

Sunday, 24 October 2010 22:57

Manu Chao, Coronet Theatre

Written by [Peter Culshaw](#)

[Print](#) | [1 Comment](#)



Manu Chao: the global troubadour brings punk thrash, skanking reggae and a generous heart

"It's not often you get a global superstar down at the Elephant and Castle," marvelled a local who spent the evening dancing like a dervish to the infectious music of Manu Chao, who had breezed into London for a rare show last night off the back of a short tour of Japan and the West Coast of America. The first person I saw as an usher was Colombian philosopher Oscar Guardiola-Rivera whose book *What if Latin America Ruled the World?* suggests – among many other things – that the US is becoming the next Latin American country. Like the others he was wearing a Colombiage T-shirt – the organisation for which this was a benefit.

[Colombiage](#) is an increasingly important festival of Colombian culture and this was a typically generous gesture from Manu Chao (the gig sold out in a couple of hours), which will enable Colombiage to carry on again next year [in tough times for the arts](#). The line-up was a trio, something of an experiment for Chao – Manu on guitar and lead vocals, with long-term sidekick Madjid Fahem on acoustic and electric guitar and Philippe Teboul on drums. Philippe used to be a drummer but Manu persuaded him to switch to percussion when he put together his first globally renowned band Mano Negra in 1988. Slightly to his confusion at the time – "I'm not playing tambourine in a rock band," he was heard to say. Actually, the percussive elements in Mano Negra were one of the major keys to their Latin-based rock's success. But still, good to see him behind a drum kit again.

Manu and Philippe bonded busking down the Paris Metro in the Eighties as part of Les Casse Pieds and there is still a busking feel to their music. As Manu has

pointed out, singing in the Metro means you have about 30 seconds to convince a reluctant audience to listen and want to pay for the music – an audience of paying fans is much easier to win over. At the Coronet, the audience was seduced from the first chugging guitar chord, often recognising songs within a note or two.

The songs themselves also adhere to a kind of Metro mentality – they are all robust and well constructed so that they do work strummed on a battered old guitar on a street corner, with an eight-piece band playing to 50,000 people in a stadium in South America or here, as a trio (the eight-piece would have felt too overwhelming in the Coronet).

As Guardiola-Rivera said to me: “Mano Negra was my band – and for so many people in South America Manu is a visionary.” After Mano Negra split up, followed by a legendary train trip across Colombia documented in the book *The Train of Ice and Fire* by Manu’s father Ramon, who was in the audience and at the backstage party, Manu went on an extended Lost Weekend for several years – but re-invented himself with two totally classic albums – *Clandestino* and *Proxima Estacion – Esperanza*, as well as the more recent almost-classic *La Radiolina*.

'Coping with assorted heartbreaks but still clinging to hope and a love of *fiesta* - sung to beats that tended to switch from punk thrash to skanking reggae'

Many of the songs from them already have a timeless sense about them.

"*Desaparecido*", "*Clandestino*", "Welcome to Tijuana" (a cross-border "point of fever", like his music) and the more recent "*La Vida Tombola*", one of two songs he has written about Diego Maradona, were greeted by a crowd of enthusiasts who, even though of unusually assorted linguistic backgrounds and cultures, seemed to know the mostly Spanish words. The odd song threw back to Mano Negra days like "King Kong Five" and there were a couple of intriguing new ones which point favourably to Manu's next album.

The politics are there – the corruption and speculation in "*Rumba de Barcelona*", the plight of migrant workers on "*Clandestino*", the “emergency” referred to in his tribute to Bob Marley, "Mr Bobby" – without bashing your head with polemics. The overall message was of solidarity with the underclasses, the repressed, the marginalised and the rest of us, “lost in the century”, coping with assorted heartbreaks but still clinging to hope and a love of *fiesta* – sung to beats that tended to switch from punk thrash to skanking reggae, often in mid-song.

Some of these switches worked better than others, and he has had an ongoing challenge of how to differentiate the albums from his live shows – a continuing experiment which this evening seemed to come off with style. The more Latin elements were lessened, and missed on some songs, due to the absence of brass, percussion and piano in his regular Radio Bemba Sound System band. But it worked convincingly enough as a stripped-down trio. In a week of cuts, of mean spirits abroad, Manu's passionately committed band were a generous, warm-hearted antidote. The end result was a great, cathartic night out for the sweat-drenched crowd and a triumph for the organisers of [Colombiage](#).

- [Find Manu Chao on Amazon](#)

- [Contact Colombiage](#)
- [Find The Train of Fire and Ice by Ramon Chao on Amazon](#)

Watch "[Me Llamen Calle](#)", used as part of the soundtrack to the film *Princessas*, about the life of Madrid prostitutes:

Like this? Tweet it to your followers!

Published in [REVIEWS](#)

Tagged under [NEW MUSIC](#) [Latin](#) [punk](#) [rock](#) [Colombia](#)

Social sharing

Latest from Peter Culshaw

- [A Night in Tahrir Square, Barbican Hall](#)
- [theartsdesk in New Orleans: How the City Got its Groove Back](#)
- [Ray Davies, Royal Festival Hall](#)

Related items (by tag)

- [CD: They Might Be Giants - Join Us](#)
- [Opinion: Why are we so ghoulishly obsessed with self-destruction?](#)
- [CD: Rhydian - Waves](#)
- [Portishead, Alexandra Palace](#)
- [CD: Lamb - 5](#)

[back to top](#)