





KING

OF Kings

GUITAR AFICIONADO • PAGE 65

by Mac Randall • photos by Antoine Doyen

THE GIPSY KINGS MAY FEATURE EIGHT GUITARISTS,
BUT THE LEAD GUITAR SPOTLIGHT
BELONGS SOLELY TO **TONINO BALIARDO**.

When discussing the long-running international phenomenon known as the Gipsy Kings, it's best to start by clearing up a few misconceptions. Yes, they really are gypsies—descendants of Romani families that journeyed from northern Spain to southern France in the early 20th century to escape persecution. Yes, they really play gypsy music: *rumba catalana*, they call it, which is poppier than flamenco but marked by the same “exotic” scales and feats of derring-do on nylon-string guitars. No, none of them has ever lived in caravans. No, they don't camp out on the edges of French towns. And no, they don't supplement their income by telling fortunes or corralling gangs of kids to steal tourists' wallets.

The actual day-to-day existence of a Gipsy King is far more prosaic than the romantic image of a traditional gypsy. Lead guitarist Tonino Baliardo explains that he and his brothers Paco and Diego (also members of the band) reside, in separate houses, on a single quiet street in the southern French city of Montpellier.

“The street doesn't belong just to us, but it might as well,” Baliardo says through an interpreter; his command of English is decent, but he's more comfortable speaking French. “My mother and my sister live only a few doors away. We're all very close.” Similarly, the five Reyes brothers who make up the rest of the group—and are cousins of the Baliardos—all live in the



> *this page*
Baliardo with his Chet Atkins, his preferred model of guitar for live performance

> *right*
Baliardo's 2004 Conde Hermanos Felipe V N2

> *far right*
His Gibson Chet Atkins CEC and other guitars in his home

“My Felipe V N2—that was the first time I was able to afford a Conde. That’s a very special memory for me.”

same neighborhood in nearby Arles. As the old saying goes, the family that plays together stays together.

And stay together they have, for nearly four decades. After starting out in the late Seventies playing parties and weddings in the south of France, the Gipsy Kings finally achieved substantial European and American success in 1988 with the hits “Djebi Djeba” and “Bamboleo.” They’ve released a total of 13 studio albums (their most recent is 2013’s *Savor Flamenco*, which won a Grammy for Best World Music Album), toured around the world, and played for presidents, prime ministers, and kings. But they still don’t mind doing the occasional party gig. In fact, the day that *Guitar Aficionado* catches up with Tonino and his bandmates, they’re on their way to a horse farm in upstate New York, where they’ll be the musical guests of honor at a hedge fund manager’s 50th birthday soiree.

“Our attitude about private shows now is the same as always,” Baliardo says. “We’re happy that people want us to do them—and pay for us to do them—but we have to be careful how many we do. If we do too many, we risk losing our real audience.”

One other thing about the Gipsy Kings that hasn’t changed over time is the core of their sound: the Spanish guitar. All eight members of the band play, but Tonino’s lead role has helped foster a particularly close relationship with the instrument. He also has the group’s biggest guitar collection, currently totaling 15. “Some of the guitars are meant for the stage, some are for home or the studio. Some are better suited for playing melodies and some are more for the *compás*,”—the traditional flamenco term for rhythm—he explains.

Clearly a practical person, Baliardo sees his guitars as tools and doesn’t get sentimental about them. “I don’t consider myself a collector,” he says, “because I don’t hang onto them. I’ve learned to use cheaper guitars for the *compás* playing. That way you don’t cry when they break, and you can just get rid of them. Sometimes a guitar has served its purpose and it’s time to let it go.”

