

## A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY & INFORMATION

“La resignación es un suicidio permanente.” This is the slogan that runs across the top of **Radiolina**, the politico-poetical section and news channel of the website: [www.manuchao.net](http://www.manuchao.net). La **Radiolina** is also the title of the album released in 2007 by one Jose Manuel Arturo Tomas, otherwise known as **Manu Chao**, son of Ramon of the same name.

I recently stumbled across a recording of a 1987 TV show in which, in my role as pop music prophet (yes really!), I went on TV to proclaim the future success of **Manu Chao** to an **Antoine de Caunes** who remained friendly, almost moved in the face of my enthusiasm.

De Caunes asked me before I started my piece: “*Is this one of those stories that you really wanted to see on TV? Looking at ‘small-timers, unknowns, small-fry?’...*”

As I write these lines, my eye falls on a copy of the Los Angeles Times dated 4 June 2007 informing me that Manu Chao, who gives the impression of being at home wherever he is in the world, gave a memorable performance to 11,000 fans packed into the L.A Sports Arena.

These days I’m known as a trendspotter, but I freely admit that while the young man’s charisma and talent were clear to see, back then, at a time when **Mano Negra** had yet to give a concert, I didn’t think he’d go so far. Today, the former small-timer and unknown small-fry, minstrel to the downtrodden (amongst other identities), is on his way to achieving the planetary impact of **Bob Marley**.

My report was broadcast as part of the **Rapido** show. Looking back on it now, I can hear **Gilles Verlant’s** commentary in voiceover: “*in his bedroom, twenty-four year-old Manu Chao is playing records, listening to his musical heroes...*”. And then Manu started to explain how he had learnt from the music made by certain pioneers, and that now he’d taken it all in he had started to write his own songs. He then added: “*if I lived in Spain I wouldn’t write rock music, Spanish rock is flamenco. Camaron is a god down there, he’s the Johnny Thunders of flamenco, etc.*” Twenty years later and **Camaron** and **Thunders**, those gods of self-destruction, are both physically dead. As for Manu, he’s in good health, living in Catalonia, and he no longer asks himself whether he’s doing rock or flamenco; he knows that what he does is simply Manu Chao. But, like **Chuck Berry**, **Ray Charles**, **Fats Domino** as well as other Hispanic musicians, he is careful to acknowledge the debt he owes to his predecessors. They didn’t simply fall from the sky as fully formed artists, and they too often cited their influences even though they had to suffer the disapproval of those who nowadays have trouble accepting a musical tradition that is not forever reinventing itself. **David Byrne**, a pretty good artist himself with his **Talking Heads**, admits with good humour to just a twinge of jealousy, his only qualification in a wholeheartedly admiring report on a concert given by Manu in Brooklyn in 2006.

If Manu’s second album seemed to some to be a little bit too similar to his first, it was simply because he wrote both of them around the same time. “**La Radiolina**” is characterized by new levels of sophistication. In my opinion, it’s a truly masterful album. The patchwork style has become increasingly complex. My intention in writing this piece is not to analyze the album, but simply to pay tribute to the overall artistic and personal effort of a little guy born in Paris with, as we tend to say, immigrant roots, an artist who has created something vast whilst always maintaining the same lifestyle. And he doesn’t hesitate to confront his detractors when they criticize his contradictions. This is a subject that will be developed further elsewhere.

In fact, there is a potential plan for a discussion between Manu and a philosopher in a forthcoming issue of the monthly magazine *Philosophie*. In terms of commitment, for Manu, who will still sleep quite naturally (i.e. he’s not trying to make a statement) on a friend’s couch after a party, and who is conscious of having given birth to the great creature that is **Radio Bemba**, the question he is asking in 2007 is: “*What do we do next?*”. He doesn’t claim to have a solution. He hasn’t switched from Esperanza to despair, but his question refers to the way things are going. There’s no need to be a top economist to know that things aren’t going to get any better. There are more and more people who no longer play the game, plenty of people who would like to put the brakes on a system that’s leading us straight into disaster. There’s no lack of resolve; the problem is, how do we organize ourselves?

“*You people who live in France (he lives mainly in Barcelona) are going to have at least five years of the same experience we had under Aznar. When I think that I had concerts banned on the pretext that I was a source of terrorism.*”

What he has done is create a style, surely not the easiest of feats. A composite style with its recurring motifs, like the mixed idioms, the background sounds - voices, the sounds of the city, police and ambulance sirens - his protest slogans, his sad observations on the state of the world and the need to hang on to hope in the chaos that is life. Somewhere further down the line we won’t really know if a certain song comes from the second or the sixth album. It will simply be a **Manu Chao** song. Just like **Brassens** making **Brassens** songs. Where **Brassens** is recognized as a poet whose language is rich and refined, even when talking dirty, **Manu Chao’s** great gift is for a knowing naivety. He cultivates a naïve language in the same way as **Picasso**, **Chaissac**, **Dubuffet** and other artists did in painting form.

He makes no apology for the act that consists of stylizing minimalist language with a Caribbean flavour, a process whose archetypal predecessor would have to be **Chuck Berry’s** “*Havana Moon*”. The passion he infuses into making animated videos of “childish” drawings by his friend **Wo** for each of his songs is impressive.

Manu, now the happy father of an eight year old boy who lives in the Brazilian Nordeste and who he goes to see as often as possible; continually asks himself questions about fatherhood and many other things. And although the lifestyle he has chosen has always excluded the sort of contract slavery that would require him to come up with a new album every year which would, probably, garner him even more success, he knows that he now has the means to put a stop to it all and live an even freer life. When questioned on this subject, he cites two reasons not to take such a step: the responsibility he has created for himself towards those who depend on him, the pleasure of serving those who look forward to his songs, and the love he feels for his different activities. Let me count on my fingers again. That makes three reasons, not two.