

CAMARÓN AT THE CENTRE OF NEW FLAMENCO

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The man who produced the great works of Camarón de la Isla, Pata Negra and Veneno explains, in a fascinating and surprisingly detailed manner, how what is now known as “New Flamenco” emerged around these figures.

Everything was started, of course, in the United States by a gypsy named Agustín Castellón, also known as “Sabicas”. The result was two albums recorded in 1967 with guitar player Joe Beck under the title *Rock Encounter*. If traditional flamenco had to explode and become out of control, it chose the best ally in those days: rock & roll. California’s revolution landed in Andalusia through three American military bases: Morón, Rota and San Pablo. It apparently was an intentional landing in flamenco territory that settled in towns with an important gypsy population between Seville and Cadiz: Alcalá, Lebrija, Morón, Utrera, Jerez, Arcos, the Puertos...

The 1960’s. With the Americans came recordings of freedom and the West Coast psychedelic revolution. Seville suddenly became a new and strange city within the context of National-Catholicism. A city filled with long-haired boys who caused passers-by to turn their heads. A city where adults could buy “laughing cigarettes” in candy kiosks, and where legionnaires coming from Ceuta and Melilla after completing their service could legally bring a suitcase full of weed.

That is why the second wild era of flamenco was born here, thanks again to another portentous gypsy, Manuel Molina, and the city’s most underground band, Smash. It was only 1970 when we witnessed an attempt to blend rock and flamenco. Smash, before dissolving in acid, established the base of later so-called New Flamenco: *El Garrotín*, *Tangos de Ketama*, and, especially, *Blues de la Alameda*, the first serious blending of blues and *bulería*.

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At this point I think it is important to distinguish between “Andalusian rock” (Triana, Alameda, Medina Azahara...), a style closer to Andalusian popular music, and “gypsy rock” (Smash, Lole y Manuel, Pata Negra, Camarón, Tomasito, Diego Carrasco...), rather inspired by basic flamenco styles such as the *soleá*, the *bulería* or the *tangos*.

In Madrid,, other artists such as Las Grecas, Manzanita or Los Chorbos came into play with a lighter but widely accepted blending of styles, led by José Luis de Carlos (CBS). These were very well done music productions, and the professional environment was closer to the American model. There was also someone called Bambino, so-called king —tita Fernanda permitting— of the “cuplé por bulerías”. A prodigious player, as they might say today. Miguel Chamona from Utrera, an unforgettable figure. The *movida madrileña*, from a musical point of view, was created by gypsy artists. But nobody knew.

TIME OF LEGENDS

Back to the South of the South. In 1975 Lole y Manuel recorded *Nuevo día*, the most surprising hit I have ever heard. The album was released, unadvertised, and every radio producer in Andalusia went to buy it in stores. When tuning the radio, you could always find Lole’s voice, Manuel’s guitar and Juan Manuel Flores’s unforgettable verses. In their second album *Pasaje del agua* (1977), Lole y Manuel fully get into flamenco rock with “Tu mirá”, a track that would later be included in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill II* soundtrack.

In those days, we used to gather at the studio in Umbrete (Seville): Lole y Manuel, Camarón, Raimundo and Rafael Amador, Juan el Camas, Kiko Veneno and others. In 1977, Raimundo, Rafael and Kiko’s album *Veneno*, an amazing album based on lyrics that were as tender as they were irreverent, and driven by Kiko’s extraordinary music that the Amador brothers blended with their wild flamenco rock guitars. In 1978, Pata Negra’s first album, *Guitarras Callejeras*, included the surprising “Rock de Cayetano”, played only with two flamenco guitars. In 1979, *La Leyenda del Tiempo* was released.

At this stage in life, it is very comforting to see that *La Leyenda del Tiempo* has become an iconic album within the short history of flamenco. This, despite having been an enormous sales failure, receiving a negative reception from the media with some

rare exceptions, and provoking irritation among unconditional gypsy followers. Everybody thought that Camarón was wasting a brilliant career with this album. Some gypsies even went back to stores to demand their money back.

