THE FACTS

CIDC-FM (Z103.5 FM, Toronto) aired a parody song entitled “12 Days of a Guido Christmas” on December 23, 2010 at approximately 8:00 pm. (It was, of course, inspired by the well-known carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas”.) The words of the parody song were as follows:

Hey, Joe Balls, Merry Christmas!
Amanouch?, I heard you saw Janoux?
Yeah, my paesan, let me tell ya what he got me this year.

On the first day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,
A ride in his IROC-Z. (I love that car)

On the second day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,
Two guinea tees (I don’t even fit in this)(?)
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the third day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,
All tree [sic] Godfaddas [sic] (love that bread, though)
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.
On the fourth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me (you’re gonna like this)

Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the fifth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,

Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z (Wait, there’s more!).

On the sixth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,

Six Sergio Tacchinis (Yes!),
Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the seventh day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,

Seven Piazza jerseys (You gotta be kidding),
Six Sergio Tacchinis,
Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the eighth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,

Eight how ya doins (How you doin’?),
Seven Piazza jerseys,
Six Sergio Tacchinis (How you doin’?),
Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the ninth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me (straighten myself out),

Nine balls-a-grabbin’,
Eight how ya doins,
Seven Piazza jerseys,
Six Sergio Tacchinis,
Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the tenth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,
Ten new hand gestures (What were they?),
Nine balls-a-grabbin' (Oh!),
Eight how ya doins,
Seven Piazza jerseys,
Six Sergio Tacchinis,
Five pinky rings! (What are you gonna do?)
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

[In a sad voice and crying is heard in the background] On the eleventh day of Christmas
my paesan gave to me,

Eleven Sinatra CDs (A moment of silence for the Chairman of the Board,)
Ten new hand gestures,
Nine balls-a-grabbin',
Eight how you doins,
Seven Piazza jerseys,
Six Sergio Tacchinis,
Five pinky rings!
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

On the twelfth day of Christmas my paesan gave to me,
Twelve gobs of hair gel (Would you watch the hair?),
Eleven Sinatra CDs,
Ten new hand gestures,
Nine balls-a-grabbin',
Eight how ya doins,
Seven Piazza jerseys,
Six Sergio Tacchinis,
Five pinky rings! (How do you like me now?).
Four fresh cannolis,
All tree Godfaddas,
Two guinea tees,
And a ride in his IROC-Z.

Yeah! That's for you, God bless.
On the following day, a complainant sent an e-mail to the CRTC, which forwarded it to the CBSC in due course. It read:

My complaint is regards [sic] to a song I keep hearing on radio station Z103.5 in Toronto. The song is titled the “12 days of a Guido Christmas” and portrays Italians in a stereotypical way. This kind of garbage should not be on the public airways [sic]. I was offended as my father had to endure this kind of racism when he emigrated to Canada from Italy 40 years ago. [The complainant then provided the words to the song.]

I guess it’s funny to the people at the station when they play this garbage. This only promotes stereotypes and does not benefit the public.

General Counsel to the radio station sent the following reply on January 20, 2011:

We are in receipt of your complaint filed with the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council in which you claim a song played on our station, CIDC-FM, portrays Italians in a stereotypical way to which you take offence. I have been asked to review your complaint and the relevant Code of Ethics and to provide you with a reply.

In reading the lyrics to the song, there is no mention of the word “Italian” or the country of Italy whatsoever. The only references which may be indicative of national or ethnic origin are the words “Guido” (which appears in the title of the song) and the word “paesan” (which appears throughout). It is our position that neither of these terms can be seen as being used in an unduly negative or abusive way that puts Italians in a negative light.

Use of the term “Guido”

The word Guido is defined in the Webster’s On-Line Dictionary as:

a slang term for a stereotypical working class white male from the Northeastern United States with a macho attitude. A cultural level considered to not be the highest, prejudices against nonwhite ethnicities - and races, and a love for gold chains and slicked-back hair, It is particularly associated with New York City, Long Island, New Jersey, Philadelphia and Buffalo. It originates from the large Italian-American population of the region however, there are “Guidos” from a variety of white ethnic backgrounds.

The definition clearly indicates the term Guido is used in a variety of white ethnic backgrounds, and does not describe Italians in particular. Consequently, it can not be said that the term “portrays Italians in a stereotypical way” as you allege in your complaint.

