



Band of brothers – the Reyes and Ballardos

# GIPSY KINGS

They may have hit their chart-topping zenith in the 80s but France's flamenco-pop sensation are still going strong, as Jane Cornwell discovers

**A**fter more than 30 years of playing together, the Gipsy Kings are impervious to the gripes of their detractors. Accusations of musical inauthenticity shall not weary them. Their penchant for bouffants, flyaway collars and leather trousers remains undiminished. Synthesizers, electric bass and drum kits still permeate their wall-of-strum *rumba* flamenco sound, which they continue to fuse with *rai*, reggae, Cuban *son* and various other genres. The fact that their biggest hit single, 1987's 'Bamboleo', is now a staple of every tapas bar speaker in the free world is taken (probably) as a compliment.

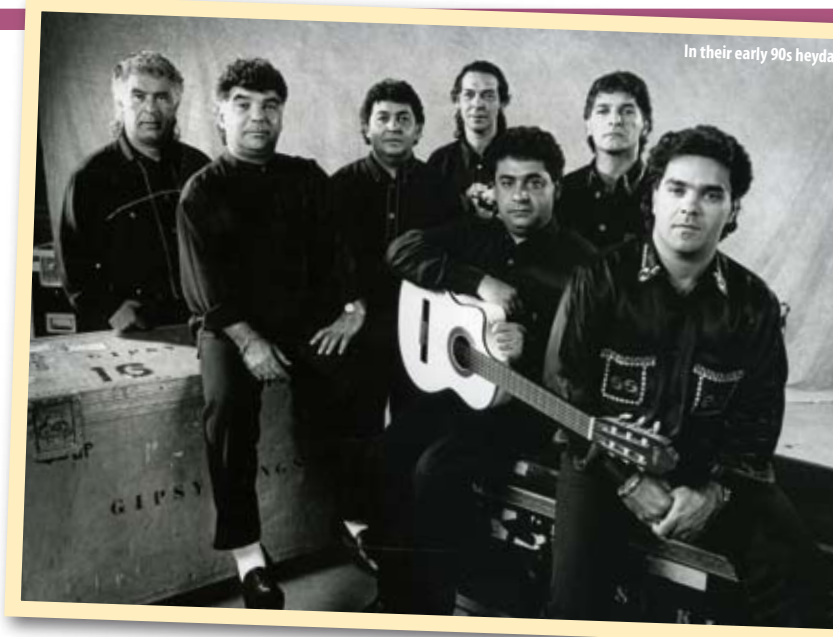
With nearly 20 albums under their

collective belts, the eight-piece Gipsy Kings have surpassed even the kerching-ing sales of The Buena Vista Social Club. They are household names in the US, Brazil and Japan; they're mobbed in Australia, Asia and Europe. They are, simply, the most successful world music act ever. So there. "The narrow minded are everywhere and from everywhere, unfortunately," singer and guitar-player Nicolas Reyes has said. "It is natural and necessary that our music will develop new sounds with the help of new instruments. But our rhythms, guitars and voices will always stay."

It's how they started, after all. Sons of the great flamenco singer José Reyes, Nicolas Reyes and his brothers Canut, Paul, Patchai

and André grew up on a campsite in Arles, southern France. Inauthentic? They are Gypsies and they are Kings ('Reyes'), after all. The family had migrated to Arles during the Spanish civil war, but as with any Gypsy encampment dancing, singing and strumming were as much a part of life as eating and sleeping. When not scraping a living gathering scrap metal or working on the local grape harvest, they accompanied their father's traditional flamenco, his *cante jondo* (deep song) style of vocalising with its wailed, rasped lyrics of love and death, passion and pain.

"When we were children we were filled with wonder while watching our fathers and uncles playing, singing and having fun together all



In their early 90s heyday

night long," Nicolas has recalled. "We wanted to do the same and begged our older brothers to teach us." Not having their own guitars as kids means that the left-handed members of the group still play guitars strung upside down – the legacy of playing a right hander's guitar the wrong way up.

