

# Giovanni Vicari

GODFATHER of the STRINGS Vol.1

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Produced by David Grisman

Executive Producer - Craig Miller

Mastered by Neville Pearsall. photos courtesy Nino Vicari

Design Layout - Dave "FM" Moretti

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# Giovanni Vicari

GODFATHER of the STRINGS Vol.1



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Classic Recordings featuring Mandolin, Guitar & Tenor Banjo

## GODFATHER of the STRINGS



My father, Giovanni Vicari, was born in Catania Sicily on May 12, 1905, with music in his soul. He was a prodigy and came from a musical family. His mother, Carmela, played guitar and his older brother, Salvatore, played the mandolin and guitar. One day Carmela heard a mandolin melody from Salvatore's bedroom. To her amazement, she found three-year-old Giovanni sitting on his brother's bed, legs crossed, playing his mandolin. It was 1908 and the stage was set for the beginning of a diversified musical life and career.

Giovanni was eight or nine when he was chosen to play on a float in Catania Harbor to welcome Crown Prince Umberto, who offered the boy a musical education, subsidized by the royal family. His formal musical training, in true classical tradition, was as a violin student. He continued to study his favorite instruments as well — the mandolin, banjo and guitar.

At age 15 he performed as first violinist in Pietro Mascagni's opera, *Iris*, at the Teatro Massimo Bellini in Catania. The visiting conductor,

Mascagni himself, asked the orchestra leader, "What is that child doing in the orchestra?" Giovanni was then asked to play a difficult violin solo. Mascagni silently applauded the magnificence of his playing and told Giovanni to continue with the orchestra. By 1925, Vicari had mastered violin, mandolin and guitar. After hearing tenor banjo on Paul Whiteman recordings, he had a banjo built in Catania!

Vicari first came to the United States in 1925. He lived in New York, taught advanced pupils, performed on major radio networks and recorded dozens of original and standard compositions for Columbia, RCA Victor and Harmonia Records from 1928 thru the 1970's. After an inspirational visit to Cuba, he made latin style records for several labels using his Spanish name, Juan Vicari. The Argentinians thought his style of the tango was authentic, dubbing him "the Argentinian."



Few people knew that Giovanni Vicari was also an accomplished artist. He painted a portrait of Toscanini while in his orchestra. Toscanini told Giovanni that if he liked it, he would sign it, if not,



he wouldn't. Toscanini signed it. Dad appeared in Othello and Don Giovanni on the Metropolitan Opera stage, playing guitar and mandolin. He was a guest soloist with the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, and the Symphony of the Air conducted by the eminent Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos.

In 1932, Vicari's first Broadway show was Firebird, then Porgy and Bess in 1935 where he played banjo on "Plenty of Nothing." He continued working in Broadway musicals like Gentlemen Prefer

Blondes with Carol Channing. He played banjo in Hello Dolly with Pearl Bailey and Ginger Rogers, Woman of the Year with Lauren Bacall and all the Rodgers and Hammerstein shows. His favorite was Sound of Music. When Richard Rodgers came to town and recognized Vicari he asked "John, you have your mandolin?", Giovanni replied, "No mandolin part in this show." Rodgers immediately added "Edelweiss" featuring mandolin. He also famously appeared in The Godfather, playing the mandolin in the classic wedding scene.

John Monaco, noted musical producer, contractor and guitarist, knew my dad for years and referred to him as "the Professor." He observed



that "Giovanni could play on a dime, compose on the spot or improvise. What amazes me most is that man's energy never stopped. He just kept going. He was a unique breed of man, saying, 'Forget about yesterday, we have to prove ourselves today.'"

Giovanni Vicari was called the "Paganini of the Plectrum" by the New York Times and "Mandolinist Extraordinaire" by Leonard Bernstein. One of his favorite refrains was

"Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life". While playing in Zorba the Greek with Anthony Quinn at Lincoln Center, the entire cast made him a surprise 80th birthday party. Dad died later that year. I remember him saying, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd live it the very same way. For what greater joy is there than to live in a world filled with beautiful music."

— Nino Vicari, 2025



## PRODUCER'S NOTES

I first became aware of Giovanni Vicari, in a movie theater, watching Francis Ford Copolla's cinematic classic, *The Godfather*, in the spring of 1972. During the celebrated wedding scene, my eyes and ears were naturally focused on the mandolin player in that ensemble, whom I later would discover was Vicari himself!

Now, more than half a century later, and through the inspired efforts of Giovanni's son, Nino, I've been given the extreme pleasure and honor of being the curator and custodian of the recorded legacy of this amazing musician and composer. Vicari performed and recorded thousands of pieces for nearly six decades and this first ever digital collection, is a wide-ranging sampler of that work. These tracks are masterpieces of Italian string virtuosity on mandolin, tenor banjo and guitar. It's with great pride that Acoustic Disc is introducing this music to discerning listeners in the 21st century. Enjoy!



— David “Dawg” Grisman



## PROGRAM

- 1 - Love Theme from the *Godfather* (mandolin) - Home recording (1970s)
- 2 - Cristina\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2055
- 3 - Stella Lucente\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2052
- 4 - Argentina\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Mandolinata - Italdisc 22 A (1962)
- 5 - Brunetta\* *mazurka* (tenor banjo) — Columbia 14372-F (1928)
- 6 - Mio Dolce Sogno\* *valzer* (mandolin) — Columbia (1930)
- 7 - Saltarello Romano (guitar) — La Voce del Padrone 25-7068-A (1954)
- 8 - Sognando di Te\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2054
- 9 - La Boheme *valzer* (mandolin) — Nightingale JC-1111 (early 1950s)
- 10 - Occhi di Bambola\* *mazurka* (tenor banjo) — Columbia 14407-F (1928)
- 11 - Piccolo Capricciosa\* *polka* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2056
- 12 - Rose D'Italia\* *mazurka* (guitar) — Columbia 147191-F (1931)
- 13 - Dolce Sicilia\* *mazurka* (tenor banjo) — Columbia 14701-F (1929)
- 14 - Speranza Perdute *valzer* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2057
- 15 - Tarantella La Palermitana\* (mandolin) — Dana International DIL 8012B (1954)
- 16 - Ricordi Cari\* *mazurka* (tenor banjo) — Columbia 14969-F (Milano - 1938)
- 17 - Il Portavoce *valzer* (mandolin) — Nightingale JC-1037
- 18 - Gina\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Mandolinata - Italdisc 22 A (1962)
- 19 - Buon Viaggio\* *polka* (guitar) — Columbia 14719-F (1931)
- 20 - Pioggia di Fiori\* *mazurka* (mandolin) — Harmonia H-2100 (1947)
- 21 - Migliavacca *valzer* (mandolin or guitar) — Harmonia H-2057
- 22 - Torna a Surriento *Neapolitan song* (mandolin, guitar) — Home recording (1970s)  
\*composed by Giovanni Vicari