

Interview with **Big Max Leo**, Photographer

by *Agathe C.*

Paris, 7 mars 2011

A week of artistic encounters begins in Granada on 18 March 2011 as the jazz and flamenco club El Tabanco del Tio Gregorio features Big Max Leo's jazz photos for its exhibition ¡Músicos de la Ostia ! More than an exhibition ¡Músicos de la Ostia ! is a call to creativity and cultural diversity: jazz and flamenco concerts will be the backdrop for encounters and exchange about visual and musical media among music pros and amateurs from all over Europe. Notably ¡Músicos de la Ostia ! will provide a unique occasion for the Paris based Big Max Leo, Photographe d'Avant-Garde, to exhibit photographs from her many years on the European Music scene and to describe the role of her newly-founded association for the promotion of the arts in the years to come.

The name Big Max Leo is unusual. How did it originate?

People often ask me this question. Most assume that it's a man's name, a big black man's name! As you can see, I am pretty far from that description. 'Max' comes from my family name, 'Maxence'. 'Leo' is my birth sign. The 'Big' is borrowed from the blues tradition of referring to blues musicians by their appearance: Memphis Slim, Big Mama Thornton, Little Walter. I adopted Big Max Leo over 30 years ago and it stuck with me.

Hmm. Let's try to get a bit closer to your personality here. What's your best quality?

I am not sure I have one! (laughs)

Well, then your worst?

I am very selective. That can be bad ...

OK. Your biggest success ?

My daughter. She's thirty now and arrived on Earth quite by chance. My best error. My biggest success.

How did you start doing photography?

My father was the family photographer. He inspired me and gave me the fundamentals which I've never forgotten.

What does being a photographer mean to you?

It's been part of my life since I began at 13. Since taking pictures is a difficult way to make a living, I've had periods where I've done less of it because I didn't have the time and I've always had to think about paying the rent. All the same, photography has always been there for me. When I'm not shooting I'm taking pictures all the same: it's how you look at things, get ideas, be in a state of readiness ... Photography is a way of being...

When are you satisfied with a photo you've done?

Obviously, when I exhibit a photograph, I'm satisfied with it. But as with all the arts, photography has to be shared to be appreciated. This is even more important when I photograph musicians. Since it's art on art, if the musicians are satisfied, it means that my pictures reflect what they are doing, what they are.

Is there anything particular about taking pictures of musicians? Do you have to have a special approach, pay particular attention to...

Yes. Definitely, yes. First, I've got to love the music. Otherwise I have a lot of trouble taking photos of the people making it. I don't work well if I don't feel something positive there. I'm looking for "feeling" pictures, not technically perfect pictures.

My second criteria is that the musicians must feel totally free and comfortable, and sometimes you've got to know when NOT to take any pictures.

Do you mean, to not be intrusive?

Yes. You've got to really pay attention, have a real understanding of what's happening on stage. What's important for me is to know the musicians, to come and hear them several times without bringing along my camera.

Do you have a favorite type of music?

What's important is that the music speaks to me that there are feelings that I relate to. I love the Blues because I feel it directly. But it can be Flamenco, too, or Funk or Jazz as long as it has depth. There are surely types of music I've never heard that could have the same effect on me as the Blues.

Do you have a favorite musician or musicians?

There are so many I'd forget one if I started naming them. They go from James Brown to Paco de Lucia by way of Prince, Muddy Waters and Steve Potts.

Do you play an instrument yourself?

I'm a beginner electric bass player. I've had the instrument for 30 years but I only started playing it about a year and a half ago. It hasn't changed anything about my vision of music, though. I already knew playing wasn't easy: that's why I took so long to take up the bass!



What's your greatest professional success?

My greatest professional success is yet to come. I have just created the cultural association "Big Max Leo Productions" whose purpose is to create cultural events which protect the artists involved. I don't mean protection in the sense of the ASPCA! I mean doing projects where artists are respected whatever the size of the project.

