.

Here’s a quick list of the winners that went home with the other big awards that evening:

- Best Album of the Year: Henri Mancini for “The Music From Peter Gunn”.
- Best Vocal performance, Female: Ella Fitzgerald for “Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Irving Berlin Song Book”
- Best Vocal performance, Male: Perry Como for “Catch A Falling Star”

Back then, there were only 28 Grammy categories. By 2019, for example, this list had grown to 84 categories.

Domenico would take many trips to the US over the years and perform in many cities from New York in the East to Los Angeles in the West. The Grammys were just the start.

The Artist

Let’s now focus on the artist behind the song. In this case, we will need to focus on the two gentlemen who created the song – Domenico Modugno who wrote and sang “Volare” and Franco Migliacci who wrote the song together with Domenico.

Before we do that though, how about we first meet the musicians that can be heard on the record. While the human aspect beyond the singer can sometimes get lost while listening to a record, it’s really important to me to – at least – try to find out as much as I can about the people who made the music and whose names are not necessarily known to the public.

The orchestra conductor for Volare was Alberto Semprini and he led a group of six very talented musicians – including himself on the piano – known as Sestetto Azzurro:

- Walter Beduschi played the bass.
- And Bruno De Filippi the guitar.
- Pupo De Luca was on the drums.
- Responsible for the harp was Ebe Mautino.
- Hammond organ: Mario Migliardi
- And piano: Alberto Semprini, the maestro himself.

Having Alberto Semprini, one of the finest orchestra conductors, composers and pianists of the 1950s – if not of all time –, involved in the project basically meant that it couldn’t go wrong musically. Semprini was born in Bath, England in 1908 and he died in 1990 at the age of 81 in Brixham which is also in England. He was of Italian ancestry and studied both composition and conducting in Milan, Italy. He spent a couple of years in Italy where he played pop, jazz and classical music, led a radio orchestra and was featured at the Sane Remo festival in the late 1950s.

While I couldn't find anything about Walter Beduschi, Bruno De Filippi and Ebe Mautino, I did find information about Giovanni "Pupo" De Luca and Mario Migliardi which I'm very happy to share with you.

Giovanni "Pupo" De Luca, the drummer, was an Italian actor and jazz musician who was born in Milan, Italy in 1924 and died in Lanzarote, Spain (where he had moved to in the early 1990s) in 2006 at the age of 82. He had his first success as an actor in the late 1960s but he was also a jazz drummer and even founded the cabaret named "Derby Club" in Milan.

Mario Migliardi was an Italian composer from Alessandria, Italy which is about 56 miles southeast of Torino who made music for movies and TV. He lived from 1919 to 2000 and, in the 1960s, even worked on films that were also released in the US such as "Secret of the Sphinx", "Colossus and the Huns" or "Battle of the Worlds".

Alright, now that we covered the band, let's return to Domenico Modugno who wrote and sang Volare and Franco Migliacci who wrote the song together with Domenico.

Domenico Modugno was born on January 9th, 1928 in Polignano a Mare which is a small town in Apulia, on the South-East coast of Italy, right on the Adriatic Sea. He died on August 6th, 1994 in Lampedusa which is in Sicily, Italy.

The man who gave the world the most successful Italian song ever was only 66 years old when he died.

His father, Vito Cosimo Modugno, was a municipal police commander and his mother, Pasqua Lorusso, was a housewife. Domenico had three older siblings Teresa, Giovanni and Vito and when he was 9, he and his family moved further south to San Pietro Vernotico in the province of Brindisi because his dad got a job there. This is where he attended primary school before attending secondary school in Lecce.

Domenico inherited his passion for music from his father Cosimo and when he was 15, he already played the guitar and the accordion and he also began writing songs.

He had enough of the provincial lifestyle and moved to Torino when he was 19, a large city in the northern Italian region of Piemonte. It's beautiful there. This is where Lago Maggiore is, for example. I'm not sure though to what extent Domenico was able to see and experience the beauty of the region as he was working in a tire factory.

He then moved to Rome to pursue his artistic career. His initial steps in show business were actually as an actor. Domenico participated in an acting competition at the Experimental Film Center where he won a scholarship as the best student of the drama department.

In 1951, aged 23, he had a small part in the film "Filumena Marturano" and over the next 30 years, he could be seen in around four dozen movie and TV roles in addition to a steady series of dramatic and musical stage productions.

In 1952, he could be seen in the war movie "Carica Eroica" in which he played a soldier who sings the "Ninna Nanna" lullaby to a little girl. This is noteworthy as Domenico now impressed audiences as both an actor and a singer.