Everything was much easier back then. Such were the times in Sevilla. Meanwhile, Camarón became friends with the hippies, the *poètes maudits*, the rockers and Juan el Camas. Without El Camas, the birth of this album would not have been possible. Camarón learnt El Bizco Amate's fandangos from him.

They were days of wine and roses, when music was lived with the same innocence and passion as in those gatherings of Diego el Gastor and Fernanda. The artists were creating without haste, unpretentiously, laughing at their failures and reveling in their discoveries. Nobody thought they were doing something big; they were living in the moment, laughing and singing. Tomatito, who came from the East of Andalusia, took some time to connect with that "bunch of fools," as he called us. He resisted because he had an album in mind like the old ones, made up of guitars and hand clapping, with the special participation of Tomatito. The truth is that everything coming out of those rehearsals went in a different direction: Kiko's songs, the arrangements by the band Alameda, Pata Negra's fun, the drums, the bass, the keyboards, the electric guitar,, and Camarón in the middle playing the electric guitars, with the bass and Gualberto's sitar.

For the first time, Camarón sang poems by Lorca, Villalón, Omar Khayyam or Kiko Veneno. He asked me to explain the meaning of "the dream goes over time...", and of course, I couldn't. Explaining Lorca's surrealism would ruin it all. After the album went on sale, Raimundo told me one day: "My friend, what I love most about *La Leyenda del Tiempo* is that I don't understand anything about the lyrics". At the time, Raimundo only listened to the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin or Jimmy Hendrix. Obviously, he didn't understand the lyrics.

From Umbrete we moved to Madrid, to Fonogram 's big studio, where Camarón added more accomplices to the experiment: Diego Carrasco and Enrique Pantoja, Manuel Soler, Jorge Pardo, Jesús Prado. In Madrid the news spread that Camarón was recording a very strange album. Los Chichos and many gypsies from the scene showed up and were quite impressed by the relaxed atmosphere in the studio.

Camarón was the centre of everything, involuntarily. He was happy being surrounded by so many people and experiencing new sensations through music. Because of that, we can conclude that that album was an experiment that, for a few months, brought many gypsy and non-gypsy musicians together for an exchange of knowledge, rhythms, melodies and forms of life. Once more, hybridization worked, but this time with Camarón at its centre, this simple coincidence making him essential to the history of flamenco.

Sabicas and Joe Beck stood out in America; Smash had a short career, but Camarón, the prince of the gypsies, was made to last, to completely change the structures of flamenco. For the flamenco collective, Camarón marked the beat: “if Camarón makes it, it is good”. If Camarón lets his beard grow, then it is time to let your beard grow. Camarón was the one to open, though unaware, the doors of New Flamenco, even as he told me one day overwhelmed by the negative criticism of his album: “Ricardo: in the next album, guitars and hand clapping”.

This album put an end to Camarón’s rock adventure but not to hybridization or to open-mindedness regarding other influences. His following albums *Como el Agua*, *Calle Real* and *Viviré* are closer to jazz parameters due to the participation of Jorge Pardo (flute), Carlos Benavent (bass) and Rubén Dantas (latin drums). The poetical intention of *La Leyenda* wanes after dispensing with classical authors and the lyrics became commercial again because of their superficiality. But, as we said before, Camarón opened the gates of the world and Ketama, La Barbería del Sur or Ray Heredia entered through them. On the other hand, in the South of the South the most conservative gypsies, those of Jerez, started to kick over the lines with Diego Carrasco and Tomasito. In Seville, Raimundo Amador shared recording sessions and live performances with the king of blues, B.B. King. Unintentionally, new flamenco promoted the creation of lesser styles, based on the pattern of the “rumba”, like the *flamenquitos* and *camperitos* who tire us on the radio with the beat of their *cajón*. It is a trite trend eclipsing the work of true creators of flamenco fusion: gypsies and rockers. Fortunately, there is and there will be the testimony of the albums and aficionados who will always be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, gypsy rock from mass-consumption rumba.