

Mambo Italiano: Ugo Ceresoli and His Orchestra Mokambo

by John Whiteoak

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Ugo Ceresoli's Orchestra Mokambo is probably the best remembered Italian-Australian dance and show band of Melbourne's Post-war era. It came to attention again in the 1980s when the band was revived for what became its famous annual Mokambo reunion nights at the San Remo Ballroom. Ceresoli and his band have been fictionalised in several novels and they are cited in many other publications as being historically significant. This article sets out to critique the mostly word-of-mouth 'Mokambo legend' by examining it in a more detailed way. The outcome is no less evocative than the legend itself.

To the Italian community of Melbourne, Ugo Ceresoli and his Orchestra Mokambo have become poignant landmarks in the story of early post-war immigration and the cultural life of Carlton and adjacent suburbs where 1950s and '60s Italian migration was intensely focused. Ugo and his orchestra are further immortalized in vivid fictionalized sketches presented in Arnold Zable's *Scraps of Heaven* and Anna Maria Dell'oso's *Songs of the Suitcase*. Both pen fascinating glimpses of the legendary Mokambo cabaret-balls at Cumparsita Hall in Carlton. Dell'oso depicts Ugo (whom she interviewed) as Livio Simioni, 'The King of the Accordion', and Orchestra Mokambo as the 'Combo Milano'.¹

Other enduring figures in the Mokambo story include Ugo's guitarist brother, Bruno, and Mokambo *cantanti*, such as Pietro Alessi, Guido Maiorano, Vittorio Sacca, Jo Muhrer (Muhrer Laurance) and—through the 1980s revival of Orchestra Mokambo—Ugo and Jo's daughter, Melinda Ceresoli. A significant uncertainty in the legend-story surrounds the compelling sound of the *Latino Americano e Italiano* music that drew a generation of post-war migrants to Carlton's Cumparsita ballroom. This sound now lives and resonates only in the minds of the rapidly dwindling number of people who actually heard and danced to it, since Orchestra Mokambo never released a record. The twirling mists surrounding the legend-like story also embrace a tantalising and plausible rumor of the filming of a Mokambo cabaret-ball. Yet, these very uncertainties are surely all the more reason to revisit the Mokambo legend or story from a deeper historical perspective.

Ugo Ceresoli: Italian Beginnings

Ugo was born on 27 September 1927 in the inland rural *comune* or municipality of Ramiseto, situated in the province of Reggio-Emilia, part of the North-Eastern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna that has Bologna as its capital. Emilia-Romagna is a fertile region noted for its hard working rural population and the abundance of its produce, including fine wines. Ugo's father Adelio Ceresoli was a metal worker (or plumber) and his mother, Paola Ceresoli (formerly Paola Zammarchi), possibly undertook other employment besides her home duties. Ugo remained especially close to his one-year older brother, Bruno, until the former's untimely death. Details of Ugo's early musical education and development in Italy are tantalisingly minimal, vague, and sometimes contradictory. They form a very probable though unconfirmed narrative that he related with slight variations to various interviewers, family and friends over the years.²

The story begins with Ugo as a nine year old boy totally besotted with the sound and sight of the accordion and who eventually persuades his parents to buy him his first accordion at the cost of 150 lire. With strong parental support, he learns rapidly (he claimed to be 'self taught') and later he, Bruno and other teenage musicians form a small dance band and perform at outdoor rural *fiesta* dances throughout the Emilia region.

I remember, always with a nip of nostalgia, the times in which, together with my brother, we ran about from one part to the other of Emilia playing mazurkas, waltzes, sambas and tangos to diminish the hardness of people's lives.³

His talent as an accordionist is soon recognised and, according to one account, he takes up formal music studies, including composition, but where, with whom, or for how long is not known. By 1952, when he boards the Oceania for the sea voyage to Melbourne, he is already a fully-fledged and highly accomplished professional dance musician and concert accordionist with experience in major cities like Milan and Genoa and, it is said, an appearance on RAI-Radiotelevisione Italiana (or the earlier Radio Audizioni Italiane) with the famous quiz show champion, Mike Bongiorno.⁴

He disembarks at Port Melbourne in late 1952 with an entire music library in suitcases, a P.A. system and a number of accordions.⁵ In Maria Dell'oso's version of what Ugo told her, the customs officials who had never seen a continental button accordion before, attempt to confiscate the accordions on the assumption they are being brought ashore duty-free to be sold, not played. To save the situation, Ugo straps on his custom-made Crosio accordion and, to the insolent 'continental-style' wolf-whistles and cat calls of some nearby Italians, he whips off a break-neck rendition of *Il Volo Del Calabrone* (*Flight of the Bumble Bee*) to the astonishment of the now smiling officers—who respectfully wave him through. In Melbourne, he is reunited with his brother and the Australian part of the story begins.

