

MANITAS DE PLATA

(written by Roland Hofmann)

One evening at a corrida in Arles in 1964 Pablo Picasso heard this young gipsy, born in 1921 in a caravan in Sete in the south of France, shouting out, „this man is more important than I am“. He engraved a drawing in his guitar and thus created the legend MANITAS DE PLATA.

Soon young man Ricardo Baliardo's „nom de guerre“ was MANITAS DE PLATA (little silver hands). Each year at the world famous gipsy pilgrimage of „Les Saintes Maries de la Mer“ MANITAS stood out from all the rest and MANITAS remained one of the main figures of this pilgrimage throughout all these years, with all tv cameras focussing on him. Then, in the sixties, nobody, least of all Ricardo Baliardo, would have dared to displace or challenge Django Reinhardt, the untouched king of „gipsy music“ as long as the latter was still alive. Among the gipsies the elder enjoy an almost untouchable status of respect, especially their music kings. The gap Django's death left accordingly was to be filled only ten years later when MANITAS DE PLATA agreed to play in public.

A first record, made without his permission (he hates studios and recording sessions up to this day), earned him a letter from Jean Cocteau, who conferred on him the title of a musical creator. It was a New York photographic exhibition by his friend Lucien Clergue that finally decided his career and made him a comet in the world of music. An American admirer recognized him on one of the photos and tried hard to convince MANITAS to start recording albums. MANITAS agreed to do so, but only on the condition that the technicians would come to his place, Arles. This did not scare off the Americans and the miracle took place in a chapel in Arles: MANITAS DE PLATA recorded his first official album.

A steady stream of managers started to arrive; one of them offered him three shows at the Carnegie Hall. But how to explain the importance of this show bizz shrine to MANITAS; when he finally arrived he could not even decipher the banner pasted across his advertisements on 57th street: „Special 4th Carnegie Hall concert, by public request!“ He is, until today, an analphabet. Altogether his record was to sell out Carnegie Hall for two weeks consecutively, as well as Royal Albert Hall in London. His tours became triumphs all over the world, from the USA to Australia, South-America to Canada, Europe to South-East-Asia. An innocent gipsy conquered the world, rose from being the insider troubadour of the rich and famous, the beautiful people of the French Riviera in the sixties and seventies, to being the musical ambassador of his music and his people, the meeting point of two principles: just like the archaic force of the waves of the Mediterranean, one of the ancient cradles of European culture, hits the dense architecture of the Southern-French coastline, one of the grand cultural landscapes in Europe, this naive and illiterate gipsy troubadour took the hearts of the „jet-set“ and the listeners all over the world by storm. And it was for the best of them to recognize his incredible talent and realized he was one of them; we mentioned already MANITAS best friend, Pablo Picasso, but not to forget many other of his life-long friends like Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, John Steinbeck, Marlon Brando, Brigitte Bardot, Charlie Chaplin and his family, Klaus Kinski, Maurice Chevalier, Charles Laughton, Françoise Hardy and many, many more.

A wonderful cult movie gives proof of those magic days in the South of France.

In New York MANITAS represented Europe at the annual United Nations gala celebrating the international declaration of the human rights. Salvador Dali, politically a little suspicious to the US, being friends with General Franco, had to make huge efforts to obtain a special permission to be present when his friend and fellow Catalan introduced Catalan to the UN.

MANITAS DE PLATA, the little gipsy boy Ricardo Baliardo, who had to panhandle in the streets to survive, had become a part of the great charity galas throughout the world, active preacher against poverty in the world and the hearts, manifest living example of a legendary social rise through his art. He was even invited by kings and queens and especially Queen Elizabeth II had fallen for his music. – She invited him several times to play for her.

Here a little anecdote: a ladyfriend once invited him to play for a prince, an important member of the jet set society; MANITAS ruined the evening by refusing to do so. When everyone had left, he turned to her, kneeling down and said, „ Now I will play for you.“ This has always been what MANITAS has loved most, to play for women, no matter if lady or maid, but always for his goddess of life, Sarah. Then he blossoms out onto the highest degree of his intuitive art.

It is not necessarily his exceptional technical abilities that bore him the admiration of many other flamenco greats, such as Paco de Lucia, Tomatito, Paco Pena, Carlos Montoya, Pepe Romero and many others, but his gift of being a divine medium through which something higher searches expression, narrows itself down to... music. This pro-odotic mediate existence and nature of MANITAS DE PLATA, which expresses itself in Flamenco as „Duende“ raises him way above most other artists.

In technical terms MANITAS' playing was to shock the sometimes blinkered Flamenco-world as he only used certain chords, melodies and techniques of traditional, Andalusian Flamenco, bearing something absolutely new, up to then unheard: The „Compas de Camargue“.

Like the pictures of his friend Picasso, his music has the air of something ecstatic, eccentric and panic. Flamenco aficionados, irritated as they are, appalled and attracted at the same time, call him „creative savage“, „rocker“ and even „punker of Flamenco“, someone not giving in to hollow formulas.

Later in his life, like so many others, he was deceived and used by many false friends and MANITAS retreated to his residence in the South of France in the early 80's playing only for himself, the señoritas and his family; he is the uncle of the most successful gipsy group in the musical history, rising from the family Reyes, the Gipsy Kings, but also of other legendary families of gipsy musicians, like the Arenas. Manuel Arenas had been playing with MANITAS for many years; now, very ill, his son Roy Arenas takes over from his father; Roy is one of the absolute shooting stars in gipsy-jazz and Flamenco guitar.

Not only is MANITAS the godfather of gipsy-music, but also his sons are amongst the very best: MANERO DE PLATA is one of the best Flamenco singers alive; also almost 60 years old, he travelled the world with his father in the 60's and 70's sharing his successes; FERNANDO DE PLATA, the youngest son and ANTONIO DE PLATA, the middle son complete the line-up and are exceptional guitarists.

MANITAS has not lost any of his technical capabilities or his divine emotional depth, but he has gained human profoundness and wisdom over the years adding the shimmering and shining brilliance of a diamond, emerging out of life-long pressure. From the troubadour of the „Beautiful People“ to the poet of music.

He wants to prove himself to the world once more; the diamond wants to shine again. Don't miss his glory.

And, believe it or not, MANITAS has recorded a new album, due out soon, just him and his guitar, his first ever „solo“-album. Just a few cheers by MANERO. Dig it!