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## *Beyond The Sun and Corroncho:* Chatting With Chris Isaak and Phil Manzanera

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### A Conversation with Phil Manzanera

**Mike Ragogna:** Phil, it's a pleasure to be talking with you, let's just jump right into your new album, *Corroncho*. "Complicada" is one of its more intense tracks.

**Phil Manzanera:** "Complicada" was the reason I did the *Corroncho* album, because that was actually written by Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders. She was married to Lucho Brieva who I did the album with. The reason we did this *Corroncho* album was because we said to Chrissie Hynde, "You should do some tracks sung in Spanish on your latest album." She had this track called "Complicated Person." We said, "Don't worry, we will translate it for you, we will sing it and show you how to sing it in Spanish. You can come into my studio, and we will just lead you through it." When she heard us singing it, she collapsed over laughing, she said, "You guys sound like Cheech & Chong or something, you should do a whole album"

based on this." Lucho said, "Oh that reminds me, in Colombia there are these guys called *corronchos* from the Barranquilla coast where he comes from and where my mother comes from. We could do it based on these two characters who are these "*corronchos*" who go out on this road trip, and that was the leading point for us going to do this album.

**MR:** I was going to ask your relationship with Lucho Brieva, how did you guys get together?

**PM:** I'm in this building right now that's three stories and it's this old Victorian warehouse in London. I'm set up with my studio on the ground floor, and one day, Chrissie Hynde and Lucho came in. She was about to go out and do a Pretenders tour and the floor above was for sale, and she didn't know that I lived there. I hadn't seen her for years and she said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well I've gotten divorced, and I've moved and I put my control room there and I'm living in this bitty, typical rock 'n' roll musician story. The money comes and the money goes." She said, "This is my husband Lucho," and I said, "You sound a bit South American." He said, "Yeah I'm from Colombia." I said, "Where in Colombia?" He said "Barranquilla." Needless to say, they bought the floor above. So, I live in the same building as him and we've become great friends. He's a sculptor, really, and works in metal.

Because of Chrissie and everything, we started writing songs, and just having a big laugh and having a load of fun, which lead to this album, which has a life of its own. It's got amazing reviews everywhere, and people love the humor in it even though they don't seem to understand what it's all about. It's baffling for me and for us. Then we started developing the thing a bit and we started to do a translation of a Bob Dylan song, "Forever Young." What we realized was that when you translate some of this stuff into Spanish, it acquires a different meaning. So, "Forever Young," became "Tu Juventud," which ended up sounding like a hymn for emerging countries in South America. Then we had guests come on and sing, and it was like a "We Are The World" for South Americans. The strangest thing was Chrissie actually ended up playing it to Bob Dylan. She came back the next day and said, "I played it to Bob over dinner." We said, "Oh that's so embarrassing," and she said, "He loved it." It's just bizarre.

**MR:** It's not bizarre at all, the reviews are not misplaced. As far as the album, I found myself laughing in spots from how you communicated through the performances, especially on songs like "Esta Vida Prestada" they're like mini-celebrations.

**PM:** What we did was we took those two characters, almost like cartoon characters. It's kind of like a Latino Gorillaz. We sort of took these characters, which were extensions of our personalities, and we used them as a vehicle to go through a lot of issues that have to do with Latinos and Latin society. Not only in South America, but with Latinos all over the world, and in a humorous way, we deal and go through all of those issues. Originally, we thought we would just do this for Colombia and it came out in Colombia and it created a complete shock. We came out on the front page of *El Tiempo*, which is the main newspaper there, because no one could believe that we called the album *Corroncho*, because it's politically incorrect to say it. It's the name that people from Bogota call the people from the Barranquilla coast. *Corroncho* literally is the name for this very ugly fish. It's so ugly that the fisherman, when they fish it out of the Rio Magdalena which goes into the Caribbean, they take one look at it and throw it back. They say this fish is so ugly that no one is going to want this fish, so they throw it back. It became a term of abuse that people from the capital call the people from the coast, like they're a bunch of *Corronchos*, and we named the album that. (laughs) It's kind of the Zappa mentality of, "You go right out and come out with the thing right there and present it on the table," and people go, "What are you doing?"

