

BIOGRAPHY

Ramón Jiménez Salazar is the name that appears on the passport of the renowned flamenco singer Diego El Cigala (Diego the Crawfish). He's called "Diego" as the result of a family argument during his baptism. The Cigala nickname came from the flamenco group Los Losada on one of his first tours. Due to the "fishy" nature of his nickname, inaccurate rumors spread that Diego had received this moniker from the legendary flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla (Shrimp of the Island).

He was born in December 1968 on Calle Provisiones near central Madrid's Rastro open market. His mother, Aurora Salazar Motos, was not a professional singer, but friends and family knew she possessed an amazing flamenco voice. Her brother was the renowned Salamanca-born flamenco singer Rafael Farina. His father José de Córdoba made a living on flamenco stages such as Torres Bermejas, El Corral de la Pachea and Arco de Cuchilleros.

The young Diego played soccer like a typical kid, but dropped everything when he heard flamenco music being sung. At the age of 12, he won first prize at the Youth Flamenco Contest of Getafe, Spain. He also won recognition on the state-owned network TVE's program *Gente Joven* (Young People).

Soon he began singing at flamenco performances as the guest of such greats as Cristóbal Reyes, Mario Maya, Manolete, Farruco, Manuel Camacho and El Güito. Musicians such as Camarón, Tomatito, Gerardo Núñez and Vicente Amigo invited him to record vocals on their albums.

Diego El Cigala released his solo debut album, *Undebel*, in 1997. Produced by David Amaya, it featured the guitar work of Amaya, along with Antón Jiménez, Paquete and Tomatito.

In 2000 he released his second album *Entre Vareta y Canasta* on the 18 Chulos label, owned by the actor Santiago Segura, the comedy duo Faemino y Cansado and the actor Wyoming, among others. Wyoming introduced Diego to Fernando Trueba, who listened to the album and was so impressed that he ended up directing its title track's music video.

His next album was *Corren Tiempos de Alegría* (We're In Times of Joy, 2001), which incorporated several Latin jazz musicians who had worked on Trueba's musical documentary *Calle 54*. Among them were two virtuosos - Bebo Valdés and Jerry González - who would go on to make an impact on his career. This album received a Latin GRAMMY® nomination for Best Flamenco Album.

With the Nuyorican Latin jazz great Jerry González, he recorded the album *Piratas del Flamenco*. Accompanied by a top-notch band, they toured Spain and Mexico in support of this album.

A dream came true for Diego in 2002 when he made his first performance at Madrid's historic Teatro Real (Royal Theater), where he was joined by the innovative young guitarist Niño Josele. This concert was captured on a live album, *Teatro Real*, that pointed the way forward for flamenco music.

Meanwhile, one of Fernando Trueba's featured musicians on *Calle 54*, the legendary Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés (1918-2013), was ready to collaborate with Diego. In September 2002, just shy of his 84th birthday, he urged the participants to move forward, emphasizing "You're young, I'm not." Fernando Trueba pushed to make sure it got done.

Keeping a low profile, Valdés and Cigala got to work. Before the end of 2002 the pair put together a concert entitled *Lágrimas Negras* (Black Tears) at Miami's Gusman Center for the Performing Arts (now the Olympia Theater). Critics hailed the recital, calling Valdés "a living legend of Cuban music" and Diego "the Sinatra of flamenco."

The results were so encouraging that even bigger plans were made for *Lágrimas Negras*. In 2003, billed as Bebo & Cigala, the duo released the critically acclaimed album *Lágrimas Negras*, a gorgeous fusion of flamenco, Latin jazz and bolero. Five-star reviews, word of mouth, and the pair's dazzling concert performances made this album a sleeper hit among tastemakers the world over for the next two years.

Barcelona's Premios Ondas (Wave Awards) gave the duo its Golden Microphone Award. They also won five Premios Amigo from Spain's recording industry association. *Lágrimas Negras* won the 2004 Latin GRAMMY® for Best Traditional Tropical Album. *The New York Times'* influential critic Ben Ratliff named it the best album of 2003.

While embarking on a marathon tour in support of *Lágrimas Negras*, Diego recorded as a guest of the flamenco guitar great Paco de Lucía (1947-2014) on his album *Cositas Buenas* (Good Things). Diego also recorded "Suspiros de España" (Sighs of Spain), the featured song on the soundtrack of the David Trueba film *Soldiers of Salamina* (2004).

