



CAMARÓN DE LA ISLA

David Flower on the late flamenco phenomenon

Camarón is without a shadow of a doubt the most significant and popular flamenco singer of the modern era. Before his emergence at the start of the 1970s, there was a long line of important figures, but Camarón was the man to really turn the modern generation on to flamenco. He was a truly emblematic figure and a social phenomenon. Yet he isn't really that well known – why is that?

Born José Monje Cruz in 1950, 'Camarón de la Isla' was a nickname, meaning 'Shrimp of the Island', referring to his pale complexion, small stature and the place where he grew up. This was San Fernando de la Isla, a proud and important town surrounded by salt flats near Cádiz, on the Atlantic coast of Andalucía. His poor surroundings and Gypsy blacksmith family were the archetypal social settings for a flamenco artist. "I've known more hunger than a snail on a mirror," he once said.

Both his parents sang around the home whilst flamenco performers, both local and famous, frequently dropped by for improvised *juergas* (sessions). Immersed in this flamenco environment, he learned from all, and by his early teens was getting publicly noticed. Despite his ambitions to be a matador or guitarist, he was soon regularly performing in the local club, before making the big move to Madrid at the age of 17. It was here that Paco de Lucía's father Antonio Sánchez, the patriarch, first heard Camarón. Within a year Paco and Camarón were recording together and creating the greatest partnership in flamenco history; a sensationally exciting collaboration that would create new watersheds in modern flamenco singing and guitar playing. Camarón's first eight records between 1969 and 1977 were all 'with the special collaboration of Paco de Lucía', each name given equal billing on the sleeves. The excitement, still audible, of these records lay in the marriage of the two greatest talents of their generation coming together at the perfect moment.

Franco's death in 1975 ushered in a period of immense liberation and hedonistic release nationwide at exactly the same time as Camarón was at the peak of his powers. The new freedom added, in flamenco circles as much as anywhere, hash and coke to the traditional wine and brandy. As his career soared, Camarón – handsome and cool with his mane of long hair and earrings – was one of those perfectly situated to both indulge and be indulged. He succumbed in the 80s to the

He's got the *gitano* look – Camarón de la Isla



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most addictive vices of them all – heroin.

Paco de Lucía and Camarón had one break around 1978. It was then that the latter created his landmark recording, *La Leyenda del Tiempo*, which has come to be seen as flamenco's *Sgt Pepper's*. It heralded new ideas, new writers, a new producer and, for the first time, didn't feature Paco. The album caused an earthquake in flamenco, but in fact now sounds the most dated of all his 20-odd recordings, as the innovations themselves – electric guitar solos, synthesizer, drum kit – are all so stuck in 1979. All the recordings with Paco, before and after this, remain timeless. 1979 also marked the debut of the 16-year-old Tomatito as the new guitarist who was to continue with Camarón until the end. In the 80s there were experiments with new instrumentation and new writing teams.

Camarón was uniquely loved and respected by *payo* and non-*payo*. (Gypsy and non-Gypsy), hardcore traditionalists and progressives alike. Adored by flamenco aficionados there was also huge number of Spaniards for whom flamenco was difficult and alien – most of them were eventually drawn towards the music by Camarón.

Camarón was always a simple man. He liked to be paid in cash before performing, Chuck Berry style. A great student of flamenco's heritage, he was humble: "You can't explain it. I do some things suddenly when singing that I can never repeat because I never know what they were or how I did them in the first place." Camarón always had great intonation and the perfect rasp in his voice – a valued flamenco quality.

In his last years he was desperate to leave money for his family's future and tried to claim 50% of the royalties on his recordings. But try as Paco and other true friends did, it was never going to happen, as Camarón only ever wrote a small amount of his repertoire. In the end the drugs got him, though the diagnosis was lung cancer. He died in 1992, aged 41, with an estimated half a million people travelling to San Fernando for his funeral.

There is precious little archive footage of Camarón available. His death brought on an explosion of TV coverage as many felt a guilty realisation that they had taken this giant in their midst for granted. His label, Polygram, notably paid much greater attention to Paco de Lucía's ongoing career partly as a result of this. Despite such an illustrious career and iconic status, Camarón's record sales fared extremely badly. Until 1989's *Soy Gitano* which sold 80,000 copies, most of them sold 2-5,000. Even the landmark *La Leyenda del Tiempo* sold less than 6,000. Unless roadside cassette sales are not included in this, which is a possibility, these figures have to be seen as terrible.

In the 15 years since Camarón died, the audiences for world music have greatly expanded, although flamenco's standing hasn't changed that much. Speculation suggests he could have become a major world star, but that presumes he would have taken on the international touring. Two years before he died, Camarón said that he had hardly done anything in flamenco, indeed that he had not yet even begun. Where would he have gone? He died too young for us to find out, thus cementing his status as one of flamenco's greatest, most mythical figures. ●

Flamenco Legend: In Search of Camarón de la Isla is reviewed in the Books section

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Castillo de Arena (Universal, 1977)

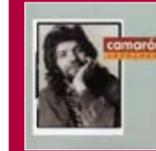
Marks the end of the first stage of Camarón's career. The last CD with Paco de Lucía as chief collaborator and produced and written by Paco's father Antonio Sánchez. The sound is better than most and the interplay is impeccable. Listen as Paco sets up the fandango with exquisite 30 second introductions for Camarón to then make his perfect entries. The tango 'Y Mira que Mira y Mira' shows how they could swing.



Calle Real (Universal, 1983)

Camarón's most accessible album benefits from Paco de Lucía's production ideas and elements from his own recently formed sextet. It contains crowd favourites 'Yo Vivo Enamorao' and 'Caminando', plus the exquisite fandango 'Calle Real' with a chamber orchestra accompaniment. Paco and Tomatito also prove that they are a smoking double act.

...COMPILATION



Antología (3 CDs, Universal, 1996)

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