Even if one concedes that the term has become so closely linked to the Italian community as to be exclusive, it only describes a segment of that population and cannot be seen as painting all Italians with same brush. It is our position that the description in this particular song of a certain character as a “Guido” does not depict all Italians as the same, just as the television series. The Sopranos’ depiction of certain Italian-Americans is not seen as depicting all Italians as being members of the Mob.

Use of the word “Paesan”

Paesan is the Americanized version of the word “paesano” (m) or “paesana” (f) widely used in Italy to denote an individual from the same hometown - a villager or fellow
countryman. The term is most widely used across the country as a term of endearment. Other cultures call it a tribe, a clan or a Cannuk [sic]. Consequently, we fail to see how its repeated use in the song in question promotes any sort of negative stereotype as you allege. The word “paesan” and its repeated use reflects [sic] a camaraderie between the individual using it and the people to who [sic] she is referring.

Contextual Considerations

It is our position that the context of the song is clearly meant to be satirical in that it is being performed by a “character” who is himself a Guido who has many paesani. The song is about their relationship and the gifts they have shared over the Christmas holiday. Upon hearing the song, one can visualize the character singing thanks to such depictions of Guidos and Guidettes on television in Jersey Shore and elsewhere. Much like The Situation, J-Woww, Snooki and Pauly D are parodies of themselves, the character in the song evokes an extreme image of a persona which is meant to be light-hearted and humorous.

We concede the image of the character in the song is that of a young man with a thick accent, greasy hair, tight white t-shirts and a souped-up sports car. We do not feel that any reasonable person would believe the description of these individuals in song can be interpreted as a description of Italians and even if one did believe that, the depiction being made is one of camaraderie between friends which can not be seen as unduly negative.

We take our obligations as broadcasters very seriously and ensure the content that is aired on our radio stations complies with all regulatory requirements as well as with the Code of Ethics. It is our sincere belief that the song “The 12 Days of a Guido Christmas” does not offend these rules for the reasons we have outlined above. We trust this is satisfactory.

The complainant was not satisfied with the broadcaster’s explanation. He replied to the broadcaster the next day (January 21) in the following terms (that letter was copied to the CBSC):

I find your resonse [sic] to my complaint to be offensive. You are insulting my intelligence if you expect me to believe that this song is not aimed at Italians. In fact, "Joe Summa and Carmine Famiglietti were not songwriters, but actors, when they decided to write a song about the Christmas gifts that a stereotypical Italian American might receive." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haya_Doin%3F.

You mentioned this definition from Webster’s online dictionary. “The definition clearly indicates the term Guido is used in a variety of white ethnic backgrounds, and does not describe Italians in particular.” I could not find your definition online but here is mine from Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guido_(slang):

Guido is a slang term for a lower-class or working-class urban Italian-American. The Guido stereotype is multi-faceted. Originally, it was used as a demeaning term for Italian-Americans in general.

Modern usage and the Italo-American reaction

The term is used in metropolitan areas associated with large Italian-American populations (such as Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens, The
Bronx, Long Island, Connecticut, South Philadelphia, Little Italy in Baltimore, the North End in Boston, Federal Hill in Providence, Johnston, Rhode Island, and New Jersey). In other areas, terms such as "Mario" (Chicago) and "Gino" (East Haven, Connecticut, Toronto, Montreal) have a meaning similar to Guido. Although some Italians self-identify as "Guidos", the term is often considered derogatory or an ethnic slur.

The term caused controversy in 2009 when MTV used the term in promotions for the reality television show Jersey Shore, which stars a predominantly Italian-American cast. This spurred objections from Italian-American organizations such as Unico National, NIAF, the Order [of] Sons of Italy in America and the internet watchdog organization ItalianAware. Although MTV removed the term from some promotions, it remains closely associated with the show, and some of the cast members use it regularly to describe themselves while the females sometimes refer to themselves as a "Guidette."

You mentioned "Upon hearing the song, one can visualize the character singing thanks to such depictions of Guidos and Guidettes on television in Jersey Shore and elsewhere," but you failed to mention the many Italian organizations are [sic] upset at that very show.

I still enjoy listening to Z103.5 but that song has no place being on public airwaves. You may think that I may be the only one complaining so I was the only one offended. That would be wrong. Many of my Italian friends have said that this song should not be on the public airwaves. Do what's [sic] right and follow your standards like you say you do.

The complainant’s brief Ruling Request was sent to the CBSC on February 2. Attached to it was the text of the letter he had sent to the broadcaster:

I have received the response from the broadcaster and I am not satisfied. The slang term "Guido" is offensive to many Italians. Here is my response to the broadcaster in case you did not receive it.

