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Mingo Balaguer

English translation

Translated from the Spanish edition revised by Mingo Balaguer. The original interview was published in Polish. Time references reflect the interview as supplied.

Welcome! It is a pleasure to see you in such good health. After your performance yesterday, more than one person was worried about your physical condition… (Laughter). It was an incredible explosion, not only of blues, but also of boogie and classic rock and roll, delivered with an overwhelming force unlike anything we had seen in a long time.

For me, a description like that is a real honour.

I understand that quite some time ago you formed your band with guitarist Pablo Sanpa. How did that happen?

I have been playing blues in Spain for more than thirty years. I met Pablo about fifteen years ago. We formed a band, but it broke up fairly soon. However, we realised that we played very well together and decided to form a new band.

Is it a regular line-up?

More or less, yes, although I am quite a restless person and tend to collaborate with different musicians. We cannot always all travel together. Often I travel alone and local musicians make up the band; other times Pablo comes with me. I am lucky enough to know a great many excellent musicians, both in Spain and in other countries, and that makes it easy for us to adapt to each tour.

So you perform abroad quite a lot. Where, for example?

Mainly in France, where I have great friends and an audience that is very loyal to the blues. I also know a great many drummers and double bass players there of an extraordinary standard.

I also perform in Portugal and Germany, and I played in the United States twice during the nineties: once at Buddy Guy's Legends in Chicago and once in Washington and the surrounding area.

I am now performing in Poland for the second time, and today, in fact, I received another invitation to take part in the prestigious Harmonica Bridge festival in Toruń.

Poland is a very special place for me because my uncle was Polish.

Today I heard that someone in your family was from Białystok.

Yes, that is true. It is a very curious story. When I first came to Poland to take part in the Blues Marathon, my cousin told me that her father—my uncle—was from Białystok. That moved me deeply, and we went to visit the place where he had lived.

Fantastic! How is the blues doing in Spain?

Really very well. The magazine published by the Barcelona Blues Society recently reported that more than 80 blues festivals were held in Spain this year.

That is many more than we have here. When did the blues really begin to establish itself in Spain?

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact date. I think it began to gain popularity in the late sixties and early seventies.

Something similar happened here.

Yes, probably because British blues began to have a strong influence at that time, and shortly afterwards American blues became very popular.

But the real boost came in the eighties, when bands such as Tonky Blues Band gained widespread recognition.

Their records were my first introduction to Spanish blues.

There you go.

So there are many bands, and you are still among the leading figures.

Yes, fortunately the blues is enjoying a great moment. I do not know whether I am still among the top names, but I think I still hold a good position. (Laughter). There are my more than eighteen released albums, and new ones are already on the way.

Returning to yesterday's concert, you always play with extraordinary energy. Has it always been that way?

As far back as I can remember, yes. (Laughter). My repertoire includes a lot of Chicago blues, jump blues, boogie, West Coast and swing blues. These styles fit perfectly with the way I play and with my personality, and almost demand an intense, energetic performance.

Although I also enjoy playing the music of artists with a more relaxed style, such as Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, so every now and then I bring the intensity down a little.

Have you had the chance to play with some of the great figures in blues?

Yes, I have been lucky enough to share the stage with numerous outstanding international musicians throughout my career. Among them, I had the opportunity to play with Charlie Musselwhite, which was a very special experience, particularly playing a harmonica duet with him.

I also had the privilege of opening a couple of concerts for Otis Rush. In Spain, I also frequently collaborate with Big Mama Montse, one of the great figures of Spanish blues.

Changing the subject, I know you work with legendary British producer Mike Vernon. Tell us that story.

Mike Vernon fascinated me from my earliest years of listening to blues. Whenever we bought records by John Mayall, Savoy Brown or Fleetwood Mac, the back cover would say: 'Produced by Mike Vernon'. We all wondered who he was.

Then, about twenty years ago, at a festival, a friend said to me: 'Come with me, I want to introduce you to someone.' It was Mike Vernon.

We spent the whole night talking, and a great friendship quickly developed.

In time, we formed Cat Squirrel, with Mike singing and me playing alongside my friend, guitarist Kid Carlos. We recorded two albums and performed at several European festivals.

On many occasions I have visited Mike's basement, where he kept his impressive record collection perfectly protected and carefully organised, stored on endless shelves.

You are a very active musician. What are your next projects?

We have recorded a new album with Mike and Kid Carlos that is waiting to be mixed.

The idea was for Mike to take care of the mix, but his health has delayed the process, and so far he has not been able to do it.

I also have numerous concerts planned with different musicians and two new albums that are practically finished and awaiting release. We will see how things develop.

Finally, what would you like to say to our readers?

Above all, I want to express my heartfelt thanks for the wonderful welcome I always receive in Poland.

Both the organisers and the audience make me feel at home.

I also want to say how happy I am to see the blues doing so well. I travel to many festivals and always find venues full of people.

And there is something that makes me especially happy: I see more and more young people in the audience. That fills me with hope. I am nearly seventy now, and many of us blues musicians belong to older generations. Sometimes I wonder what will happen when we are no longer here.

Fortunately, I believe the blues is in good hands. We just need to keep supporting those who keep it alive: festival organisers, journalists, radio presenters and everyone who works to promote this music. They are absolutely essential.

Editor’s note

Editor’s note: This English translation is based on the Spanish edition reviewed by Mingo Balaguer to correct minor inaccuracies identified in the original edition published in Polish, while faithfully preserving the content and spirit of the interview.

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