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Mingo Balaguer

English translation

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Mingo Balaguer is a highly talented Spanish harmonica player with an incredible stage presence. He has had the chance to play with many artists and has agreed to tell us a little about his life as a musician constantly on the road.

Blues & Co: Hello, Mingo. First of all, could you introduce yourself to our readers?

Mingo Balaguer: Hello, my name is Mingo Balaguer. Blues has been my passion since I was very young, and for more than 35 years I have been singing it and, above all, playing it on the harmonica. My first professional blues group was called Caledonia Blues Band, founded in 1986, with which we released five albums. In 1994, we had the opportunity to travel to the United States and play at Buddy Guy's Legend club in Chicago.

We officially disbanded in 1996, although we have occasionally reunited to play in Spain in 2001, 2004, 2005, 2012 and in July 2019 for the 25th anniversary of the Cazorla International Blues Festival, since twenty-five years earlier we had taken part in the very first edition of that festival.

When Caledonia Blues Band disbanded, I formed two other groups that no longer exist, The Blues Machine and The Blues Blasters, with each of which I recorded a CD.

Today I play with quite a few groups and work as a freelance musician with some of the most prestigious blues musicians in Spain and elsewhere. This has allowed me to play at many blues events and festivals in several countries, including the United States, Luxembourg, Mexico, Bulgaria, Georgia, France, Portugal, Germany, Poland and Indonesia, among others. I have 18 CDs to my name. I am sponsored by the German harmonica brand HOHNER and the Polish microphone and accessories brand SYTY.

Blues & Co: You are a highly talented harmonica player, and you have played with many artists. Could you tell us about them?

Mingo Balaguer: Throughout my musical career, I have had the opportunity and good fortune to accompany and play with many blues musicians from different countries. I particularly remember opening for the great Charlie Musselwhite in Seville in 1992 with Caledonia Blues Band. In 1997, with The Blues Machine, we opened for B.B. King at the bullring in Marbella, Málaga, Spain. I have had the chance to open for many great blues names, such as Johnny Mars, Hubert Sumlim, Louisiana Red, Otis Rush, Magic Slim and Johnny Winter, and to play with great musicians such as Carey Bell, Lazy Lester, Jerry Portnoy, Sugar Ray Norcia, Kenny Neal, Paul Lamb, R.J. Mischo, Gary Primich, Charlie Sayles, Lurrie Bell, Sherman Robertson, Bruce Ewan, Bobby Radcliff and many more.

I toured Spain from 2005 to 2010 with the British guitarist Otis Grand, and in 2019 I played at the international blues festival in Jakarta, Indonesia, with the Japanese guitarist Shun Kikuta. That same year, I

played in Bulgaria with the French singer and guitarist Cisco Herzhaft, with whom I formed a close friendship and whom I met again in 2022 at Les Nuits Blues de Marnaz festival in France, organised by Blues N' Trad Productions.

Blues & Co: Did you build your career in the United States?

Mingo Balaguer: No, I have always been self-taught and built my career in Spain, although it is true that I have had the opportunity to travel extensively, to play with musicians from different countries and to learn from musicians from other countries who came to play in Spain.

In my opinion, to understand the language of the blues, it is not necessarily essential to travel to or live in the United States. Many African-American blues musicians have left a considerable legacy and cultural heritage in many European countries.

Blues & Co: What are your best memories of the United States?

Mingo Balaguer: One unique experience was playing at Buddy Guy's Legend club with my group Caledonia Blues Band in 1994. A few days earlier, I had the opportunity to meet the great Jimmy Johnson, who was playing in a club in Chicago. What a surprise it was when, after I told him that our group would be playing at Buddy Guy's Legend two days later, I saw him at our concert. Jimmy Johnson is one of the most wonderful and humble people I have ever met in my life.

I also met the harmonica player Charlie Sayles during my tour of Washington, DC, in 2002 with my group The Blues Blasters and the harmonica player Bruce Ewan. We were playing at the Artscape festival in Baltimore, and I heard that Charlie was playing at a club in Baltimore. As soon as we had finished, we went to see him. I had always greatly admired him. He was incredibly kind and even invited me to play a few songs with him and his group.

I also remember very well our performance that same year with The Blues Blasters at the Kennedy Center Millennium. Bruce Ewan was our guest too. It was packed, with a wonderful audience; it was an incredible experience.

Blues & Co: You also play a lot in Spain. There are many very good musicians there, aren't there?

Mingo Balaguer: Yes, fortunately Spain is by far the place where I play most. I am quite well known because I have been playing here since 1986. I have always been involved in many projects, playing with numerous groups and working as a freelance musician with other groups in this country. Sometimes I help blues musicians from other countries, when they ask me, to come and play at festivals in Spain.

I must say that blues in Spain has progressed at a tremendous pace. The current standard of the vast majority of musicians in this country is extraordinary and, from my personal point of view, we have absolutely nothing to envy other countries for: there are great blues musicians here.

Blues & Co: You have just played on Mike Vernon's album with the group Cat Squirrel, Blues What Am. Was it Mike Vernon who asked for you?

