

## THOUGHTS ON THE PASSING OF PACO DE LUCIA (PART 2: A MORE PERSONAL VIEW)

I've been writing about the pivotal role Paco de Lucia had in the development of modern flamenco. In his defense, I don't want to leave him as a two-dimensional person whose main contribution was to have a huge impact on flamenco – which is, furthermore, if you'll pardon my saying so, a musical form that most audiences have no real understanding of; they cannot; it is literally foreign to them – fully as much as Ulan Bator and Beijing are foreign to us even though we may have seen a PBS travelogue about them and spent a week or two in each. Anyway, I'd like to take a minute to fill in some of the blanks here.

Paco was, in a sound-byte, simply without equal. He played the guitar with more verve and impeccable technique than anyone else ever had before, and I don't think he has an equal among his contemporaries. He did make significant contributions toward bringing flamenco out of its provincial closet and onto the world stage, from where it has won many admirers and adherents the from all around the globe. He did this, as I've mentioned, through his introduction of new rhythms and melodies, inventive syncopation and counterpoint, his willingness to allow his flamenco to absorb and express other musical influences, and of course his flawless technique. In the process, I think Paco -- and the entire flamenco music/ recording/film/touring culture that was with him and behind him -- did change something essential about flamenco that is forever lost. What is gained in its stead is a new sensibility, a new sound and look that have value within a different context, and ever so much more commercial clout. To me, personally, the loss of something authentic and unique outweighs the gain of yet one more thing that is zippy and exciting and commercially viable. However, I say again: I think that flamenco's birth pains and transformation into something other than what it started out as were inevitable the moment anyone started to play for paying audiences rather than for friends and family.

As it happens, in Paco's case, it is important to note that those audiences pressured him to dazzle them with his technique and to stop wasting his time in accompaniment of song. I quote from D.E. Pohren's book Paco de Lucia and Family: The Master Plan (ISBN: 0-933224-62-1, pp. 70-71): "Accompanying was not destined to be Paco's role in flamenco. Even when he still wanted to participate in the festivals as an accompanist,

the public would not permit it, for Paco had grown too big for an accompanying role. As I have written elsewhere, the last time I saw Paco accompany, he was doing a beautiful job bringing out the best in the singer Fosforito when the audience began getting impatient; the public at first timidly began suggesting (out loud) that Paco play something spectacular, then soon began demanding it in a most raucous manner, drowning out both Fosforito and Paco. So Paco had to open up with an impossible *picado*, some far-out chording, some complex counterpoint, all of which drove the audience wild with approbation and killed beyond repair the inspiration of Fosforito's *cante*. Paco was hopelessly embarrassed, Fosforito managed a thin smile, and the insensitive masses thought it was all great."

Speaking of the song and the singing, it was as I mentioned above CENTRAL to the old flamenco – whose gatherings were, essentially, sing-and-tap-and-clap-and-cheer-alongs. Everyone knew the songs, everyone knew the *compas* (the rhythms) and everyone joined in the revelry. And it was that ACTIVE PARTICIPATION that made it an INTIMATE experience. (Let me ask you: when is the last time you got together with friends and sang and danced?) It is also important to note that authentic flamenco is sung in Calo', the gypsy language, and not Spanish. As soon as the flamencos toured outside of Andalusia, non-gypsy audiences wouldn't have understood the words being sung (I speak Spanish and I can't understand half the sung words, even after years of listening to recordings). More importantly, the new audiences wouldn't have known the songs anyway; their experience would have been every bit like your attending the opera and seeing some actors in flashy costumes sing incomprehensible things loudly in another language. I mean, isn't that what seeing your last flamenco performance was essentially like for you??? Modern flamenco is sung in Spanish, of course, but a bit of the original sensibility has been lost and flamenco has become something else in the greater transition. The bridge for this seems to have been guitar itself, as part of the entertainment-value of rhythmic musical performance. Whether or not anyone can understand or be moved by the sung words, pretty much any audience could and can relate to guitar playing. As a matter of fact, this circumstance speaks to the most visible tectonic shift in flamenco: originally the guitar's function was to accompany the singer, but in a lot of the new stagey flamenco everything is there to accompany the guitar . . . and the various instruments often take center stage and riff off each other.