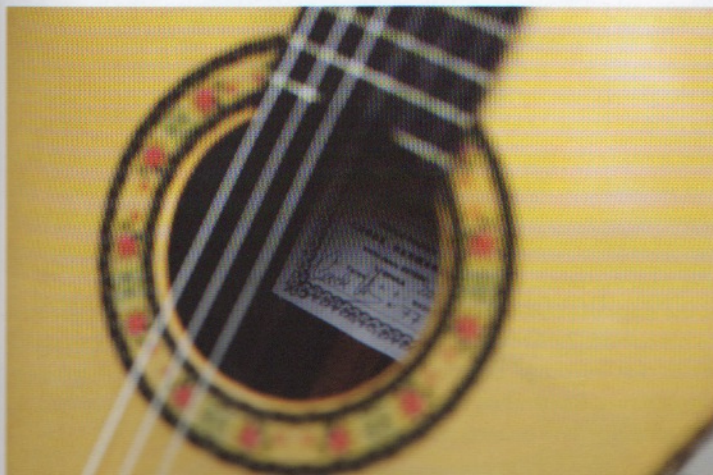
But every rule has its exceptions, and there is at least one guitar Tonino won’t be getting rid of any time soon: his first Conde Hermanos, a Felipe V N2 model bought at the brothers’ workshop in Madrid in 1991. “That was the first time I was able to afford a Conde,” he remembers. “It was a treat

to actually go there and buy one. That’s a very special memory for me.”

The 1991 Conde remains one of Tonino’s principal recording guitars. In the years since, he’s picked up three more: a 2002 AF25/R, a 2004 Felipe V N2, and a 2008 Gravina 7 credited on the label to *Sobrinho de Domingo Esteso*—Nephew of Domingo Esteso. Esteso was the guitar-making founder of what became the Conde dynasty in the early 20th century. Esteso’s nephews Faustino, Mariano, and Julio Conde took over his workshop after his death in 1937 and eventually parted ways, creating three separate luthiery businesses in Madrid that their families continue to operate today. They are respectively located at Calle Gravina, Calle Felipe V, and Calle Atocha, thus the model names. Tonino also owns guitars by Félix Manzanero of Madrid (a 1977 Santa Ana 12) and Eduardo Ferrer of Granada (a 1984 Gomez 20), as well as a Cordoba, a Takamine, a Godin, and a guitar he built himself in the Gipsy Kings’ pre-fame days.

So what are the primary differences between a classical guitar and a flamenco guitar? The main one, according to Baliardo, is the action. “On classical guitars, the string tension is higher and the strings are further off the fretboard,” he says. “For flamenco guitars, the strings are set to the absolute limit—as close as you can get to the fretboard without making a buzz.” In general, classical guitars also tend to be made of thicker, darker-sounding woods like cedar and rosewood, whereas flamenco guitars frequently use spruce and cypress. It’s also more common to see pickguards—or *golpeadors*—on flamenco instruments, as the music’s aggressive rhythms are tough on guitar tops.

Baliardo prefers not to bring his Spanish guitars on the road. For one thing, you can’t plug most of them in. His standard live solution for the past two decades has been the Gibson Chet Atkins CEC, which he discovered on an American tour in the early Nineties. “I bought my first one new at Guitar Center in L.A.—it’s retired now—and I’ve kept buying them whenever I’ve been able to, usually one or two a year,” he says. “Gibson doesn’t make them anymore, so I have people hunting online for them all the time. They’re comfortable, they play well, and they have a very distinctive tone that cuts through the sound of the other guitars onstage. But as much as I love them, the standard pickups on the Chet Atkins don’t quite have the power to meet the specific demands of our music. So now when