The Early Years in Melbourne

Events following Ugo's arrival in Melbourne are much more verifiable and confirm that he reached Australia as a very accomplished and experienced musician. One can easily imagine that he arrived with the full expectation that his talents, knowledge and experience would be greatly appreciated and grasped in this geographically and culturally isolated country, and that his musical career would be quickly and successfully re-established within the mainstream of Australian entertainment culture.

The formal gateway to musical employment, membership of the Professional Musician's Union, was however restricted to British subjects or naturalized individuals of non-British heritage. Furthermore, there were already many well established musicians of Italian heritage in Melbourne, such as the accordion virtuosi Egidio Bortoli and Lou Toppano, the multi-instrumentalist Giovanni Cera, and the guitarist Nino Alda, all of whom were reputed performers of Latin, Spanish, Italian, 'Gypsy', 'Continental', light classical and American popular repertoire—repertoire similar to that offered by the Ceresoli brothers. Furthermore, they also led dance bands that were, until the late 1950s, the Italian community's first choice for major community functions.

Getting Started

The Ceresoli brothers' response to their situation was one that various other migrant Italians had adopted before them. This was to form an Italian band from available members of the Italian community (such as the all-Italian 'Argentino Tango Bands' formed in early 1930s Depression-era Melbourne), gain as much media exposure as possible, compete for whatever work was available within the local Italian community, and do whatever non-musical work was necessary to become financially and materially established.⁶ Bruno, for example, became an expert driving instructor and by the end of the 1950s had established his *Presto Scuola Guida* (driving school) in Carlton while, around the same time, Ugo became the proprietor of a small 'Mokambo' bistro (also called Nando's) in Carlton, where he sometimes played for his customers.

In November 1952, the Ceresoli brothers were living in boarding accommodation at 230 Palmerston Street, Carlton. The concierge, Mrs Parkin, was enthralled by their musicianship and encouraged the brothers to enter radio station 3UZ's talent contest, 'Are You an Artist'.⁷ Scrapbook cuttings show that they also appeared in many other contests, including 3UZ's Christies' Auditions, 3KZ's Monbulk Jamboree, 3XY's Talent Tote, and the 3DB's Australia's Amateur Hour. 'Duo from Milan smooth, tuneful in semi-final', proclaimed a 1954 *Listener In* headline and the article noted that they 'provided the best radio entertainment' of the Lever £1000 Contest.⁸ The photogenic brothers gained excellent mainstream media publicity from their many contesting successes but, for whatever reason, these are almost unreported in the Melbourne news section of *La Fiamma* of the period.



Ugo and Bruno Ceresoli ca. 1955

They also formed a dance band with other young Italian musicians and began providing music for functions organised by the main Italian social club of that time, *Circolo Italiano Cavour* and, eventually, other Italian organisations. A 1953 photograph shows a very youthful band comprising Ugo, Bruno, *cantante* and bongo player, Pietro Alessi, Franco Pascazio on trumpet, Franco (surname unknown) on saxophone and clarinet, and Renzo Conte on drums. Most of these players appear to have stayed with the band throughout the 1950s despite the entry of new players such as Giuseppe Alessandrello on bass and tenor saxophonist Alberto Caselli. The name Mokambo was not adopted immediately, as Ugo explains:

The name was chosen instinctively without much thinking. We had seen the film *Mokambo* [probably the 1953 Hollywood jungle film, *Mogambo*] ... when, one evening, someone asked us what we called ourselves, we looked at each other without knowing how to respond. All at once as one we remembered 'Mokambo' and the name was created.⁹

Ugo says that after the band was named, 'I specialized myself in Latin American rhythms so that Mokambo could be defined as the ethnic community orchestra.'¹⁰ The choice and ongoing use of the name Mokambo was particularly fortuitous since it related to exotic imaginations of Africa and was therefore even more ethnically neutral than the Hispanic names adopted by many other local Italian bands. 'Mokambo' also tapped directly into a late 1950s vogue for musical exotica exemplified by the, then, globally popular 'exotic' music of Arthur Lyman. For example, a 1959 report about music at the Mocambo Club in Newtown, Sydney, mentions that the resident four-piece band featured taped jungle sounds with bird-calls behind exotic numbers like *Taboo* and *Caravan*.¹¹

Enterprise Rewarded

The fame of the Orchestra Mokambo grew slowly but steadily, bolstered in part by the growth of the post-War inner Melbourne Italian community. From late 1953 Mokambo began to gain higher profile community functions, such as the October 1953 *ballo pro-Ospedali* at the Royal Ballroom alternating with Giovanni Cera's Orchestra Continentale. Ugo also took other musical work, including solo playing from table to table at the Hotel Britannia in Swanston Street. Yet engagements for Mokambo remained insufficient and the obvious solution was for the band to create their own.