Despite pressures to dazzle his audiences guitaristically Paco de Lucia

actually did have a long career in being an accompanist to, and collaborator with, singer Camarón de la Isla; they were close friends for many years and they made many fine recordings of flamenco song and guitar. However, Paco experienced his own tectonic shift when Camarón died of a drug overdose some years ago. The drug use itself was an artifact of how many flamenco artists were now traveling in a modern and dangerous fast lane of a type that hadn't existed before. The effect of this loss of a close friend on Paco was that he was pushed into a deep grief for a year, during which time he hardly touched the guitar. When he came out of it, his music was more of the modern-band-type that I mentioned eight paragraphs ago.

Let me say another thing about flamenco music itself. I'd stated at the beginning of this writing that the old flamenco was by gypsies, for gypsies, and about gypsies, and that the very best of it occurred in private surroundings that included friends and neighbors . . . who ENJOYED IT DEEPLY. I first encountered this music many years ago through recordings, which are never as compelling as a live performance; and even now I listen to recordings much more than I go to live sessions. But even so, the MUSIC itself was, from the beginning, a grabber for me. *It made me happy to listen to it.* I fell in love with the rhythms, the sensibility and flow of the chording, and the depth and texture of musical expression of this exotic and out-of-the-way music that, frankly, was somehow accessible. And I'm far from the only person to have had this reaction; something about flamenco had this power . . . under which spell I still listen and play guitar today (I play flamenco). When I say "live sessions" I really do mean that: that music is ALIVE. The rhythms themselves are the heartbeat that one can tap one's foot and clap one's hands to. I think that this must be the "purity" that people speak about and that I mentioned before. And, for me, this is what has been lost in flamenco's modern guise: the new flamenco is complex and flashy, and even amazing, but it's not compelling to me. It lacks emotive power. It's lost the steady, rhythmic heartbeat. Instead, it stands outside my door and bangs on it with technique, speed, and novel introduction/juxtaposition of instrumentation – but I don't sense that it has any real interest in entering my space and saying anything personally significant to me. I do think that a lot of it is about the recording obligations and performance careers of the artists – which, quite honestly, aren't the reason I buy the tickets.

Since we're speaking of change, you have probably heard the cliché about how there's change and then there's change. Flamenco grew out of the life conditions of its early adherents that I described earlier and it was, in

fact, CONTINGENT on them – exactly as everything (including ourselves and everyone we know) are dependent on conditions and context. And these are tricky quantities: change one thing and other things change too. I'll give you an example of what I mean: One of the most famous of all flamencos was Diego del Gastor, who lived in the town of Moron de la Frontera, and who died in 1973 of a heart attack. Diego was a giant of “authentic” flamenco who had influenced many musicians before he died, as well as a whole new generation that has come since. Diego had been having fainting spells for a while; as it turned out in retrospect these were symptoms of cardiac insufficiency, but there was no doctor available in Moron to diagnose him and possibly forestall his death (there was a nurse/midwife, but she did not have anything like the training needed to deal with cardiac problems). So, to everyone's shock and regret, Diego died. But had there been a good doctor in town . . . or two or three or four . . . then sooner or later there would probably have been a hospital. If there had been a hospital then there would have been an ambulance. If there had been an ambulance there would have needed to be streets wide enough for that sized vehicle . . . and telephone service to call for it. If there had been streets wide enough for such vehicles there would have been more cars. If there had been more traffic there would have been traffic lights . . . and an electrical grid. If there had been traffic lights and electricity there would have been more inhabitants. If there had been more inhabitants then the town would have needed a greater economic base. With a greater economic base . . . well, you get the idea; any little thing can be significant enough to be the thin edge of the wedge, as in the aphorism about *how the kingdom was lost for want of a nail*. And, in the matter under discussion, as the city/town grew and life conditions changed, the flamenco gatherings – which were never, from the beginning, about anything other than life conditions – would have changed with it.

