

The Construction of a Song: on the Recording of De André's Voice in the 1990s

Vera Vecchiarelli

The work of Fabrizio De André¹ is usually associated with a type of song in which the word takes on a central role. His production is characterised by the extreme care of the sung line and by the selection of themes with a great socio-cultural impact. These features, together with close attention to outcasts and similar human types, have encouraged an insistent comparison with the figure of the poet (Fabbri 2005, 2007). Furthermore, De André's case constitutes a central point in the development of the academic debate on the 20th Century *popular* song. The research perspective has been oriented towards the analysis of the 'poetic-musical text' (Cosi-Ivaldi 2011; La Via 2011a, 2011b, 2012), more frequently in its poetic component or on its themes (Giuffrida-Bigoni 1997; Ivaldi 2015; Marrucci 2009a, 2009b, 2013), towards the characteristics of authorship, to peculiar traits or specific work phases (Fabbri 1997; Pavese 2003, 2009, 2013; Sinopoli 2005, 2006).

From the very beginning of my research² it was important for me to reflect upon the figure of the author himself, contextualising the image of the so-called 'cantautore' De André within the context of record production. My contribution intends to embrace the stimulus to discuss the artist's identification with the poet and to consider De André's creativity as a result of a choral work process (Brusco 2020; Fabbri 1997; Pavese 2003, 2009). At the same time, I wonder about the effective role of such a rich personality in that process and about the way in which the peculiar attention to the poetic text engaged with the work on the recorded sound. This aim is connected to a reading of the creative process as a fluid and unitary system, where any element 'has an equal potential to contribute to the uniqueness of the recording' (Moylan 2020: 29). Indeed, according to Simon Zagorski-Thomas (2014), the construction of the track is not only a mechanical reproduction, but it includes further and meaningful characteristics. Therefore, an appropriate consideration of this phase of work

1 Fabrizio De André is probably the most important Italian 'cantautore' (singer-songwriter). He was born in Genoa in 1940 and his production was between 1960 and 1996. His early records were very close to the French *chansonnier* style, especially to the production of Georges Brassens. Over the years he searched for further musical solutions and proposed works of refined cultural relevance. His records were the result of careful collaborations, which generally aimed at absorbing new poetic and musical styles. In this regard, it will be useful to remember, among others, the important contributions of Gian Piero Reverberi, Nicola Piovani, Francesco De Gregori, Massimo Bubola, Mauro Pagani, Ivano Fossati. Among the records with the greatest impact *La buona novella* (1970), which was freely inspired by the apocryphal gospels, *Crèuza de mã* (1984), a work entirely in Genoese (1984), and the last album *Anime salve* (1996).

2 This chapter collects part of the results of my PhD research started in 2016 at the Sapienza University of Rome. Some of the information collected in the chapter was presented during the conference *Ethnography of recording studios* that took place at the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice from 24 to 26 January 2019.

adds an important piece in the description of the creative system of this author/performer.

The Anglo-American context provides numerous stimuli for expanding the research perspective, which have encouraged me to conduct an overall assessment of the record production process. Several papers based on an ethnographic research methodology have suggested to me that a similar approach could also be followed in the study of De André's work; for example, by shifting attention towards situations of collective creativity, such as the setting of the recording studio. In this regard I particularly wish to mention Joe Bennett and Philip McIntyre's studies on creativity (Bennett 2011, 2012, 2013; McIntyre 2008a, 2008b, 2012) and, in the ethnomusicological field, the work of Paul Green and Thomas Porcello (2005), as well as Louise Meintjes (2003).

Unlike these works, my own research is based on a historical perspective, due to the fact that De André passed away 20 years ago. I have therefore focused on interviews with those people who collaborated with him, in various different capacities. My approach is characterised by direct comparisons between several important sources which afford us a better understanding of De André's process of creative writing. The application of an ethnographic method is combined with the study of the extensive autograph materials that since 2003 have been available at the University of Siena's De André Archive (Fabbrini-Moscadelli 2012).³ As Stefano Moscadelli explains in his introduction to the inventory (Moscadelli 2012), this archive contains various items related to De André's intellectual activities. Among them the musician's books and 'materials of study and work' are particularly significant, as they include annotations, comments, notes, manuscripts and drafts. These archive resources are a precious aid for investigating De André's writing process, and when combined with an ethnographic type of investigation it is possible to go beyond an exclusively philological-analytical approach. In this way the opportunity has arisen to 'give voice' to these documents, notes and manuscripts, while also making them more comprehensible and accessible.

This chapter focuses on the operations of recording and mixing of De André's studio productions in the 1990s particularly the interventions on his voice. I have been able to reconstruct this work thanks to interviews with the sound engineers Maurizio Camagna and Paolo Iafelice (in September 2018 and February 2019 respectively). Camagna's collaboration with De André began in 1989. He was responsible for the studio recording and mixing of *Le nuvole* (1990), and he supervised the recording and mixing of the live album *1991 Concerti* (1991) as well as the first phase of recording for *Anime salve* (1996). Iafelice started working on *Anime salve* when the project was already in progress and he dealt with completing the unfinished recordings, as well as supervising the mixing of all the tracks. The analysis of the production phase has also been possible thanks to the memories of other people who in various capacities met De André's work. Mark Harris, Gian Piero Reverberi, Pasquale Minieri have helped me to understand how the sound treatment was intertwined with the arrangement and the performance choices. Finally, a conversation with Dori Ghezzi, De André's wife, was fundamental for interpreting and expanding the information gained through the interviews. In fact, she acutely observed her husband's creative activity, and was often present in the studio during recording sessions. Generally speaking, the use of the interview aims at the reconstruction of an overall picture with an analytical purpose, in combination with additional analysis tools and other types of sources. In this sense, this chapter differs from those publications which are rather oriented towards the collection of first-hand accounts on a specific theme or aspect. Among these, the book *Fabrizio De André. In studio* (2015), edited by the Fondazione Fabrizio De André Onlus, from which further fragments of published interviews are mentioned in the following pages.⁴

The accounts I have collected regard a limited phase of the entire process that leads from

3 From now on, AFDA. The arrival of the De André Archive at the University of Siena encouraged the birth of the eponymous Centro Studi in 2004, a research organisation located at the Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche e dei Beni Culturali of the University of Siena.