Mingo Balaguer: Yes, indeed. It was Mike who suggested that I form this new group with him and the great Spanish guitarist Kid Carlos. The three of us are the core of Cat Squirrel.

Blues & Co: How did you first meet Mike Vernon, before this album?

Mingo Balaguer: It is an old story that I love telling and retelling.

I was 14 or 15 in the 1970s when the first British blues records arriving in Spain began to find their way into my hands: records by John Mayall, Ten Years After, Fleetwood Mac, Savoy Brown and so on, which I devoured avidly. Curiously, I always stopped at a line common to most of those records: 'Mike Vernon – Producer'. I wondered who Mike Vernon was. It was a mystery, because we saw photographs of the artists, but there was never a photograph of the producer, and in those days it was difficult to find one. In short, I felt great admiration for this person, whose identity I apparently would never discover.

It was in 2008, at the blues festival in Antequera, in the Málaga region, that someone from the organisers suddenly came over to me and introduced me to Mike Vernon in person. It was incredible: I was shaking Mike Vernon's hand in person. Apparently he had retired and had been living in a village in Málaga for some time. Since then, we have become great friends.

Later, in 2010, Mike Vernon produced Fun To Visit, the album by my group Mingo & The Blues Intruders, for Karonte/Cambayá Records. In 2012, he gave us the lyrics for the song Wild Wild Women, from the album to which we gave the same name, released by Música Fundamental.

Who could have told me that we would go on to share a great musical project called Cat Squirrel?

Blues & Co: Mike Vernon's album also features a Spanish guitarist, Kid Carlos. Was it you who recommended him to Mike Vernon?

Mingo Balaguer: I have known Kid Carlos since he was very young, because his father, Cristobal Moreno, is a very good friend of mine and a great blues enthusiast.

In the late 1980s, Cristobal ran a blues programme on the radio in his town of Guillena, in the Seville region, and from time to time he also organised blues concerts there, where I played on several occasions. Influenced by his father's blues music, Kid Carlos began playing guitar at a very early age. He has great talent and has been well known in our country for many years.

It was Mike Vernon who met him in person a few years ago and quickly recognised his great talent. After that, he championed him and recruited him for his first group here in Spain, called The Mighty Combo.

Blues & Co: You record a lot with Kid Carlos. What is the relationship between you?

Mingo Balaguer: As I mentioned in the previous question, thanks to my friendship with his father, I have always followed Kid Carlos since he first began playing guitar as a little boy. In fact, even when he was very young, I liked inviting him to play with me because he has always understood the language of the blues perfectly and has great talent.

Long before we founded Cat Squirrel, Kid Carlos and I played together a great deal as a duo. We also have a group called Mingo Balaguer Blue Shadow, whose core members are Kid Carlos, another great Spanish guitarist called Pablo Sanpa, and me.

Blues & Co: You sometimes come to play in France. What do you think of French audiences?

Mingo Balaguer: Yes, I have been playing in France for several years now. It all began thanks to two French friends I have known for many years, Jean-Michel and Philippe, from Tours and Lyon respectively. They have always loved blues too. Philippe, in particular, is a great harmonica player, and I have played with his groups several times. I also have a close friendship with a very good guitarist who lives in Lyon, called Christophe Hanart.

Jean-Michel Hernandez has helped me a great deal to make my way in France. He has contacted events, organisations and festivals over several years, which has enabled me to play there on several occasions. He also enabled me to meet several French musicians with whom I formed the group Mingo Balaguer & The Heart Beats, made up of Pierre-Louis Labonne on guitar, Antoine Escalier on bass and many wonderful drummers, depending on their availability, such as Hugo Deviers, Fabrice Bessouat, Jérôme Henry, Pascal Delmas, Simon Boyer or Guillaume Destarac. I had met Guillaume in Spain, as he had taken part in the recording of my album Mingo Balaguer Blueshadow.

French audiences are fantastic. Every time I have played in France, the audience has been incredible. France has always been very supportive of culture, and you can see that in the audiences of all ages who come to concerts, enjoy themselves and have a good time.

Blues & Co: Are you preparing a new album under your own name, or with someone else?

Mingo Balaguer: Well, I am always thinking about doing something new. At the moment, I have nothing definite planned immediately, because Cat Squirrel's album Blues What Am has just been released by the French label DixieFrog. For now, we are presenting the album to Spanish audiences, but we plan to present it in the rest of Europe in 2024.

I do not think I will return to the studio this year, but who knows? I already have one or two projects under way. I never stop; I always have several irons in the fire.

Blues & Co: To finish this interview, I usually leave the last word to you. Over to you, Mingo.

Mingo Balaguer: I would like to thank Blues & Co magazine for spreading the music I love so much, and especially Christophe Leboeuf, the author of this interview, for taking an interest in my music from the very first moment.

The work done by media such as magazines, radio stations, associations and so on to spread the blues, which is a minority genre, is very important in keeping it alive. It is especially important for us musicians, as it allows us to become known and share our music throughout the world.

Finally, my eternal thanks to my friends Jean-Michel Hernandez and Philippe Bruneau for their warmth, their hospitality and their help in every way.

Prepared and conducted by Christophe 'Dameuh' Leboeuf.

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