Italian cabaret-style balls held in multi-functional halls—so-called *balli Italiani*—had an extremely important function for early post war migrants. They offered a place where *all* Italians could come together to eat, drink, talk in Italian, listen and dance to Italian, Latin-American and other popular 'Continental' music, enjoy (where offered) variety acts and MC banter in Italian, and possibly even find romance. Early *balli Italiani* were mostly organized by the Catholic Church or other welfare agencies but, by the late 1950s, several Italian bands were running their own regular *ballo Italiano* as entrepreneurial ventures. While Orchestra Mokambo's earliest such venture appears to have been a regular Saturday night *balli Italiani* at Fitzroy Town Hall, the Mokambo legend is mostly woven around Cumparsita Hall, situated on the corner of Kay and Canning Streets, Carlton (now the San Marco in Lamis Social Club rooms).

In late January 1958, an advertisement appeared in *La Fiamma* for Sunday evening 'Ballo Italiano' at Cumparsita Hall with Orchestra Nino Alda and *cantante* Gigi Rayola and his 'vasto repertorio di canzoni Italiane'. The advertisement for the following week, however, named 'La Famosa Orchestra "Mokambo", e il noto cantante Pietro Alessi e il suo vasto repertorio di musica moderna'. The revised advertisement appeared for several more weeks, by which time Mokambo was also presenting Saturday afternoon Calypso Dancing sessions at Victoria Hall in Russell Street. Although these weekly Cumparsita *balli Italiani* were then discontinued, they probably represent the genesis of Mokambo's association with Cumparsita Hall and of the regular Sunday 'Ballo Mokambo' at Cumparsita Hall that continued until the late 1960s. During February, another rival band, Eugenio Milazzi's

Mexican-costumed nine-piece band, Estrellita, began a regular '*Ballo Italiano*' at Fitzroy Town Hall, which ran successfully for some months. Other rival bands at this time included Cubana, Cumbachero, Latina, Granada, and Flora (later as Mambo), El Bajon, Abruzzesina, and Swing Continental.

Ugo had bigger plans for the Mokambo Orchestra and in May 1958 he registered 'Mokambo' in his own name as a business organisation operating from his living quarters at 230 Palmerston Street. 'Mokambo' was conceived to, among other things, present a variety of *ballo Italiano*-type social events for Italian migrants *and* the wider ethnic community of Carlton, which included a large Jewish component. Cosmopolitan functions like this were also called *Ballo Continentale*.

Ugo promoted his own brand of *ballo Italiano* as '*Ballo Mokambo*' and was determined to make them the most successful of all. The *Ballo Mokambo* scene he created was sometimes referred to as '*Club Mokambo*' since it was, in fact, a loose-knit Italian social club, albeit without a constitution, committee, or strict rules beyond appropriate dress, behavior and adherence to its liquor license laws. One strategy for success that he had developed before 1958, and which he continued for many years, was the presentation of beauty quests in conjunction with balls. Of particular importance was the annual Miss Mokambo quest since the successful Miss Mokambo provided much wider publicity for Mokambo by entering and sometimes succeeding in much larger beauty contests. With his good looks, personable nature, abundant talent, and growing reputation for organising beauty quests, Ugo was eventually invited to organise and even judge other quests—and, of course, provide the Mokambo Orchestra for the quest balls. From 1959 he also ran an annual *Mister Brutto* (Mister Ugly) quest. Imminent 'club' activities advertised in mid-1959 included: (July 21) Election of Miss Bellezza Continentale; (August 16) Partying and dancing to a fifteen piece orchestra and a *cantante famoso* and (August 20) *Massaia Italiana* lottery draw in between partying and dancing. Club activities were held in a variety of all-purpose venues but, by 1960, regular Sunday *Ballo Mokambo* nights at Cumparsita Hall, operated with 8.30-12 P.M. liquor licenses, had become Club Mokambo's core activity.

