

Robert 'Robi' Svärd

There's a new guitarist making waves in flamenco – and he's not Spanish, but Swedish. He tells **Chris Moss** about his conversion

Swedish-born Robert 'Robi' Svärd started playing Beatles songs with his dad at the age of four. Three years later he began taking classical guitar lessons, dabbled with the electric guitar and then, after moving to Sydney when he was 14 to live with an uncle – a violinist at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra – he studied at the city's Conservatorium of Music. Now 40, he has just released a debut album, *Pa'ki Pa'ka*, of fiery, flamboyant flamenco, recorded at Granada's famous FJR Estudios de Grabación.

He says his conversion to flamenco guitar took place in Sydney in 1998. "It was during my last year at the Con. I came home late one night to my residential college and heard somebody playing flamenco guitar amazingly well next door. It was Niño Josele, who had just won the largest flamenco guitar competition in Spain and was in Sydney as part of a 'Gypsy' segment at the Sydney Festival that year."

Josele would go on to be an acclaimed leader of the emerging 'new flamenco' scene but back then he was a rising star. He and Svärd got on well and hung out for ten days.

"I immediately fell in love with the way the instrument is used when playing flamenco," says Svärd. "By that stage I was getting quite tired of playing music not written for my instrument at the Conservatorium. It felt like for once I was playing something meant for this – and only for this – instrument. I had, of course, previously listened to a lot of flamenco, but never really had the opportunity to learn from anyone. I graduated and then moved to Seville, where I stayed for five years."

It might seem something of a cultural leap from Sweden to Seville,

but Svärd comes from what he calls a "very mixed family": his mother was born in India to parents of Indian, Armenian, British and Portuguese extraction, and his father was Swedish. While he lived in Australia, his parents were living in China.

"I don't really identify myself as being solely Swedish," he says.

When living in Seville, he worked with singer El Pechuga, and also had occasional gigs with legendary flamenco-blues band Pata Negra, led by brothers Rafael and Raimundo Amador. On *Pa'ki Pa'ka*, he is joined by Granada-based singer Alfredo Tejada and percussionist Miguel Rodríguez 'El Cheyenne.' Svärd says there was never any sense of his being

an outsider to the Andalusian scene. "Alfredo had long before made it very clear to me that he loves my music. He told Cheyenne about me, and after listening to some of my pieces he too said that he'd love to record with me."

He now lives in Gothenburg, where his album launch at the local Konserthuset in April was a sell-out. "It was an amazing evening," he says. "The next move is touring. At the moment we're scheduling a week-long tour through Sweden and Spain, but we'll also travel to Germany, France, possibly the UK and America as well as Australia in the near future." ♦

♦ **ALBUM** *Pa'ki Pa'ka* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue, see p73



Stig Magnus Thorsen