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Mingo Balaguer

English translation

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Mingo Balaguer is an incredibly talented Spanish harmonica player. For more than 30 years he has travelled the world's stages alongside the biggest names in blues, with 17 CDs to his name. He is always looking for a musical project with talented young artists. I was lucky enough to meet him during his national tour, at the Café de la Gare in Chenu, in the Sarthe department (72).

Blues Magazine: Hello, Mingo. It is incredible to be able to talk to an artist who has travelled so extensively. Could you introduce yourself to our readers?

Mingo Balaguer: I have been playing harmonica professionally since 1986, when we founded our first blues group, Caledonia Blues Band, which has five CDs to its name. In 1994, we were lucky enough to travel to the United States and play, among other places, at Buddy Guy's Legend in Chicago. That gave us the opportunity to accompany Charlie Musselwhite and open for many great names on the blues scene, such as Johnny Mars, Hubert Sumlin, Louisiana Red, Otis Rush, Magic Slim and Johnny Winter, during their tours of Spain.

We officially disbanded in 1996. That did not prevent us from occasionally getting back together to play in Spain between 2001 and 2012, and in July 2019 at the Cazorla International Blues Festival, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of a memorable concert at that same festival.

After Caledonia Blues Band, I formed two other groups that no longer exist, Blues Machine and Blues Blasters, with which I recorded a CD. It was around that time, in 2002, that I also began singing. Today I am a member of several established groups and, alongside that, work as a freelance musician with some of the most prestigious blues musicians in Spain and other countries. That has enabled me to play at many blues festivals in the United States, Luxembourg, Mexico, Bulgaria, Georgia, France, Portugal, Germany, Indonesia… To date, I have recorded 17 CDs.

Blues Magazine: Your latest album is called Blue Shadow. Could you tell us a little about it?

Mingo Balaguer: I composed ten of the album's tracks during lockdown. I added a cover of Louis Jordan's Early In The Morning. I have always liked that song. My intention was to record a CD with as many musicians as possible, including those I have played with throughout my career, whether bass players, drummers, pianists or guitarists. But I realised that it was a very complicated project, both financially and logistically. So I decided to bring together the musicians I had played with most recently, whom I knew would identify with my project.

On guitar, two names naturally suggested themselves: Pablo Sanpa from Madrid and Carlos Moreno from Seville. Pianist Paul San Martín comes from San Sebastián. Double-bass player Oriol Fontanals comes from Catalonia, and drummer Guillaume Destarac is Parisian. They are joined by a special guest, saxophonist Alain Sancho, from Bilbao.

It was a real joy. I was able to select and bring together the different kinds of blues I identify with. I am deeply grateful to the musicians for their great professionalism. The recording went as naturally as could be, and we greatly enjoyed recording together. It was a lovely experience.

Blues Magazine: You are a renowned harmonica player who enjoys festive blues. Is that because of your Spanish background?

Mingo Balaguer: I do not really know whether it is because of my Spanish background. But yes, I like festive blues and, more generally, blues that enjoys itself, both in the music and in the lyrics. I particularly like blues with spicy content and double meanings — that is its essence — food and cooking and, of course, fun and partying. What I like most is being able to put on a live show with plenty of energy and enjoyment.

Blues Magazine: On each of your albums, you work with musicians of great quality. Why do you choose to do that, and why not put together your own group again today?

Mingo Balaguer: I have always liked surrounding myself with musicians who know the language of the blues. For me, knowing that language is fundamental and important, well ahead of virtuosity. If the musicians are also experienced and good, that is the icing on the cake.

At present, I am a member of eight established groups, as well as various musical projects. I will mention only a few; you can find more information on my website, www.mingobalaguer.com: Mingo & The Blues Intruders, with three CDs and a nomination for the European Blues Challenge 2012 in Berlin; Mingo-Coloma-Simón Blues Express, with one CD; Mingo-Sanpa & Bárez Bros, with one CD and a nomination for the European Blues Challenge 2021 in Poland; Tia Carroll & Mingo-Coloma-Simón Blues Express, with the extraordinary American singer Tia Carroll, with whom we have had the opportunity to tour many blues festivals in Spain since 2017; Blues Train, with two CDs; Devil's Harp Attack; Blues Triumvirate; and Mingo Balaguer & The Red Hot Playboys, with plans to finish recording a CD for 2021.

Blues Magazine: You are currently touring France. How is it going?

Mingo Balaguer: Well, things have not gone badly at all. It is true that some scheduled events and festivals have been cancelled, and concert capacity has had to be reduced because of this nightmare called Covid. But nobody is to blame; it is simply bad luck. I have had a good time and enjoyed myself. That is what matters: you must always be positive.

Blues Magazine: For this national tour, you have chosen French musicians. Could you introduce them and tell us why you chose them?

Mingo Balaguer: I have been lucky enough to play with fantastic musicians, but I had nothing to do with choosing them. Jean-Michel Hernandez, who lives in France and with whom I have shared a close friendship for more than twelve years, is behind this wonderful group we have called The Heartbeats.

Jean-Michel is a great blues fan. We met at the Rock & River Blues festival in Puente Genil, Spain. For some time he had been thinking about bringing me to Touraine, where he lives, so that I could become known in France. So he contacted local authorities, concert venues and festivals. The project began with the Touraine blues guitarist Pierre-Louis Labonne, whom he particularly admired. Pierre-Louis contacted a great bass player, Antoine Escalier, who in turn contacted drummer Hugo Deviers.

We were due to play some concerts and festivals in June, but they were cancelled. In October, however, we were able to give six concerts. Because of scheduling commitments, Hugo Deviers could not play all of them. Fortunately, we were able to call on three other drummers: Guillaume Destarac, who took part in recording my latest album, Blue Shadow; Fabrice Bessouat; and Jérôme Henry.