Ballo Mokambo at Cumparsita Hall centered on Orchestra Mokambo's own Latin-American and Italian popular music and its popular *cantanti* but subsequently drew upon a variety of local Italian talent, such as the tiny prodigies, Vincenzo Verga on accordion and Virgilio Donati on drums (now a world famous jazz-rock drummer) or the young *cantante* Tony Pantano, thereby assisting these and many other local artist to become established. Ugo even published a *Canzoniere 1960* (small songster) for Club Mokambo members containing lyrics to his own song compositions, *Italia*, *Buonanotte Tristezza*, and *Mamma Stanca*, and others by popular Italian song-writers, including superstar, Domenico Modugno, who made a triumphant appearance at Festival Hall in December 1959. Ugo was proud of having kept his homesick *Ballo Mokambo* patrons in touch with the Italian hit songs of the day by importing them immediately they were available.¹²

By 1960, Ugo was advertising from 230 Palmerston Street offering music, catering, photography, limousines, printing and MCing for weddings, baptisms, society *feste*, fund-raisers and other functions. He also ran an import agency for the '*Italiano* and *Continentale* band arrangements' published by various Italian and Spanish music houses. His brother, a businessman in his own right, played a very active and supportive role in the multi-faceted Mokambo enterprise but, for whatever reason, he always maintained a low public and musical profile and, in later years, played less often with the orchestra.

The Orchestra, the Musician, the Music

As the fame of Ugo Ceresoli, Ballo Mokambo and Mokambo Orchestra continued to grow, the core orchestra itself grew larger and more select. To have the best orchestra possible, Ugo needed players who could read music arrangements at first sight with great accuracy and he therefore often had to look beyond the relatively small pool of fully professional Italian dance musicians available to him. By the 1960s, the core orchestra included Anglo-Australian professionals such as pianist Ken Whitburn who remained a Mokambo stalwart for many years.



Orchestra Mokambo at Torino Studios reception rooms. Brunswick, 1960. L-R Ugo Ceresoli (accordion), Pietro Alessi (cantante), Franco [unknown] (alto sax), Nino Cabrera (trumpet), Renzo Conte (drums), Alberto Casselli (teno sax), Ken Whitburn (piano), Bruno Ceresoli (bass).

Latin-American music was a critically important part of Mokambo's repertoire and more than half of the 578 numbered orchestrations in the original Mokambo library are mambos and cha-cha-chas, plus boleros, beguines, congas, guarachas, rumbas, sambas, calypsos and other Hispanic fare. Many are Italian-published arrangements of the Latin hits of Xavier Cugat and other leaders in Latin dance music.

Ugo's musical role within the orchestra was more like that of a conductor-director. His accordion playing was foregrounded in tangos, sambas and certain other Latin, Italian or Continental repertoire where the deeply expressive sound (e.g. *Arrivederci Roma*) or the dazzling melodic gymnastics of his Continental button accordion playing was especially appropriate. Otherwise he confined his contribution to tastefully applied embellishments since his piano player provided the required rhythmic Latin and other vamping. Nevertheless, these embellishments and 'fills' on the relatively rare Continental accordion (the author's own instrument) must have given the orchestral sound an evocatively unique sonority and texture. Ugo also delighted his patrons by leaving the stage to do a *passerella* around the tables. His personal repertoire on accordion was very comprehensive. It covered light classics, compositions for accordion, including many of his own, Latin and Spanish, Jewish, French, 'Gypsy' and other Continental repertoire, a wide variety of Italian popular music, plus a sprinkling of American hits, and all the more traditional Italian favorites like *Ciribiribin*, *Calabrisella*, *Santa Lucia* or *Nanni*.¹³

Moomba International

Besides the regular Cumparsita cabarets-balls, the Miss Mokambo and Mister Brutto quests and other special Cumparsita Hall events of 1960, there were several very prestigious balls at the Royal Ballroom (Miss Teenager of Victoria Ball and the Italian National Ball); a Miss Cavour Cabaret Ball at St Kilda Town Hall and a Mokambo *Ballo Di Fine Anno* at Fitzroy Town Hall. Orchestra Mokambo appeared in a *Grandi Spettacoli di Varietà* at the Plaza Theatre, Thornbury, where Pietro Alessi sang Ugo's beguine *Italia* to acclaim. It also played for private and sporting club functions at Italian reception rooms and other hired venues. The orchestra gained particular kudos and media attention for its role as a support act for the separate Melbourne concerts of the famous visiting Italian *cantanti* Aurelio Fierro and Nilla Pizzi. *Ballo Mokambo* at Cumparsita Hall remained in full swing during 1961 with even more quests, novelty nights and new cabaret artists, including the immensely popular, Duo Moreno, and Mokambo advertisements began promoting its new *cantante*, Guido Maiorano. Then Ugo was handed an opportunity that suddenly brought him and his orchestra to the attention of the mainstream media and offered a new spectrum of possibilities for him as a musician and for 'Mokambo' as an orchestra and broader entrepreneurial project.

