

## DIEGO EL CIGALA

Spain has produced many thrilling flamenco singers, but none so brilliant or innovative as Diego El Cigala.

He was born on a cold December day in 1968, on Provisiones Street near Madrid's famed flea market, El Rastro. Diego's mother, Aurora Salazar Motos, sister of the great musician Rafael Farina from the Spanish city of Salamanca, did not pursue a professional career as a flamenco singer despite her great talent. His Andalusian father, José de Córdoba, made a living at popular tablaos (flamenco clubs) such as Torres Bermejas, El Corral de la Pachea, and Arco de Cuchilleros.

Ramón Jiménez Salazar is the name shown on El Cigala's passport. His commonly used name of "Diego" is the result of a family dispute while at the baptismal font. "El Cigala" was a nickname given to him by gypsy guitarists the Losada brothers – and not, as it is often said, by famed flamenco singer Camarón during one of their first tours together.

Little Diego spent his time running after a soccer ball, but whenever he heard flamenco he would drop everything just to listen. Soon he started to sing for dancers, invited by well-known artists such as Cristóbal Reyes, Mario Maya, Manolete, Farruco, Manuel Camacho and El Güito, among others. As well, musicians such as Camarón, Tomatito, Gerardo Nuñez and Vicente Amigo began to collaborate with him on their recordings.

In 1997, he started his solo career with the album *Undebel*, produced by David Amaya. This album featured guitarists Antón Jiménez, David Amaya, Paquete, and Tomatito. Three years later he produced his second album, *Entre Vareta y Canasta*. Award-winning Spanish director Fernando Trueba (*Belle Epoque*, *Calle 54*) filmed the video of the title track from the album.

Then everything began to change in 2001 with the release of *Corren Tiempos de Alegría*, which was nominated for best flamenco album of the year at the Latin Grammys. It began when Fernando Trueba's musical documentary *Calle 54* was still being edited, and Diego was blown away by the scene of Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés performing the song "Lágrimas Negras" with a fellow countryman, Cachao Lopez. Diego declared that he had to meet Valdés and play with him. They began with "Amar y Vivir," written by Consuelo Velásquez: "Por qué no han de saber, que yo te amo vida mía..." ("Why shouldn't they know that I love you, my darling?") sang Diego, on what would become the first studio track that he would record with Bebo, and destined to appear on the album *Corren Tiempos de Alegría*. "I still remember the excitement of that Sunday morning in which Bebo and Diego recorded together for the first time," recalled Fernando Trueba. "Everybody cried."

That same year, El Cigala recorded the album *Piratas del Flamenco* with celebrated Latino jazz trumpeter and percussionist Jerry González. During that year, they both toured throughout Mexico and Spain with a breathtaking live show. Months later, El

Cigala performed at one of the most coveted stages: the Teatro Real in Madrid. The recording of this concert, which included collaboration with Niño Josele, became a monumental flamenco manifesto by El Cigala.

Both Diego and Bebo felt this initial collaboration was just the beginning and that they needed to take their musical encounter further. It was Fernando Trueba who became the missing link they needed to materialize the ideas that surged between that voice and that piano. Keeping it quiet, the three of them got to work on a new recording and before the end of the year, El Cigala and Valdés delivered *Lágrimas Negras (Black Tears)* at the Gusman Theatre in Miami. The next morning, the press described the pianist as “a living classic of the Cuban music” and the flamenco singer as the “Sinatra of flamenco.”

In 2003, *Lágrimas Negras* went from an intimate, spontaneous project to an unstoppable superhit that went far beyond the borders of flamenco and Latin music to win over hundreds of thousands of mainstream music fans all over the world. The excellent reviews, the brilliant live performances, and fantastic word of mouth all worked together to keep this album at the top of the charts for the next two years. The Ondas Award became the first of an immense pile of awards including remarkable ones such as Micrófono de Oro, five Amigo Awards, three Music Awards and, deserving special recognition, two Grammy and five Latin Grammy nominations. Even Ben Ratliff, the hard-to-please music critic of the *New York Times*, acknowledged *Lágrimas* as 2003’s Album of the Year.

In the middle of the extensive *Lágrimas Negras* tour, El Cigala collaborated with Paco de Lucia for his album *Cositas Buenas*. Afterwards, he recorded “Suspiros de España,” which was featured on the soundtrack of the movie *Soldados de Salamina* by David Trueba.

