

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Nigel Williamson on the rebellious sounds of

MANU CHAO



ALL PHOTOS: *Youri Lenquette*

Bob Dylan once wrote that *'to live outside the law you have to be honest.'* It's a line that applies perfectly to Manu Chao. He follows no rules and thumbs his nose at convention in pursuing his extraordinary vision of multicultural diversity and radical politics-with-beats. And he has a withering contempt for the commercial dictates of the corporate music industry that sustains him. That he gets away with it is simply down to the fact that there's no contrivance or artifice about what he does, merely a burning honesty and conviction. Chao was born into a cosmopolitan family. His grandparents lived in Cuba and Algeria and his parents are Spanish, but he was brought up in France in a left-wing intellectual household. By the early 80s and still in his teens, he was in Paris, doing dead-end day jobs and playing nights in the bands the Hot Pants and Los Carayos. At this stage, his main influences were punk and rockabilly. But by the time he formed Mano Negra in the late 80s, his music had expanded to reflect the cultural melting pot that is modern France. Streetwise and subversive, Mano Negra (the name came from a Peruvian terrorist organisation), blended rap, *rai*, flamenco, salsa, and anything else they fancied with their agit-punk aesthetic. The band's first album *Patchanka* (a term derived from *patchanga*, a Spanish pejorative for cheesy dancehall music) appeared independently in 1988. It led to an international deal with Virgin France, who released *Putas Fever* the following year. *King Of Bongo* followed in 1991, by which time the band was established as the most important alternative-rock act in France.

But it was two ambitious and anarchic tours to South America that were to cement the Mano Negra legend. The first in 1992 found them on a year-long cruise around the continent's port cities and performing at the dockside from a stage built into the ship's hold. The following year they undertook a ten-week train journey across war-torn Colombia, giving free concerts en route and negotiating safe passage with murderous gangs of local guerrillas (see *Songlines* #15).

The trip led to the break-up of Mano Negra, but not before they had recorded a

final album, 1994's *Casa Babylon*. With the group dissolving before his eyes, Chao never quite knew who was going to turn up in the studio and so he evolved the style of working he calls '*casualidad*' (chance) and which he has adopted ever since. "I'd light a joint and wait and see what happened and work with the moment," he says.

He spent the next three years travelling through Mexico, Brazil and elsewhere with a portable eight-track, amassing thousands of hours of tape of raw material and song ideas. It was this experience that was eventually edited down and re-recorded into the 16 songs that comprise *Clandestino*.

With virtually no promotion (Virgin initially declined to release it in the UK and licensed the record to Palm Pictures), the record's popularity grew by word of mouth until one day Chao took a phone call from his French label telling him he'd sold half a million. It didn't stop there and *Clandestino* went on to top the French charts and become one of the best-selling world music albums of all time.

The follow-up, the excellent *Proxima Estación Esperanza* (named after a Madrid metro station) appeared in 2001 and last year came *Radio Bemba Sound System*, a live recording that crammed a staggering 29 songs into 64 minutes of joyous exuberance that captures the spirit of Manu Chao.



Man oh man: Mano Negra loiter around in the streets

Despite the political messages and the social agenda, Chao's music is above all about fun. As we noted when *Clandestino* was included in *Songlines'* 50 essential world music albums, his records sound like '*he's just had a very good joint, a couple of beers and he's hanging with friends*'. To put one of his albums on the stereo is to feel you've been invited to the party too.

BEST ALBUMS

Clandestino (Virgin, 1998)



Not a difficult choice this one, as *Clandestino* was voted number six in *Songlines'* list of the all-time 50 essential world music albums (#19). The mix of Latin, rumba, samba, reggae and acoustic-oriented rock is world music in the most genuine sense and the album has now sold four million copies worldwide. But what makes this Chao's most potent album is not only the ridiculously catchy tunes with their insanely memorable hooks, but that he makes the revolution sound so much fun. Now that's truly subversive.

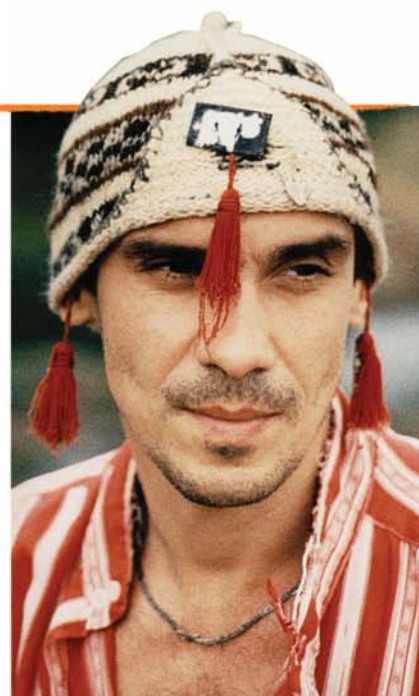
Putas Fever (with Mano Negra, Virgin, 1989)



The second album from Mano Negra took its title from the Dominican slang for venereal disease caught from a prostitute. The energy and attitude owes much to the band's roots in rockabilly and punk rock. But onto that aesthetic, they graft a gleeful hotchpotch of musical influences from the Mediterranean, Latin America and the Caribbean. Unusually, the album gets better as it goes on. Virgin front-loaded the most commercial tracks so we have to wait for the more adventurous material to unfold – which somehow serves to make the journey all the more satisfying.

BEST COMPILATION

Chao probably regards compilations as a corporate scam to fleece the fans. But given that many of his more recent converts are almost certainly unfamiliar with his earlier work with Mano Negra, it's a shame there isn't a comprehensive career retrospective available. Four band albums and three solo releases mean there's plenty to choose from and there must be unreleased material in the vaults and various B-sides and rarities to give added value to such a collection. So come on, Virgin, what about it?



BEST AVOIDED

Mano Negra, King Of Bongo (Virgin, 1991)



It's not a bad album and ageing punk rockers and fans of The Clash will love it. But *Songlines* readers should approach *King Of Bongo* with caution. It's the most rock-heavy of the band's four releases, as they make their bid for an Anglo-American audience with half a dozen tracks sung in English and such unsubtle lyrics as '*Daddy's a motherfucker... and your brother's sucking dicks.*'

LIKE MANU CHAO? THEN TRY...

✦ **Los de Abajo, Cybertronic Chilango Power** (Luaka Bop, 2002)

Mexico's Radio 3 award-winners share Chao's counter-culture politics as well as his post-modern Latin sensibility, love of street soundscapes and ability to write irresistibly catchy tunes. Reviewed in *Songlines* #13.



✦ **Sergent Garcia, Sin Fronteras** (Virgin, 2001)

With a background in punk and alternative rock and his French-Spanish connections, the parallels are obvious. Salsa, ragga, ska, Latin-freestyling and bongo-driven rap are all part of Sergent Garcia's thrillingly inclusive vision.

