

A blues of the southern united states



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A LIVING HISTORY Flamenco is not merely a style of music, song or dance from Spain but rather a way of life that influences the daily activities of many individuals. The art of flamenco was intended to be an outward expression of an individual's most profound emotions and the flamenco way of life. It was never intended to be a technical art performed with stoic precision yet without *duende* (a passion/feeling for flamenco). The main components and styles of flamenco will be discussed briefly while an in depth presentation of the characteristics of flamenco dance (*baile*) and its evolution shall emerge subsequently.

Present day flamenco consists of singing (*cante*), dancing (*baile*) and guitar playing (*toque*); each of which is a distinctive art. Those only vaguely introduced to flamenco may be surprised to learn that the *cante* was and is the centerpiece of the flamenco art form. In contemporary times singers perform in the background and their singing is usually perceived as musical accompaniment to the dancers. Throughout history, however, flamenco has been based on the art of singing and the *cantaor* (singer) often provided his own rhythmic accompaniment with rapping of the knuckles or a stick (figure 1).

Various styles of flamenco permeate yet the art is divided into four specific categories including deep/profound flamenco (*jondo* or *grande*), intermediate flamenco (*intermedio*), light flamenco (*chico*) and popular flamenco. *Jondo* or *grande* flamenco is the serious flamenco and is comparable with the blues of the southern United States (The Art of Flamenco, p. 47).

Of all forms of flamenco this is the most difficult to understand and interpret properly. The artists who explore this style are considered the nobility in the world of flamenco. In order to grasp this style an artist must have a true feeling of flamenco (duende) that he is able to pass on to his audience. Jondo flamenco is an emotional art and the artist must possess only enough technical proficiency to allow him/her to communicate with spectators his emotions and passion for flamenco. Jondo flamenco is not concerned with a mastering of technique for improved technique does not mean an increased ability to relate emotions to the public. If an artist becomes too involved with the difficulty or complexity of his art he loses the ability to impart duende for his energy is focused specifically on technique. Flamenco intermedio consists of styles that tend toward flamenco grande but the intermedio is not as difficult to perform properly and not as moving. Flamenco chico is sensuous, tender and poetic and is usually not intensely moving.

This style of flamenco usually consists of shouting, stomping and fast movements. Popular flamenco is the collaboration of all three above forms and does not resemble pure flamenco. It is the commercialization of flamenco and is aimed at the general public who like a good show but seek no emotional involvement. The contrast between flamenco juerga and popular flamenco is best surmised in the words of an artist, "primitivism versus polish, warmth versus anonymity, creation versus rigidity, emotion versus intellect, instinct versus schooling, fun versus formality." (The Art of Flamenco, p. 51). The professional flamenco artist must follow either the commercial route in which the art is sacrificed to some extent to money or the private route in which money is sacrificed, to some extent, for purity of

expression. True flamencos are purists who will in no way compromise the art and if they must go hungry in the process it is just one of the hazards of the trade.

The contrast between popular flamenco and flamenco juerga is most evident in the flamenco baile due to its extroverted nature. Often an amateur to the art of flamenco will appreciate the baile most while paying negligible attention to the cante and toque. This occurs mainly because as a beginner one is not able to grasp the soul searing intensity of the song or accompaniment. But one will always be able to appreciate the grace and sensuality of the dancers movements. Unlike the other forms of flamenco, flamenco baile requires that the body be the means of expression. Flamenco dancers (bailaoras) use movement to dig into their emotional selves and express their most unutterable emotions through their body's movement. A true flamenco bailaora will elicit emotional response without analysis.

The dance of the arms, hands, shoulders and fingertips is the very essence of the feminine dance (figure 2). The female dancer (bailaora) uses various arm movements, " rhythmically linked, flowing one into the other, forming continuous spirals that culminate in curving, meandering, sinuous fingers. The hands and fingers receive the emotions articulated by the arms framing a slightly arched body." (Flamenco, Body and Soul p. 116). She dances, " with a bending, undulating waist designed by nature itself to express her voluptuous imagination, with her curving shoulders and undulating seeking arms slender promising fingertips begging for sanctuary. With her head and her eyes, and her flashing teeth and her very heart." (Flamenco, Body and Soul, p.

116) (figure 3). Hands and fingers may also be incorporated for rhythm by finger snapping, hand clapping or the use of castanets. It has been suggested, however, that the use of these instruments occurs due to inability to work the upper torso. The bailaor uses his feet to create the zapateado (figure 4), a rhythmic coordinated heel and toe movement which produces a syncopated staccato sound. The bailaor digs deep into himself during his dance to ultimately release his distress. The male dancer concentrates all movement to the feet and develops a beat dependent upon inner rhythms.

