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Monday
JUN 2018

Eliseo Parra: Re-creating The Tradition

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Eliseo Parra

Hearing the beauty, the stories and the hidden possibilities in an old, traditional song requires an unusual combination of qualities – imagination and a passion for your subject just for starters.

Few have been better at it in Spain for the past three decades than singer, percussionist, composer, and folklorist [Eliseo Parra, appearing with his septet](#) at The Gleason Room at the Fillmore, Miami Beach, Saturday at 8:30 p.m.

Trained as a musician, Parra has made himself into a leading figure in the collecting, study, and performance of Spanish traditional music.

But rather than suggesting pieces in a musical museum, his work, live and on record, is an update of collected melodies and rhythms. As re-created by Parra, the songs might feature an expanded instrumentation or carry texts by writers such as Garcia Lorca or Lope de Vega or might be reframed in once unthinkable, "what if" musical mixes.

For Parra, preservation does not mean frozen in amber.

In the notes to his album *De ayer mañana* (2005) he described his approach: "Traditional music, which someone composed [...] was given to the people, they made it their own, and then, they passed it down to their descendants, like an inheritance, until it got to us, polished like a jewel by dint of being sung [...] that's how I take it, I recreate it as best as I know how and I pass it on to the next generation"

He was born in [Sardón de Duero, Valladolid](#), and moved with his family to Barcelona in the 1960s. It was in Barcelona where Parra started his career as a rock singer and drummer, even founding a band, [Mi Generación](#). But in the following years, Parra became involved with jazz and salsa groups, worked as a studio musician and began exploring roots music.

In 1983, he moved to Madrid. He started to research traditional Castilian music and doing field work with scholar Jose Manuel Fraile Gil, a collaboration that yielded several books.

He launched his solo career in 1992. His album [Tribus Hispanas](#) (1998) is now considered a landmark in the traditional music field. In his most recent work, [El Man Sur](#) (2015), his seventh studio recording, Parra explores several of the Andalusian styles that have nurtured the roots of flamenco.

From his home in a small town in Avila, Spain, Parra spoke about discovering popular art, the importance of tradition and what, if any, music that we are now listening, will be worth preserving and recreating 400 years from now.

Question: What's a rocker like you doing in a place like this? Traditional folk music? What happened?! How did this come about?

Eliseo Parra: (laughs) Well, I was looking for authenticity or perhaps, I was looking for myself, and I realized that in those genres, what could I say? I wasn't going to write songs like Lennon and McCartney and I heard the Fania All Stars when they came through and I had to say 'I'll *never* going to get to that level. I wasn't born there.'

So I was still living in Barcelona and worked with [Majorcan folk singer] Maria del Mar Bonet on [a record based on traditional folk songs](#) and as part of that work I started to listen to the original recordings and wow! To sing like that you *really* had to know how to sing. That's when it bit me and that's when I started. I would hear those recordings of old ladies playing *panderetas* (tambourines) and I was shocked. What is this? I'm a percussionist, I *know* how hard is to get a good sound from a percussion instrument, and listen to them!

Then I discovered the work of [musician and folklorist] [Aqapito Marazuela](#) and I started to see how important that music was. So when I moved to Madrid in '83 I knew I wanted to get involved with folk music. I met the great ethnomusicologist José Manuel Fraile Gil and with him, I did field work and that was a discovery and a moment of self-discovery

Question: Was there a "Eureka moment" for you?

Eliseo Parra: I'm not sure there was "a" moment. When you are in a village with your tape recorder and walk into someone's home and start to watch and listen, you find yourself thinking: "Wait a minute, this is a vast, wonderful world, and there is so much to do here."

Question: Performers working in genres with strong traditions often find themselves in the push and pull between fundamentalists who don't want any changes to what they perceived as the original music and those who see change as vital for preserving the tradition. In that continuum, where do you place yourself ?

Eliseo Parra: I believe re-creation is the way of keeping a tradition alive. Purists might say "No, this wasn't done this way" but I ask them: when was it done the way you say? How can we go back 200 years and find out? At first, I was concerned about purists, now I tell them to go get some fresh air. I'm going to do what I want to do and they are going to say whatever they want to say.

Question: You see your work as preserving the tradition by updating it ...

Eliseo Parra: Yes. And in my re-creating it, my goal is respecting the original. I don't give myself a broad license [to change things] but I'm open-minded — and then the work itself creates a method. A song might start as a melody that an old lady in such-and-such village sang. So when I set out to dress up the song, I try things out and it's the song that tells me "Not this. No, not that. That might be." What's important is that it doesn't lose its essence, its soul.

Maestro, José Manuel [Fraile Gil] used to say: "We must have a foot on the fields, with the old ladies, and the other foot here, in the present." The fact is, we can't do it like they did it [in the past] We can't and we shouldn't, because we are living in a different time.

Question: Again, nobody knows what those popular creators would do if they were living today but, most likely, not what they did then ...

Eliseo Parra: That's clear. Look at work songs. Think about reaping the fields. As they reaped, the men were singing because it was hard work, under the Spanish sun, which in the summer is hot as hell. Now there's one man in a machine, a huge machine, and he is alone in the cabin, with air-conditioning and playing music on the stereo. Singing? How would he sing? It's impossible. He can't sing.

Question: Having been involved in this work and in so many genres of music for so long, what songs, what artists do you think the Eliseo Parras of 2518 might want to preserve and update?

Eliseo Parra: (laughs) I had *never* thought of that. Well, "Besame Mucho" will still be sung in 2518, and people will still listen to Charlie Parker. The authentic music still will be heard. The rest ...

What: Eliseo Parra In Concert Presented by FUNDarte and Centro Cultural Español (CCEMiami) Part of a month-long series Out in the Tropics 2018.

When: Saturday, June 23rd, 2018 at 8:30 PM

Where: The Gleason Room at the Fillmore Miami Beach.

Tickets: \$25 General Admission per performance / \$20 for students (under 18) and seniors (over 65), Centro Cultural Español (CCEMiami) members and Miami Beach Residents, with I.D., in person, at the theater Box Office Only. Purchase tickets through FUNDarte at <http://www.fundarte.us>, <http://www.ticketmaster.com> or by phone (800) 745-3000 (ticketmaster) or (305) 673-7300 (Fillmore Miami Beach Theater).

Also:

Eliseo Parra will offer a talk about Spanish traditional music at the Centro Cultural Español 1490 Biscayne Blvd. Miami, Friday June 22nd, at 7 p.m. This event is Free.

If you are a musician, you are invited to bring your instrument. (In Spanish)

An edited version of this interview was posted on Artburst Miami.

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