

Profiles of

# ITALIAN AMERICANS

*Achieving the Dream  
and  
Giving Back*

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MARYLOU TIBALDO-BONGIORNO  
JEROME BONGIORNO  
*Filmmakers*

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*In the film, Little Kings, three Santello brothers—Italian Americans—are talking.*

*DOM: How can you expect to have a good relationship with your wife when you're doing someone on the side?*

*GINO: We're Italian.*

*DOM: Okay, hold it right there. What is this?*

*You always say that. 'We're Italian.' What the hell does that mean?*

*GINO: Don Corleone, Al Capone, Caligula, Casanova. . .*

*DOM: Degenerates. All degenerates.*

*GINO: Stupid, these people lived large. Life is too short.*

*DOM (to JOHNNY): You agree with him?*

*JOHNNY: He's not wrong.*

*DOM: Johnny, I'm disappointed in you.*

*JOHNNY: Dom, calm down.*

*DOM: I'm not going to calm down. That's not what being Italian should mean to you. We're not gangsters. We're not immoral. Now if you say . . . Dante, Michelangelo, DaVinci . . . then . . .*



Photo: © Bongiorno Productions, Inc.

Jerome Bongiorno sees himself as part of the classic Italian-American experience. In 1950, his father, Peter Bongiorno, emigrated with little education from Sicily at age 17. He settled in Brooklyn, joined the bricklayers' union, married a Brooklyn-born, Italian-American woman, Patricia Coppola, and saw to it that his three children were educated at Catholic schools. Jerome then experienced the next part of the Italian-American

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<sup>1</sup>From *Little Kings*, by Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno, Emmy-nominated. Award-winning husband and wife filmmakers.

journey—the family moved from Brooklyn to suburban Staten Island. He was educated by Christian Brothers in high school and then by Jesuits in college, where he met his future wife, Marylou Tibaldo.

After majoring in biology in college, Jerome spent two years in medical school. He then decided to teach high school science by day and play/record original music with his rock band by night, in addition to pursuing painting and drawing. Then he made a right turn into filmmaking—not a typical career for the son of a working-class, Italian-American family. Jerome says: “To my family, filmmaking was like going to Mars.”

Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno’s father, Angelo L. Tibaldo, emigrated from Montecchio in Northern Italy with his family. The year was 1936 and he was six years old. The family lived first in Newark, New Jersey, and then moved to nearby Belleville. Angelo worked in a local leather factory. While stationed overseas in the Air Force, he met and married an Italian woman, Paolina Peloso, from his parents’ home town of Montorso. The couple settled in Newark, in a neighborhood filled with relatives. He educated both of his children at Catholic schools. Marylou earned scholarships to Queen of Peace High School and Saint Peter’s College.

In college, Marylou, too, majored in biology and that’s where she met Jerome. After graduation, she spent two years in a neurophysiology doctoral program, but decided to teach high school science in a prep school and write and produce plays with Jerome. In 1986, they were married at the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in the city where they settled—Newark, NJ.

While they were writing and directing one of their plays, an actor suggested they make a film together. They did, and the couple was “hooked.” In 1994, Marylou enrolled full time in NYU’s Graduate Film School. In 1999, the Bongiornos formed their own production company, Bongiorno Productions, and produced award winning, cutting edge fictional and documentary films. They refer to themselves as a “two-person band”—Marylou raises the money and directs; Jerome shoots and edits. They write their screenplays together. They often use their documentary films as research for their fictional stories. Marylou explains that approach with a quote from director Jean-Luc Godard: “In filmmaking, you can either start with fiction or documentary, but whichever you start with, you inevitably find the other.”

### *Of Sons and Mothers*

While their filmmaking technique developed from their varied experiences—theater, music, painting, drawing—the content and themes of their films reflect their Italian-American experience: first-generation, Catholic, and family-oriented. It all served not only as a sense memory to inform what they created but also to inspire them thematically.

For example, Marylou and Jerome made *Mother Tongue*, a short documentary that featured Jerome's cousins, who are mother/son restaurateurs. Documentary filmmakers are told to "shoot what you know," Marylou said, so she and Jerome "looked in our backyard and to the riches of our Italian-American family." That film led to an expanded 43-minute version that further explored the complex Italian-American mother/son bond. It featured comments from seven men and their mothers, including director Martin Scorsese, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, actor John Turturro, and singer Pat DiNizio of the "Smithereens." *Mother Tongue: Italian American Sons and Mothers* earned an Emmy nomination and revealed that the Italian-American mother/son relationship is very passionate. The mothers in this film are very opinionated about their sons' lives, particularly their ultimate career paths. Many times they disagreed with their sons' choices but they stayed right beside them each step of the way.

For instance, DiNizio tells of his band's endless round of playing "noisy and horrendous" nightclubs, with a familiar face in the audience—his mother. Fans christened her "Mother of the Smithereens," of which she is proud. In the film she speaks lovingly of the spaghetti and meatball dinners she fed to the band when they rehearsed in her basement at top volume for seven years. She also talks on film of the sacrifices her son had to make because he chose to be a musician rather than hold a secure job in the family sanitation business.