His music career started to pick up speed in 1953 when Domenico competed against other musicians in the musical contests "Il Trampolino" and "Radioclub".

He was not only an actor and a singer. He was also a singer-songwriter. Later, he would also add the job titles of director, film producer and politician to his resume. He even worked as a manager after discovering the Italian comedy duo Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia in 1958; he became their manager and helped them to a long running film career during which they called themselves Franco and Ciccio.

But let's take it step for step now.

Things really took off for the singer Domenico Modugno in 1954 when he signed with the RCA Italiana label and later the Fonit record label in Milan.

Domenico then wrote two hit songs in 1955: "Vecchio Frac" and "Lu Piscì Spada".

In 1957, together with Riccardo Pazzaglia, he wrote the song "Lazzarella" for singer Aurelio Fierro who secured the second place at the "Festival della Canzone Napoletana" with it as well as the number two spot on the Italian charts. Aurelio Fierro was a successful Italian actor and singer who specialized in songs in the Neapolitan dialect and he lived from 1923 until 2005. Domenico added two more classics to his inventory in 1957 when he wrote "Resta cu'mme" and "Strada 'nfosa".

And one year later, in 1958, the time had come: Domenico recorded and released his eternal hit "Nel blu dipinto di blu" also known as "Volare".

That year, Domenico participated in and won the San Remo Music Festival with kind of a jazzy version of "Nel blu dipinto di blu" which paved the way for the worldwide huge success of the song. At San Remo, Domenico presented the song together with Johnny Dorelli, an Italian singer, actor and television host. Domenico had already indirectly played Sanremo in 1956 with the song "Musetto (La più bella sei tu)" that he had written and that was performed by Gianni Marzocchi – it came in 8th.

Later that year, Domenico represented Italy at the 1958 Eurovision Song Contest with "Volare". Although he came in third – the victory belonged to France and Switzerland came in second –, the song turned into a classic selling over 22 million copies, receiving two Grammy awards and being a worldwide charts success.

Two of the reasons why "Volare" was such a huge hit were the music and Domenico's singing which I'll discuss in chapter "The Music". The other huge factor was Domenico's breathtaking and revolutionary stage presence. It was full of passion. It was perfect in that sense. And Domenico was the one Italy and the world were waiting for to arrive on the world stage. And the world was able to witness it when he performed "Volare" at the 1958 Sanremo Music Festival with open arms looking like he was going to fly. Up until then, Italian singers performed their songs with their arms on their chest and without moving on stage. And there was Domenico with his passionate, extroverted, expressive and informal style with his arms spread out. He literally destroyed the existing convention of the 1950s which was that a singer should be calm and collected on stage while keeping a proper and beautiful posture. This was summed up nicely in what would become his signature move at the start of the final instrumental chorus of the song – Domenico rotating his body and turning his back to the audience, pumping his fists into the air before turning around to face the audience again. Back then, this was considered a revolutionary gesture.

During the course of 1958, at 30 years old, Domenico had turned into a worldwide superstar singing his song in front of audiences all over the world.

The song didn't seem to have made him super-duper rich at the start but it seems that he earned some very good money. One piece of evidence here is a story that he spent some (if not most) of the money

earned with “Volare” to buy a Ferrari that he ended up ruining in an accident. Please note that any statement I’m making regarding his finances can only be speculation and, at the end of the day, none of my business.

The success continued for Domenico when he won San Remo the second time in a row in 1959, this time with the song “Piove” also known as “Ciao, ciao, bambina” and in 1960, when he came in second with his song “Libero”.

He represented Italy again at the 1959 Eurovision Song Contest with “Piove” which earned him rank 6 – sort of a bad result for a song that has become such a classic in the meantime. But nevertheless, 1959 was another huge year for Domenico.

Also in 1959, Domenico released a song titled "Io" which was covered by Elvis Presley in 1964 who released his English version under the name "Ask Me”.

Domenico did Sanremo a couple more times and even won it two more times in 1962 with “Addio....addio....” and in 1966 with “Dio, come ti amo”. In total, he participated in the Sanremo festival 12 times, won 4 in 1958, 1959, 1962 and 1966 and came in second in 1964 and 1974.

The late 1950s and the 1960s saw Domenico’s musical career peak but he remained a busy man even beyond that. In the 1970s, he switched his focus to more classic music genres and profiles as a singer and as a musician, adapting poetry, acting on television and on stage and in lead singing roles of modern operas.