**MR:** (laughs) You are of Latin decent and you lived in Colombia for a bit.

**PM:** I was brought up in Cuba and left about three months after the revolution, then Venezuela. My mother was Colombian, my father was British, and I have a huge family in Colombia. I have like 60 cousins--it's a large family, so I've always had one foot in South America and one foot, bizarrely, in Europe. With Roxy Music, it had nothing to do with South America, so I have that duality.

**MR:** You also inherited your mother's Spanish guitar. That was your first guitar?

**PM:** On the first guitar, which is sitting in front of me right now, I learnt to play Latin folk songs in Havana in 1957. It's just what they call "accompanimento," which just means accompanying yourself on guitar. My mother had guitar lessons when she was in Havana; when you're six or seven, you just want to get your hands on whatever grown-ups are playing with. She just taught me a few chords and it got into my system. Remember, when I was there in Havana, this is the time when the people who eventually became the people from the Buena Vista Social Club were at their prime. They were people performing at the Tropicana Club and places like that. As a little child, I was there. I was watching and getting into the grooves of Latin music. It really gets in your DNA, and it was already in my DNA from my mother. That humorous side always comes out. It's always been a part of my life. For the first ten years in Roxy Music, nobody asked me about it. Eventually it's come out.

**MR:** You have a lot of guests on this album, not only Chrissie Hynde. You have Annie Lennox and Robert Wyatt among others. Who are some of your international guests and their importance?

**PM:** For instance there's a guy that I've produced, who's like the Spanish David Bowie, called Enrique Bunbury. Enrique Bunbury was the singer in the most famous Spanish rock 'n' roll band called Héroes del Silencio. Mr. Bunbury is still only 40 now. I've been producing him since he was twenty. He plays in places like LA to 20,000 people; last year, he played the biggest ever concert in Mexico City. He's going to be touring next month all over the States. He's on it...I've got a Catalan singer who's huge in Spain, I've got Chrissie, Annie from the Eurythmics, Robert Wyatt, I've got Paul Thompson from Roxy. I've got a great young Cuban pianist, Aldo Lopez Gavilan, who I'd helped to get a classical music scholarship here in the '90s, and he won all sorts of awards for playing. He's a great jazz pianist and he plays the very first bit of piano on the album, which they call, in Latin music, Tumbao, which is a riff really. He's a wonderful jazz saxophonist here, an Israeli guy, and a wonderful Israeli bass player, so it's very multi-national. Mixing it all up is what I like to do.

**MR:** Look at the kinds of music you've been associated and the artists you've been associated with. You've been with Stevie Wonder; you produced David Gilmour; you worked with Steve Winwood, Bob Dylan, Keith Richards... And there's Roxy Music. When you're doing your solo work and projects like this one, are you working on them simultaneously with producing projects by others?

**PM:** It's quite simple, really. I got into the music business because I wanted a social life. (laughs) I wanted to meet people; through music, you can meet people and it brings people together. People I work with have been friends of mine for the last forty years. I met David Gilmour when I was 16, I met Robert Wyatt when I was 17, I met Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno when I was 21. I knew Chrissie when she first started. Annie was a supporting act with the Eurythmics on the Roxy Music tours before they were the Eurythmics. I see them socially, I live next door to David Gilmour, I see him every other week. Our spouses get on and my wife does Pink Floyd's press. Robert Wyatt comes and stays here and records his albums in my studio. It's like working with your friends, it's not like business; it is part of life. When I work with Spanish speaking acts--I produce a lot of Spanish speaking acts--some of them become friends. So, you see them socially and they happen to be in the studio while you're working on something, and you say, "Why don't you stick something on that. It's just one big musical family." I don't compartmentalize,

there's no plan. It's the same as Roxy. I will tell you the truth, there was really no master plan; we just fumbled along doing what we felt like doing. That's where there are so many solo projects and things. We were doing Roxy Music in January, February, and March this year. Me and Andy didn't want to keep touring, so Bryan continued doing the same show as Bryan Ferry.