In 2005, Diego returned to his flamenco roots by way of his concept album, *Picasso En Mis Ojos* (Picasso In My Eyes), paying tribute to the iconic painter Pablo Picasso. He was joined by such musicians as Paco de Lucía, Tomatito, Raimundo Amador, Josemi Carmona and Jerry González, with songs ranging from Rafael Alberti's classic "Se Equivocó la Paloma" (The Dove Made a Mistake) to contemporary pieces by Javier Ruibal, Javier Krahe and Carlos Chaouen. This album was certified Gold for its sales in Spain and Venezuela, and it went on to win the 2006 Latin GRAMMY® for Best Flamenco Album. Meanwhile, the success of *Lágrimas Negras* continued to reverberate, as its concert DVD *Blanco y Negro* took home the 2006 Latin GRAMMY® for Best Longform Music Video.

The retrospective *Cigala* (2006) looked back at his body of work with a five-CD compilation. That same year, at Seville's flagship flamenco festival, known as La Bienal de Flamenco, he shared the stage with Mali's Salif Keita, who is known as the Golden Voice of Africa. Diego again showed his respect and admiration for roots musicians from all over the world.

Among trips, concerts, collaborations and raising his sons Rafael and Diego, El Cigala found the time to record *Dos Lágrimas* (Two Tears, 2008). It featured Spanish and Cuban musicians reimagining boleros, Spanish coplas and Argentine tangos such as "Dos Gardenias," "María de la O," "Historia de un Amor" (Story of a Love) and "Compromiso" (Commitment). He also gave a tender performance on the title song of the Antonio Mercero movie *¿Y Tú Quién Eres?* (Who Are You?), which deals with Alzheimer's.

Continuing his interest in tango, Diego traveled to Argentina to make *Cigala&Tango*, a live album recorded April 27, 2010, at Buenos Aires' Gran Rex Theater. For two weeks leading up to the concert, he rehearsed and hung out with local musicians at a nearby house. From there, Diego and the musicians gave recitals in Córdoba, Argentina; La Plata, Argentina; and Montevideo, Uruguay; before returning to Buenos Aires for another performance. It was the warm-up to what would become a major tour.

The album featured Diego's longtime musicians. It also included two Argentine tango greats: the bandoneón player Néstor Marconi and the guitarist Juanjo Domínguez. Also featured were the prominent Argentine musicians Pablo Agrí (violin) and Diego Sánchez (cello). The

Argentine rock singer Andrés Calamaro also collaborated on this project, giving it his unique stamp.

In an innovative strategy, *Cigala&Tango* was bundled with Spain's *El País* newspaper upon its release in June 2010 and sold 74,000 copies in its first week. By October 2010 its sales in Spain had surpassed 100,000 units. It was certified Gold in Colombia and Argentina, and in 2011 won the Latin GRAMMY® for Best Tango Album.

Also in 2010, Diego made his cinematic debut in an unexpected way, voicing Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story 3* during a scene in which he goes into a trance and speaks with an Andalusian accent.

In 2010 he again won Best Ibero-American Singer at the Premio Lunas del Auditorio, given by Mexico City's Auditorio Nacional to honor the venue's most outstanding concerts of the year. He had also won this award in 2005, 2006 and 2008.

Cigala&Tango went worldwide with a 90-date tour in 2011-12 that played to over 160,000 fans. *The New York Times'* Ben Ratliff named it the concert event of the year.

He again delved into Argentine music with the 2013 album *Romance de la Luna Tucumana*, this time adding folk and romantic elements. Featuring the electric guitar of Diego "El Twangero" García, it gave a new spin on Diego's music. Duetting with Diego were the tango singer Adriana Varela and folk singer Mercedes Sosa. During its first week of release, the album was certified Gold in Spain. His tour in support of this album was a commercial and critical triumph, as reported in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*: "García's slide guitar and the dense groove of the milonga rhythm are the perfect accompaniment for El Cigala's voice. It's palpable. The tandem of Cigala and García, flamenco and milonga, could open a new sonic chapter, just as Cigala did with Bebo Valdés on *Lágrimas Negras*."

Romance De La Luna Tucumana in 2013 earned Diego his second Best Tango Album Latin GRAMMY®. His 2014-15 tour in support of this album ran for 78 concerts and included sold-out performances at New York's Carnegie Hall, and Los Angeles' Disney Hall.

In 2016, he launched his *Cigala&Piano* tour, where he performed his favorite songs accompanied only on piano. This 40-city tour included five performances in Santiago, Chile; and multiple dates in Buenos Aires; San José, Costa Rica; and Mexico City. During summer 2016 he performed 14 dates in Europe, duetting with the 85-year-old Cuban singer Omara Portuondo and giving attendees an unforgettable experience. He also made another stylistic leap, releasing his intensively researched salsa album *Indestructible*, due for release in late October 2016. *Indestructible* features an All-Star cast of old school "salseros" that include Oscar d'Leon, Larry Harlow, Bobby Valentin, Roberto Roena, Luis "Perico" Ortiz and many others from the "Fania" glory days. Also featured in *Indestructible* is Latin Jazz piano great, Gonzalo Rubalcaba.