4 I would also like to point out a recent contribution by Francesco Brusco (2020) published while this chapter was in press. His paper is dedicated to the description of the different personalities involved in a recording studio. In particular, it looks through De André's production and is conducted according to the general idea of the strongly cooperative nature of record production.

the conception of a song to its final recording, but they shed light on some crucial aspects of the creative process and reveal many of the requirements and objectives that were connected with the artist's writing methods, communication and performance. I wish to point out that both of the sound engineers repeatedly affirmed that the practices they described were perfectly 'normal', within the context of their extensive professional experience; in Camagna's case, he was co-owner of the Metropolis recording studio in Milan, where most of the work on the albums took place. It is important to bear this in mind, as what were in fact diffuse and common practices should not be seen as distinctive features of De André's approach and of his work, which should instead be considered in a broader context, within which his specific case has some distinctive features.

A 'mania for precision'

On the occasion of the mixing of *Crêuza de mă* (1984) digital technologies were employed for the first time ever in a record released by De André. In the early 1980s the use of these new techniques had introduced a revolution in the methods of record production (Cook et al. 2009; Zak 2011). The record, written and produced with Mauro Pagani, was recorded in analogue and digitally mixed by Allan Goldberg at the Stone Castle Studios in Carimate.⁵ Due to this new development, the degree of precision of the studio production work increased significantly. However, this also meant that production timescales were significantly lengthened, culminating in the period of over six months of studio production for *Anime salve* (Sinopoli 2005, 2006). Although *Le nuvole* (1990) was still recorded analogically (with only the mastering carried out digitally), the introduction of computers made it possible to use technology for precision control, particularly for regulating percussive sounds.

For example, to adjust the timing of percussive sounds because Pro Tools was not available at the time, they had to pass through an Akai S1000 16-bit sampler that could sample only a few dozen seconds in 32 MB of memory (yes, that's megas, not gigas!). It was a huge job: entire nights were spent in fixing the tempos and tuning the percussions of the musicians, sampling everything one little piece at a time using a MIDI-only sequencer. To make things even more complicated, it must be said that when the S1000 reproduced a sound in stereo, it was in phase once and three times out of phase because the two channels couldn't get synchronised, perhaps because the processor was too slow, and so you had to reproduce the various little pieces several times until the phase was correct. In short, it was a genuine nightmare! (Lucchesi 2013).⁶

This is a short but significant example which effectively shows how work in the studio in those years was characterised by what Camagna defined as a genuine 'mania for precision'.⁷ This was partially due to De André's need to be absolutely secure on a technical level, even if this meant risking a less spontaneous and more sterile outcome. Every single aspect of the work was the result of careful reflection. Nothing was reckless or unconsidered, and every decision was preceded by endless discussions and reconsiderations, so that the tracks were constantly altered and reshaped. As Piero Milesi had already pointed out,⁸ this kind of attention to detail reached extremes during the production of *Anime salve*: «If there was a detail that tormented him, that detail became the universe and nothing moved on until it was resolved. And this is part of the methodology of the search for perfection: it will never

5 The sound technicians were Allan Goldberg and Lucio Visintini, while the studio co-production and mixing were supervised by Allan Goldberg.

6 Original in Italian: 'Ad esempio, per aggiustare i tempi dei suoni percussivi e dato che all'epoca non c'era ancora Pro Tools, questi dovevano passare attraverso un campionatore Akai S1000 a 16 bit che poteva campionare solamente poche decine di secondi in 32 MB di memoria (sì, Mega e non Giga!). Fu un lavoro immane: intere nottate passate ad aggiustare temporalmente e intonare le percussioni dei musicisti campionando tutto pezzetto per pezzetto utilizzando un sequencer solo MIDI. A rendere le cose ancor più complicate, va detto che l'S1000 quando riproduceva un suono in stereo, una volta era in fase e tre in controfase perché i due canali non riuscivano a uscire sincronizzati, forse a causa del processore troppo lento, per cui dovevi riprodurre i vari pezzettini più volte finché la fase non era corretta. Insomma, fu un vero incubo!'.

7 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018).

8 Piero Milesi (1953-2011) was the co-producer, arranger and conductor on the album *Anime salve* (1996).

be attained but it is right to seek it» (Milesi in Fondazione De André 2015: 177).⁹

De André's recordings in those years were certainly characterised by a close attention to every detail but, according to my interviewees, this was not solely due to his own meticulous attitude. Instead one must bear in mind that sound recording practices are influenced by their technological and cultural context. In the 1990s, they were still conditioned by the popularity and widespread diffusion of dance music in the previous decade, resulting in the prevalence 'of computers, electronic drums, synthesisers, and of a music that was also a bit sterile' (Cammagna in Fondazione De André 2015: 162).¹⁰ Dori Ghezzi also pointed out that, rather than being due to her husband's obsessional disposition, his search for greater precision was due to the profound changes brought about by the introduction of the computer. What might at the time have been seen as an excessive search for perfection was at least partly motivated by the advent of a whole new approach towards sound recording. According to De André's wife, similar practices were the norm for most productions in those years: 'the way of working had changed: records were not made as they had been previously, and the computer was used starting from the phase of pre-production'.¹¹

In this case, Dori Ghezzi was referring to the working method for the album *Anime salve*. As Piero Milesi told Alessandro Sinopoli (Sinopoli 2005, 2006), these recording sessions were preceded by a very careful and lengthy phase of pre-production. Milesi recalls that most of the decisions were made in this preliminary phase, so that the production process was a sort of 'writing up' of what had already been established, although, of course, there were some specific exceptions to this rule. In terms of creativity, this involved some substantial differences from the past: thanks to the extensive sampling that had already been carried out, the musicians were able to listen to the parts directly from the multitrack. The initial difficulties caused by this change of approach were explained by Milesi in an interview in 2006 with the Fondazione De André:

Another reason why I think Fabrizio found it hard to work with me is that he was more used to Mauro Pagani's methodology. I worked in another way and Fabrizio was rather disorientated by this: on his latest albums he had been used to working directly with the instrumentalists, and the starting point was the so-called 'phrase'. I instead had a training as a composer who used pen and paper, with working methods of a certain kind, and so I tended first of all to focus on structural and formal aspects (Milesi in Fondazione De André 2007: 346).¹²

Milesi is referring to a shift of creativity into a different dimension, no longer with the goal of constructing a product in a collective context ('on his latest albums he was used to working directly with the instrumentalists') but now with a certain intimacy, which was shared with the authors of the songs and just a few others. After all, due to the predefinition of the songs, it was no doubt natural for them to be wary of any individual creative contributions arising from a group situation in the studio, especially if this meant introducing any variations to the initial scheme. This was radically different from the analogical approach, with a pre-production phase that usually involved a rather approximate and provisional roughing out of the arrangement, starting from very simple and rudimentary informal recordings.

Milesi's approach involved an intermediate step, in the form of a further preliminary test recording, which was already quite well defined thanks to arrangements made with a sampler. This step anticipated and substituted much of the lengthy work which used to be carried out in the studio (involving many technicians, musicians and producers), substituting it with a more private and intimate dimension (with the presence of only Milesi and De André). Mark

9 Original in Italian: 'Se c'era un dettaglio che lo tormentava, quel dettaglio diventava l'universo e non ci si smuoveva finché non era risolto. E questo rientra nella metodologia della ricerca della perfezione: non la si raggiungerà mai ma è giusto ricercarla'.

10 Original in Italian: 'del computer, della batteria elettronica, dei sintetizzatori, di una musica anche un po' asettica'.

11 Dori Ghezzi, telephone communication on 31 July 2019: 'era cambiato il modo di lavorare, non si facevano più i dischi come si usava fare nel passato, si usava il computer sin dalla pre-produzione'.

12 Original in Italian: 'Un altro motivo per cui credo che Fabrizio si sia trovato in difficoltà nei miei confronti è che s'era ben abituato alla metodologia di Mauro Pagani. Io lavoravo in un altro modo e Fabrizio ne è rimasto piuttosto spiazzato: negli ultimi album era abituato a lavorare direttamente con gli strumentisti, dove il nucleo di partenza era la cosiddetta frase. Io invece mi ero formato come compositore carta e penna, quindi con metodologie di lavoro di un certo tipo perciò tendevo a privilegiare in prima battuta l'aspetto strutturale e formale'.

Harris¹³ also claimed that the practice of carrying out very carefully planned initial recordings, which was greatly facilitated by the use of computers, encouraged some different dynamics regarding the relationship between the ideas sketched out in the pre-production phase and the final recording of the track:

He used to do some preliminary recordings for me with just guitar and voice. I went home and worked on them, and then I tried to make him understand, because I couldn't play all of the parts together. I said, 'listen to the guitar part, and imagine that underneath it there's this bass part here', and I played it on the piano. 'Then I'll do these harmonies, then we'll go in this direction'. It was an operation conducted mostly in the imagination. What is the problem – if we can call it a problem – of doing the demos with the computer and all that stuff? The problem is that you get obsessive and you say: 'Hey, but here it sounded like this. Can't you hear how natural this thing here is? Let's bring back this bit here, and that thing over there'.¹⁴

Harris clearly felt that the fact that previously it had not been possible to listen to the overall effect of the arrangement until the moment of recording had allowed more scope for creativity, as it meant that everyone was less firmly attached to the original idea and more willing to make changes. In fact, as Piero Milesi himself pointed out (Bertoncelli 2012), during the recording of *Anime salve* any proposed variations led to an in-depth reflection on whether it was appropriate, due to a certain resistance, especially on the part of De André, to deviate from what had already been 'determined' in the preliminary recordings.

The situation I have described should help to contextualise what Camagna has described as 'a mania for precision'. Apart from De André's personal propensity to coordinate the work and deal with every aspect, the increase in the level of control over the details should be put into relation with a specific working context and the changes that had occurred in the 1980s in production methods. It is important to take different factors into account, not only those related to authorial intent, as suggested by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's systems model of creativity, which has been applied to popular music by Phillip McIntyre (McIntyre 2008b, 2012; McIntyre/Fulton/Paton 2016). This model involves: «a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation» (Csíkszentmihályi 1997: 6). Therefore, the innovation introduced by the individual is always acknowledged by a social group (the field) that has a shared set of ideas (the domain); vice versa, the individual is immersed in a specific cultural system, from which he receives impulses and inspiration. According to the systems model, several factors at the basis of artistic creation must be taken into account: these include the expressive needs of creative individuals, as well as their practical, economic and socio-cultural conditioning. An appraisal of the cultural and social factors involved also makes it possible to define more precisely the role and contribution of the author in a context in which similar professionals are active. In this case, the propensity of the artist to be meticulous must be related to the production context of the time and the other people involved in it.

The work on the voice

In this context, the acoustic treatment of the voice stands out as the centre of studio work, as it requires a high degree of care and attention. An anecdote related by Paolo Iafelice reveals how easily a good performance could condition the selection of the recording materials. The sound engineer told me about an episode during the recording of *Anime salve*, specifically the

13 Mark Harris collaborated with De André on the album *Fabrizio De André* (also known as *L'indiano*, 1981) firstly as a musician and arranger, and then as a musician on the tours in 1981-82 and 1997-98.