As an actor, he starred in 44 movies and he produced two. Some say that he achieved his greatest success as an actor in 1973 where he starred as Mackie in Brecht's Threepenny Opera.

Domenico was married to Franca Gandolfi, an Italian actress and singer from Messina, Italy, from 1955 until his death in 1994. Franca starred in a number of movies in the 1950s but retired from show biz in 1963 to be able to focus on her growing family.

Speaking of which, together they had three kids: Marco, born in 1958. And Marcello and Massimo, both born in 1966.

All three children followed in Domenico’s footsteps and chose the show biz.

Marco is a writer and an actor. Marcello is an actor and a composer. And Massimo is a singer, just like his dad was. Massimo even participated in the Sanremo festival twice.

After Domenico’s death, it turned out that he had a fourth child resulting from an affair with Maurizia Cali, a dancer, choreographer and director from Trieste, Italy. Fabio Camilli, Domenico’s fourth son, is an Italian actor and was born in Rome on August 10th in 1962. Probably in an effort by his mother to hide the truth, Fabio was given the last name Camilli after Romano Camilli, the engineer in charge of PR of the Teatro Il Sistina in Rome where his mother, a dancer, had worked as a choreographer and the man who raised Fabio as a father. This is just speculation as I really have no idea how Romano Camilli entered Maurizia Cali’s life and how they handled her having a son from Domenico. Did Romano know whose son Fabio was? Again, I don’t know. Anyway, the news that there is a fourth child claiming to be Domenico’s was a huge story in Italy. It was an endless back and forth between Fabio Camilli and Domenico’s other three kids. The case was finally settled in 2019 – after a legal battle that raged for 18 years and in which Franca, Domenico’s widow, and his three other sons disputed Fabio’s claims – when the civil section of the

Supreme Court of Cassation recognized Fabio Camilli as Domenico's legitimate child based on DNA evidence. Let's not forget that this makes Fabio eligible for a piece of the pie or, in other words, for a portion of the royalties that Domenico's family still gets paid from his work.

Back to Domenico's professional endeavors and final phase of his life now.

Domenico was recording a TV show in 1984 when he suffered a thrombosis attack that ultimately left him paralyzed and forced him to use a wheelchair. After having abandoned his artistic career to be able to focus on his rehabilitation, he went into politics. As a member of the Radical Party in Italy, a center-left liberal political party, Domenico formally kicked off the final professional phase of his life on July 2nd, 1987 when he was elected as a member of the Chamber of Deputies in Torino. The Chamber of Deputies is a house of the bicameral Parliament of Italy (the other being the Senate of the Republic). He stayed there until April 18th, 1990 when he became a Member of the other house, the Senate, where he remained in office until April 22nd, 1992. Before his time with the Radical Party, Domenico supported the Italian Socialist Party and had his first taste of politics when he criticized human rights' violations by Augusto Pinochet and his regime which he was "rewarded" with Chile denying him entry when he traveled there to give a concert.

While in politics, Domenico fought for the rights of disabled people and, as part of that, he belonged to an investigation commission which raised a scandal in Italy by denouncing the insane asylum in Agrigento, Sicily, as sort of a concentration camp. I checked out a couple of really disturbing stories and images of the asylum that I could find on the web and have to say that it really breaks my heart to see how these poor people were treated. The sad thing is that the asylum in Agrigento wasn't an exception. It was one of many back then. In 1989, Domenico gave a concert for the patients and their relatives at the asylum. The Italian state mental hospital system ended in 1998 based on a law that was passed in 1978, the Basaglia Law.

While still in office, Domenico had a heart attack in 1991 while he was on a plane travelling from New York, where he had performed live on stage in his wheelchair at Carnegie Hall, back to Italy. He still performed every now and then at that time with his final active years being 1992 and 1993. The last song Domenico recorded was "Delfini" together with his son Massimo. There's a video online that shows the two performing the song live on RAI Uno. While I find the instrumentation there to be suboptimal and sort of artificial – just like a lot of pop songs in the 1980s and early 1990s were –, I found this to be a wonderful song with a beautiful melody and lyrics. And seeing the two together sitting there and performing the song together with so much love for each other was so powerful.

Eventually, Domenico moved to Lampedusa, which is a small island in the Mediterranean south of Sicily, where he died at home from another heart attack on August 6th in 1994 at the age of 66.

