

# ALTRE VOCI

O T H E R V O I C E S

April / May 2018

Volume 37, No. 2

NEWSLETTER OF THE ITALIAN CULTURAL SOCIETY

## HOW YANKEES BECAME *Italian*

**Between the 1880s and 1920s** more than 4 million Italians arrived in America, many of them settling in New York City. To New York's baseball front offices they represented an untapped audience. The New York Yankees began searching for an Italian-American ballplayer that would bring them the Italian immigrant audience. Their search took them to the Pacific Coast League where an immigrant son, **Tony Lazzari**, a San Francisco area boy, was posting unparalleled numbers with 60 runs in the 1925 season.

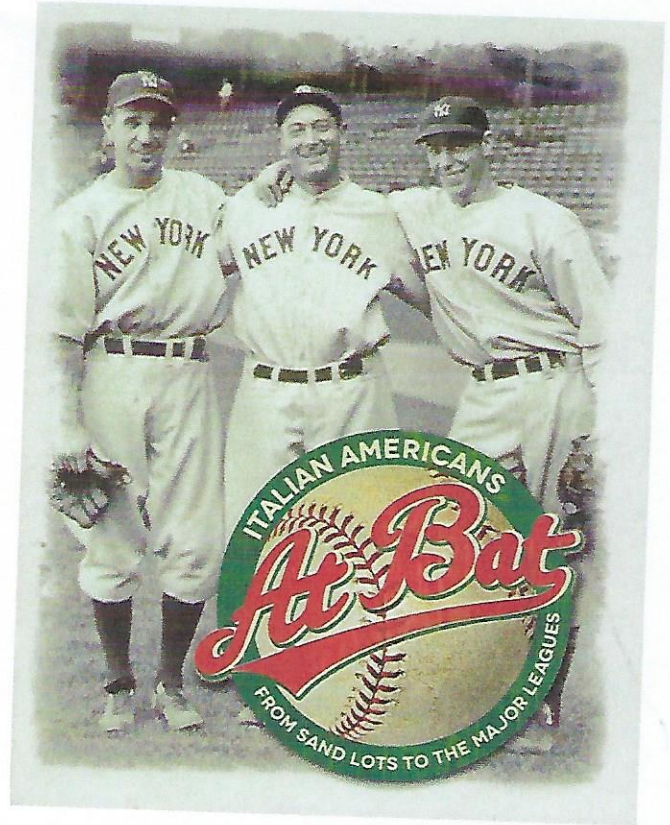
When the gates opened on the 1926 season, the 22 year old second baseman found himself in the lineup with **Babe Ruth** and **Lou Gehrig**. But unlike his teammates, Lazzari carried a particular burden the moment he stepped up to the plate; an unfavorable portrayal of Italian-Americans during the 1920s. With one swing of the bat after another, Lazzari began changing that image. In his rookie year he clubbed the third most home runs in the League leading the Yankees to the 1926 World Series.

Just as the Yankees hoped , Italian-Americans flocked to the ball park to see Lazzari play. Lazzari became almost as big a drawing card as Babe Ruth and Italian societies held banquets for him wherever he played. Lazzari wasn't just a ball player, he was an Italian-American ball player and the ethnic hero the Yankees had wanted.

With their new fan base, the Yankees signed another Italian player from San Francisco, short stop **Frankie Croscetti** who played for the next 37 years. With Lazzari and Croscetti anchoring the middle of the diamond as double play partners, the Yankees had gained their foothold in Italian America, and Italians gained their foothold in Yankee America.

Yet it was another son of Italy, a third San Francisco player, who drove it all home. He was the "Yankee Clipper," **Joe DiMaggio**. Entering with a forceful presence in 1936 with a three-hit debut, he never looked back and won the first of three Most Valuable Player Awards in 1939.

In May 1941, DiMaggio began his rise to mythical heights with a hit that drove in his rookie teammate **Phil Rizzuto**. That hit laid the foundation of "The Streak" -with each game DiMaggio's hitting streak continued to build. It bonded a whole nation, taking over headlines of newspapers. Non-Yankee fans and non-baseball fans joined baseball fans. in the excitement across the nation. *The Streak* lasted 56 games, a baseball record. DiMaggio, like Lazzari, was a man who did not seek attention, yet this son of an Italian fisherman was



(L to R): Frank Croscetti, Tony Lazzari, Joe DiMaggio, 1936

the largest Yankee of them all, both an ethnic hero and an icon of American culture.

In 1941, the same year of DiMaggio's Streak, Italian-American Phil Rizzuto took over as shortstop from Croscetti. Standing at five-foot-five he won the MVP Award in 1950 and was voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. He was joined by Italian-American teammate and catcher **Yogi Berra**, one of the most beloved baseball players in Major League history who also had a three time MVP and Hall of Fame career. Berra and Rizzuto made a formidable force and led the Yankees to many victories. After 13 years with the Yankees Rizzuto became their broadcaster for the next 40 years.

Spanning the Lazzari through Berra years, the Italian-American Yankees won 19 world series in 37 years. What these players accomplished was something greater-something more lasting. They helped change the way Italian-Americans were perceived in America, enabling their ethnicity to gain its acceptance in a new culture.

*This article is abridged from an article in the OSIA Summer 2015 issue of Italian America Magazine by Miles Ryan Fisher, "How Yankees Became Italian."*

MEET FILM DIRECTOR ROBERT ANGOTTI  
FOR A SPECIAL SHOWING OF THE FILM, 'THE ITALIAN  
BASEBALL FAMILY' on SUNDAY APRIL 29, at 1:30pm.  
SEE INSIDE, P2 FOR DETAILS...