14 Mark Harris, telephone conversation, on 16 February 2019: 'Lui a me faceva dei provini con chitarra e voce e basta, poi andavo a casa, ci lavoravo e quindi cercavo di fargli capire, perché non potevo suonare tutte le parti insieme. Dicevo 'senti la parte di chitarra, immagina che sotto c'è questo basso qua e glielo suonavo al piano, poi io faccio queste armonie, poi andiamo di là...'. Era un'operazione fatta più nell'immaginazione. Qual è il problema, se di problema si può parlare... il problema di fare i demo con il computer e tutto il resto è che poi uno si ossessiona, dice 'eh, però... qui veniva così, non senti la naturalezza di questa cosa qua, recuperiamo questo qui, quella cosa là'.

opening of the song *Princesa*,¹⁵ in which De André's voice is immersed within street noises:

When I arrived, the beginning of the album [the first verse of *Princesa*] had already been done in the studio, but it didn't sound real. So, when I started mixing the piece, I said 'Fabrizio, I don't think this thing works. Since we're talking about *viados*, let's go and record it on the street to make it as realistic as possible'. Fabrizio and Piero really liked this idea and so we hired a cinema microphone expert and one night, when we had finished work, we went to Viale Papiniano, which is a very busy avenue just behind the studio. Me, Fabrizio, Piero and this operator went and recorded the verse. Then some *viados* were supposed to come into the studio and complete the scene with their voices. But, because he had to shout to be heard above the noise of the street, the recording didn't come out very well and so in the end we decided to recreate the situation in the studio, by adding the noises of cars to the recording.¹⁶

Iafelice refers to the comprehensibility of the sung words, more specifically to the diction, which had flaws due to being recorded on the street. The importance of effectively rendering the sung word is an essential issue which also Camagna mentions: 'Understanding the words was fundamental, and the text had to be perfectly comprehensible from the beginning to the end. It was certainly one of the goals that always had to be pursued'.¹⁷ This is a crucial point in De André's production in general and it was already a distinctive feature of his first recordings. Gian Piero Reverberi, while describing his work with De André in the 1960s, stated that 'a good mixing was the one that allowed all of the words to be clearly understood without having to relinquish the orchestral colours, optimising the sound levels'.¹⁸

This approach continued to be valid for a period of over thirty years since, despite the changing ways of working and the revolution of new technological possibilities, the basic aims regarding the reception of the sung word remained substantially unchanged over the years. For the recording of *Princesa*, too, along with the attempt to obtain a clean performance, while taking pronunciation, diction and the scanning of words into account, it was indispensable to choose the most suitable means of recording to ensure that the singing voice would remain clear. Camagna and Iafelice explain that the mixing operations were usually accompanied by a targeted listening in order to conduct an in-depth checking of the tracks according to this criterion of comprehensibility, as well as by adjusting the volume levels so as to make some of the words more audible. It was also necessary to adopt a standardised approach to the mixing, in which the voice was always perfectly distinct and comprehensible (while always maintaining a balance with the sound environment).

The recording of a single vocal line could even go on for months, at the same time as the work on the other tracks on the album. Camagna explains: 'The voices were recorded many times, even with gaps of weeks or months. [...] We recorded, then we proceeded with the editing, and then maybe a single bar was recorded another time, even many days later, until we were completely satisfied'.¹⁹ Also Piero Milesi points out that the in-depth work on the voice was intended to perfect the singing more and more, with attention paid to every detail, such as 'a small inflection, a breath, a ripple' (Bertoncelli 2012: 165).²⁰ This involved the need to position the microphones and regulate their relative volume levels very precisely, so that

15 Lyrics and music by F. De André and I. Fossati, in *Anime salve* (1996).

16 Paolo Iafelice, telephone conversation, 15 February 2019: 'Quando arrivai io, l'inizio del disco [prima strofa di *Princesa*] era stato già fatto in studio, ma non era reale. Quindi, quando iniziai a missare il pezzo dissi 'Fabrizio secondo me questa cosa non funziona, parlando di viados andiamo a registrarla in strada per renderla il più possibile verosimile'. A Fabrizio e anche a Piero piacque moltissimo questa idea e quindi affittammo un microfonista del cinema e una notte, finito di lavorare, andammo in viale Papiniano, un viale molto trafficato proprio dietro lo studio. Andammo io, Fabrizio, Piero e questo microfonista e registrammo la strofa. Poi sarebbero venuti i viados in studio e avrebbero completato la scena con le loro voci. Però, siccome lui doveva urlare per via dei rumori della strada, non venne benissimo e per questo alla fine decidemmo di ricreare la situazione in studio, applicando i rumori delle macchine alla registrazione'.

17 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'La comprensione delle parole era fondamentale, il testo doveva essere perfettamente percepibile dall'inizio alla fine, era sicuramente uno degli obiettivi da perseguire sempre'.

18 Gian Piero Reverberi, e-mail dated 25 May 2018. 'un buon missaggio era quello che permetteva la percezione di tutte le parole senza dover rinunciare ai colori orchestrali ottimizzando i piani sonori'.

19 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'Le voci venivano registrate tantissime volte, anche a distanza di settimane o mesi. [...] Si registrava, poi si andava avanti col montaggio, poi si registrava un'altra volta magari una sola battuta anche diversi giorni dopo, finché non si era completamente soddisfatti'.

20 Original in Italian: 'una piccola inflessione, un respiro, un'increspatura'.

all the tracks had a sound that was as homogeneous as possible, even if they were recorded at different moments separated by a long time. For this reason, an interminable number of recordings were made, which for obvious reasons of space could not all be preserved. In the recording of *Le nuvole* (1990), for example, out of the twenty-four channels available (as many as forty-eight for some tracks, where two tuned recording devices were used), only a few channels were dedicated to the voice, generally five at most. But these three, four or five final tracks, on the basis of which the definitive one was 'constructed', were themselves the result of assembling the fragments of previous recordings, gradually obtained by selecting each word, and sometimes even each separate syllable of the words.