**MR:** When you get together with Bryan Ferry, what's the creative process like?

**PM:** With Roxy, its writing has always been done the following way, really. I do a demo and he would try to write a top line to it. It wouldn't be the conventional way you would write, it's not like I've got this couple of chords and these words. Conventional songwriters will sit down and throw things backwards and forwards. Roxy was never like that. We would do all of the music and say, "There you go, try and write something on top of this." Sometimes, it worked. Sometimes, it was a disaster. Overall, with the Roxy albums, we had a good hit rate, and sixty-five percent of it was really good, and the rest is average going down to rubbish.

**MR:** Your run of albums such as Manifesto, Flesh And Blood, and Avalon established Roxy Music's "dance" image.

**PM:** Some people hate that period, and some people love it. It's really funny that different countries and different places loathe Avalon but love the first one, and others came to Avalon when they first got into Roxy, and hate the beginning stuff. It's quite compartmentalized because it's difficult for us when we talk about this because you get people taking sides. We just went from A-to-B; we were just doing our jobs, so to speak.

**MR:** When I think of Avalon, I think of the era and a sound that was very mimicked, especially by many European "new romantic" acts. In some respects, I feel that it helped establish the more elegant sounds of the '80s. Do you agree with that?

**PM:** Well, no, not really. In some countries, they did. But in England, among critics, the latter became too smooth, it lost our mojo and the early thing, when Eno was in it was really the best period.

**MR:** Well, that's critics. I can remember the time and bands doing the Europop dance thing, and they were definitely mimicking you. I think you were the forefathers of a lot of that music.

**PM:** It's vaguely flattering when you think about it for fifteen seconds and then you've got to keep looking forward.

**MR:** I think that was just a beautiful period for your influential music.

**PM:** I totally understand, and people say that all of the time. Sometimes, you can hear a little bit of influence and sometimes you think, "I can't hear us in any of those bands." Maybe it was the ideas behind what we were doing, and not literally copying the music.

**MR:** Of course, yes. And two Roxy songs of that period are classics..."Dance Away" and "More Than This."

**PM:** We had great trouble, live, persuading Bryan to sing "More Than This." He just doesn't like singing it at all. A number of times, I would say, "People like to hear it, for God's sake." On the Roxy tour, we played it about four times in sixty gigs. Luckily, we recorded one. He just wasn't into it.

**MR:** Was it the octave jumps?

**PM:** I think it probably has to do with the fact that at the time, he could sing very high, and as you get older, your voice lowers. I think he finds it a bit uncomfortable.

**MR:** Ah. Okay, back to **Corroncho**. I want to ask you about a couple of songs on here. "Angeles Y Lobos?"

**PM:** Yes, that's "Angels And Wolves."

**MR:** It starts out with a signature Spanish guitar. Are you aware of how sensuous a part you're playing might be and then build on that?

**PM:** Absolutely, and remember, we're dealing with these two characters here. In this relationship of these two Latino men. Lucho is the Latin lothario, the lover and the sneaky guy in the whole album. The funny thing is when I was writing with him, I was looking at him because he's a good looking guy and had a lot of girlfriends at the time. I was thinking, "I was writing about you and your relationships. I didn't really realize it, and we were having a lot of fun like this." This is a sort of "Bolero," which is a type of Latin love song. This guy who obviously has no chance of having a proper relationship is singing this love song. It's so ironic; this is the same guy who was driving the low rider car before. Now he's singing this traditional Latin love song. Because we're superimposing it on these cartoon characters almost, it's much easier to get into the mood of it. It's almost a road trip that these guys go on--it's the adventures of the *Corroncho*. So, throughout the album, there's a lot of things that happen. "Noche De Putas" is about a party that actually happened on the floor below here, while I was asleep upstairs. This party occurs where he's chatting up this girl, and he asks what she does for a living, and she says she's a prostitute. Then she breaks the toilet in his downstairs and he's stuck at five in the morning trying to stop the water from coming out with his finger. It's the adventures of these characters, but half of it is true.

