

SOUNDING OUT...

# BARCELONA

With its famed Modernista architecture, buzzing bar scene and easy sophistication, the 'capital of the Western Mediterranean' has become the It-place. Jordi Urpi goes beyond the guidebooks and gives the inside story on the Barcelona music scene



LEFT: Gaudí's famous Casa Milà (Paul Morrison)

BELOW LEFT: Take your partner by the hand – the sardana (Catalan Tourist Board)

BELOW: Local band Macaco

are regular dances, balls and parties. Every other day there is something to see and hear and when the festivals come round, the timetable is packed and cultural activity frantic.

On Fridays, the Plaça del Rei is the setting for popular traditional dance sessions and every weekend of the year, people meet in front of the cathedral at Plaça de Sant Jaume, for the *sardana*. Although it now tends to be an older crowd, the *sardana* is the Catalan dance and a symbol of identity, even danced during the dark Franco days when Catalan culture was rigorously repressed. It's a circle dance for men and women holding hands with rather stately music played by a wind band (*cobla*) featuring shrill flutes, dark, reedy Catalan oboes and brass. Twenty-somethings and morris dancing-phobes are more likely to go for the more physical *correfoc* (walk with firecrackers), the *castellers* (human towers) or the *balls de gegants* (dance with giants). The powerful sound provided by the *gralla* (wind instrument) or the *timbal* and the *caixa* (drum instruments) is more raucous and raunchy than the gentle *sardana*.

Barcelona's essence is paradoxical. As Catalunya's *cap i casal* (capital), it's a symbol of pride and of the local defence of a millennial culture. But as a port city, exchange – of money, languages and of customs – has been integral to its evolution. The paradox has given rise to a healthy, creative and richly mixed identity. During the Franco dictatorship there was a repression of regional music and identity throughout Spain and Barcelona and Catalunya suffered particularly because of its leftist history. Today, while there is a pride in Catalan music, the predominant view is open-minded and looking towards the future. It's

It's over a decade since the euphoria of the Olympics put Barcelona on the tourist map. Every weekend, thousands of visitors mingle with locals to take in the city's easy-going, vibrant mix of *seny* and *rauxa* – urbane sophistication and plain old fun. But well before the city's marketing department got into self-promotion, the Catalan nation fought a fierce battle for ethnic identity – leftist, Republican, intellectual and proud, the local culture goes far deeper than

EasyJet and cava. If this independent spirit and urban verve are reflected most famously in La Rambla and the Barri Gòtic and in the audacious architecture of Antoni Gaudí, there's a lot of less obvious art and tradition to be had behind the photogenic façades.

And in front of them – in this city of plazas and atmospheric streets – culture is largely an open-air affair. The climate, usually perfect and never painfully hot or cold, keeps the street spirit alive all year round and there





commonly said that to live and work in Catalunya is to be Catalan, regardless of one's origins.

Javier Patricio 'Gato' Pérez (1950–1990) was one of the most important fusioners. He arrived by boat from his native Argentina in the mid-60s and, after walking round the city quarters, fell in love with the *rumba catalana*, a Gypsy form and the only truly local musical style. Gato Pérez explored rumba's Caribbean character and added lyrics, in both Catalan and Spanish, to give the city a narrative. This mixing of cultures lives on in the streets thanks to bands like Macaco, Dusminguet, Ojos de Brujo, Cheb Balowski and Brazuca Matraca, who will all happily meld *corrandes* and jazz, flamenco and scratches, *batucada* and rock.

You might not expect it here in the cooler, calmer north but there's also a serious flamenco scene. From the run-down, marginal neighbourhood of El Somorrostro (now disappeared) came the unique talent of Carmen Amaya (1913–1963), the greatest *bailaora* of all times. Her legacy lives on in the performances of Miguel Poveda, Mayte Martín, Duquende and Ginesa Ortega. The *tablaos*, after several years churning out tourist shows, are now important as training centres for young *cantaors*, *tocaors* and *bailaors*.

In the streets of the Ciutat Vella, you might chance upon tango dancers, dixie bands, a flamenco trio, some elementary Balkan outfit, a didgeridoo, bagpipe or a *rabab*. And if you like percussion, follow the drumming to Ciutadella park.