Editing a song by combining several different recordings is still a routine practice in the music business, which has been carried out for many years. It is however interesting to note that in De André's albums many recordings were made with rather long intervals of time between them, in order to improve the piece not so much on a technical level, as much as from the point of view of its interpretation:

Expressiveness was also very important, and with Fabrizio intonation was never a big problem. He was very talented, and he sang very well. [...] But over the years you become more and more of a maniac, and he said, 'I would like it to be interpreted in another way' and he maybe even redid it hundreds of times, until there was a version that satisfied him.²¹

De André's close attention to expressiveness and interpretation is a fact that is confirmed by several other sources. For example, several people told me an anecdote relating to Piero Milesi in almost exactly the same way, which clearly shows that it had particularly struck him. It concerns a passage of *Disamistade*,²² in which the recording of the word 'sangue' (blood) had been recorded over and over again because De André was never completely satisfied with the effect obtained. This word occurs twice in the song: in line 9, 'due famiglie disarmate di sangue', and then in line 19, 'uno scoppio di sangue'; the first of these lines is characterised by the repetition of the two similar sounds 'disa' / 'di sa', the second by the alliteration of the fricative [s]. In both cases (the first of which is shown in Figure 1), the word corresponds to a downward inflection in the melody, leading down to the lowest note in the whole song:



Figure 1. *Disamistade*

This descent of the note also corresponds to a reduction in volume that Piero Milesi represented in a graph (Figure 2) that was published on the website Via del campo.it²³

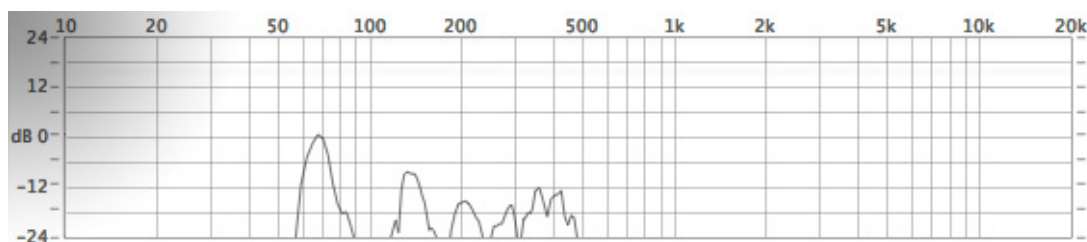


Figure 2. The last syllable of the word 'sangue'

21 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'Contava molto anche l'espressività, l'intonazione con Fabrizio non è mai stata un grosso problema. Lui era molto bravo, cantava molto bene. [...] Però con gli anni diventi sempre più maniaco, diceva 'mi piacerebbe che fosse interpretata in un altro modo' e la rifaceva magari anche centinaia di volte, fino a che non c'era una versione che lo soddisfacesse'.

22 Lyrics and music by F. De André and I. Fossati, in *Anime salve* (1996).

23 http://www.viadelcampo.com/html/anime_salve2.html, last access last access December 28th, 2023.

The song *Disamistade* is about a feud between two families, involving an interminable escalation of increasingly grave acts of mutual violence, interspersed with moments of waiting between one episode and the next. The word ‘sangue’ seems to express a sense of latent tension deriving from the intervals of waiting and the acts of revenge, thanks to the sliding effect created by the combination of the pitch interval and the *diminuendo*, and for this reason it probably required a greater effort of vocal interpretation.

So, the need to record the same passages many times was almost always motivated either by practical or by expressive considerations. In addition to the careful attempt to attain certain expressive effects, typical cases concerned the change of a word within the poetic text during the recording sessions. The attention to the clarity of the songs and the slow maturation of the interpretation, were both accompanied by adjustments to the poetic text, which could involve the completion of some verses, or various other changes which, in many cases may have been suggested by the purely sonic rendering of the words themselves.

Some documents in the De André Archive can give one an idea of this kind of work, which was mainly carried out at the moment of recording. Some interventions of this type can be detected in the worksheets for the song *La domenica delle salme*.²⁴ Sheet 130H of folder IV/29 (Figure 3) reveals that several modifications were made to the first seven lines of the songs just before it was recorded: ‘nella’ was replaced by ‘dalla’ in the third line; ‘individuarlo’, in the fifth line, was replaced with the more musical and fluid ‘seguirlo’, which reduced the number of syllables of this line from eleven to nine; and a little further down ‘appesa’ (hanging) becomes ‘accesa’ (illuminated), which resonates with the concept of the ‘lampadina’ (lightbulb) in the next line. The three words with different meanings but similar sounds – *appesa* / *accesa* / *arresa* – written in the upper right-hand corner of the sheet, seem to indicate that a choice was being made that was based on the sound component of the words. These three words are characterised by their assonance and rhyme and are differentiated only by the double consonant: ac-cé-sa / ap-pé-sa / ar-ré-sa. From the semantic point of view, however, they refer to completely different thematic areas.