Let's now talk about Franco Migliacci who wrote the song together with Domenico. He was born as Francesco Migliacci in Mantua, Italy on May 1st, 1930. Franco studied in Firenze, Italy and took part in a competition that rewarded him with a three day visit to Cinecittà – which is basically Italy's equivalent of Hollywood in Rome – and also a small role in a film. Later, he moved to Rome where he was able to secure small roles in around 18 movies. In 1958, as we have discussed already, he co-authored "Volare" together with Domenico Modugno. The lyrics were based on Franco's inspiration that was based on a wine-fueled vision Franco had and in which he combined his memory of two Marc Chagall paintings. The collaboration between Franco and Domenico lasted until 1960 but Franco's long career as a songwriter and a writer for TV, movies and radio was just about to start. In the 1960s, he wrote lyrics for

singers such as Mina, Milva and Gianni Morandi, to name a few. In the 1970s, Franco was the Italian voice of actor Klaus Kinski and he continued to write lyrics; notable works here are the song “Il cuore è uno zingaro” for Nada and “Che sara” for Jose Feliciano – an absolutely wonderful classic. Also in the 1970s, he founded a record company together with Gianni Morandi. In the 1980s, he wrote lyrics for Eduardo De Crescenzo and Gianni Morandi again – to name two examples –, he produced Italian singer Scialpi and he was the illustrator for a children’s magazine named “The Pioneer”. In the 1990s, he worked on Ambra Angiolini’s debut album and in the 2000s, he was appointed president of the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers. Please note that these were just a few examples of what Franco worked on over the years. It’s really hard to summarize the work of such a hardworking legend but I did my best to give you a quick and representative overview.

The Music

There is a school of thought that considers “Nel blu dipinto di blu” a ballad in a dramatic chanson style. A chanson is, in general, a lyric-driven French song type that had its origins in medieval France – well, in this case it is an Italian song – and that requires a high degree of originality and technical virtuosity and that usually consists of a couple stanzas. The difference between typical pop music and the modern chanson is that the latter follows the rhythms of the language it is sung in, rather those of the English language and that it has a higher standard for lyrics. Based on this definition, “Volare” is the perfect chanson, a soaring paean to freedom with its lyrics being based on and inspired by a Marc Chagall painting of a hovering person with a blue face, imagining someone painting themselves blue and flying through space. And Domenico Modugno was the perfect chansonnier.

In addition to the classic category of “chanson”, there is a school of thought that “Volare” belongs to what is called “Canzone d’autore” which may be best translated as “singer-songwriter movement” and which was informed by the French chanson and embedded it with uniquely Italian sensibilities. This is a view that is a bit more refined and, therefore, probably a bit more accurate, in my opinion. One of the key characteristics of this category is that the singer and author roles are joined. “Canzone d’autore” has its home in the broader category of “Canzone” which is an Italian song or ballad that is usually 3 to 4 minutes long on average and basically a short strophical composition which implies that it consists of similar parts that are repeated. While a “Canzone” allows melody, harmony, rhythm and the character of the timbre to vary freely, it doesn’t come with polyphony, for example. The “Canzone d’autore” is one of seven main genres in today’s Italian musical system based on the form of the “Canzone”: The traditional song, the pop song, the “sophisticated” song, the political song, the rock song, the children’s song and the “Canzone d’autore”. Out of all those, the “Canzone d’autore”, which “Volare” belongs to, is considered to have the most complex and richest vocabulary, rhetoric and syntax. While the definition of the “Canzone d’autore” allows for the usual instruments such as drums, bass, guitar, piano, etc., the lyrics pretty much play a major role here. In the “Canzone d’autore” bucket, we find that songs have a tendency of individual characterization expressed in its vocabulary that is richer and more open to literary suggestions than in other categories. These songs have a poetical character based on the use of metaphors, for example. The singer, the “Cantautore”, is the protagonist in a lot of songs and also the poet that us listeners relate to. The “Canzone d’autore” emerged on the scene in the late 1950s. “Canzones” were obviously different back then compared to what they are today. In the 1950s, the main genres under the “Canzone” umbrella were “the Neapolitan song”, also known as the “dialect song”, the traditional song, the variety show song and the night-club song. The big Italian cities even had “Scuole Cantautorali” which were singer-songwriter schools). Based on what we’ve heard so far about the “Canzone d’autore”, we have to conclude that Domenico Modugno was the perfect “Cantautore”. At least until he became an international star with “Volare”. From early on, Domenico was trying to find and

establish the characteristic of being a “personality” that is identifiable with the protagonist of the song. That started with his early songs in Sicilian and then in the Neapolitan dialect, with a strong vocal characterization and a very particular emission of vowels like “o” and “e” which accentuates the popular-like character of lyrics and music. The interesting thing is that the huge success Domenico had with “Volare” basically outshone his characteristics as an autonomous creator. It was just too big and from then on, Domenico wasn’t as effective and useful as a “Cantautore” compared to the asset he was for television, cinema and the theater.