Since Ugo's arrival in 1952, post-war migration had swelled Melbourne ethnic communities' to proportions that could no longer be ignored as

inconsequential to Melbourne's overall cultural makeup. An early indicator of this paradigm shift was the decision by the Moomba Festival Committee to include a Miss Moomba International Quest and a variety show, *International Medley*, to be held in the Alexandra Gardens. It was to feature music, drama, dancing and other entertainments by artists drawn from the various ethnic communities and auditioned by representatives of the Moomba International Cultural Group. Only overseas born entrants could audition for the *International Medley* show or enter the Miss Moomba International pageant.

The selection of pageant winners was scheduled to take place at an International Evening ball at Melbourne Town Hall. Ugo was appointed Musical Director for the entire event with Orchestra Mokambo providing music ranging from accompaniments for the auditions to the ball itself. The event was an entrepreneurial coup and an official gesture of much historical significance for post-war migrants in Melbourne. Ugo had undoubtedly achieved his dream of seeing Mokambo—as he put it— 'defined as the ethnic community orchestra'. His profile reached new heights within the Italian community and Moomba patrons and media reports spread knowledge of Ugo Ceresoli and Orchestra Mokambo into the wider Melbourne community. It also raised his and his orchestra's esteem within the music profession, making it much easier for him to hire leading players as required.

Mokambo's Multilingual *Cantante*

Ugo probably entered 1962 with every reason to be optimistic, and the year lived up to all expectations. Regular and 'special' 1962 *Ballo Mokambo* functions included a song contest with heats and a final, and a special *Cumparsita Twist-Everybody-Twist* night, presented only a week after the new twist craze in Rome was reported in *Il Globo*.¹⁴ High profile balls included the Miss Cavour Ball at St Kilda Town Hall, the Alitalia Miss Juventus 1962 Ball and the Festa Nazionale Italiana Ball at the Royale Ballroom. From May, Orchestra Mokambo ran a regular Sunday afternoon dance at La Scala Theatre in Footscray in addition to many other individual engagements. It was also a support act for the early September Melbourne concerts of the famous Italian *cantante* Claudio Villa.

Much more significant than all these things, however, was Ugo's commencement of a musical and personal relationship with a beautiful and musically gifted young Anglo-Australian woman, Jo Muhrer (maiden name Laurance). There was always a sprinkling of Anglo-Australian women at *Ballo Mokambo* who came by invitation or were drawn by a sense of adventure to the cosmopolitan—or seemingly exotic—social atmosphere and Italian-Latin music. Jo had developed a love of singing at an early age and later trained in voice production and linguistics. Her intense interest in vocal sounds and time spent overseas gave her a particular fascination for non-Anglophone languages. She was initially attracted to opera and operetta, but by the time of her introduction to *Ballo Mokambo* her interests as a singer lay more in the colour and deeply personalised expressiveness of crooning. At *Ballo Mokambo*, where Ugo invited her to sing a number with the band, two new

musical passions were born, Italian *canzoni popolari* and Afro-Cuban rhythms.¹⁵

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MOKAMBO

UGO CERESOLI
recentemente ritornato dall'Italia e da un giro del mondo, ha portato con se le ultime novita' musicali e presentera nel 1967 artisti locali ed internazionali.

I quattordici anni di affiatamento del 19 elementi della orchestra MOKAMBO sono garanzia di successo e di serate indimenticabili che solo

l'Orchestra Mokambo puo' offrirvi!

SIGNORE e SIGNORINE
questo interessa VOI!
Ogni sabato sera, durante i trattenimenti danzanti alla Brunswick Town Hall, saranno estratti due premi di \$10 ciascuno, in contanti, tra le dame presenti.

Poster for Ballo Mokambo featuring Jo Muhrer at Brunswick Town Hall, 1967.

She had studied German and various other languages but neither read nor spoke Italian to any degree. However, with her exceptional ear, coupled with tips on pronunciation from Ugo, Maiorano and other Italian *cantanti*, she rapidly became and remained a *Ballo Mokambo* highlight. Her ability to 'interpret songs in eight languages', and native ability to croon and sing ballads in English, greatly increased the versatility of the orchestra. From early 1962 she shared equal billing with Guy as Mokambo's permanent *cantanti* and was also *cantante* for *Trio Mokambo* and *Quartetto Mokambo*, formed the same year by Ugo for work in cabaret venues such as the Blue Danube Cabaret in St Kilda. She eventually became the mainstay *cantante* for Mokambo.