That letter was, for the most part, identical to the above message of January 21 that had been copied to the CBSC, with the exception of the following closing paragraphs which the complainant had changed in the version attached to the Ruling Request:

Songs that use words that are "often considered derogatory or an ethnic slur" should not be brodcast [sic] on public airwaves. The broadcaster is well aware that this song may offend many Italians, yet they insist on playing it to get some laughs at the expense of the Italian race. The broadcaster has not indicated they will stop playing this song, nor have they apologised [sic] to me for offending my race.

This seems to me as being unsympathetic towards this issue towards me and their listening audience. Please inform me of any dicisions [sic].

THE DECISION

The Ontario Regional Panel examined the complaint under the following provisions of the CAB Code of Ethics and the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code:
CAB Code of Ethics, Clause 2 – Human Rights

Recognizing that every person has the right to full and equal recognition and to enjoy certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no abusive or unduly discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, Clause 2 – Human Rights

Recognizing that every person has the right to the full enjoyment of certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no abusive or unduly discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, Clause 4 – Stereotyping

Recognizing that stereotyping is a form of generalization that is frequently simplistic, belittling, hurtful or prejudicial, while being unreflective of the complexity of the group being stereotyped, broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no unduly negative stereotypical material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, Clause 7 – Degrading Material

Broadcasters shall avoid the airing of degrading material, whether reflected in words, sounds, images or by other means, which is based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, Clause 9 – Language and Terminology

Broadcasters shall be sensitive to, and avoid, the usage of derogatory or inappropriate language or terminology in references to individuals or groups based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

[...]

b) It is understood that language and terminology evolve over time. Some language and terminology may be inappropriate when used with respect to identifiable groups on the basis of their race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability. Broadcasters shall remain vigilant with respect to the evolving appropriateness or inappropriateness of particular words and phrases, keeping in mind prevailing community standards.

CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, Clause 10 – Contextual Considerations

Broadcasts may fairly include material that would otherwise appear to breach one of the foregoing provisions in the following contextual circumstances:
a) Legitimate artistic usage: Individuals who are themselves bigoted or intolerant may be part of a fictional or non-fictional program, provided that the program is not itself abusive or unduly discriminatory;

b) Comedic, humorous or satirical usage: Although the comedic, humorous or satirical intention or nature of programming is not an absolute defence with respect to the proscriptions of this Code, it is understood that some comedic, humorous or satirical content, although discriminatory or stereotypical, may be light and relatively inoffensive, rather than abusive or unduly discriminatory;

[...]

The Panel Adjudicators read all of the correspondence and listened to the broadcast of the challenged song. The Panel concludes that the challenged broadcast is in breach of the Human Rights Clauses of the CAB Code of Ethics and the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, as well as Clause 9 of the latter Code. With one Adjudicator dissenting, the Panel concludes that the broadcast did not breach any of the other codified standards cited above.

The Words “Guido” and “Guinea”

While the Panel appreciates the focus of the complainant on the word “Guido”, the Adjudicators are also extremely conscious of the fact that that word was not used even once in the parody song. The complainant himself did use the word in providing the name of the song, “12 Days of a Guido Christmas” in his initial complaint but the word was not actually aired as a part of any of the verses broadcast on CIDC-FM. The Panel is also conscious of the fact that the complainant’s greater, overriding concern was that the song “portrays Italians in a stereotypical way.” This decision will deal with the broader question of stereotyping in the next section.

The foregoing being said, there is another disparaging term for Italians used in the second stanza of the song and that word is repeated in every stanza thereafter, namely, the word “guinea”. This Panel has previously dealt with a complaint about the use of the term in its decision CKTB-AM re an episode of the Phil Hendrie Show (CBSC Decision 02/03-0383, May 2, 2003). In that challenged broadcast, a radio host had commented on a report that an Italian doctor had cloned a human baby in the following way: “Some wop cloned a baby” and “another guinea baby is foisted upon the world [...] little greasy kid.” After a commercial break, Hendrie said that he had intended “no offence” in using the terms and suggested that Italians should sue the Mafia for creating negative stereotypes about their ethnicity. A listener complained that the use of terms “wop” and “guinea” were racist. This Panel agreed. It began its explanation with the following generic overview:

That elements of the population have succeeded in creating a number of catchwords, nicknames or appellations intended to apply to identifiable groups (frequently minorities
distinguished by their ethnicity, nationality, religion or skin colour) is not one of society’s notable achievements. While there may be some such terms that are positive and admiring in their nature, many, perhaps most, and certainly all of those at issue here, are not. They tend to be epithetic, denigrating, even derisory in nature. Generally consisting of a single word, they are frequently meant to evoke disparaging reactions with respect to the targeted groups they “define”. At worst, they are ugly and nasty. At best they are condescending, a shorthand reference by the user to others who do not have the “right stuff”.