I am very happy to be able to count on so many great musicians and friends, with whom we are already working on future tours in France. I would like to thank Jean-Michel personally for all the work he does so selflessly to make this possible.

Blues Magazine: You have played around the world and with many legendary artists. What are your best memories?

Mingo Balaguer: I have played at many festivals with great artists and opened for many of them, such as Johnny Mars, B. B. King, Johnny Winter, Hubert Sumlin, Louisiana Red and Otis Rush. I have also had the pleasure of taking part in jams or playing with artists such as Charlie Musselwhite, Carey Bell, Gary Primich, Sugar Ray Norcia, Kenny Neal, R. J. Mischo, Bruce Ewan, Bobby Radcliff, Charlie Sayles, Paul Lamb, Jerry Portnoy, Sherman Robertson and Lurrie Bell, among others.

My best memories go back to when Caledonia Blues Band accompanied Charlie Musselwhite in 1992. I also have very fond memories of sharing the stage with the great Carey Bell in Seville, and I will never forget Otis Rush's energy and talent when we played together in 1995 at the Cerdanyola del Vallès Blues Festival and the Rebel 95 Festival in Palma de Mallorca.

Blues Magazine: Do you have any anecdotes about those experiences?

Mingo Balaguer: Among the best anecdotes I remember is, for example, inviting Charlie Musselwhite to my house to rehearse for the following day's concert. Charlie is a very humble man with great human qualities, a wonderful person.

I also remember very well going for a drink in Granada with Magic Slim, John Primer and the rest of their group, The Teardrops, in 1993. Those were very funny moments. And I will never forget interviewing Carey Bell and discussing anecdotes about the blues musicians of the time while enjoying a good steak with potatoes and a bottle of wine.

Blues Magazine: Is there a French artist you would like to share the stage with?

Mingo Balaguer: In fact, I would be willing to share the stage with any French blues musician, just as I have shared it with blues musicians from all over the world. Blues is an international language and, although we all know that blues is a musical expression of enslaved people in the United States of America, mainly originating from the west coast of Africa, I have met great blues musicians all over the world.

Blues Magazine: What do you think of blues in France?

Mingo Balaguer: I think France has blues musicians of a very high standard. For example, I was impressed by those I played with last September and October: Pierre-Louis Labonne, Antoine Escalier, Hugo Deviers, Fabrice Bessouat, Jérôme Henry and, as I already knew him, Guillaume Destarac, who is truly spectacular.

While touring Bulgaria, I had the opportunity to share the stage with Cisco Herzhaft. I loved it; he is a great blues musician. I also met Big Dez several years ago, and I like him very much. In 2018, at the Hondarribia Blues Festival, I discovered Awek, whom I really liked. I also know the great drummer Pascal Delmas and, of course, the wonderful harmonica players Jean-Jacques Milteau, Nico Wayne Toussaint and Marko Balland. I am sure there are many others I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting. I look forward to it eagerly.

Blues Magazine: What do you think of French audiences?

Mingo Balaguer: Fantastic! Everywhere I have played, the audience has been incredible, even though numbers have been reduced because of public-health measures. France has always given culture a great deal of support, and you can see people of all ages enjoying themselves at concerts. I hope to see venues full of people in the years ahead. When this nightmare is over, it will be incredible.

Blues Magazine: I usually finish my interviews by leaving the last word to you. So, if you have anything to say to our readers…

Mingo Balaguer: I would like to take this opportunity to thank Blues Magazine for doing so much to make this music I love better known, and particularly you and Franck Deschamps for your interest in my music. The work done by media such as magazines, radio stations and associations to spread the blues, which is a minority genre, is very important in keeping it alive and, above all, for us musicians, as it allows us to share our music throughout the world.

Mingo Balaguer — Blue Shadow

Label: Rock CD. www.mingobalaguer.com.

Over thirty years, Seville-born harmonica player Mingo Balaguer has become a leading figure in Spanish blues, of which he was one of the pioneers in the days of the legendary Caledonia Blues Band. That adventure lasted ten years, on European stages and also in the United States, where they shared the stage with leading names such as Johnny Winter, Charlie Musselwhite and Magic Slim.

With his thorough command of the language of the blues, Mingo moves between the electric Chicago style, with Little Walter as a reference, and California's West Coast sound. This new album, released under his own name, was recorded and produced by Jordi Gil at Sputnik Studios, with local and French musicians: Guillaume Destarac on drums, Oriol Fontanals on bass, Alain Sancho on saxophone, Paul San Martín on keyboards, and Pablo Sanpa and Kid Carlos on guitars.

All eleven tracks were composed by Mingo, apart from Louis Jordan's Early in the Morning. The album opens with Toxic Woman, a devilishly lively number that immediately makes you want to get up and dance. Unemployment Blues gives the guitars pride of place, and Party Animal takes us into a funky atmosphere, while Happy To Meet My Baby immerses us in a jazzy mood tinged with rockabilly swing. This album has everything to please, especially fans of harmonica players.

Would you like to get this record? Here is the email address of the distributor in France: jm.hernandez@orange.fr.

Franck Deschamps

Interview prepared and conducted by Christophe 'Dameuh' Leboeuf.

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Left to right: Antoine Escalier, Pierre-Louis Labonne, Mingo Balaguer and Hugo Deviers. Photograph © Thierry Chapeau.

Pablo Sanpa and Mingo Balaguer. Photograph © Juan Cuervo.

Tia Carroll and Mingo. Photograph © Juan Cuervo.

Main portrait of Mingo Balaguer with the harmonica. Photograph © Fernando Moreno.