Recent immigration enriches the scene further – biggish names are Gani Mirzo (Kurdish *oud* player), Nino Galissa (*mandinga* pop) and Nass Marrakech (Gnawa music).

Not everyone loves all this street music. Police have been known to confiscate street musicians' instruments and some neighbours think every note is just a bit more city noise produced by the musical equivalent of a mendicant. But it's always been the case of a few passionate producers and independent venue-owners keeping the scene alive – and no moral majority will break that section of Catalan culture.

## VENUE LISTINGS

Barcelona is now an international music capital so most tours stop by here – just last autumn, Orchestra Baobab, Gilberto Gil and Noa and Ali Qasimov came through. Check the local newspapers to find out what's happening each night at the city's big

venues – **Apolo, Bikini, La Paloma, Palau de la Música** and **L'Auditori**. For smaller clubs (see live music venues listed below), useful tools are *La Guia del Ocio* and *Movin' BCN* (bilingual Spanish-English). The essential world music listing in Barcelona (and across Spain) is *Batonga!* – a free, monthly magazine, widely available all over the city. As it tends to run out in four or five days from every point of distribution, you can check the exhaustive listings (an average of 100 concerts per month, plus festivals, only in Barcelona) at the *Batonga!* website, [www.mondosonoro.com](http://www.mondosonoro.com).



## LIVE MUSIC VENUES

➤ **Antilla** Hot rhythms by well-known local artists, who share the stage with young talents. The temperature rises every Sunday with a tremendous *descarga* – full-on Latin

blow-out. (Aragón 141, +34 93 451 45 64, [www.antillasalsa.com](http://www.antillasalsa.com))

➤ **Bantabá** This new arts space showcases, once a week, African music and combines food, drinks and tunes. (Passatge Sant Benet 9, +34 93 319 30 66, [www.arrakis.es/~bantaba/](http://www.arrakis.es/~bantaba/))

➤ **La Boîte & Jamboree** Both host free-for-all jazz and blues, with occasional tango, flamenco or bossa nova sessions. Concerts every night. (La Boîte, Avinguda Diagonal 477, +34 93 319 17 89; Jamboree, Plaça Reial 17, +34 93 319 17 89, [www.masimas.com](http://www.masimas.com))

➤ **Centre Artesà Tradicionàrius** The ideal corner to hear folk – Irish, Basque, Occitan or Galician music.

There are also Catalan dances and instruments workshops. (Travessia de St Antoni 6-8, +34 93 218 44 85, [www.tradicionarius.com](http://www.tradicionarius.com))

➤ **L'Espai** Class venue supported by the Catalan government promoting popular



Marti Escuder





Mas i mas

## RECOMMENDED CDS

Two recently released records which give an insight into Barcelona's music scene are *Barcelona Zona Bastarda* (a double CD) and *La Colifata*, a record released by street musicians with the help of Manu Chao.

Best place to purchase CDs is **Etnomusic**, Bonsuccés 6 (close to Las Ramblas), +34 93 301 18 84, [www.etnomusic.com](http://www.etnomusic.com)



## DINING WITH MUSIC

Barcelona's residents love eating out – but they also love talking while they do it. There are not many restaurants offering live music, apart from some Arabian and Irish joints. The best alternative is the *tablao flamenco*, where you can get a nice meal before the *cante* and *baile* performances. Two of the best: **Tablao de Carmen** (Avda. Marqués de Comillas s/n, Pueblo Español de Montjuïc, +34 93 325 68 95, [www.tablaodecarmen.com](http://www.tablaodecarmen.com)) and **Tablao Cordobés** (Ramblas 35, +34 93 317 57 11, [www.tablaocordobes.com](http://www.tablaocordobes.com)).



## FESTIVALS

➤ **Tradicionarius** Three months of traditional music from Catalan-speaking territories (Catalunya, Balearic Islands, Valencia). Fifteen years old and still going strong, this festival runs from mid-January to the end of March. (Travessia de St Antoni 6-8, +34 93 218 44 85, [www.tradicionarius.com](http://www.tradicionarius.com))

➤ **Flamenco de Ciutat Vella** This festival celebrates its tenth anniversary this spring. Three nights of double shows (*cante* plus *baile*) in an open-air stage in the city