Interview with **Big Max Leo**, Photographer

by *Agathe C.*

Paris, 7 mars 2011

There are thousands of culture organizations. What's different about yours?

Big Max Leo Productions isn't in competition with any other groups. The English word "non-profit organization" better expresses my aims than the French word "association". I'm not looking to create shows that are "successful", but rather shows that come from artists and what they want to do. That's the most important thing: that the show comes from the artists. It's a philosophy, an ethic. And by the way, we decided during our first general assembly to adopt the voluntary social responsibility norms called ISO 26000. Our statutes and rules of conduct all go in this direction; we're strict enough that we can ensure the protection of artists and their projects from every point of view.

What kind of projects?

Concerts and exhibitions like ¡Músicos de la Ostia! which is our premiere event. We will also be doing pedagogical projects conceived and directed by artists. We're also looking at art book publishing. In short, respect artists and enable them to share their projects – which are not always commercially viable or are very difficult to get out to the public.

Big Max Leo Productions is a product of our times?

We're not living in a very nice era. Money rules almost everywhere and there's less and less place for art. Even in the art world, money grubbing has become a way of life. Thirty years ago things were different: artists could evolve in more favorable conditions. So, it's more and more urgent to protect people who want to do something other than make money, but who, like everybody else, have to feed and house themselves.

You'll see the Granada project as a "success" if...

If the music is deep. If the musicians bring out the great vibe. If the public is good and open.

How did you discover the Tabanco del Tio Gregorio?

It's a Flamenco and Jazz club that exhibits Antonio Valentin's incredible water colors. It's manager, Javier Lopez, asked me to exhibit my photographs. The event was born from that. We thought about how to do that and came up with the idea of a Flamenco concert as an opener. Big Max Leo Productions and the Javier Lopez's own non-profit share the same values and he is more in contact with Flamenco artists and me with Blues artists.



You are bringing up the idea of exchange and sharing again. Is it important for you that Big Max Leo Productions premier event is happening in Spain and not in France?

Yes, going to another country creates an exchange between music, languages and cultures. Once you're abroad you see things differently. For a photographer, it's very inspiring. And then, we want to be international in our scope. We've got to get a move on! We want some real mixing and encounters!

Finally, let's dream a bit.

Who would you like to attract to Big Max Leo Productions?

Honorary members? What would be your most amazing connection, your most beautiful project?

Since we're talking about Spain, I'd love to meet Paco de Lucia. That would be some honorary member (laughs)! More seriously, I'd like us to establish our credibility as an organization. Not just as a dream, but in reality. If the Granada Happening is a success, the rest will follow...

Big Max Leo's significant dates ...

- 1957 arrives on Planet Earth
- 1974 photographic debut
- 1977 becomes a mother
- 1978 becomes a slave in a multinational
- 1978-1998 parties every single night ☺
- 1978-2010 many exhibitions in Paris and around France, photos published in a variety of magazines and as album covers for a variety of musicians
- 2006 becomes a grandmother
- 2008 takes her first music lesson
- 2010 exhibits at the Académie du 13^e and Ateliers du Chaudron, Paris
- 2011 exhibits in Granada, at the Tabanco Jazz & Flamenco Club ... Olé!
- 2012 continues her career change to bass player of the Back Guard ☺

El Tabanco Club

Special Program Holy Week 2011

Tuesday, April 19 (21:00h)

Jazz : Jul Frayssinet, Remi Dugué

Friday, April 22 (21:00h)

Flamenco : Yerbita, Antonio Carmona

Saturday, April 23 (14:30h)

Opening of the exhibition "Músicos de la Ostia" by **Big Max Leo** Photographer

Saturday, April 23 (19:00h)

El Tabanco Experience Artistas invitados

El Tabanco

Cuesta de San Gregorio 24, Albaicín, Granada
Reservations 662 13 70 46

www.eltabanco.com



www.bigmax.org