All of this doesn’t mean that most of the music experts back then considered Domenico a great singer when he had his initial success in the 1950s. “Volare”, for example, was quite unusual for the times and Domenico’s voice was considered rather rough and unsophisticated. Some said he had a husky, nasal and forced vocal style. The Italians have a word for this: “urlatore”. Which translates to “yeller”. Domenico’s singing style was different from what was called “bel canto” – which means “beautiful singing” – and also different from how the Crooners sounded – primarily male US singers of jazz standards, mostly from the Great American Songbook, backed by either a full orchestra, a big band, or a piano.

Well, Domenico’s singing was one of the reasons for the song’s great success in addition to the beautiful music if you ask me. It was new. And unusual. The other half was Domenico’s breathtaking and revolutionary stage presence which I discussed as part of the chapter “The Artist”.

Italian-Americans – or Americans with Italian roots, mostly from the urban Northeast – dominated the music market of the late 1950s in the US and Domenico Modugno’s success was therefore not hugely surprising. What made it special and different was the fact that it was a hit by an Italian singer in the US – an import and not an export.

Here are some of the Americans with Italian roots that were famous at the time:

Fran Sinatra, obviously,
Perry Como – whose real name was Pierino –,
Dean Martin – whose real name was Dino Paul Crocetti –,
Bobby Darin – whose real last name was Cassotto –,
Frankie Avalon – whose real name was Avalone –,
Tony Bennett – whose real last name was Benedetto –,
Joey Dee – whose real last name was DiNicola –,
Dion – whose real last name was DiMucci –,
Connie Francis – whose real name was Concetta Franconero

And also non-Italians were successful with cover songs of Italian originals. Elvis Presley is the best example here: “It’s Now or Never” was one of his biggest hits – an English-language cover of the Italian classic “O Sole Mio.” Another example would be Dean Martin who famously covered “Nel blu dipinto di blu” itself.

One might wonder why Americans of Italian descent were so successful in the music and show business of the 1950s. To shed some light into this, we must look at the bigger picture and also take the overall situation of Italian Americans in the US at the time into account.

On the music side, the swing era that had ended by then had left an opening for new sounds to emerge on the American pop scene. While other international artists and songs would also be successful around that time, it was the Italian Americans who really used this opportunity to share their music with the world.

A number of Italian Americans fought in World War 2 and when they returned, they were able to use the GI Bill to attend university – for a lot of these young people, they were the first in their families to go to college. Also, the economy was continuously improving right after the war which improved the quality of lives for a lot of Italian-Americans which in turn allowed them to move further into mainstream culture. Overall, there were greater opportunities such as education that allowed Italian-Americans to be even more active in all areas of life. One example is that they became more involved in public service; they became police officers, firemen and went into politics and / or assumed government positions on the local and federal level. Vincent Impellitteri is a prominent example who, in 1950, became the mayor of New York City. As such, it was one of the aspects of how life in the US had changed for Italian-Americans that many of the most famous and successful singers and actors of the post-World War 2 years were Americans of Italian descent.

While I could have discussed this aspect in the chapter titled “The Artist”, I chose to examine it here in the “The Music” chapter as I thought it would be closer related to the music than to the artist.

Let’s talk some more about the song itself now:

The musical arrangement led by Alberto Semprini stood out. The band that played the song was relatively small – only 6 people including Alberto Semprini – and the inclusion of a Hammond organ, played by Mario Migliardi, was quite unusual. The song has the drums and bass to the fore which created an infectious, pronounced groove.

“Volare”, on a high level, consists of two verses and two chorus sections.

The first verse acts as the introduction to the song and it is sung in a way that makes it appear slower than the actual tempo of the song. The drums are still waiting for their turn. After the first verse, the chorus kicks in and starts the groove with all instruments including the drums joining Domenico. As we will hear in the “Lyrics” section shortly, the first chorus consists of three parts – the “Volare” part at the start and the end of the first chorus with a – what I call – “E volavo volavo felice” part in the middle. The second chorus also consists of three parts – the “Volare” part at the start and the end of the second chorus with a – what I call – “E continuo a volare felice” part in the middle.