The Panel then applied the foregoing perspective to the challenged words.

The issue in the matter at hand is whether the terms “wop” and “guinea” are, even if epithetic, not so problematic that they pass the “pure, antiseptic and flawless” test. In the view of the Panel, they do not. They fall within the category of sweeping racial slurs. They are disparaging terms, utterly without redemptive value. While there may be some dramatic programming circumstances (not encountered here) in which the use of such words may be contextually justified, their appropriateness should be carefully monitored.

The Panel finds nothing redemptive in the matter at hand regarding the utterly gratuitous use of the word “guinea”. While it was not used in the challenged parody song in the denigrating, nasty way Phil Hendrie had employed it, the Panel finds that the word is, by its nature, abusive and unduly discriminatory. Like the racial epithet “wog” dealt with by this Panel in CFRA-AM re The Lowell Green Show (Somalia Commission Report) (CBSC Decision 96/97-0238, February 20, 1998), “guinea” is disparaging and abusive. Unless the word is contextually justified, a Panel will be likely to find its usage in breach of the Human Rights Clauses of the CAB Code of Ethics and the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code.

Insofar as the context is concerned, the Panel finds no justification for the use of the word “guinea”. The Panel does not consider that it is “light and relatively inoffensive”, as would be required in order to apply the comedic defence established in Clause 10(b) of the Equitable Portrayal Code. The word is derogatory, inappropriate, abusive and unacceptable and there is no more reason for its usage here than there was in the Phil Hendrie Show. While, for reasons discussed below, the Panel finds the rest of the parody song relatively harmless, it considers that this word taints the humour. Other relatively harmless choices might have been made. In the view of the Panel, this one is in breach of the Human Rights Clauses of the Code of Ethics and the Equitable Portrayal Code, as well as Clause 9 of the latter Code.

The Rest of the Song

The Panel finds the comments of the broadcaster’s General Counsel to the effect that “there is no mention of the word ‘Italian’ or the country of Italy whatsoever” to be unconvincing. Indeed, in this respect, it appreciates the aspect of the complainant’s Ruling Request in which he commented that “You are insulting my intelligence if you
expect me to believe that this song is not aimed at Italians.” The Panel’s view is that every line of the song makes it abundantly clear that the ditty was indeed focussed on Italians. Moreover, the Panel does consider that the song stereotypes Italians. The foregoing being said, the matter does not end there, for, even admitting that stereotyping comments have been made, the codified standard requires that “programming contains no unduly negative stereotypical material or comment.” In other words, not all stereotyping is of a negative nature. To label one community superbly athletic, another skilled in computers and mathematics, another endowed with culinary finesse, yet another remarkably intelligent would not be insulting or negative to any one of those communities. There is no prohibition against stereotyping comments unless they are unduly negative. Two previous decisions may be usefully applied. In one of these, a decision of this Panel, namely, CFNY-FM re a “Wha’ Happened?” segment on the Dean Blundell Show (CBSC Decision 08/09-1238, September 23, 2009), the Panel made the following comments regarding the issue of stereotyping:

[T]he Panel Adjudicators were somewhat troubled by the language and tone used in the segment dealing with the Mexican gynaecologist. Beginning with the reference of Hyper-Lee, the woman telling the Mexican story, to “a Mexican gynaecologist”, one of the co-hosts laughed, possibly (in the view of the Panel) as though such terms were mutually exclusive. Then the reference to the doctor “by name” was a mocking “Doctor Taco”. And there were numerous examples of the affecting of a Mexican accent to accompany elements of the story. The bottom line for the Panel, though, is that, although the attitude of the co-hosts was distasteful and crude, there was not a single specific negative stereotypical comment made regarding Mexicans. Accents, even though they may indeed be mocking, do not per se constitute unduly negative stereotypical comments. Nor does the application of a yuk-yuk name such as that mentioned immediately above. All in all, the Panel does not find the unduly negative stereotypical content required for a finding of breach of Clause 4 of the Equitable Portrayal Code.