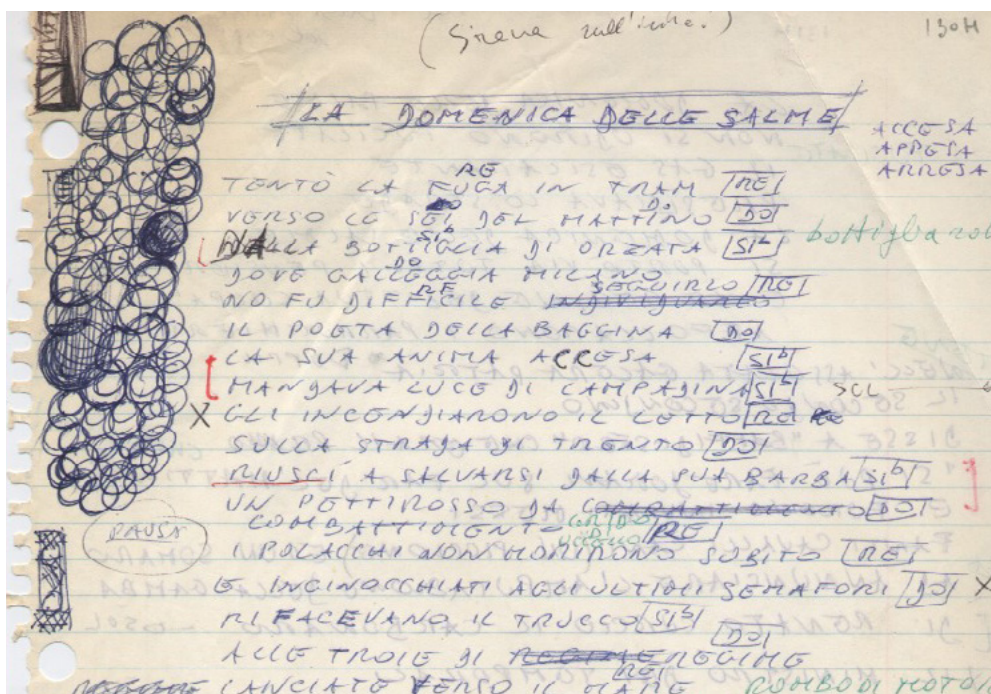


Figure 3. Worksheets for the song *La domenica delle salme* (AFDA, IV/29: c. 130H). The document shows that several modifications were made to the first seven lines of the songs just before the song was recorded.

²⁴ Lyrics and music by F. De André and M. Pagani, in *Le nuvole* (1990).

Sheet 57H of folder IV/29 (Figure 4), instead, represents a significant advance in recording practices, as is shown by the small numbers corresponding to each of the lines, which indicate the channels on which the voice was recorded. The final verse is written with another pen, evidently added at a later date. In fact, some other documents inside the same folder confirm that it was completed during the recording sessions. This is a useful example to show how in many cases the work of writing continued during the production phase.

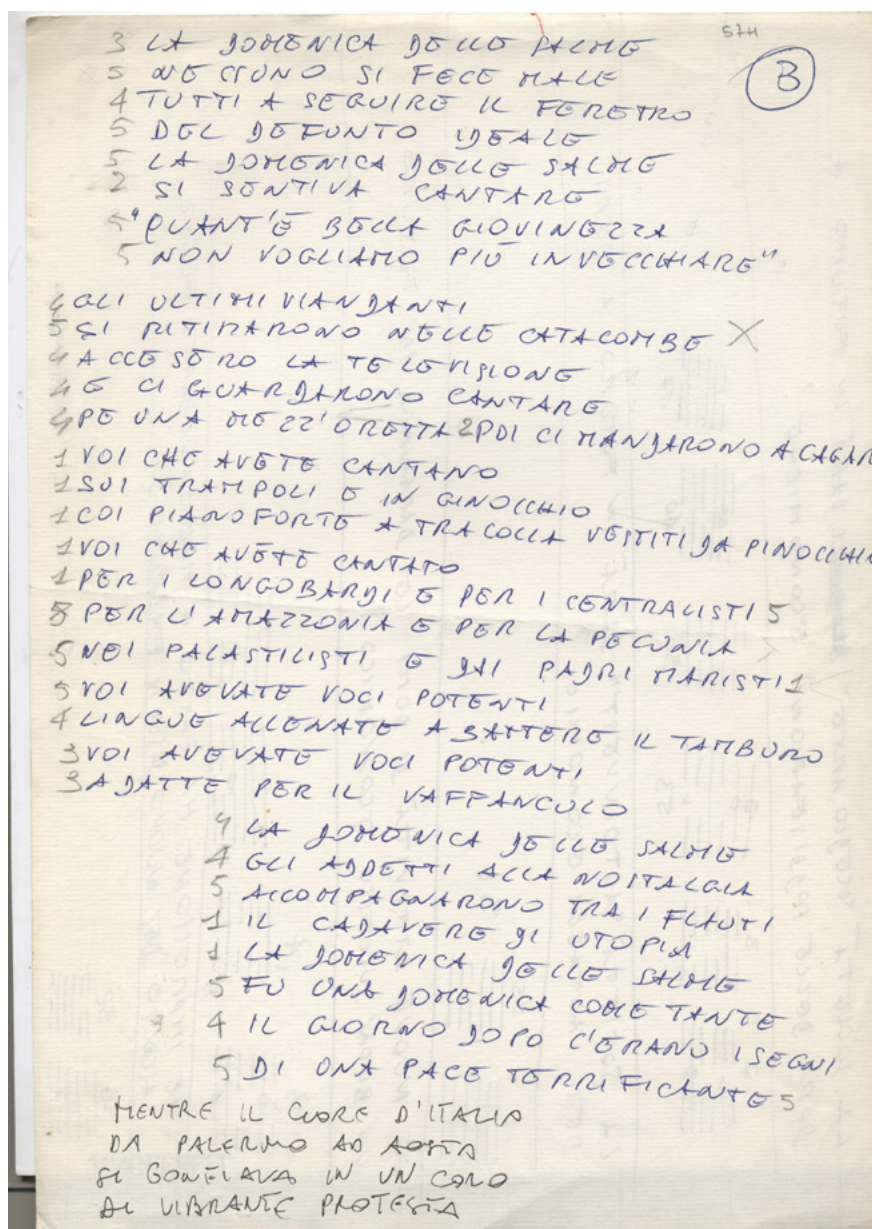


Figure 4. Worksheets for the song *La domenica delle salme* (AFDA, IV/29: c. 57H). The small numbers corresponding to each of the lines indicate the channels on which the voice was recorded.

The documents that refer to the songs of *Anime salve* (1996) indicate a similar tendency to carry out further modifications to the poetic texts throughout the process of recording. In the folder IV/165, the document E/26 (Figure 5), regards the recording of the song *Disamistade*. It shows some corrections made to the lyrics during the recording session. These include changing the lines '*e la parte che manca / la integra l'autorità*' into '*e alla parte che manca / si dedica l'autorità*' and replacing the word '*aggrega*' (joins/aggregates) with '*oppone*' (opposes), which has almost the opposite meaning. Once again it is clear that the selection of the words to be sung

was dictated by phonetic as well as semantic criteria, and that the final solution represented a delicate balance between several different but complementary factors.

