

# el Periòdic News

## Artur Blasco

RESEARCHER AND POPULARISER OF CATALAN FOLKLORE

### The Ancient Catalan Songs Help us Keep our Traditions Alive

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Artur Blasco i Giné (Barcelona, 1933) is a legend in the world of music, a researcher and populariser of Catalan folklore, author of 10 volumes of ancient songs from 229 Catalan Pyrenees villages that have been passed on by mouth for generations, collector and owner of some 250 accordions, and the current organiser of the annual Pyrenees accordionists' meeting. We talked about the history of the accordion and its evolution, as well as the importance of ancient Catalan songs for the evolution of the Catalan language and the history of Catalonia in general.



DIALOGUES WITHOUT BORDERS

—You are the author of 10 volumes of ancient Catalan songs and are now preparing to publish an 11th volume, which is scheduled to be presented this October. Please tell us about this collection.

—We are talking about a very interesting and important work. This collection is made up of songs that our grandparents sang to us. Each Catalan family had its own songs. Some of

the performers couldn't write, read, or tell the time by a clock, but they sang amazing songs that I have written down and transcribed into musical notes. Many of the performers are no longer alive, but the story is timeless.

—What did our grandparents sing about?

—About everything! Thanks to these songs, we can learn what fashion was like at that time,

how people treated the church or their neighbours. And it's very important to say that all of these songs were recorded without any censorship.

These songs will not only help us keep our traditions alive — they represent the evolution of the Catalan language and Catalan culture in general. It is important that our future generations know about the traditions of Catalonia.

A total of 12 volumes with

1,537 songs by 417 performers from 229 cities in Catalonia will be issued. Vinyl records with recorded vocal parts are also available.

—Could you tell us about your private accordion collection and museum in Alt Urgel (Catalonia)?

I have enough accordions to tell us about the history of this instrument: there are about 250 of them, and most of them are donated. Together with my wife, we created this museum and managed to get a loan to buy the house where the museum is now situated. It was half-ruined and nobody was buying it, so we renovated it.

The museum is unique in Catalonia. Mostly friends and friends of friends come here. Others who want to visit it have to sign up in advance.

I have a co-operation agreement with the Ethnological Museum of Montjuïc at the Barcelona City Council. Sometimes I go there and hold conferences. I also collaborate with the Quart de Poblet (Valencia).

—Why the accordion?

—The accordion is not just an instrument — it is an orchestra. Moreover, it contributed to the development of pair dances in Europe, because before the accordion appeared, only group dances were danced. So it was

thanks to the accordion that the inhabitants of towns and villages could embrace their women neighbours by the waist while dancing. In other words, this instrument was the basis for the development of a new kind of communication.

**—How did your passion for this musical instrument begin?**

—I am a biologist by profession, but since childhood I have been fascinated by music. But in my second year of university, I decided to postpone my studies and see the world. I hitchhiked and didn't return home for six years. I travelled to Syria, Lebanon, Beirut. Then I settled in Stockholm, where I worked on a cod boat for a while. We went fishing in Greenland, and when we returned from a voyage to unload in the port of Reykjavik, one of us played the diatonic accordion. The journey back took a week, because of course the cod ship was very slow. So he played, and we sang, because there was nothing else to do.

Then I returned to Catalonia and never parted with the accordion again.

**—Can we say that the accordion is the traditional musical instrument of the Pyrenees?**

—It disappeared from Catalan land after the Second World War, because the houses that produced accordions stopped making diatonic accordions



and started producing chromatic ones. Factories opened up all over Europe, America, and as a result, diatonic accordions disappeared.

But in the mountainous areas of Europe they have survived (in Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Bavaria, France) ... and in the Pyrenees as well.

**—And what kind of accordion do you prefer?**

—I am very minimalistic. I like to play the diatonic accordion that was implemented throughout Europe and throughout the world. As the first instrument, it is the most primitive, and the most traditional.

**—How has accordion music evolved over time?**

—Today, diatonic accordion music, characteristic of the Pyrenees and especially of the Alt-Urgel, is at its highest level. For the most part it develops according to tradition, but young people often innovate, as Astor Piazzolla or Kepa Junkera used to do. There are musicians who stick to a pure style, as I do, and there are those who develop with innovations in creativity.

**—Are there any brands of Catalan accordions?**

—There was one who had the same surname as me, but we are not related, Estanislao Blasco. He had workshops in the Gracia neighbourhood of Barcelona. But people from here used to go to Perpignan for accordions.

**—You are the organiser of the Pyrenees accordions' meeting. Could you tell us about this event?**

—The first meeting took place on the 2nd of August 1976, and has been held every year since then. We are connected with the whole world. Every July, accordions from Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Ireland, France, Portugal, Colombia, Canada, Italy, Dominican Republic, Finland and other countries come here.

Similar festivals are also held in Novosibirsk (Russia). I have been to Novosibirsk many times and I was impressed. I can say that Russian culture is a universe, indeed! ●

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