

Based in a neighbourhood with a long history of autonomy and activism, DJ Balli's Sonic Belligeranza record store sits at the epicentre of the city's experimental music scene

By Jamila Squire & Seth Wheeler

Halfway down Via Mascarella, a busy street curving away from Bologna's university district, you'll find Sonic Belligeranza record shop and cultural centre. Directly opposite the art and politics bookstore Modo and near the popular weekend hangouts of Modo bar and L'Ortica, Sonic Belligeranza is a small, albeit significant institution through which Bologna's experimental music cultures operate and meet.

Since the late 1970s, the street has held a symbolic and practical role in the coordination of Bologna's countercultures. Infamously, it was the site of the murder of Francesco Lorusso – a student shot dead by the Carabinieri in March 1977 – an event that led to a citywide insurrection seen as the culmination of years of militant activity emerging from the heterodox social movement known as Autonomia.

The events of 1977 cast a long shadow over the city's cultural memory, and though the movement Lorusso belonged to would largely retreat during the 80s – an outcome of state repression, escalating violence, despair and heroin addiction – the creativity that surrounded that moment continued nonetheless.

This is in no small part due to the network of free spaces provided by Bologna's radical social centres (many of which are now licensed by the council) emerging in the late 60s: large, squatted buildings that provided Bologna's youth with the space to experiment with new ways of living away from the imposition of waged work and rent. As such, a vibrant culture of self-organised gigs, film screenings, exhibitions, poetry and theatre performances has continued to flourish in the city, albeit in diminishing circumstances.

A significant motor behind this activity has been Bologna's student body. Drawn by the city's reputation as a dynamic engine of political/cultural innovation, every year 10,000 young students enroll. Those belonging to the DAMS (the Department of Art, Music and Spectacle established by Umberto Eco) continue to make significant contributions.

While punk revitalised Bologna's political and squatting scenes during the 80s, the early 90s ushered in an explosion of dance music and electronic experimentation. During this decade Bologna became an important international meeting point for the hybridisation of radical politics with sound system culture. In the aftermath of Britain's



Riccardo Balli with a cardboard cutout of himself as part of the Balli-Marraffa-Balli trio

Criminal Justice Act (1994), the city became a refuge for many of England's dissenting sound systems, with Spiral Tribe, among others, finding a temporary home here.

Sonic Belligeranza opened its doors in the early 2000s, the brainchild of Riccardo Balli (aka DJ Balli), author, noise artist, polymath and raconteur. Balli cut his teeth in the social centre scene of the late 90s before a brief stay in London introduced him to breakcore, a moment that, he says, "significantly changed the course of my life".

Ostensibly operating as a record shop specialising in experimental genres, Sonic Belligeranza is also a label for Balli's various provocations, ranging from intense speedcore (350 bpm), to forays into the world of gabber, which he says holds striking similarities to Italian Futurism; from the extremities of death-rap to more recently an 8-bit free jazz trio composed of Balli armed with a Gameboy, a Balli cardboard cutout, and the iron lungs of saxophonist Edoardo Marraffa.

Over the last two decades, it has also grown into a small collective built around Balli: musician, radio journalist and record producer Ossydia Speri; techno/industrial/dark electro artist and Frenesia Records founder Filippo Mulazzani aka Zumal; and Samuele Maoloni aka AcidZab.

Sonic Belligeranza constantly hums with activity, visited by those seeking information on Bologna's various undergrounds or just to hang out. On a recent trip, we met a gaggle of Israeli war resisters keen to buy a farm on the outskirts of the city. "What food will you grow?" we asked naively. "Food?" they replied. "Don't be so fucking ridiculous, we are going to grow noise!"

Sonic Belligeranza originally moved to Via Mascarella in 2021 from Via Pratello – also the home of Bologna's infamous Radio Alice. Arguably the world's smallest record shop and gallery space, Balli's wardrobe-like "megastore" was forced to close its doors in 2024 after a protracted spell of "noise terror". Every day at aperitivo hour, the road would be blasted by noise artist Maurizio Bianchi's industrial offerings, forcing the owners of several gentrifying restaurants to board up with cardboard in an attempt to stifle the sound. In typical Balli style, he and his comrades responded by boarding up their windows in return, plastering them with the slogan "noise is the music of the working class". After a €5000 fine, Sonic Belligeranza opened a larger shop across the street that same year – we aren't sure how: indeed, we prefer not to ask, as such a turn of events only illustrates the DIY spirit that captures Bologna's cultural scene.

On a June visit, we are fortunate enough to attend several DJ Balli gigs, all free, as the youth of Autonomia would have insisted: a scrap DJ set utilising misprints and offcuts of vinyl at Vinilificio record press; the Balli-Marraffa-Balli trio at the Albani market in the working class district Bolognina; and a launch night for a mutant goth Italo disco 12" that quickly evolved into a breakcore/gabber set at Frida gelateria. "In Italy," Balli concludes, "Italo disco still has a poor reputation, seen as a poor subgenre despite its growth in popularity among international audiences. Mutant goth Italo is the sound clash resulting from the most mushy Italo disco and the most depressive darkwave. It's a beautiful mutation." ● sonicbelligeranza.com