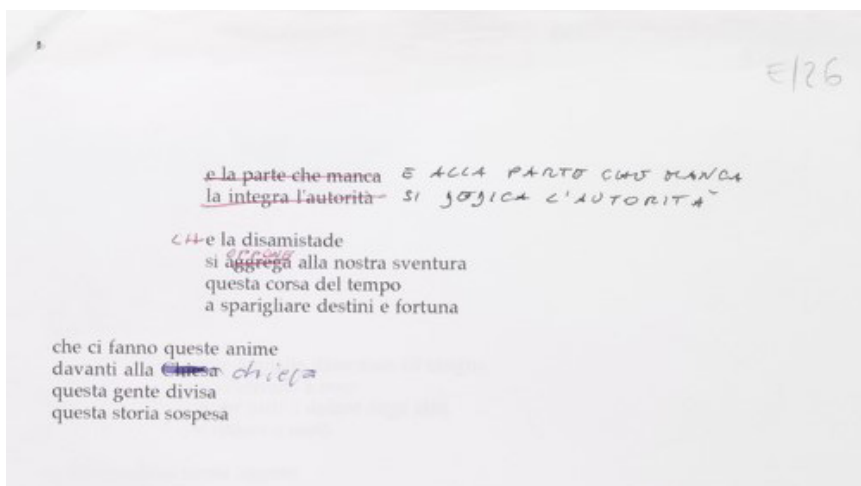


Figure 5. Worksheets for the song *Disamistade* (AFDA IV/165: c.E26). The document shows some corrections made to the lyrics during the recording session.

The examples I have given clearly show how adjustments to the text continued to be made even in the recording studio, being integrated with considerations regarding the sound and the performance in a continuous interchange of stimuli and ideas. In this context, the recording of the voice was practically a test bed. The fact that the more strictly musical part of the song was progressively taking shape also facilitated the resolution of the last problematic issues and uncertainties, especially the final decisions regarding the interpretation and adjustments to the text. For this reason, the creative process should thus not be evaluated as a succession of independent and detached phases. As Timothy Warner (2009) claims, it is necessary to have a broad overview of the creative process, in order to establish a relationship between the main stages of which it consists. In his genetic model of creativity, he identifies the four phases of 'conception', 'production', 'perception' and 'contextualization' which should be considered not so much as the separated stages of a linear process, but rather as belonging to a complex system that admits reciprocal exchanges and influences: «Crucially, these four are not separate elements in a linear production process but rather as activities that occur concurrently, each informing, and often bringing about, modifications in the others» (Warner 2009: 142). This means, for example, that what is elaborated in the pre-production phase is based on a prediction of the next two stages, namely the production and the reception of the work in relation to the contemporaneous and very recent repertoires. Thus, production can influence the choices made during the writing phase, suggesting further changes, since the phases defined by Warner are themselves liable to continuous alteration and remodulation. According to this system the analysis of every single phase is therefore incomplete unless it is adequately contextualised in the overall creative system.

The thorough work on the voice also included a close attention to timbre. Camagna explains that, in the specific case of *Le nuvole*, this requirement in this sense was quite easily satisfied, thanks to a 'German valve microphone made by a company called Neumann. The model was the U67, dating to the 1950s: an old microphone that he liked very much and that created a very warm timbre'.²⁵ Dori Ghezzi also confirms that her husband particularly appreciated the Neumann, which had already been used for his previous albums, because it rendered his specific vocal timbre so faithfully: 'it was an old microphone to which he was

25 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'un microfono a valvole tedesco di un'azienda che si chiama Neumann, il modello era l'U67, un modello degli anni Cinquanta, un microfono vecchio che a lui piaceva molto e che creava un timbro molto caldo'.

very attached because it reproduced really well the dark timbre of his voice'.²⁶ The merits of this microphone include the fact that it enhances the lowest pitches, which satisfied a precise request by De André himself. Camagna explains that the Neumann U67, even when he sang very close to it, enhanced the peculiar timbre of his voice without ruining its sound, unlike many other microphones: 'Instead, that microphone managed to maintain a nice bright sound even when you were very close, greatly amplifying the low tones at the same time. This is called the proximity effect'.²⁷

This microphone was fairly common, but, in addition to its indispensable function of ensuring that the words sung were comprehensible, it allowed De André to achieve some specific personal objectives: above all the emphasis of the lowest tones, which were a characteristic trait of his timbre. Camagna also focuses on another issue: the intentional exploitation of the proximity effect, which was motivated (in addition to the previously mentioned timbral needs) by De André's tendency to 'croon' directly into the microphone. During the International Seminars of Ethnomusicology (Seminari Internazionali di Etnomusicologia) 2019 organised by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini,²⁸ the sound engineer Pasquale Minieri, who had attended some recording sessions for the album *Rimini* (1978), mentioned that closeness to the microphone was a characteristic feature of De André's singing; a habit dictated by a need to communicate directly, and by the desire to sing 'into the ear' of his listeners. Minieri's testimony is confirmed by Dori Ghezzi, who added that, over the years, De André alternated this propensity with other expressive modalities, although it remained a very characteristic element. In his description of the peculiarities of the proximity effect, Albin Zak highlighted how the alteration of the voice that it produces has some precise expressive implications: «It is a kind of distortion, and it creates a muffled boominess that requires filtering. On the other hand, with controlled use it can be an expressive device, adding, for example, a warm intimacy to a vocal performance» (Zak III 2001: 110-111). This dimension of intimacy described by Zak encourages us to place De André's work in a purely discographic perspective, not necessarily connected to the revival of a live performance (Turino 2008).

As regards the effects that were applied to De André's voice, both of the above-mentioned sound engineers explained how the only intervention made was aimed at further defining the timbre and the clarity of the sung text. Camagna reports that in addition to the reverb effect, essential for creating a natural-sounding setting, compression was also applied: 'The compressor is an absolutely standard intervention that compresses the waveform, in order to crush the voice. It makes it more understandable and even a little bigger, and so it helped Fabrizio to obtain those bass notes because it pulls up the frequencies that you can hear less and lowers those that would otherwise be heard more'.²⁹ Thanks to the compression of the waveforms it was therefore possible to standardise the singing line, enhancing its clarity and favouring a certain colour.

