

Gino Paoli, leading voice of postwar Italian popular music, dies at 91

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The death of Gino Paoli on March 24, 2026 at the age of 91 marks the passing of one of the central figures of postwar Italian popular music. A leading representative of the so-called “Genoese school” of songwriters, Paoli helped reshape Italian music in the late 1950s and ’60s, composing works that have endured for decades, including “Il cielo in una stanza,” “Sapore di sale,” “Senza fine” and “La gatta.”

Paoli stands as a towering figure in Italian popular music for good reason. He belongs to, and helped crystallize, the tradition of Italian melodicism: a clarity of line, emotional immediacy and structural economy that gives his songs their enduring power. His melodies, at once simple and deeply expressive, exemplify a musical language capable of conveying complex inner states with remarkable directness.

Many of Paoli’s most enduring works—including “Sapore di sale,” “Il cielo in una stanza” and “Che cosa c’è”—were arranged by another central figure of Italian music, Ennio Morricone. Before achieving international fame through his film scores, Morricone was a prolific arranger at RCA Italiana, where his work played a significant role in shaping the sound and musical identity of the “Genoese school” of singer-songwriters.

To understand Paoli’s significance requires more than considering his catalog of achievements. His long career reflects the emergence of the *cantautore* (singer-songwriter), the growing integration of music into commercial mass culture and the political limits of a generation shaped by the unresolved contradictions of postwar Italian capitalism.

Paoli was born in 1934 in Monfalcone, near the Slovenian border, and grew up in Genoa, a port city that became the cradle of a new musical movement. Alongside figures such as Fabrizio De André and Luigi Tenco, he helped break with the conventions of the Italian “bel canto” tradition, replacing ornate vocal display with lyrical introspection and a more direct, modern language.

This artistic shift corresponded to profound social changes. Postwar Italy was undergoing rapid industrialization, internal migration and the reorganization of everyday life. Traditional musical forms, rooted in prewar sensibilities,

proved inadequate to express the social, emotional and psychological realities of a new generation.

Paoli’s early compositions gave voice to this transition. “Il cielo in una stanza” turns a private romantic encounter into a song of universal longing and emotional intimacy, while “Senza fine” sets aside a traditional story, instead sustaining a continuous, looping sense of emotional intensity and reflection. Without advancing an explicit social perspective, these works nonetheless reflected the experiences produced by a society in flux.

The *cantautore* has often been presented as the embodiment of artistic authenticity. In reality, it was a broad and internally differentiated phenomenon. While Paoli’s work centered on personal and lyrical expression, other figures—among them De André, Tenco, Francesco Guccini and Giorgio Gaber—pursued a more overtly social and critical direction, addressing inequality, class and political life more directly, with varied degrees of success.

This diversity reflected a wider search for new forms of expression under changing historical conditions. At the same time, the expansion of the recording industry and mass media placed music within increasingly commercial frameworks, shaping both its production and its reach.

Within this context, Paoli’s orientation toward the inner life became a defining feature of his work. His songs, focused on love, memory and subjective experience, achieved broad resonance precisely because of their immediacy and emotional clarity. They became embedded in Italy’s cultural life and continue to speak to universal aspects of human experience.

That emphasis, however, also marked one of the principal tendencies within the *cantautore* movement. Where others sought to confront social contradictions more directly, Paoli remained largely within the sphere of personal expression. This reflected not simply an individual choice, but a particular artistic path shaped by the cultural and political limits of the period.

Paoli’s personal life bore the imprint of these pressures. In 1963, at the height of his early success, he attempted suicide,

shooting himself in the chest. He survived, but the bullet remained lodged near his heart for the rest of his life.

While often treated as a purely personal episode, the event can be best understood within a broader context. The postwar economic boom, far from a period of unbroken progress, involved intense social dislocation and psychological strain. For artists navigating fame and creative expectations within an increasingly commercial cultural sphere, such pressures could become acute.

Paoli's subsequent career, marked by periods of withdrawal and renewal, reflected a sustained effort to continue working within these conditions. He remained an active presence in Italian music for decades, even as the industry and its forms underwent significant change.

Paoli's later turn to formal politics, serving as a parliamentary deputy for the Italian Communist Party (PCI) from 1987 to 1992, has often been cited as evidence of his social engagement. More fundamentally, it signaled an adaptation to the existing political order.

By this point, the Stalinist Italian Communist Party had long since abandoned even a nominal connection to socialism, transforming itself into a pillar of the parliamentary order. Its policy of the "historic compromise" and sustained collaboration with bourgeois parties expressed a definite class orientation: the containment of working class struggle within the framework of the capitalist state.

Paoli's association with the party reflected the broader evolution of layers of intellectuals and artists who, as a result of the betrayals of the PCI and trade union apparatus, gravitated toward official institutions. What appeared as engagement took the form of participation in parliamentary life, rather than alignment with independent class struggle.

This development was part of a wider historical process. The Italian left, above all the PCI, played a central role in subordinating the working class to the state and integrating oppositional tendencies into existing structures of power. Paoli's political role must be understood within this context.

The "Genoese school" occupies a central place in the history of Italian music. Its leading figures introduced a new songwriting language, emphasizing lyrical depth and personal expression, and their influence extended across generations.

At the same time, the *cantautore* tradition did not develop along a single line. Some artists moved toward a more direct engagement with social and political realities, while others, including Paoli, focused on the exploration of individual experience. These differing orientations emerged from the same historical conditions and expressed distinct responses to them.

Paoli's work exemplifies one of the most enduring elements of this tradition. His songs continue to resonate

because of their emotional precision and accessibility, even as they remain rooted in a framework centered on personal experience.

Paoli's career spanned the transformation of Italy from postwar reconstruction to the crises of the 21st century. Over this period, music itself underwent profound changes, shaped by technological developments, industry restructuring and globalization.

From vinyl records and radio to digital streaming, the means of production and distribution evolved, but his work retained continuity with the traditions established in the early *cantautore* period.

Paoli's death is a bookmark in the history of Italian music. His passing follows that of other major figures of his generation, marking the gradual disappearance of those who shaped the cultural landscape of the postwar period.

Official tributes have emphasized his contributions as a songwriter and his role in transforming Italian music. These assessments, while not without merit, tend to present his career in isolation from the broader social and historical context.

A more critical evaluation must recognize both his artistic achievements and the conditions that shaped them. Paoli was neither simply a product of his time nor a figure who stood outside it. He was a representative of a generation whose aspirations were formed (and constrained) by the contradictions of postwar capitalism.

Gino Paoli's songs endure because they give clear expression to fundamental human emotions, capturing moments of intimacy, longing and reflection.

At the same time, the conditions that shaped this artistic outlook have not disappeared. The tension between individual expression and the need for a more consciously social art remains unresolved.

Paoli's death thus marks not only the loss of a major artist, but the close of a chapter in which these questions first emerged in modern Italian music and which remain, in essential respects, unanswered.



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