
Moreno: Keeping the Gypsy Fire Burning
By Michael Dregni

Paris. Autumn leaves cover the quays along the banks of the River Seine. Under the Paris skies, the fall wind sweeps through the city.

In a café on the Place de Tertre on Montmartre, Gypsy guitarist Tchouta Adel, son of old-time Matelo Ferret cohort Spatzo Adel, is playing duets with Jeannot. In a Russian cabaret across town, Matelo's sons, Boulou and Elios Ferré, unfurl their sophisticated amalgamation of Gypsy music and bebop. Rodolphe Raffalli, Sami Dausset, Serge Krief, and Angelo Debarre are all displaying their craft. To the north of the city at La Choie des Pucés, a café in the infamous flea market, Ninine and Mondine play traditional gitane music, while Patrick Saussois and his Alma Sinti band stir up the dancing crowd at a favored guinguette, a quayside patio dancehall along the old river.

Some seventy years after Django and his Quintette du Hot Club de France first melded musette and Gypsy music with swing, jazz manouche is alive and well in the city of its birth, Paris. We are waiting for the music to begin at Le Bistro d'Eustache near Les Halles at 37, Rue Berger. Well-known Selmer guitar expert François Charle and I keep an anxious eye out for the arrival of Gypsy guitarist Moreno.

Le Bistro d'Eustache is one of the best cafés for jazz manouche, recommended to me by Hot Club de Norvège guitarist Jon Larsen. The walls are plastered with ancient posters announcing the annual Django festival at Samois-sur-Seine, providing a remembrance of things past. The music of the present is booked at the bistro every Thursday night by Gypsy renaissance man Patrick Saussois, who, along with leading one of the hottest bands in town, also operates his own jazz manouche CD label, Djaz, which has launched albums by Francis-Alfred Moerman, Dorado Schmidt, and Saussois himself.

As we stand outside the bistro, Moreno comes casually strolling down Rue Berger carrying a guitar case. Tall, dark, and handsome, he looks like a Gypsy Burt Reynolds. He greets François Charle and several acquaintances before joining the other members of his trio inside. There's no sound check, none of the interminable fooling around during band setup: Moreno simply unpacks his petite bouche Favino guitar, his rhythm guitarist tunes his own Favino, the string bassist readies himself, and the music begins.

Moreno launches into "La Gitane," the blazing musette waltz composed by Paul "Tchan Tchou" Vidal. Accented by the bass, the rhythm guitarist is rock steady, playing la pompe, the deceptively simple boom-chick boom-chick jazz manouche rhythm. Moreno gazes unconcernedly about the bistro, rarely bothering to watch his fingers as he reels off the waltz's signature melody starting with a finger-contorting sixteenth-note triplet.

The night is young and looks very promising.

The Music of His Father

Moreno was born in 1963 in Alsace, the region on the French-German border that has passed back and forth between the two nations more times than you care count. Alsace is also an area where many Gypsies settled over the years, and it is a hotbed of jazz manouche—home to, among others, Bireli Lagrene, Mandino Reinhardt, and Titi Winterstein and Lulu Reinhardt of the incomparable Titi Winterstein Quintett.

Moreno grew up speaking Rom, traveling with his family throughout France, and learning to play the guitar music of his father. As Moreno writes in the liner notes to his second CD, "My father died when I was very young, but as far as I can remember he always had a guitar with him. My older brothers taught me all they knew. All I had to do was open my ears, watch and try to copy the finger positions. Sometimes they were hard with me and they would slap my hands when I made a mistake, but they quickly saw that I was talented.

"I must say that all I thought about was playing the guitar. At night, when there would be guitar parties, I would pretend to be asleep in the camper and would watch carefully from behind the window. When I saw a chord I didn't know I would quickly reproduce the finger positions on my left forearm. Then I would take my guitar that I always hid next to my bed and silently press the chords while lying in my bed. Nobody knew."

Moreno studied the recordings of Django, the hero of many a manouche guitarist, but was also schooled in the traditional Gypsy music that influences the Alsatian Gypsies' music more strongly than the jazz-inflected sound of the Parisian Gypsies. But alongside Django, Moreno had one other great influence, his mentor Paul "Tchan Tchou" Vidal.

"I busked in the cafés around Toulon [a city in southern France]," Moreno writes. "One day I was playing at a terrace café when a short, well-dressed man, wearing a hat and a moustache, came up to me. He said, 'You're from Alsace. I can tell by the way you play.' It was Tchan Tchou, a gypsy guitarist who got his nickname because of his slanted eyes. I had heard a lot about Tchan Tchou and had listened to his records. I had often dreamed of meeting him. I could talk for hours about him. The same night we met, we played together and immediately hit it off. I was nervous and very impressed by him. He played two notes for ten of my own. I quickly understood that I was nothing next to him. I was like a young puppy jumping around like crazy while he took his time to carefully place his phrases.