**MR:** How about the song "Diario."

**PM:** What happens is the album finishes, and it's us writing our diaries and I'm upstairs where I am. This is where real life melds with these cartoon characters. He's downstairs, where he actually lives, working. I'm writing my diary about my experiences about doing the album and thinking about polluted ideas and politics and the invasion of Iraq. He's downstairs trying to chat up women on the phone and trying to get his old girlfriend to come back around and they're all rejecting him. It turns out that Phil, the guy upstairs, is going out with his ex-girlfriend. It's a weird sort of thing that turns from a story into a reality and back again.

**MR:** And there's always humor.

**PM:** The other tradition in South America is writing humorous songs. When I was growing up in Venezuela and I would go up to Colombia, there would always be the latest song, which had a cheeky lyric in it. It would add lots of innuendos and humors, basically. Underlying that, we slipped in all of these other issues, which are really important issues, but we put it across in a humorous way. It's always better to put things across like that. You get to have things stay with people longer if you don't put it in a very serious obvious way.

**MR:** Speaking of humor, wasn't your TV debut playing the hands of the guitarist on *Red Dwarf*.

**PM:** You know about *Red Dwarf* in America then?

**MR:** It was a great series, but it didn't catch on here. *Doctor Who* and other British shows did, but *Red Dwarf*, not so much.

**PM:** Yeah, that was great fun. At the time, it was very popular here and it was fun to go down and be the hands of that character. It's a great actor's trick, I put my hand through the other persons back and it looks like it's their hands. They put the guitar in front, obviously didn't film any of me, just my hands, and it looks like that guy was playing.

**MR:** What guitars are you playing lately?

**PM:** Gibson has asked me to try out their new revolutionary guitar called Firebird X. I'm famous for using a red Firebird, but this guitar is quite different. I'm actually trying them out in the studio now...there's four of them. I've decided to try and write some new songs for the next album literally today. I took a

picture of it and it's going to be up on the Gibson website in the States. There may be a little footage of me starting to use this. That is hot off the press, literally an hour ago.

**MR:** A scoop! Obviously, you're also playing some acoustic guitars.

**PM:** Yeah, although another thing about this Firebird X is that it can simulate an acoustic guitar. I was trying that out a little bit. I have some lovely Gibson acoustics, and I have my guitar that was my mother's guitar in Cuba. A Gibson Elvis Costello guitar, which is a real beauty, I saw around David Gilmour's house, and I said, "God, I need one of these."

**MR:** What advice do you have for new artists?

**PM:** My biggest advice for new artists is listen to the biggest range of music you can because all of that stuff goes into your brain and comes out at some point. If you limit yourself to types of music, you won't have such a great pallet of colors to work from. That is my biggest bit of advice. I was brought up with South American music, then brought to London with The Beatles and the '60s in London, jazz, funk, soul, rock 'n' roll, r&b... Now, I just listen to all new stuff all of the time.

**MR:** Any parting words of wisdom?

**PM:** Keep healthy. (laughs) Your health is your wealth.

**MR:** I so appreciate your time. All the best with your exhilarating *Corroncho*.

**PM:** In times of possible grayness, this is what we need, cheering up.

**MR:** Yes, sir. Thank you again Phil.

**PM:** Thanks so much, Mike.

**Tracks:**

1. Lowrider
2. Complicada
3. Rosa
4. Para Ti Nengon
5. Suavecito
6. Angeles Y Lobos
7. Esta Vida Prestada
8. Cancion Para La Que Sea
9. Noche De Putas
10. Tu Juventud
11. Coyote
12. Diario

*Transcribed by Theo Shier*