

Playing in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria in December last year



If there's one artist synonymous with flamenco, it's him. Jan Fairley looks back over a career spanning five decades and counting

PACO DE LUCÍA

Paco de Lucía is one of the world's most exciting guitarists for at least three good reasons. He revolutionised flamenco from the 1970s, enabling, "the hands [to] find a way to do what the heart wants to say." As the first leading flamenco artist to work with jazz musicians, he brought external influences into flamenco. And he created the first flamenco sextet by adding flute and bass to two guitars. After a wild after-show party in Peru, the Peruvian *cajón* box was added – an innovation that was so successful it is now de rigueur for any flamenco group.

For many the benchmark has been de Lucía's memorable concerts with jazz fusionists like Chick Corea, John McLaughlin and Larry Coryell, which brought him into international circles. For those who know the flamenco scene, the crowning moment has to be his creative partnership with the late Camarón de la Isla (*Songlines* Beginner's Guide, #45), which from the late 60s radically modernised flamenco music.

Born in Algeciras in 1947 and taking his stage name Paco de Lucía from his Portuguese mother (Luzía), he learnt guitar from his father Antonio Sánchez Pecino (known as *El Gitano Rubio* – 'the blond gypsy') who started teaching him from the age of seven. His genius (which he says, "is not born into you, you have to work for it") came from his father's determination that his sons would become famous and not be forced, like him, to play for rich patrons in whore houses to keep food on the table. So he handed down to Francisco Sánchez Gómez the only trade he knew – as did Ramón, the eldest of de Lucía's four brothers. De Lucía may have wanted to go and play football but instead he allegedly practised the guitar 12 hours a day until his fingers bled. It established a habit that persists to this day of shutting himself away to "strain his brains" for ten-hour days, months at a time, in order to reach the highest level possible.

Leaving school at 11, he and brother Pepe formed the duo Los Chiquitos de Algeciras (The Little Boys of Algeciras). A few years later the family moved from Algeciras to Madrid and the brothers got themselves into José Greco's dance company off to tour the US. There, de Lucía received the seal of approval from flamenco's leading émigré Sabicas who encouraged him to develop his own guitar style. Back in Madrid he completed the first phase of his in-depth mastery of the tradition.

At the time Madrid was a crucible for flamenco, despite the cultural straightjacket of Franco's dictatorship. Flamencos gravitated from the agricultural poverty of Andalucía to work in the capital's *tablaos* clubs. The new generation (people like de Lucía, Camarón, Enrique Morente) learnt the tradition inside out from their elders

PHOTO: GREG

MACHO GONZALEZ/ESTERIS/STOCK/PHOTOSHOT



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while paradoxically agitating against the old ways – it was considered sacrilege to change anything – and establishing their right to innovate. Flamenco (song, dance, guitar) was traditionally passed on within extended flamenco families – most of them Gypsy – prized as a hard-won heritage and exchanged competitively in clubs and festivals. By the time de Lucía met Camarón in 1968 in the historic tablao club Torres Bermejas to create arguably the greatest artistic partnership ever known in flamenco (rivaling the legendary early 20th century masters Chacón and Montoya), they were ready to challenge notions of purity, to create the music of their time and bring flamenco into the Spanish mainstream.

Perhaps it was being a *payo* (non-Gypsy) that gave de Lucía the nerve to innovate in the ways he did. He has learnt everything he knows by listening, watching, copying and practising. He learnt to push the flamenco envelope further by playing with American jazz-fusion musicians from whom he learnt ways of improvising using different chord patterns and sequences and how to fluently move from one scale to another. To everyone’s amazement he was able to rapidly commit complex phrasing to memory using just his eyes and ears. He learnt to work with whole tones (something he ascribed to playing music by Spanish composer Manuel de Falla). Most significantly, instead of playing the different flamenco *toques* (rhythmic styles) as traditionally dictated, he put aside the guitar *capo* freeing up the possibilities of which chord patterns could be played. All of this led him and Camarón – and later his sextet – on a path of sensational creativity and their seminal influence has led a whole new generation to follow in their footsteps.



For all this, de Lucía is clear about the difference between flamenco and other guitar traditions: “However you learn, if you do not have the emotion, your music is nothing. The music comes from the experience of the Gypsy [and non-Gypsy], always persecuted, darting from one place to another. The music is intense, it has many changes of direction, it cannot rest.”

At the turn of the millennium, de Lucía left Spain for Mexico after much personal upheaval, disappearing off the European music scene radar for several years to live in a rainforest. The resulting Grammy winning disc, *Cositas Buenas*, released on return to Spain, expresses an intense journey. These days, working with a new group of young musicians, de Lucía displays a mellowness that has come with age but still remains effortlessly cutting-edge. ●



Listen to excerpts from Paco de Lucía’s *Luzia* and *Cositas Buenas* albums on the podcast

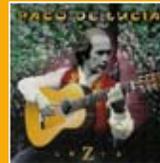
BEST...

...ALBUMS



***Cositas Buenas* (Universal, 2004)**

Among the many jewels on this album, catch a previously unreleased recording of Camarón with new guitar accompaniment from de Lucía and Camarón’s other guitarist Tomatito.



***Luzia* (Polygram, 1998)**

Composed while his mother was dying, the album is impregnated with grief and full of exquisite tenderness. De Lucía uniquely sings two songs, a *seguiriya* for his Portuguese mother Luzia, and a *rondeña* for Camarón, pushing his guitar work to new heights.



***Live... One Summer Night* (Philips, 1984)**

The sextet weave magic on this disc recorded live on their 1984 European tour. The exhilarating interaction is palpable – it feels like you’re almost there.

...COMPILATION



***Antología 1 and 2* (Polygram/Universal, 2007)**

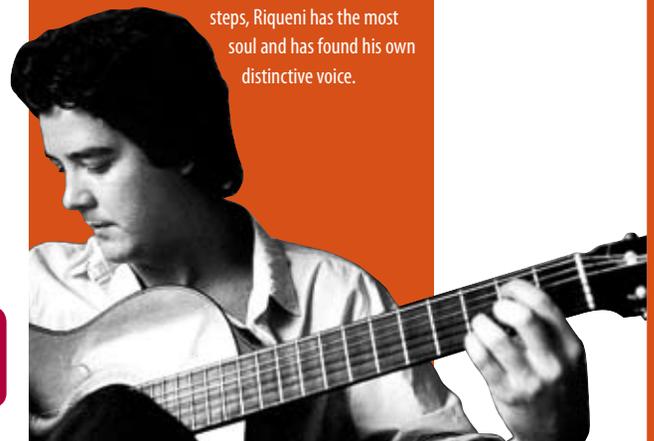
Pure de Lucía and a marvellous run through his work over the years: the second disc includes his hit ‘Entre Dos Aguas’ and classical pieces like ‘Almoraíma’ and Rodrigo’s ‘Concierto de Aranjuez’.

IF YOU LIKE PACO DE LUCÍA, TRY...



RAFAEL RIQUENI (Nuevos Medios, 1990)

Of all the new generation of guitarists who have followed in Paco de Lucía’s steps, Riqueni has the most soul and has found his own distinctive voice.



Top to bottom: a youthful flamenco novice; Paco de Lucía pictured more recently; with Camarón

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