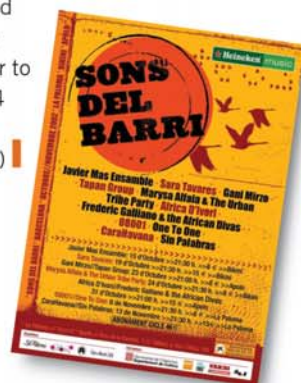
centre. Sells out every night. Last week of May. (+34 93 443 43 46, [www.tallerdemusics.com](http://www.tallerdemusics.com))

➤ **La Mercè** This is the annual street invasion at the end of September. In honour of Barcelona's patron saint, Virgin of La Mercè, hundreds of sound stages and activities are spread across the city. (+34 93 301 77 75, [www.bcn.es/merce](http://www.bcn.es/merce))

➤ **Músiques del Món** Highly rated, this is where you'll hear the most authentic traditional music: Asian *ghazal*, female choirs from

the Maghreb, Turkish whirling dervishes, Mongolian throat-singing... Also sells out very quickly. From October to first week in November. (+34 93 476 86 00, [www.fundacio.lacaixa.es](http://www.fundacio.lacaixa.es))

➤ **Sons del Barri** First aired last October, this festival mixes new faces from the international scene (Sara Tavares, Frederic Galliano) and Catalan musicians that come from all over the world (Africa d'Ivori, Tapan Group). From October to mid-November. (+ 34 93 451 61 16, [www.comunicart.info](http://www.comunicart.info))



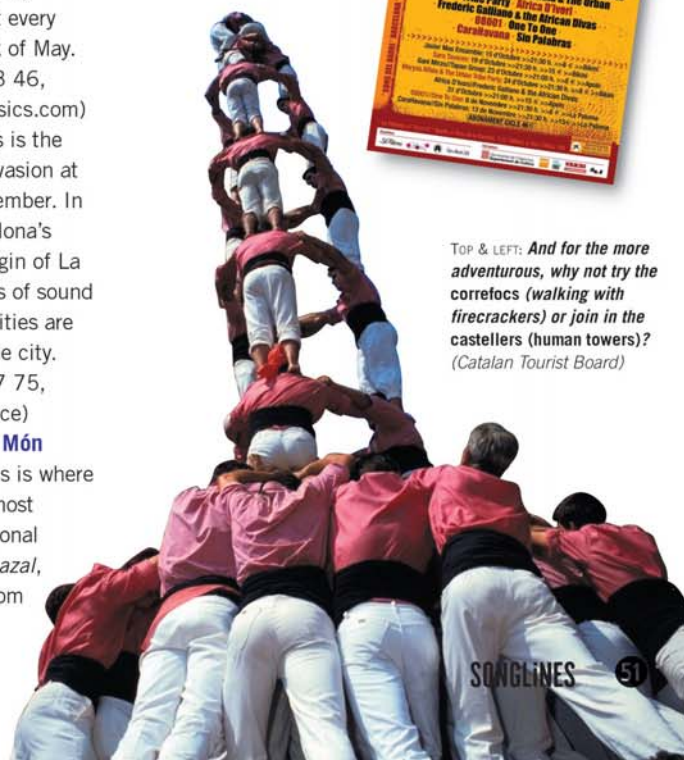
music, both local and international. (Travessera de Gràcia 63, +34 93 414 31 33, <http://cultura.gencat.es/espai/>)

➤ **Harlem Jazz Club** Fifteen-year-old space located in the old quarter, it's a small-sized venue but a cathedral for musicians living in Barcelona. Offers all kinds of roots music: Gnawa, Gypsy, Brazilian, *mandinga*, flamenco... unmissable. (Carrer Comtessa de Sobradiel 8, +34 93 310 07 55, [www.atiza.com/bar.asp?Bar=HARLEM](http://www.atiza.com/bar.asp?Bar=HARLEM))

➤ **Jazz Sí** Linked to the Taller de Músics school, with over 20 years' teaching modern, jazz and flamenco music behind it. Blues sessions on Mondays, Cuban *descarga* on Thursdays and flamenco on Fridays. Free entrance. (Requesens 2, +34 93 329 00 20, [www.tallerdemusics.com](http://www.tallerdemusics.com))



Jazz Si (Antonio Narvaez)



TOP & LEFT: *And for the more adventurous, why not try the correfoc (walking with firecrackers) or join in the castells (human towers)?* (Catalan Tourist Board)