Each baile (dance), or danceable compas (rhythm/beat) does not have traditional characteristics that have to be adhered to. The rhythm largely determines the dance, and between bailes with very similar rhythms and moods there will be no inherent differences in the dance. Traditionally the bailaoras (female dancer) main concentration was from the hips up and the bailaors (male dancer) from the waist down. However, flamenco dance was revolutionized by two incomparable figures; Antonio el de Bilbao and Carmen Amaya (figure 5).

These two individuals altered the trend of flamenco dance by incorporating both feminine and masculine aspects into their dances. They transformed flamenco baile from non-technical, simple and direct to difficult, complex and extremely technical. Although their style incorporated more technical precision these artists were capable of relaying duende and thus remained true to flamenco's original purpose - personal expression. It is strictly up to the dancer to use whatever technique he wishes in whatever manner he wishes, within certain limits, as long as they help him express what he feels and is striving to communicate with the audience.

However, only certain movements and techniques are accepted as being truly flamenco. The inner passion of the dancer must be released through his movement. When precision becomes the focus all energy is centered on the technical aspect of the dance. The dancer no longer focuses on emotional expression or *duende* and the essence of flamenco has been lost. The origins and development of flamenco baile are obscure and murky yet can be pieced together through historical facts and contemporary similarities in the dance of various cultures.

Baile flamenco is believed to be descended from ancient religious dances of the Indian Hindus including the Bharata Natyam, Kathak and Kathakali (figure 6). These sacred dances involve story telling and spontaneity; although not as openly as in flamenco. Arm gestures, hand movements and footwork bear a striking similarity yet this is where the resemblance ends. Through its evolution flamenco has lost many traditional elements of Indian dance; flamenco dance is not symbolic or religious and does not utilize the various eye and facial movements of classical Indian dance. It is postulated that lay persons adopted the highly civilized religious dances of the Indian Hindus and shed many of the highly stylized gestures, returning to a more basic art form concerned mainly with the expression of oneself and one's emotions. The development of specific Indian dances into flamenco, within Spain, still poses a mystery for the recorded history of flamenco baile does not begin until the *café cantante* period in 1842. However, a history has been surmised through available facts and postulation.

Traditionally performed in temples during religious rites the sacred Indian dances eventually began to be performed outside the temples in India. As the

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dances were performed publicly more often, laypersons adopted and modified the movements. Through caravans and trading vessels different cultures witnessed the simplified dances and returned home with a new and exhilarating form of movement dedicated to personal expression. The more simplified dances also dispersed throughout Spain when Indian gypsies followed Moorish armies during their conquest of Spain's southernmost province, Andalusia, during the 6th century. The modified Indian dances arrived with these unique cultures and a distinct dance style was established in Spain.

A subsequent event in the development of flamenco was the second influx of gypsies to Spain. Bands of gypsies began an exodus from India during the 9th century due to oppression. They roamed across Asia, Africa and Europe aimlessly searching for a new homeland. During their trek the bands of gypsies dwindled as tribes were left along the way until a few remaining gypsies filtered through the Spanish peninsula.

Eventually they settled at Andalusia, a multi-ethnic province in which Jews, Christians and Arabs lived side by side, in the 15th century. Andalusia was currently the center of Moorish civilization. The cultural coexistence in Andalusia was destroyed, however, when Spanish Christians completed their re-conquest of the last Moorish stronghold in 1492.

With the momentum of this defeat the overly-impassioned Christians decided to purge Spain of all undesirable elements and passed laws ordering the expulsion of Moors, Jews and gypsies who had no useful profession. These

laws were followed by reign of terror against those cultures who refused to comply (Art of Flamenco, p. 44).

It was due to these events that persecuted cultures (Jews, Arabs and Gypsies) who shared no common bonds united against oppressive Christians. They grouped together into tribes/bands and went underground hiding in uninhabited regions, living in caves and foraging for food; soon after their banishment the oppressed cultures were joined by Christian fugitives and dissenters. Because of the forced coexistence of the Jews, Christians, Arabs and Indians various folk and religious styles of music, song and dance blended with gypsy abandonment and improvisation. Controversy often arises about cultural contribution to the art of flamenco. Andalusians contest that flamenco was an established art form within their province. They argue that gypsies brought no style of song or dance of their own but simply adopted the culture of each land where they roamed.