And with the second verse, we’re back to the slow appearing introduction-type section that kicked off the song.

Domenico sings both the first and the second verse in a way that you just cannot wait for the chorus to release the tension that built up over course of the two verses. Right when the tension becomes unbearable, he and the band relieve the audience with a jump into the rhythmic chorus that is kicked off by a long “Volare, oh oh”. This is when Domenico and the band are flying.

After two verses with chorus each, the band have their big moment when they play the chorus loudly without any singing by Domenico. To be precise, they only play the – what I call – “Volare” part of the chorus before Domenico then repeats the “Nel blu” part two times with a softer voice towards the end of the song which is marked by the words “con te”.

The Lyrics

In terms of its lyrics, “Volare” is a soaring tribute to freedom based on and inspired by a Marc Chagall painting of a hovering person with a blue face, imagining someone painting themselves blue and flying through space.

"Nel blu, dipinto di blu" is best translated as "In the blue that is painted blue". And “volare” means “to fly” or “flying”.

The lyrics were not typical for the time as they expressed a carefree attitude combined with a search for an undefined freedom. This was not in line with the morally correct attitude of the 1950s.

In this section, I’m only gonna discuss *Domenico’s* version of the song but not any of the cover versions. The list is just too long as the song had so many cover versions where the lyrics sometimes differed to varying degrees.

In the song, Domenico basically implies that being with his loved one invokes a feeling of flying in him. The prelude of the song is surreal as it says he had a dream that he thinks will never return – a dream in which he painted his hands and face blue after which he was swept away by the wind, starting to fly in the endless sky. Then, Domenico describes how the moon takes any dreams with it when it goes down. And this is when the song turns into a full love song when Domenico says that even though he’s no longer up in the blue sky and that another dream like this will probably never come along again, he’s just as happy here on the ground, lost in the blue of his lover’s eyes.

This is the stuff dreams are made off. Fantastic stuff. Weird stuff. But at the same time wonderful and beautiful.

The song consists of two verses and two main chorus sections. After the second chorus, which is slightly modified compared to the first one, the band plays parts of the second, modified chorus again until the end of the song which is marked by the words “con te”.

From a song structure and lyrics perspective, this is an amazingly simple and successful formula building on a strong repeated chorus with two lyrically deep verses.

Let’s now explore the actual lyrics – line by line first in Italian and then in English.

Verse 1:

Penso che un sogno così non ritorni mai più, mi dipingevo le mani e la faccia di blu. Poi d’improvviso venivo dal vento rapito, e incominciavo a volare nel cielo infinito.	I think that a dream like this will never come back, I painted my hands and my face blue. Then suddenly I was swept away by the wind, and started to fly in the endless sky.
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Chorus:

Volare, oh oh, cantare, oh oh oh oh. Nel blu dipinto di blu, felice di stare lassù.	Flying, oh oh, singing, oh oh oh oh. In the blue painted blue, happy to be up there.
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E volavo volavo felice
più in alto del sole ed ancora più su
mentre il mondo pian piano spariva
lontano laggiù.
Una musica dolce suonava soltanto per me.

And I flew, I flew happily
higher than the sun and even higher
While the world slowly, slowly disappeared
far away down there.
A sweet music played only for me.

Volare, oh oh
cantare, oh oh oh oh.
Nel blu dipinto di blu
felice di stare lassù.

Flying, oh oh,
singing, oh oh oh oh.
In the blue painted blue,
happy to be up there.

Verse 2:

Ma tutti i sogni nell'alba svaniscono perchè
quando tramonta la luna li porta con sè.
Ma io continuo a sognare negli occhi tuoi belli
che sono blu come un cielo trapunto di stelle.

But all dreams fade away at dawn because
when the moon sets, it takes them along with it.
But I keep on dreaming in your beautiful eyes
That are as blue as a sky quilted with stars.

Chorus:

Volare, oh oh,
cantare, oh oh oh oh.
Nel blu degli occhi tuoi blu,
Felice di stare quaggiù.

Flying, oh oh,
singing, oh oh oh oh.
In the blue of your blue eyes
Happy to stay down here

E continuo a volare felice più in alto del sole
ed ancora più su,
Mentre il mondo pian piano scompare negli
occhi tuoi blu,
La tua voce è una musica dolce
che suona per me.

And I keep flying happy higher up than the sun
and even higher,
While the world slowly disappears in
your blue eyes,
Your voice is a sweet music
that plays for me.