After José's death in 1979, the Reyes played rumba flamenco at Roma parties and on street corners, partly because "we liked to watch the pretty girls dance." *Gitanos* like José Reyes had been mixing rumba rhythms with flamenco since the 1950s, deploying

the Kings their signature sound – his gruff and powerful flamenco voice echoing that of his father's. Other musicians rated them: Eric Clapton allegedly took strumming tips from guitarist Tonino Baliardo. And while flamenco musicians such as Paco de Lucía appealed to select audiences with purer forms of flamenco fusion, the Kings were slick and eminently danceable. They even had a live light show worthy of a stadium outfit (actually, they were a stadium outfit). One of the first acts to cash in on the US' growing Hispanic population, the album *Gipsy Kings* stayed in the American charts for a staggering 40 weeks on its release in 1989.

The Kings' stock riposte to purists who question their fusion (and by association their authenticity) is that Gypsies have always fused all kinds of music. In the way that, say, Salif Keita or Youssou N'Dour maintain their African roots within an electronic setting, so do the Gipsy Kings keep a firm hold on the music their grandfathers made around a campfire. Despite the occasional struggle to keep things burning, the Kings rejuvenated themselves with 2004's inspired, pared-down *Roots* album (reviewed in #24) and have stayed *caliente* ever since.

They are, they say, contributing to the evolution of flamenco rumba, to the lifeblood and spirit of a proud yet beleaguered people. Sales of more than 20 million albums testify to their winning formula, while their current project – the soundtrack to an acclaimed UK stage production of *Zorro The Musical* – only underlines their determination to follow their own unapologetically mainstream path. ●

**Zorro The Musical previews at London's Garrick Theatre from June 30**  
[www.zorrothemusical.com](http://www.zorrothemusical.com)  
[www.gipsykings.com](http://www.gipsykings.com)

You can hear excerpts from all the Best... albums (see right) on this issue's interactive sampler: [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/053](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/053)

It was Nicolas Reyes who gave (and gives)

**They are, simply, the most successful world music act ever. So there.**

## BEST...

### ...ALBUMS



**Allegria (Elektra, 1982)**  
 The first album the Gipsy Kings released under their own name. Primarily a collection of more traditional flamenco-style pieces – its acoustic guitars, voices and handclaps doesn't portend the epic productions that would follow.



**The Gipsy Kings (Sony, 1988)**  
 The disc that introduced the Gipsy Kings and their brand of *rumba* flamenco to the world. Think rhythmic guitars, passionate wailing and syncopated *palmas* within everything from percussive romps to plaintive melodies. Includes two of the band's biggest hits, 'Djebi Djoba' and 'Bamboleo'.



**Mosaique (Elektra, 1989)**  
 With its sly use of kit drums and synthesizers, *Mosaique* introduces outside genres and instrumentation to the basic flamenco mix. Here is *rai* fusion, jazzy guitar riffs, Cuban flavours and – with the first appearance of 'Volare' – a bit of Italian song.



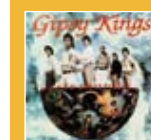
**Roots (Sony, 2004)**  
 Just as it says on the tin. After a decade's worth of over-produced, session-muso heavy albums, the Kings kiss their extravagant production values goodbye and go back to whence they began on this excellent acoustic album (reviewed in #24).



**Pasajero (Tinto Tinta/Sony BMG, 2006)**  
 Old habits die hard: here, once again, is the Kings' polished sound with its big drums, dub bass and electronic programming and percussion. Having pleased the purists with *Roots*, *Pasajero* (featuring splashes of everything from reggae to *mariachi* and Cuban *son*) sent them soaring back up the charts (reviewed in #40).

### ...TO AVOID

**Este Mundo (Columbia, 1991)**



Released the same year the Kings lent their flamenco backing to Bananarama's version of 'Long Train Running' and when they appeared as one of several acts on a compilation of new versions of songs from Disney films, *Simply Mad About The Mouse* (*rumba* flamenco-fied 'I've Got No Strings' from *Pinocchio* – enough said). Not their greatest year.

## IF YOU LIKE GIPSY KINGS, THEN TRY...

### KALOOMÉ



**Sin Fronteras (Long Distance, 2004)**  
 Based amongst the substantial population of Catalan Gypsies in the French city of Perpignan,

Kaloomé are a rootsy version of the Gipsy Kings, with the distinct advantage of female vocalist and dancer Sabrina Romero (reviewed in #27).



Kaloomé's lead vocalist, dancer and *cajón* player, Sabrina Romero

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