"Of course, I see my own Italian-American mother, Jerome's mother, all my aunts and grandmothers in the mothers of these men," Marylou said. Jerome added: "Marylou has always been fascinated by the dynamics between my mother and me. When we don't get along, it's explosive. When we do get along, it's magic. Those times contain all the ambition, emotion, and passion that Italians had when they uprooted themselves from their country and came to America."

*We're Italian*

Another of the couple's films with an Italian-American theme is *Little Kings*. It tells a simple story of three Italian-American brothers with complicated love lives, their interactions, failings, triumphs, and discoveries. In a very revealing scene, the brothers are arguing about one's (Gino's) dissolute behavior, particularly his marital infidelity. Gino defends himself by saying "We're Italian," pointing to role models with the names Don Corleone, Al Capone, Caligula, and Casanova. "All degenerates," his younger brother, Dom, says. He adds: "That's not what being Italian should mean to you. We're not gangsters; we're not immoral."

In *Little Kings*, the Bongiorno's pay homage to Fellini's *Amarcord*, Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, and "some Quentin Tarantino and Woody Allen for innovation and humor."

In their films, Marylou and Jerome portray what they see as the best qualities of Italian Americans—"Not being afraid to show our emotions, being sensual, and exhibiting passion."

Film critic Sherry Mazzochi wrote of *Little Kings*: "There are the requisite scenes of family dinners overflowing with pasta, wine, and yelling relatives. But she (Tibaldo-Bongiorno) has crafted a movie that is as fresh and appealing as its youthful cast." The cast member who plays Gino, Mark Giordano, added some insight to an understanding of the film's theme when he said that when he auditions for parts, he is often told he's "not blue-collar enough and too intelligent" to play an Italian American."<sup>2</sup> Jerome Bongiorno responds: "Nobody plays an Italian American like an Italian American. Too often it's really disappointing to watch a film about Italian American characters where the actors, if they're not Italian American themselves, or if they're being directed by someone who's not Italian American, wind up acting coarse, with a *cafone* attitude."

## Revolution '67

Besides mining the Italian-American experience, the Bongiorno's also focus on challenges of social change. Once again, they did not have to go far to find a subject. One of Marylou's lifelong passions, which Jerome now

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<sup>2</sup><http://media.www.theticker.org/2.10634/little-kings-a-success-without-stereotypes-1.1416288>

shares, is her love for Newark, New Jersey. She grew up there and has lived there with Jerome since they were married. Many of her contemporaries have abandoned this city of poverty, crime, and widespread neglect.

As a means of giving back, the Bongiorno work to find solutions to the city's problems. But first they needed to understand how the city came to be one of the nation's most troubled. Marylou and Jerome decided to turn back to the summer of 1967. It was a time when riots raged in Los Angeles, Detroit, and other cities, as well as Newark. The Newark Riots smoldered for six days and took the lives of 26 people. Some 725 were injured, and approximately 1,500 people were arrested.

Their 90-minute film—*Revolution '67*—incorporates powerful archival news footage, animation, and interviews with activists, the former state governor and city mayor, journalists, a former National Guard member, historians, and eyewitnesses, with a jazz soundtrack.<sup>3</sup> All cities have high population densities," the film says, "but when poverty is prevalent, the city deteriorates: crime, low graduation rates, corrupt government—Newark." The Bongiorno have come to understand that the only solution for Newark is to reduce the poverty. That can be done in one of two ways: gentrify the city and move the poor out, or, their goal, rehabilitate the city by creating jobs and a middle class. "This requires empowerment," they said, "and constant pressure on the political structure. You can't take 'no jobs' for an answer."

*Revolution '67* was broadcast nationally on the premier PBS non-fiction series P.O.V., where it was seen by more than a million viewers. It has won international prizes, two national awards for outstanding film of American history, and is on a college and community tour, being shown to diverse audiences around the world.

### *You Can't Take "No" for an Answer*

In a very challenging industry, Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno know they have their work cut out for them. But like their ancestors before them, they will not shy away from the challenge:

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<sup>3</sup>[http://blog.nj.com/ledgernewark/2007/06/revolutionary\\_viewpoint.html](http://blog.nj.com/ledgernewark/2007/06/revolutionary_viewpoint.html)



Making films aimed at social change is especially challenging. To produce these films, we rely on the enlightened, progressive leadership of foundations, corporations, and government sponsorship. Many times, in order to secure grants we have to suffer initial rejections. We must go back many times. You can't take 'no' for an answer.

### *A New Breed of Filmmakers*

At a time when movies and television seem determined to portray Italian Americans as negative stereotypes, the work of Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno offers a refreshing and truthful alternative. Upcoming projects include *Watermark*, a love story set in Venice, Italy, and post-Katrina New Orleans, the fictional version of *Revolution '67*, which is being executive-produced by Spike Lee, and a documentary about eco-sustainable housing.