They assert that if the gypsies who emigrated from India brought a folk style similar to flamenco then gypsies in other cultures would practice flamenco styles also. This argument is quickly refuted since startling similarities between the music and dance of the Spanish gypsies and gypsies of other countries are present. Vicente Escudero in his work, "Mi Baile" states that a Russian gypsy dance is very similar to the famuca in its compas (footwork) and movements of the arms plus upper torso; Nevertheless, the dance there has developed much more acrobatically (Lives and Legends of Flamenco, p. 176). In addition, the many falsettos of Hungarian gypsy violin and flamenco guitar are nearly identical as much in feeling as in structure (Lives

and Legends of Flamenco, p. 178). Additional accounts of similarities between Spanish gypsy style and gypsies from other countries exist yet will not be explored in depth here. The Moors ruled in Andalusia for eight centuries and it is thus impossible to deny their influence in the development of flamenco dance. The movements of the upper torso, arms and hands remained in existence due to Moorish approval.

However, there was discouragement of feminine footwork due to a ruling in the Koran - women would not utilize footwork in order to not show their legs (Lives and Legends of Flamenco, p. 144). This ruling and the fact that gypsy dancers were not technically trained are the main reasons why feminine footwork was nearly non-existent in flamenco baile until this century.

Throughout all of the debates about the evolution of flamenco it is clear that the art of flamenco had been brewing for many centuries in Andalusia. During the time of the Moors flamenco dance was popular and still somewhat religious yet after their expulsion from Spain all religious affiliation was lost. It was then that the baile along with cante and toque went underground and became the art of a persecuted people. Consequently, the mingling of the various cultural styles of these persecuted people can be cited as the creation of an art form we today call flamenco.

The recorded history of flamenco dance does not begin until the start of the café cantante period in 1842 and the majority of flamenco dancers, at that time, were gypsies with fundamental technique and sparse repertoires. The footwork of the men was relatively simple and primitive while women, with very few exceptions, used almost no footwork and concentrated on the arms,

hands and upper torso. In gypsy or primitive flamenco dance neither men nor women used castanets but relied on movement of the upper torso and their own personalities (*gracia*) (figure 7). It was a completely spontaneous dance and provides a look at what flamenco was intended to be. Dance found itself on stage during the *café cantante* period, however, and it began to expand in the amount of space it utilized. The arm movements once motivated by inner feelings now became repetitive, concentric movements made by a number of dancers and the syncopated rhythms of the *zapateado* (dance concentrating on footwork) became the protocol for male dancers. The larger space of the *café cantante* period demanded a company of dancers and choreography became a vital component of flamenco. During the *café cantante* period choreography dominated flamenco dancing.

The possibilities in choreographing flamenco dance were numerous yet the dance became delightful, festive and jovial but also boring and routine. The essence of flamenco was lost and no longer were dancers exploring their emotional selves on stage. Then in 1915, Serge Diaghliev's Ballet Russe came to Spain and changed the tide of many art forms including flamenco dance. Diaghliev demonstrated how to utilize space and all the qualities a dancer possessed. Flamenco dancers suddenly re-evaluated their profession once confronted with Diaghliev's integrity. Three paths were unexpectedly available to flamenco dancers; please the public with routine dances, return to their origins as individual *bailaors*, or enlarge their companies with more brilliant choreography to present pure flamenco dancing on a large scale. A return to pure flamenco dancing, as it was originally performed by individual dancers, and the development of large professional companies dedicated to

authentic flamenco baile were the two new directions in which flamenco dance moved. Unlike in Indian religious dances the various movements of flamenco do not have specific meanings and the dance is not attempting to convey a story.

The techniques and movements in flamenco are not symbolic and in a solo dance no actual story is being told. The dancer utilizes the techniques and movements of the dance to help express the inner self and also utilizes whichever passions or moods are affecting him at the time of dancing. The same movement can denote love or hate, tragedy or happiness depending on the mood of the dancer. "Dancing is such like an abstract painting in that two individuals will be moved differently by the same dance and the same viewer may be affected differently if viewed on separate occasions.

" (The Art of Flamenco, P. 70) The passionate dancer, when he feels himself moved during the course of a flamenco session, responds with creation of movement and a release of passion and emotions beyond rehearsed arrangements and memories (figure 8). The technique helps him achieve the release and the arrangement help solidify the technique but his inner passion is his motivating force. Flamenco baile is a wonderfully moving art form which lost its focus for some years but has regained its integrity. It is an art form which relies mainly on the passions of the performer and not on technical precision. Flamenco baile was intended to be a spontaneous art and has returned to its original purpose through the efforts of many dedicated and pure flamencos; both performers and spectators.

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