Ballo Mokambo at Brunswick Town Hall

Promotion and reports in *Il Globo* suggest that the momentum gained from 1961 did not translate into a cornucopia of orchestra work during 1963. In April of that year, Ugo applied to Brunswick Council to lease Brunswick Town Hall for weekly Mokambo cabaret balls and these commenced in March 1964. Rival *balli Italiani* continued to be run from St. George's Hall in Carlton, San Remo Hall in West Melbourne and elsewhere. But Ugo was now running both his Sunday night Ballo Mokambo at Cumparsita Hall and the more up-market Saturday night cabaret balls at Brunswick Town Hall. He had also created a

distinctive 'sommbrero' trade-mark that, from thereon, appeared on all his promotional material.

Bands, artists and television celebrities featured at Cumparsita Hall and Brunswick Town Hall that year included *chitarrista e cantante* Carlo Dei, *fisarmonicista e cantante* Gino Ginetti, 'Maria of Sunnyside Up', Quartetto Paolo Trevi, Barry Sherridan and the Wanderers rock band, 'Negro' [in fact, a Torres Strait Islander] club and T.V. crooner, 'Georgia Lee', American crooner, Johnny Dane, and conga player, Albert La Guerre. Orchestra Mokambo also remained the premier band for major community functions, albeit sometimes sharing the stage with *ballo Italiano* rival, Estrellita. The year ended with a *Grande Spettacolo* at each venue featuring seven cabaret artists. Although 1964 had been a particularly successful and exciting year for Mokambo Orchestra it also marked the end of Mokambo's climb to ever-greater successes.

Ballo Mokambo continued at Cumparsita Hall and Brunswick Town Hall until 1968 with guest artists including the 'stelle della televisione' Buddy England, Judy Jacques, Sergio G. and the Flippers, 'Lou and Simon', 'Lyn and Jan' and others. But going by reports and advertisements in *Il Globo*, *Ballo Mokambo* were presented with less and less frequency. The orchestra continued to play for prestigious civic balls and pageants and came to heightened media attention in 1967 when two local song compositions interpreted by Jo, won both first and second prize in the first annual *Festival Della Canzone Italiana* held in Melbourne. From early 1967 Ugo and his future wife, Jo, were deeply involved with another daring venture: the establishment of Mondo Music at 304 Lygon Street, Carlton, which offered sheet music, recordings, acoustic and electronic instruments, imported and local recordings, radiograms and instrumental tuition.

After 1967, Mokambo Orchestra appearances became much less frequent and sometimes as far-flung as Werribee. In 1970, Mokambo was booked to appear on October 10 at, ironically, the very venue where it had begun its exciting odyssey seventeen years earlier, the Circolo Italiano Cavour in South Melbourne. However, tragedy was afoot and Bruno died a few weeks later on November 2 following a short illness. Without the brother he had been so close to all his life, Ugo no longer had the heart to continue running the Mokambo Orchestra.

But what hampered the progress for the orchestra after 1964? For one thing, the Melbourne Italian community had become more consolidated and much less in need of the particular type of supportive Club Mokambo social scene Ugo had established in the late 1950s. *Balli Italiani* were still popular but, by 1964, they were competing with a growing number of Italian-owned night spots where patrons could sit, listen and dance to Italian-Latin bands and Italian *cantanti*. Regional social clubs were booming and their own cabaret balls represented increasing competition for *Ballo Mokambo*. Some, like the Veneto club, were already planning lavish clubrooms with entertainment rooms. And, from 1967 the *ballo Italiano* scene, itself, became fiercely

competitive, with weekly 'Copacabana Cabarets' at Copacabana Hall Brunswick followed by many others, such as those run from the new San Remo Ballroom, the Catania Ballroom and Italia Hall. Whereas there had only been a handful of Italian bands in competition with Mokambo Orchestra in the late 1950s, there were well over a hundred by 1970.

Furthermore, while many local Italian bands besides Mokambo identified themselves with Latin music when the mambo and cha-cha-cha was a craze, by 1964 Italian-Australian community taste was already changing, especially that of Italian youth. One event that illustrated this was the successful 1964 tour of the Italian pop group Peppino di Capri and his Rockers with *cantante* Mina (best known for her catchy soft rock hit *Tintarella Di Luna*)—the same year that the Beatles' spectacularly successful Australian tour and small all-electric rock band model changed mainstream Australian popular music for ever. By the late 1960s Italian social organisations and entrepreneurs were promoting 'young generation dances' where the Latin music that Mokambo excelled in was already a distinct marker of the parental generation's dance music. Another outcome of this shift in style and taste was that many accordionists (including this author) abandoned their acoustic accordions for the modern sound of transistor-enhanced accordions or organs and, in so doing, abandoned the very sound that was most audibly 'Italian' and 'Continental' and which had been the main metaphor for Italian 'Latinness' in music since the Italianisation of the tango. This same sound had also helped to distinguish Orchestra Mokambo from just any large competent dance orchestra playing Latin or European dance music from commercial arrangements. Ugo lamented this shift and refused to abandon his traditional accordion for a transistorised model, explaining, sardonically, that you can't do a *passerella* amongst the tables with the latter.¹⁶