(NOTE: I mentioned, above, that Diego del Gastor was a giant of “authentic” flamenco. He was . . . but I want to put this into perspective without diminishing him or his brilliance. In reality old flamenco was not one entity with one epicenter; it was a regional mix of Cadiz-flavor flamenco, Sevilla-flavor flamenco, Ronda-flavor flamenco, Lebrija-flavor flamenco, Huelva-flavor flamenco, Jerez-flavor flamenco, Algeciras-flavor flamenco, of course Moron-flavor flamenco, and so on. I say “flavor” rather than “style” because the differences were often matters of nuance, accent, and sensibility rather than something more categorical. Nonetheless, Moron-“style” flamenco got better press – at least in the English-speaking

world – as you’ll get some insight into if you read and/or Google the references I cite further below.)

## A PERSONAL NOTE

I wish to add that, aside from my long-term involvement in and love of flamenco, a lot of what I’ve just written is from personal experience, thinking, reading, conversations and hearsay, musings, general life experience, having been into and around flamenco since High School, and a Summer in Madrid and Granada studying flamenco. I never met Paco de Lucia and I don’t claim to know him; my most direct experience of him, aside from listening to his recordings, is to have seen him on stage, as a member of an audience. But he did manage to cast his spell over me nonetheless. Part of this spell is that, in his later photographs, he did not look happy as a person. I am guessing that this might have had something to do with the history I’ve been writing about and the pressures of the life style he lived under.

If you are interested in a fuller account of this remarkable music, I recommend that you (1) obtain a copy of D.E. Pohen’s [The Art of Flamenco](#) and (2) Google Steve Kahn’s [The Flamenco Project](#), as well as Carl Nagin’s article on “The Ballad of Gypsy Davy”. And if any of you reading this should want to listen to re-releases of old flamenco recordings in cd form, you should know that the originals were recorded on 78 rpm records, which all had a short running time. The performers consequently had been instructed to speed the music and singing up so that the recording could be squeezed into the time allotment.

## AN EPILOG TOUCHING ON PACO AND FLAMENCO

A week or so after I sent my friend Michael my response about Paco’s impact on flamenco, he responded with the following email:

“As you probably know, the UN has included flamenco in its “Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” When I first read about this “proclamation” of the “intangible,” I thought it was hilarious. I still think that, but now it occurs to me that, in its own bumbling, bureaucratic way, the UN was trying to articulate its version of your

argument.

“From the get-go, the UN was all about preserving cultural expression. That, I guess, is what UNESCO was supposed to do. But, maybe a little like our own National Endowment for the Arts, UNESCO seemed to prefer the fossil over the facile – praising the opera house while ignoring the street musicians just outside.

“But in 2001, word got out that a commercial venture was planning to “develop” the celebrated Jemaa’ el-Fnaa Square in Marrakesh. (That’s the place that showed up in every other movie for decades, from “Around the World in Eighty Days” to Indiana Jones.) Everyone knew the Square was the center of the region’s cultural life – but it was constantly changing. Juice-vendors, storytellers, puppeteers, singers, drummers, musicians, snake-charmers, dancers, prancers, vixens, etc.

“When advocates for saving the Square approached the UN for support, everyone realized they needed a whole new category. Even the usual catch-all phrase – “oral tradition” – didn’t cover it. (What about all of those musicians who played without anything written down, just . . . fully present with their instruments and ENJOYING IT DEEPLY?)

“Someone came up with the phrase “oral and intangible heritage” to describe all of the other ways in which people give meaning and texture and depth to their lives, without necessarily involving a commodity. So Jemaa’ el-Fnaa Square was the inspiration for the first “Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in November 2001. By 2009, one hundred sixty-six “elements” were designated as oral/ intangible masterpieces.

“And one of them was flamenco.

“I wonder if there’s some sort of cultural Heisenberg principle at work here: there may be things we can’t observe without changing them. And the harder we try to locate them, the less we know about where they’re headed. Just naming them whisks them beyond our reach. Oral . . . intangible . . .”

Amen to that.