On the issue of degrading content, the Panel said:

As to the application of Clause 7 of the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code, the Panel has found no connection. In other terms, the Panel finds nothing in the Mexican gynaecologist segment of the program that is remotely degrading. To use some of the complainant’s words, a bit sickening perhaps (to some), a little grotesque perhaps (to others), certainly bizarre, but demeaning, not at all, in the view of the Panel, nor degrading, to use the word that appears in Clause 7. To demean, in the sense of the Oxford English Dictionary, is: “To lower in condition, status, reputation or character.” To degrade, in the OED, is: “To lower in estimation; to bring into dishonour or contempt.” Those are the critical terms insofar as Clause 7 is concerned. In the view of the Panel, that segment in no way accomplishes any of those forms of diminution. The challenged segment is not in breach of Clause 7.

In the other decision, namely, CJAY-FM re Forbes and Friends (Chinese Language “Translations”) (CBSC Decision 02/03-1646, April 16, 2004), the Prairie Regional Panel examined a comedic segment that aired on the morning show. In it, the host took a phoney call from a fictitious Mr. Wong who offered to help the hosts learn some phrases in Chinese. The ensuing “translations” provided by Mr. Wong were in English but
pronounced so as to sound Chinese. A complainant alleged that the skit was demeaning to the Chinese community. The Prairie Panel found that

In the present instance, the Panel concludes that the humour is neither deep nor cutting. It depends principally on the relatively light-hearted technique frequently applied in cases of ethnically-oriented humour, namely, the use of accents. While these are generally employed so as to leave the impression that the person or group that is the brunt of the “joke” is inferior, occasionally the issue is simply that the person or group is different. The Panel believes that this is the case in the matter at hand. The Panel considers that the Chinese community is not belittled, mocked or marginalized. It is the object of humour, to be sure, but not on the grounds of any alleged or even implied inadequacy, weakness or failure.

The majority of the Panel is not oblivious to the fact that stereotyping frequently carries a “Don’t you find this funny?” underlying tone. There may even be said to be a gently mocking aspect to descriptions of those being stereotyped. Indeed, in the matter at hand, the majority concludes that the comments made in each of the verses were undoubtedly meant to characterize Italian habits and practices, even on a somewhat tongue-in-cheek basis, but it does not consider that the comments were negative, much less unduly negative. While the Panel does not consider there is anything positive to observe about the parody song, the majority does not find that there is any breach of either Clause 4 or Clause 7 resulting from its broadcast.

Dissent of K. King

K. King dissents from the conclusion of the majority that there is no breach of either Clause 4 or Clause 7 resulting from the broadcast of the parody song.

Broadcaster Responsiveness

In all CBSC decisions, the Council’s Panels assess the broadcaster’s responsiveness to the complainant. In the present instance, the Panel notes that the broadcaster’s General Counsel gave a lengthy and thoughtful reply that attempted to respond to the complainant’s overall concern. While the Panel is curious about his explanation that the song did not stereotype Italians, which the Panel believes it clearly did, General Counsel also caught the key issue that, if any stereotyping or characterization did occur, it did not do so in an unduly negative way. In any event, the broadcaster’s response complied with the Council’s requirements of membership. Consequently, the Panel considers that CIDC-FM has fully met that membership obligation in this instance.
ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE DECISION

CIDC-FM is required to: 1) announce the decision, in the following terms, once during peak listening hours within three days following the release of this decision and once more within seven days following the release of this decision during the time period in which the parody song was broadcast, but not on the same day as the first mandated announcement; 2) within the fourteen days following the broadcasts of the announcements, to provide written confirmation of the airing of the statement to the complainant who filed the Ruling Request; and 3) at that time, to provide the CBSC with a copy of that written confirmation and with air check copies of the broadcasts of the two announcements which must be made by CIDC-FM.

The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council has found that CIDC-FM’s broadcast of the parody song entitled “12 Days of a Guido Christmas” breached provisions of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters’ (CAB) Code of Ethics and Equitable Portrayal Code. By broadcasting that song, which included a disparaging racial epithet referring to Italians, on December 23, 2010, the CBSC concluded that CIDC-FM had aired abusive or unduly discriminatory comment contrary to the terms of the Human Rights Clauses of the CAB Code of Ethics and the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code. The CBSC also concluded that the word in question was derogatory, inappropriate, abusive and unacceptable, and consequently in breach of Clause 9 of the CAB Equitable Portrayal Code.

This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council.