



## For the Love of Sicily

**Allison Scola** '94, '95 (T5) was backpacking through Europe a year after graduation when her brother suggested she meet up with a second cousin who lived in Rome. She persuaded a stranger who spoke Italian to call the cousin, a pastry chef in his 70s, and arrange a get-together.

"He brought me all this cannoli, which I can completely relate to, and that was it," she says. "The floodgates were open. I was in love with Italy."

The musician, songwriter, singer, and travel guide has maintained a connection to the country since—the round-about result of that cousin's old-fashioned customs.

Scola had returned to Rome several months after her first trip to learn Italian, hoping her cousin would help her find a job. He had other plans for her, however. "He said, 'Why are you here?'" she recalls. "You should go home. You should get married."

Disheartened, Scola decided she'd return home to launch a career in advertising. But her cousin told her she should first go to Sicily to meet his two brothers. Knowing only some 150 words in Italian, she headed to Palermo. "I didn't even know what these guys looked like, but as soon as I got off the train and onto the platform, I recognized them," she says. "I saw my grandmother's arms and my uncle's cheekbones and immediately knew they were family."

That three-week stay, despite the language barrier, changed the course of her life.


Almost two decades later, after years of working in advertising, the former music and theater arts major is, among other things,

a performing artist creating eclectic acoustic songs heavily influenced by Sicilian folk culture.

Living in New York City, she and her husband, guitarist Joe Ravo, also make up the music ensemble Villa Palagonia, named after the Sicilian town near where Scola's paternal grandmother grew up. Blending American pop with traditional Sicilian and Italian folk, they recently recorded *Rhythms & Roots*, their first album.

Scola has also launched a boutique travel organization, Experience Sicily, through which she leads small-group tours of the island that last up to 15 days. This June, she'll lead "Soulful and Sunny Sicily," combining theater, swimming in the Mediterranean, a cooking class, and a vineyard tour. Next year, among the tours she'll lead is "Music and Revelry in Sicily." She's exhibited at the Philadelphia Travel & Adventure Show, drumming up business for her tours and playing four 15-minute concerts with her husband.

"She's absolutely captivating because she dances so well, she sings so well, and she plays the tamburello—what we'd call a tambourine—the traditional way, which is hard to do," says Barbara Shiller, board president of the folk music organization CT Folk in New Haven, Connecticut. Shiller has known Scola for years and accompanied her on a trip to Sicily last fall. "Most performers, certainly here in America, are not playing that kind of music, but [her] interpretation just makes it so accessible."

"I have this vision," Scola explains. "Music is my love, and it's in my blood, and it's another avenue to introduce people to Southern Italy." 

—ROBIN L. FLANIGAN

**ROOTS AND MUSIC:**  
Scola blends Sicilian and Italian folk, on traditional instruments, with American pop.