Riunione Nostalgia

The decade following the loss of his brother and the disbanding of the orchestra was a difficult time for Ugo. *Mondo Music* was sold up and he more or less gave up on his first musical love, playing the accordion. But he was sustained musically by an ongoing passion for lyrics and melodies that evoked deep feelings of nostalgia and yearning. His dream as a songwriter—one held by many other leading Italian musicians—was to win first prize in the coveted Italian Song Festival of Australia, and perhaps even touch the Holy Grail of Italian popular songwriters and *cantanti*, the annual San Remo Song Festival. He had, in fact, reached the finals of the third Australian (Melbourne) festival in August 1969 with his *Non Aspetto Nessuno*, interpreted by Jo.

The 1980s, however, brought a remarkable resurgence of his former status and musical career. By 1980, with the encouragement of family and confidants such as John D'Andrea and Ivano Ercole, he began to revive his accordion technique and plan the revival of *Ballo Mokambo* on an even larger scale than before. Ivano, being a journalist, was the ideal publicist and manager for the proposed revival of *Ballo Mokambo* and was to write many evocative reports and illustrated articles about Ugo and New Mokambo

Orchestra over the coming decade. The first of these, published in *Il Globo* of 8 June 1981, announced a Mokambo 'Riunione Nostalgica Grande Dinner Dance' at San Remo Ballroom on July 17, with a new Orchestra Mokambo of eleven players and two *cantanti* (Jo Muhrer and Vittorio Sacca). Melinda Ceresoli, then age 10, and her friend Simone Sommers sang with the orchestra and, from thereon, Melinda often appeared with the orchestra as a featured artist. Although it must have been an emotional night for Ugo, being surrounded by many of his old Cumparsita Hall patrons, it was a great success with over 500 guests turning up. It was followed in October by an even more successful 'Grande Dinner Dance—Spettacolo'. His 'Nostalgia Della Mokambo' project was already a reality. Here was a new tradition constructed out of nostalgia, not for the country of birth, but for a time and social scene that Italian-Australians fondly recalled from the dynamic early days of their migration—the time of their hard but fulfilling struggle to establish themselves, find love, make a home, and create a family as so-called 'new Australians'

The following July brought 'Mokambo Nostalgia Gala Night '82' with three *cantanti* (Jo, Vittorio and Tony Serrano), plus a floor show and dancing to Mokambo's Latin, Italian, Continental, 1940s swing and other 'pre-Beatles music'. The annual Nostalgia Gala Nights with their atmosphere and joy of the 'tempi eroici dell'immigrazione italiana a Melbourne' became an increasingly popular and well-publicized event, sometimes including exotic floor show acts such as the Brazilian Ritmo Orchestra with dancers (Gala '85). Mokambo continued to run other *Ballo Mokambo* at San Remo Ballroom, beginning with a 'Champagne and Chicken Night' in early 1982, and also played for many other large Italian functions held at San Remo Ballroom.



New Orchestra Mokambo at San Remo Ballroom, 1982.

As the fame of New Mokambo spread, the orchestra was offered more bookings on the vast Italian social club circuit that had sprung into existence since the 1960s. In 1983, Ugo found time to present a cabaret style show on 3EA Ethnic Radio with his band called *Piccolo Varietà Italiano*.

Possibly of even greater satisfaction to Ugo was formal recognition of his ability as a song writer. Jo's interpretation of his *Ho Bisogno Di Piangere* was awarded a 'special prize' at the 1982 Italian Song Festival. The following year he entered *A Prestito Del Tempo*, interpreted by the popular Italian combo leader Sergio Giovannini (a.k.a. Sergio G.) and this time he won first prize. It was presented by Premier John Cain at a lavish civic reception and comprised a cash prize, a trophy, a return trip to Italy and a commitment by the Italian Consul General to enter *A Prestito Del Tempo* into the San Remo Song Festival. He was probably even prouder in 1985 when Melinda entered the Australian festival for the first time, or a few years later when The Generation, an octet she belonged to with other young professionals, began touring with much success.

