



Rio Loco, Toulouse

Philip Sweeney sonically and gastronomically travels the world from France's 'Pink City', Toulouse, during Rio Loco's 20th anniversary celebrations

Successful city music festivals require suitability of place and of culture. Great musical ports like New Orleans or Havana are perfect. Though not a seaport, Toulouse's location made it a crossroads between Spain and France. Then air travel helped. The early 20th-century aviation industry saw legendary constructors like Latécoère and Blériot and intrepid aviators in the mould of Saint-Exupéry flying the pioneering Aeropostale route from the city's airfields down through Spain, Africa and Brazil to Buenos Aires. In the 1940s Spanish republicans fleeing Franco's massively strengthened the existing Spanish presence.

Musically, the murals in the magnificent city hall attest to the centrality of Toulouse in the world of the 14th-century southern French troubadours, a tradition claimed as

antecedent by the neo-Occitan groups of the 1970s and 80s. Prominent among these, Fabulous Trobadors made the city's Arnaud Bernard *quartier* a key location of Occitan cultural revival. The Hispanic membership of the population has accentuated other Latin implants. It's probably fanciful to link the Aeropostale Argentina connection to Toulouse's strong tango *aficion*, but certainly not the fact that Carlos Gardel, the greatest star of the genre, was born in Toulouse, in the popular quartier of Saint-Cyprien, home of the Rio Loco festival itself, furthermore. Apart from Gardel, the most celebrated musical son of Toulouse is Claude Nougaro, the singer who most notably infused French *chanson* with American jazz over the four decades up to his death in 2004. A statue of Nougaro adorns the centre of Toulouse and it was in his honour

that the forerunner of Rio Loco, then called the Festival Garonne, was founded 20 years ago. Younger music lovers doubtless think Zebda, Toulouse's own *keur* (North African origin) stars, much more famous than Nougaro, though younger ones still probably regard Zebda as *grand-papys*.

Of critical importance for a city festival is the actual site. Toulouse has a humdinger, the Prairie des Filtres, a long willow-planted meadow on the south bank of the Garonne, bordered on one side by the river and on the other by a monumental raised boulevard, the Cours Dillon with its quadruple row of the beautiful plane trees, the ends demarcated by the two historic bridges the Pont Saint Michel and the Pont Neuf. Named for the filters purifying the city's water supply housed there in the 19th century, the Prairie later became a



landing strip for the city's pioneering aviators before passing into use as a park and public event ground. By day the sun illuminates the elegant stone facades on the opposite bank, and at night the floodlit bridges and the distant dome of the Basilica of Saint Sernin provide an exquisite backdrop. The site is big enough to contain three sizeable outdoor stages, a small 'cultural village' of tented shops selling books and artefacts, areas for children's activities, and a street of bars and food stalls. But it's small enough to stroll easily throughout, and only crowded around the main stages for the big acts. And nobody sleeps there: this is no Glasto-WOMAD refugee camp megalopolis. The action is not restricted to the main festival site, with a dozen or so small venues around town offering subsidiary gigs over the week that follows the opening night.

The other vital ingredient of a good festival is of course the content, and if it's to avoid the pitfall of offering the same bands as all the other world music festivals, this must include something distinctive, ideally local. In recent years, Rio Loco director Hervé Bordier has focused annually on a different geographic theme: the Caribbean episodes have been notable for a strong Francophone Antillean presence. For this big 20th anniversary year, Bordier offered four simultaneous strands. Europe, Africa, Latin America were the first three. Rio Loco's world music content has always tended towards the international big names, and this year was no exception, with Goran Bregović giving his usual tip-top value and Hugh Masekela headlining for Africa. Other European stand-outs were Rocío

Márquez, her fair hair and *soigné* appearance belying a flair for serious deep flamenco song, the *fadista* António Zambujo, and the Greek band Imam Baildi, which is a better name if you overlook the culinary connotation, a baked aubergine dish, and think of the original meaning, 'the imam wept.'

Africa had the excellent Congolese Jupiter and Okwess International, no strangers to world music festivals, and a new outfit, Vaudou Game, another promising band with an iffy name, led by a dynamic singer-guitarist from Benin named Roger Damawuzan. Then there were more permutations on Gnawa fusion than you could shake an iron castanet at: Gnawa must surely soon depose dub reggae as the world muzak of choice. There was an African presence among the food franchises too, including stands run by local Senegalese, Cape Verdean and Antillean restaurants from Saint-Cyprien vying with good south-west French mobile bistros and loads of appetising regional Spanish. The food side of Rio Loco itself is good enough, but if you're not satisfied with that, it's easy to nip out and grab a table at



one of the many cafés and restaurants within ten minutes' walk on either bank of the river.

As for salsa – the music rather than the sauce – the Latin American contingent provided a welcome reminder of the pre-eminence of Puerto Rico in that genre in the shape of the 14-piece Bio Ritmo. Other Latinos included a rather messy Colombian electro-tropical pop outfit called Bomba Estéreo, their accomplished harpist compatriot Edmar Castañeda, and a big jolly samba band from Rio called Casuarina.

Rio Loco went big on Occitania this year, billing everyone from Massilia Sound System down: the Marseille-based stars of Occitan rap were celebrating their own 30th birthday. Fellow Marseillais male voice ensemble extraordinaire, Lo Còr de la Plana, were in hand, and the choir's leader Manu Théron also joined Arnaud Bernard's own human beatboxer Ange B of the Fabulous Trobadors in a neo-traditional bal outfit called Polifonic Sistem, to mention only around ten percent of the multifarious Occitan musical action.

Among all this, there was even room for Claude Nougaro, in the form of an accordion-rich homage concert-jam organised by the top squeezebox session pro Lionel Suarez, abetted by multinational guests such as the ubiquitous René Lacaille from La Réunion and his Malagasy neighbour Régis Gizavo. One could imagine the spirit of Toulouse's favourite crooner joining in Rio Loco's 20th celebrations eagerly, propped up at the bar beside Gardel and Saint-Exupéry. ♦

+ DATES The festival takes place in the middle of June, exact dates not yet confirmed
+ ONLINE www.rio-loc.org

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