Considering this situation, which reveals the great importance that was given to the effective rendering of the singing, it is certainly no coincidence that, during the production of *Anime salve*, a problem concerning the way De André's voice was to be rendered led to a lot of tension with Camagna, who quit his job as a consequence. This episode was the proverbial last straw that finally upset a situation that, for various reasons, was already very tense and disharmonious, leading to a further reorganisation of the working group. Paolo Iafelice took his place, continuing with his recordings and subsequently also dealing with the mixing. The problem of the voice was resolved by changing the microphone:

26 Telephone conversation with Dori Ghezzi (31 July 2019): 'era un microfono vecchio, a cui lui era molto legato perché rendeva bene il suo timbro scuro della voce'.

27 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'Invece quel microfono riusciva a mantenere un bel suono brillante anche stando molto vicino, amplificando allo stesso tempo molto i bassi. Si chiama effetto prossimità'.

28 The seminar *Ethnography of recording studios*, supervised by Serena Facci and Giovanni Giuriati, was held at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice from 24 to 26 January 2019.

29 Maurizio Camagna, unpublished interview (Milan, 6 October 2018): 'Il compressore è un intervento assolutamente standard che comprime proprio la forma d'onda, in modo da schiacciare la voce. La rende più comprensibile e anche un po' più grossa, quindi aiutava nel caso di Fabrizio nell'avere queste basse perché tira su le frequenze che si sentono meno e abbassa quelle che si sentirebbero di più'.

We opted for the U47, also by Neumann, which was much cleaner. The problem is that, because of that deep low zone that he liked so much, it was unfortunately worse, because the U47 has a slightly more pronounced proximity effect and he, Dori, and all of the entourage liked this very much. However, it was a bit distorted, but they didn't let me clean it. Fabrizio didn't need it, because his voice was already deep in itself, but he couldn't be persuaded because he said 'this voice has always been my strength, my trademark'.³⁰

The idea of the vocal timbre thus once again appears to be the real driving force of De André's sound, or the first factor among 'a set of indicators that allow for its identification' (Delalande 2010: 161). It is a trademark sound which was consciously and deliberately emphasised already in the very first recordings and which is one of the few constants of De André's highly heterogeneous artistic production. It also becomes clear how closely intertwined the work on the voice is with the overall work on the song, for example with the progressive refinement of the text and its vocal interpretation. Also, for this reason, perfecting a vocal line did not simply consist of the application of technical skill, but required a predisposition towards understanding the underlying needs of the whole artistic project. The interviews that I carried out reveal the dimension of a shared task, a primary condition that led those involved to participate in the decisions of the others by means of proposals, stimuli, opinions, and in some cases disagreements. This is a type of creativity that, while being directed by an individual (or individuals), thrives and feeds on the contribution of other people. In this delicate balance, one very important thing – which according to the interviewees was the most important thing – was the harmonious interplay of the team and the existence of a tranquil environment of mutual trust. The lack of a completely harmonious situation during a phase of the production of *Anime salve*, due to a series of eventualities, created problems, also in terms of creativity, which led the sound engineer to abandon the project halfway through. On the other hand, a good working atmosphere could favour creative solutions of various types, as suggested by Paolo Iafelice:

Fabrizio heard very well, even though he sometimes didn't know how to specify what he had understood in technical terms, but he immediately identified something if it wasn't going well. It must be added that he really liked to be surprised, and he was very open to new things and suggestions, as long as they were relevant. In fact, he never held me back. (Iafelice in Fondazione De André 2015: 180).³¹

The situation I have outlined reinforces the concept of work in the recording studio as a social activity (Frith-Zagorski-Thomas 2012) or, as Louise Meintjes claims, 'a microcosm of the society within which it exists' (Meintjes 2003: 9). This scenario, with De André immersed in the reciprocal mechanisms of record production, challenges the image of the lone songwriter/poet and encourages us to go beyond the image of an authorial figure, which is strongly influenced by myths and preconceptions that have no critical support (Boden 2004; Negus 2011); in this context, we have seen how projects took shape through working with a group in which De André (assisted by others) had the role of coordinator and depositary of an artistic project. Moreover, the case I have presented demonstrates the effectiveness of a type of ethnography which is based on the collection of interviews for the purpose of historical reconstruction and combined with a rigorous analysis of written sources. For example, it has highlighted how the work on sound was intertwined with the improvement of the poetic text and the performance. Finally, this approach has proved helpful for a more conscious analysis of working contexts involving several individuals.

30 Paolo Iafelice, telephone conversation, 15 February 2019: 'Passammo all'U47, sempre Neumann, che era molto più asciutto. Il problema è che, per via di quella zona bassa profonda che a lui piaceva molto, fu purtroppo peggio, perché l'U47 ha un effetto prossimità un pochino più pronunciato e questa cosa a lui, a Dori, a tutto l'entourage piacque molto... però era un po' falsata, ma non me la fecero pulire. Fabrizio non ne aveva bisogno, perché aveva una voce profonda già di suo, ma non ne volle sapere perché diceva 'questa voce qua è da sempre la mia forza, il mio segno di fabbrica'.

31 Original in Italian: 'Fabrizio ci sentiva molto bene, anche se magari a volte non sapeva circoscrivere in modo tecnico ciò che aveva colto, ma identificava subito se qualcosa non andava. A questo va aggiunto che gli piaceva molto essere sorpreso, era molto aperto a novità e suggerimenti, sempre che fossero pertinenti. Infatti non mi ha mai frenato'.

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This essay could not have been written without the collaboration and the first-hand accounts of several people. I would particularly like to thank Maurizio Camagna and Paolo Iafelice for helping me to understand the working methods and atmosphere that were typical of the recording studio. Special thanks also go to Dori Ghezzi and the Fondazione De André for support, useful discussions and valuable information, as well as for their authorisation to publish the documents I have quoted.

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