Ugo toured the club circuit with Sergio G. as a duo in 1984 (and, later, with other *cantanti*) and became much in demand as a solo *fisarmonicista* on the club circuit and for other venues and events. Quartetto Mokambo was also reformed for engagement not requiring the full orchestra and Orchestra Mokambo was sometimes seen at the annual Lygon Street Festival. He had also entered another phase of his personal life with his new wife, Rita. Many interesting musical possibilities lay ahead, but a lifetime of intense work, or over-work, was quickly catching up. Serious health problems and an operation curtailed Ugo's activities during 1991 and much of 1992 but Orchestra Mokambo was back in full swing at the end of 1992 with a highly publicised *Ballo Anti-Recession* at San Remo Ballroom. It continued to work throughout 1993 and into 1994 with lots of club work (the Veneto Club especially) but Ugo, now in his late sixties, was once again struggling with serious illness. The second Mokambo era was drawing to a close and it did so on 23 February 1996.

Those who had come within the sphere of his extraordinary life and evocative music were now left to reflect upon what Ugo and his music had been to them. He, himself, had been well aware of the social power of his music. A ten year old child once related to him (in Ivano Ercole's words), 'one of those simple genuine children's phrases which are somehow able to reach the meaning of a human experience. Ugo—he said—my papa and my mamma married themselves with your orchestra.'¹⁷

The Orchestra Mokambo story is but one of many that need to be told about Italian instrumentalists, *cantanti* and Italian-led bands that enriched Italian-Australian or wider Australian social and musical life. Yet the early Mokambo history is unique in itself and the 1980s revival of the original *Ballo Mokambo* evenings as glittering annual *riunione nostalgica* balls represents a fascinating example of the actual creation of an Italian-Australian tradition.

The story is also that of a man who, despite his many creative, daring and vigorous strivings for business success, lived a life that, at its deepest level, was passionately committed to making music. Ugo said in 1987 that 'There are so many beautiful things in the world, but music is one of the most beautiful things that God has created; if you do not love music, you cannot be complete.'¹⁸ While Ugo's social legacy has been focussed upon here, his musical legacy, such as his unpublished *canzoni* and accordion pieces, awaits serious evaluation and, hopefully, publication and live performance as music that has enriched Australia's musical heritage.

NOTES

¹ Anna Maria Dell'oso, *Songs of the Suitcase*, Sydney, HarperCollins Publishers, 1998; Arnold Zable, *Scraps of Heaven*. Melbourne, The Text Publishing Company, 2004.

² The pre-Melbourne story is a composite of available accounts, including articles based on interviews with Ceresoli: Judy Brett and Graeme Smith, 'Ugo Ceresoli' in 'Multicultural Music Making in Melbourne', *M.A.T.I.A. Music 11*, North Sydney, Australia Council, 1987, p. 30-1; Sandra Baldi, 'Musica a Melbourne con Ugo Ceresoli', 1988 Italian Song Festival brochure, Melbourne, p. 17.; and Ivano Ercole, 'Ugo Ceresoli e l'Orchestra "Mokambo" di nuovo in pedana dopo 12 anni', *Il Globo* 8 June 1981, p.16. The remainder of the article, with referenced exceptions, is based on primary source research, including *La Fiamma 1952-8*, *Il Globo 1959-94*, the scrap books, band library, and other documentation held by the Ceresoli family, Mokambo files at the Italian Historical Society (Co.As.It.), Public Records Office Victoria, plus interviews and discussions with Jo Muhrer, Graeme Smith, Melinda Ceresoli, Ivano Ercole, Paul Pergolese, Mimmo Bottari, and others.

³ Ivano Ercole, 'Ugo Ceresoli: la Mokambo e il "Ballo Anti Recessione"', *Il Mondo*, 8 November 1992, p. 25.

⁴ Radio Audizioni Italiane became RAI-Radiotelevisione Italiana in 1954.

⁵ Dell'oso, op. cit., pp. 242-3; Brett & Smith, op. cit., p.30.

⁶ See John Whiteoak, 'Italo-Hispanic Popular Music in Melbourne before Multiculturalism', *Victorian Historical Journal* , 78(2) 2007.

⁷ Sands & McDougall Melbourne and suburban directory for 1952 lists Mrs May Johnson as the occupant.

⁸ *The Listener In*, 9 April 1954, p.20.

⁹ Quoted in Ercole, op. cit., 1981.

¹⁰ Quoted in Baldi, op. cit., p.17.

¹¹ *Music Maker* (Sydney), October 1957, p.27.

¹² Discussion with Ivano Ercole, 25 February 2007.

¹³ I catalogued and studied the extant early library in detail. See also John Whiteoak, op. cit.

¹⁴ *Il Globo*, 30 January 1962, p.3.

¹⁵ Discussions with Jo Muhrer Laurance and Ivano Ercole, 'Jo Muhrer 16 anni dopo', *Il Globo*, 26 July 1982, p.18.

¹⁶ Brett & Smith, op. cit., p.31

¹⁷ Quoted in Ercole, op. cit., 1981

¹⁸ Quoted in Brett & Smith, op. cit.