Volare, oh oh,
cantare, oh oh oh oh.
Nel blu degli occhi tuoi blu,
Felice di stare quaggiù.

Flying, oh oh,
singing, oh oh oh oh.
In the blue of your blue eyes
Happy to stay down here

Nel blu degli occhi tuoi blu,
Felice di stare quaggiù,

In the blue of your blue eyes
Happy to stay down here

Nel blu degli occhi tuoi blu,
Felice di stare quaggiù,
Con te!

In the blue of your blue eyes
Happy to stay down here
With you!

Ah, that's beautiful!

The net is, not only the music and Domenico's voice have helped this song become a timeless classic.
It is also a lyrical masterpiece that will never grow old.

The Legacy

While it's difficult to summarize the legacy "Nel blu dipinto di blu" left behind, it is safe to say that it is the most successful foreign language hit in the history of the US. That's a good start, isn't it?

Early on, the song's legacy was reflected in the way it changed musical performances in Italy at the time of its release. Domenico revolutionized the industry – which had a lasting impact – when he performed the song at the 1958 Sanremo Music Festival with open arms looking like he was going to fly. Up until then, Italian singers performed their songs with their arms on their chest and without moving on stage.

Being such a successful song, "Volare" was covered numerous times and today counts as one of the most covered songs ever. Before we get to the cover versions, though, we also have to note really quick that the song's huge success inspired imitation. As a result, international songs were an integral part of the US charts in the years after the release of "Volare". Sure, Italian-Americans were still successful in this category – Connie Francis is one example here – but other countries enriched the pop music sound in the US like never before; examples here are Emilio Pericoli's 1962 hit "Al di là", the Singing Nun's "Dominique" in French and Kyu Sakamoto's Japanese "Sukiyaki".

Alright, let's now turn our attention to the cover versions of "Volare". Since the song was covered so many times through the decades since its release in the 1950s, it would probably take us all day to go through all the cover versions. I counted over 50 cover versions. Therefore, let's just focus on a few select ones. Apologies in case I should have missed your favorite cover version of "Volare".

"Volare" has been translated into several other languages including Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and Finnish and in addition to all the cover versions, it is still used as the basis for a lot of football / soccer chants.

Fun fact: In the UK, the song came out on August 23rd, 1958 along with eight other versions of the song recorded by other international singers. That's just crazy, isn't it?

"Volare" found itself in the main US charts three more times with English lyrics written by Michael Parish: Dean Martin's version in 1958 landed on the number 15 spot, Bobby Rydell's version in 1960 landed on the number 4 spot and Al Martino's version in 1975 landed on the number 33 spot.

Dean Martin's half-English cover version of "Volare" was released in the same year as the original itself: 1958. Dean had it on his album "This Is Dean Martin!" and the song peaked at the number 15 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 and on the number 2 spot on the UK Singles Chart to name two examples. Dean's version is a bit more relaxed, cool and playful and not as passionate and dramatic as the original, in my opinion. That's neither good nor bad, that's just Dean – who was a legend in his own right.

Bobby Rydell, an Italian American singer, released his version of "Volare" in 1960 making it to number 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 and to number 22 on the UK Singles Chart.

And in 1975, it was Al Martino's turn. Al Martino had an amazing and massive voice. He was considered one of the great Italian American pop crooners. His disco-type version of the song reminds me of "Copacabana" by Barry Manilow. At least it gives me the same happy feeling. Al Martino included the song on his album "To the Door of the Sun". His version reached number 33 on the Billboard Hot 100 and also charted in a couple of other countries.

Louis Armstrong performed a jazzy instrumental version of "Nel blu dipinto di blu" live during the 1960s which you can find on some of his live albums.

Petula Clark covered "Volare" in 1965 for her album "The International Hits". I love this version which was in the typical Petula Clark style that just makes you happy.

David Bowie covered "Volare" in 1986 for "Absolute Beginners" which was a British rock musical film. That was a crazy good version. Absolutely lovely.

In 1989, the Gipsy Kings released an up-tempo cover version of "Volare" which used a mix of Italian and Spanish lyrics. The song was a number one hit on the Billboard Hot Latin Songs chart in the April of 1990 and it was also a minor hit in the UK where it peaked at number 86. In France, it peaked at number 16 and in the Netherlands, it peaked at number 26. This version has become one of the great live songs that makes the crowds at Gipsy Kings go crazy. Out of all the cover versions I know, this is the most powerful one, in my opinion.

Alrightie, those were the cover versions.