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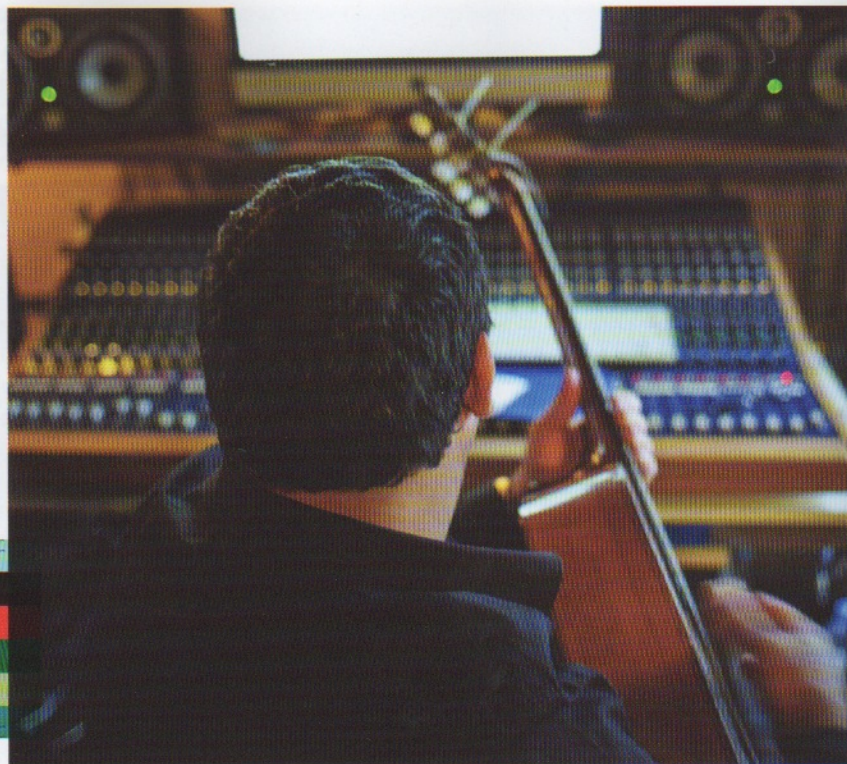
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In the Romani tradition, music-making skill is highly prized, and each new generation is watched closely to see who shows early signs of being a star player. Given that Tonino's father, Manitas de Plata, is a famous flamenco guitarist and his uncle, José Reyes (father of Baliardo's bandmates, the Reyes brothers), is an equally famous flamenco singer, it's not surprising that he learned the guitar more through osmosis than formal lessons, or that his playing skill made him a family focus of attention while still a child.

He confesses now that he wasn't always comfortable with this. "If anyone from the older generation—my grandfather and his friends—saw me outside our house, they would grab me, take me inside, and tell me, 'Now you're going to play guitar for us for the next two hours,' " he says. "That's very much the gypsy way. But I would be frightened to go outside, because I might see them coming, and then what would I do? I didn't know what I could possibly play for two hours."

Before long, that wouldn't be a problem anymore, as Baliardo's growing love of the instrument made grandfatherly coercion unnecessary. "When I was a teenager, I would generally practice five to six hours a day," he remembers. "I tried for a long time to play just like Paco de Lucía, but when the Gipsy Kings started, I decided I had to go my own way."

And a distinguished way it has been. One milestone in the Gipsy Kings' recent history was a June 2013 concert celebrating the 25th anniversary of "Bamboleo," the Kings' first big hit in Europe. The show took place in the Arènes d'Arles, a 25,000-seat amphitheater built by the Romans in 90 A.D. and normally used for bullfighting. Baliardo claims it was the first time in the arena's history that gypsy music had been played there.

"Just because of that, it would have been memorable," he says, "but there were other reasons too. Arles is really the band's home base—more so than Montpellier—so it was important for us to celebrate the anniversary of that great success at home with the people who supported us early on. There's a large gypsy community in Arles, and our families make up a lot of it." He adds, only half joking, "We could probably have filled the amphitheater with our families alone."

Standing on the stage of a 2,000-year-old venue would be a thrill for any performer, and yet, true to his nature, Baliardo remains down to earth about it. "There's so much amazing history in that building," he acknowledges, "but I'm just glad we didn't play there later in the summer. Remember, it's a bullfighting arena. When the weather gets hot and the wind picks up...let's just say you can smell the bulls." **CA**