

Teye's Electric Gypsy guitars

by Jaap van Eik

La Mora and La India from the Electric Gypsy series. Exotic names for electric guitars. Hand made by a Dutch (flamenco) guitarist, who lives in Austin, Texas, with his Spanish wife. His name is Teye. And Teye is not your everyday person. "I make a guitar that has as many sounds as possible."

Our meeting was memorable. We met in the train station cafeteria. Didn't know each other, but the remarkable individual who entered the room left little room for error. This big man, in his leather overcoat, Siberian fur hat atop his head, flashy shades, and carrying a huge guitar case in his right hand, simply must be none other than Teye. He plunked himself in the chair next to mine, shed his coat, shades, and head gear, and without further ado commenced his tale. With a tempo and verve that made my head spin there unfolded a breathtaking life story. Because his experiences were many, he had taken to writing everything down. Look-, spoke Teye, while producing a well-worn notebook, "in here I log everything that captures my attention, sometimes illustrated by a quick sketch." He ought to publicize this, really.

The dynamite of this afternoon arrived an hour-and-a-half later, however. Meanwhile, the station cafeteria had filled to the brim with people. "Would you like to see my guitar?" asked Teye. Without waiting for a reply he ripped open the case, took his instrument, twisted the tuning pegs, and picked a little. Then, decidedly, he stood, and brought to life a piece of flamenco, at hurricane volume. "A good instrument," praised Teye after finishing the impromptu performance. For a few seconds, there was silence. Then, thundering applause. Teye made his bows to the left, to the right, routinely, sat down, and continued his tale.

Teye attended the Conservatory of Music in Groningen, played in countless bands, but at a given moment traveled to Spain in pursuit of a girl who he'd met some time ago in England. Arriving in Spain's sunny south he was confronted with the unavoidable certainty that here he had found his Destiny, lingering endlessly in Granada, Sevilla, and Cordoba, where he ran into famous flamenco guitarist Paco Peña, who just hosted a summer guitar seminar. So it was that Teye became enthralled with the flamenco, and he started his travels between the Netherlands and Spain. The moment arrived when he was embraced by a family of Gypsy musicians, which earned him the nick-name El Gitano Punky (the Rock & Roll Gypsy) – it also became the title of his first solo LP in 1988. His restless nature prompted travel to America where he again met up with other people that had become friends during his ceaseless roaming. Money to fund these overseas travels came from countless gigs in the Netherlands. "With the guitar on my back, traveling per bicycle," Teye clarifies. His first visit to the USA made him realize that, although his soul was definitely in Spain, his opportunities were beckoning in America. To make a long story short, he returned to the old world, continuing the improvement of his flamenco chops, but also dove deeper into electronics, and electronic music. And at long last he ventured, together with Spanish love Belen, to the USA. Teye collaborated with Joe Ely (among others), made his second solo album titled Viva el Flamenco and acquired the much-coveted Green Card. This adventurer from the Netherlands was apparently providing something officially considered to be of value to the American society.

His third album FlamencObsesionArte was released in 2004. On it, Teye skillfully combined the flamenco with electric guitar and added a little visual extra: a remarkable underwater flamenco-videoclip. Ashamed in any way over this type of fusion he is absolutely not. On the contrary, this record can be considered among the giants of the genre like Paco de Lucia and Tomatito. Expectations ran high. "It all went extremely well, everything just clicked in place. We were on a world music/flamenco festival in Sevilla and everybody really dug what we were doing. The CD also got released in the USA but then things started to go wrong. We had someone to do the publicity but they took the money and

accomplished very little.” A big disappointment for Teye and his flamenco-dancing wife. Now what? After two American tours, they took stock, and decided to quit. Because Teye had yet another dream. He had been a tinkerer all his life. Made a pedalboard with which to send percussive sounds like handclaps to back up his flamenco. Also he designed and built a portable flamenco dance floor with built-in microphones! Now, to carry around a floor like that is the rage, even in Spain.

A few years back, Teye built an electric guitar based on designs by British constructor Tony Zemaitis. Teye had known this man well and bought a couple of instruments from him in the early nineties. Today's collector's value is astronomical – people pay upward of \$40,000 without blinking an eye – so you don't really hit the road with these things anymore. “I'd made an imitation of it, and it played and sounded fantastic – better even than my real Zemaitis. I had brought it on our last US tour and showed it to everyone, around all the stores. People flipped, really! Including in Sam Ash (a famous music store chain).

Well, we wanted to stop touring with the flamenco. Then a good friend said to me: Why don't you make guitars for a living? We talked about it for hours. Must be impossible. But I decided to do it anyway.”

“I've always found that when you buy any electric guitar, you buy a very specific sound you're not really free to make or completely change the sound with your hands. A Telecaster will always sound like a Telecaster type of idea. I build a guitar that has as many sound possibilities as possible, the whole point of it being that you yourself will make and shape your own sound. With classical and flamenco guitars that always has been the whole idea, the starting point. I've never understood why it is so different with electric guitars.

La Mora and La India

Tony Zemaitis, son of an immigrant of Lithuania, made his fame in the nineteen seventies when guys like Ron Wood and Ronnie Lane of The Faces started playing his guitars. Followed later by other guitar slingers like for example our friend Teye. What immediately catches the eye on these guitars is the aluminum front plate. This idea originated when Tony Zemaitis electrically shielded Fender Stratocaster pickups in order to rid them of hum. The man passed away in 2002, but enjoys a true cult status in certain circles. His guitars are genuine collector's items and fetch astronomical sums on the second-hand market. The two instruments that Teye produces are based on these guitars, but differ in certain key points. For example they feature three humbucking-pickups by a certain Jason Lollar. “A certified Tone-freak”, according to Teye. “When I installed the Lollars in my prototype guitar, the initial difference in sound wasn't even that big with what I used before. But the Lollars have that something that makes it impossible to stop playing. There is a complexity to the tone that I hadn't- heard before.”

Teye mainly uses mahogany, both the Honduras and African variety. “But” says he, “Manuel Reyes, most famous of constructors from Cordoba, always said: It's not the wood, it is what you do with it.”

Thanks to word of mouth advertising, and by profiling on guitar shows, the orders are beginning to come in. An Electric Gypsy currently goes for \$8500. “I would not be able to afford one myself” grins Teye. The guitars take about a month in construction, partly because he makes with some help his own bridge and tailpiece.

The two models are called “La India” and “La Mora”, they only differ in cosmetics. The second model originated when a friend from the Netherlands asked Teye to shop around in the USA for a vintage black Les Paul Custom. These guitars in mint condition are now overpriced. Reason why the friend chose for an Electric Gypsy. Provided that the guitar would be black...

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