In 2005, Diego decided to pay homage to one of the greatest painters of all times, Pablo Picasso. In this CD, musicians such as Paco de Lucia, Tomatito, Raimundo Amador, Josemi Carmona and Jerry González contributed their sound to songs ranging from the classic “Se equivocó la paloma” by Rafael Alberti to other tunes by contemporary composers such as Javier Rubial, Javier Krahe, and Carlos Chaouen. *Picasso en mis ojos (Picasso in my eyes)* became a gold record in Spain and also in Venezuela. The next year at the Latin Grammys it was hailed as the Best Flamenco Album. That same night, the Best Video Clip award went to “Blanco y Negro” by El Cigala. Directed by Fernando Trueba, it is from the in-concert DVD *Bebo & Cigala*, a recording of these two great artists performing their *Lágrimas Negras* repertoire.

Later in 2006, Cigala released a collection of his work in a 5-CD set. In addition, at the Bienal de Sevilla, Diego shared the stage with Salif Keita, considered the golden voice of African music. The occasion only served to confirm Cigala’s ease in adapting his art to great popular songs rooted in diverse cultures.

Despite being increasingly busy, El Cigala found enough time to work on a new album, *Dos Lágrimas*, which was released in 2008. In this work, top Cuban and Spanish

musicians reinterpreted such popular boleros, coplas and tangos as “Dos Gardenias,” “María de la O,” “Historia de un amor” and “Compromiso.” We also listened to him – as tender as ever – delivering the main track in the movie *Y tú, ¿Quién eres? (And you? Who are you?)*, directed by Antonio Mercero, which focuses on the challenges faced by Alzheimer patients.

In April 2010, Diego traveled to Argentina to record *Cigala & Tango*, a live recording at the Teatro Gran Rex in Buenos Aires, with repertoire based on the Argentine tango. During the two weeks prior to the recording, the artist lived with the musicians in the same house, which also served as the rehearsal site. After that, they did a small tour in Cordoba, La Plata, and Montevideo, concluding with a concert in Buenos Aires.

The project involved, in addition to Diego’s usual band, two legendary masters of the Argentine tango: the bandoneonist Néstor Marconi and guitarist Juanjo Dominguez. In the background we have two additional well-known Argentine musicians: Pablo Agri on the violin and Diego Sanchez on the cello. As a host, friend, and top-class collaborator, the rocker Andrés Calamaro also put his unique stamp on this project.

2011 proved to be yet another year of awards and continued strong record sales, with *Cigala & Tango* selling over 120,000 copies in Spain and becoming a Gold Record in Colombia and Argentina. It received the Latin Grammy for Best Tango CD. A subsequent U.S. tour resulted in sold-out shows and great reviews. On December 28th, 2011, the prestigious *New York Times* ranked the El Cigala show as New York’s best concert in all categories of pop, rock, and jazz that year. Noted their critic Ben Ratliff: “Town Hall, Nov. 1. A séance that continually changed form and mood according to the whim of El Cigala, the great Gitano singer – a mile of charisma with a soul-scarring voice – and his band, as they played their own sort of traditional flamenco that brushed against jazz and tango.” The international Cigala & Tango tour, lasting into 2012, consisted of 90 concerts on the world’s best stages. More than 160,000 spectators thrilled to this unique show.

In 2013 Diego released his latest album, *Romance de la luna Tucumana*, a new interpretation of the Argentine repertoire, this time focusing on folkloric aspects. Key to some of the excitement generated by this CD was the participation of Mexico’s famed electric guitarist Diego Garcia, known as “The Twanguero,” who brought a totally new sound to Diego. Also critical to the success of this unique collaboration was the influence of two Argentine singers: Adriana Varela, and the legendary Mercedes Sosa. The album quickly became a huge sensation in Spain where it reached Gold Record status in its debut week. The Spanish tour was a critical and commercial success, with 15 sold-out concerts. The excitement was well captured by a reviewer for *La Nacion*: “The slide guitar and heavy groove of Garcia’s milonga assemble a perfect society with the voice of El Cigala. You can feel it. El Cigala and Garcia in tandem, flamenco and milonga, could be another musical chapter as the one he opened with Bebo Valdés in *Lágrimas Negras*.”

At the end of 2013 Diego's *Romance de la luna Tucuman* won him his second Latin Grammy for Best Tango Album. It is this landmark CD that will be the focus for his upcoming tours through the United States, Europe, Australia, and South America.