In 2001, Domenico was posthumously awarded with the Sanremo Music Festival Special Award. One of the reasons given for this were that Domenico, with his song and victory, managed to "turn the Sanremo Music Festival into a stage of worldwide relevance".

In 2005, "Nel blu dipinto di blu" and 13 other songs were picked by fans of the Eurovision contest and by the EBU – the European Broadcasting Union – to compete against each other at the 50 Years of the Eurovision Song Contest anniversary competition. The song finished second which shows that even 50 years after its initial success, "Volare" is still a favorite of many. ABBA's "Waterloo" won the contest and Benny Andersson, a Swedish musician, composer, producer and member of the Swedish music group ABBA said while receiving the award: "I myself voted for "Volare" but I am pleased that so many people voted for us."

At the 2008 Sanremo Music Festival, Modugno's widow, Franca Gandolfi, and Franco Migliacci, who wrote the song with Domenico, were presented with the "Special Award for Creativity" for "Volare".

Also in 2008, Italy celebrated the 50th anniversary of "Nel blu, dipinto di blu" with a stamp that showed a man flying on a blue background.

Another honor followed in 2010 when "Volare", interpreted by Italian singer Simona Galeandro, was declared the most popular song of the 20th century, winning the international competition of the 2010 Viña del Mar International Song Festival.

During the Covid-19 crisis that came over the world in early 2020, "Nel blu dipinto di blu" was one of the songs that Italians all over Italy would sing from their windows and balconies to show their unity against the Corona virus and to applaud the health care workers in hospitals and other front-line medical staff. Thousands of the 60 million Italians who were forced to stay at home due to the government-imposed lockdown would blend their voices to sing "Volare", the Italian national anthem, also known as, "Inno di Mameli" and other songs together in nationwide flash mobs while waving Italian flags. Along with that, many Italians played instruments or just used pots and pans that they banged. During one of the darkest times Italy had ever seen when people were trapped in their homes for weeks – Italy was one of the worst hit countries with lots of people dying from the virus – once more it was "Nel blu dipinto di blu", this wonderful soaring paean to freedom, that united the Italian people, gave them hope and maybe even

made them forget the harsh reality for a few minutes by making them dream they can fly and let this tragedy behind them. At the same time, it reassured them that even though they can't fly away, they would keep dreaming by looking into each other's eyes – a confirmation that love is the strongest force that keeps us going even through the darkest times.

Today, a bronze statue of Domenico Modugno and a waterfront dedicated to him in his hometown of Polignano a Mare proudly remember the town's most famous son. At 3 meters tall, it faces the town center and has Domenico standing with open arms – just like he used to sing – embracing his town. Conceived and built by Argentinean sculptor Hermann Mejer, it was inaugurated on May 31st, 2009.

When it was released, “Nel blu dipinto di blu” quickly assumed the status of a worldwide musical standard and has remained one ever since. It is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest pieces of popular music – or music in general – ever recorded and performed. It is a song that has a special place in the hearts of thousands, if not millions, of people around the world – including mine. Thank you, Domenico Modugno and Franco Migliacci.

The Good-Bye

That was it. What a journey. Another episode of “The Greatest Hits Explained” with Michael Winter, your host and editor of the show comes to an end.

Please note that you can find a link to the sources I used for this show in the show description. Also, I'm mentioning all the sources I used at the very end of this show. As I explained during the intro, this show is based on my personal research of sources I found online and otherwise. Therefore, I owe a lot of thanks to the authors of these original sources. I have used both paraphrased and literal content and quotes from these sources without declaring them during the show as it would have taken away from the flow. In no way was this intended to claim that I came up with all the original content. I see my job as putting together and processing the content from a variety of different sources in a way that it creates a new and exciting narrative that wouldn't necessarily be possible using the single sources alone in an unprocessed way.

And if there's anything that I pronounced incorrectly, please forgive me. I did my best.

I hope you enjoyed this musical journey during which we explored many interesting facts about the wonderful song “Volare” by Domenico Modugno.

If so, please subscribe and make sure to also check out and tune in to other episodes of “The Greatest Hits Explained”.

Until then, stay safe and have music in your heart.

Outro

If you liked this show, please donate, subscribe, leave a review, a like, a comment – whatever applies to the specific platform on which you're listening to this. I appreciate it.

Sources

And finally, here's a list of sources I used for this show. A big thanks goes out to all the authors of these sources. Please note that I have used both paraphrased and literal or verbatim content and quotes from the following fine sources as appropriate.

<Please see the separate sources PDF doc for the sources.>