"I decided to stay in Toulon. I found myself a camper and accompanied him for four years. He taught me the basics, in particular the art of waltzes, the notion of measure and the musicality of a phrase. It is when you are separated from someone like that you realise how much you learned from them. Today I still think of how he played and he remains a reference. I was extremely lucky to have met with someone like Tchan Tchou."

In the Footsteps of Django

Moreno's travels naturally led to Paris, where in 1995 he released his first album, *Yochka*, on the French label Al Sur that is renowned for its recordings of traditional Gypsy music, flamenco, rai, Taureg chants, and more. The album featured nine Moreno originals interspersed with a cover of Titi Winterstein's "Milko" and a stylish Gypsy rendition of "[Somewhere] Over the Rainbow." *Yochka* served notice that a gifted new manouche guitarist had arrived on the scene.

(On this first CD, Moreno was backed by another young manouche guitarist named Potzi, who has gone on to play with violinist Yves Teicher on Teicher's *Fiddler on the Groove*

[RCA Victor/BMG France] as well as in the funky French group Paris Combo. This band, lead by the talented accordion-toting chanteuse Belle du Berry, offers an incredible new wave blend of Gypsy jazz, Edith Piaf-style torch songs, and what might be termed "grunge musette" on their 1997 Paris Combo CD [Boucherie Productions].)

In 1996, Moreno returned with *Moreno Boléro*, also on Al Sur. Now playing one of Cognac luthier Maurice Dupont's beautifully crafted Selmer-style guitars, this second album is like a musical biography, paying tribute to Moreno's many influences. There are covers of the almost-obligatory jazz manouche standards such as "Les yeux noirs" and Django's "Nauges," songs by which Gypsy guitarists are too often measured. These are surrounded by three songs penned by Moreno's mentor, Tchan Tchou: "Tant pis ou Tant mieux," "Les yeux de Dolorès," and the song by which he has become best known, "La Gitane." Also included are covers of Cabral's "La Foule" and the campy classic "Besame Mucho," once recorded by ace Argentine guitarist Oscar Aleman.

In 1997, Moreno appeared on a couple cuts of the astonishing Romanian accordionist Robert de Brasov's debut CD, *Prima Jubire* (Al Sur). The songs are long, swirling jams, mostly traditional Gypsy and Romanian pieces arranged by de Brasov, and Moreno's is a perfect foil to the soaring accordion.

Later in 1997, Moreno released his third and most recent CD, *Electric!* (Al Sur). As the title shouts out, Moreno plays all of the songs on an electric guitar, this time made by French luthier Alain Mazaud. The songs range from mainstream jazz standards to Guérino's early musette waltz "Brise napolitaine," Dorado Schmidt's "Swing Dorado," and Moreno's tribute to his mentor, "Tchan-Tchou." All in all, it is very mature album, with Moreno moving effortlessly between an undercurrent of the manouche sound blended into arrangements more typical of an American-style jazz combo.

In 1998, Moreno and his trio joined forces with fellow Gypsy guitarist Angelo Debarre to record *Romano Baschepen* (al sur). The album presents a true meeting of the minds: Here are two of the fastest and surest of jazz gitan guitarists dueling through fourteen cuts. The songs include a variety of standards, such as "Undecided," "Rose Room," and Django's "Dinah," as well as the original title cut and a selection of Gypsy classics like Schnuckenack Reinhardt's "O Letchto gürgo" and Titi Winterstein's "Metro Swing." The result is Moreno Winterstein's most accomplished album to date, the album that best show his live potential.

Music of the Ages

But at Paris' Le Bistro d'Eustache on an autumn evening, Moreno and his trio are all acoustic. During a solo in one number, he picks out the lead on one string, turning the tuner to reach the different notes and microtones. François Charle orders a coffee at the bar while I drink a pastis, which seems almost a requisite for a tourist. The tiny bistro is packed to capacity with late diners supping on steaks and fries as music fans strain their necks to watch the band in amazement. Moreno and his trio play with a joy and fire and abandon that inspires great jazz gitane—and great music in general. Their music reaches back to the glory days of Django, Baro and Matelo Ferret, Tchan Tchou, and ages of other Gypsy musicians before them.

Thanks are due to François Charle, whose guitar shop at 17, Galerie Vero-Dodat, 75001 Paris, France, should be an essential stop on any tour agenda; Vanessa Griffiths-Nayler in the Export Department of Media 7, distributor for the Al Sur label; and Jon Larsen of the Hot Club de Norvège and Hot Club Records in Norway for their assistance.

Michael Dregni
[Back to Articles](#)
[Back to Swingpage](#)