

THOUGHTS ON THE PASSING OF PACO DE LUCIA:  
AN OVERVIEW OF MODERN FLAMENCO (Part 1 of 2)

By Ervin Somogyi

Paco de Lucia, born as Francisco Sanchez Gomez, died recently. For those who don't know who he was, he was a stellar presence in the world of modern flamenco, and of the modern guitar in general. He played with dazzling brilliance, composed new pieces and melodies, introduced new playing techniques, devised breathtaking variations on traditional rhythms, and raised the bar for anyone aspiring to give their own voice to this lovely and complex musical form. And, because he was a pioneer in many ways, he was controversial. Any time someone does any of the former, you get the latter; it's just how things work.

I received an email from a friend, Michael Smith, that addressed this. He wrote: "I've heard several memorial tributes to [Paco] over the past few weeks -- the gist being: "many say he revived and transformed flamenco, while others feel he besmirched a once-pure musical tradition, yadda yadda and an additional yadda." And I found myself thinking, *I wonder what Ervin thinks . . .*"

My answer to him was [a shorter version of] the following:

Hi, Michael:

Hmmmm. Yes indeed . . . Paco and all that. I think that they're all correct: Paco did advance flamenco; for a long time he played it brilliantly. He also moved away from it into a form of flamenco-ized jazz. But I don't think that he destroyed a "pure" art form; regardless of what he did or didn't do, there are plenty of people who still play the "old" flamenco, so it's not (yet) destroyed. The worst that can be said about Paco is that he helped to bastardize flamenco into something largely unrecognizable to traditionalists. However, as there are fewer and fewer of these around as time passes, I don't know who there will be here twenty years from now to miss the older forms. On the other hand there are plenty of people who will tell you that Paco made significant contributions toward bringing what was formerly an ethnic music that sometimes toured into the international mainstream, and

that this is a transformation that represents a bona-fide coming-of-age or coming-out party.

It is an interesting question to grapple with, largely because it occurs at the crossroads of one of the oldest discussions in the history of civilization: namely, the nature of change and transformation. I think it goes beyond the mere question of who likes the new flamenco and who doesn't -- although, for sure, there's plenty of material to discuss at that level of the matter. If we're talking about . . . how should I put it . . . the rupture of a tradition, then it might be useful to take a look at exactly what a tradition is. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin "traditio", which means *a passing on, a releasing of something older to something newer, a handing over, a heritage, a continuing*. *Extradite*, from the same root, means *a bringing back*. But "tradition" also signifies *a giving up*, as in a betrayal. In fact, *tradition* and *betrayal* have the same root. The ancients had a sense that these are children of the same mother, as it were . . . and that we can distinguish one from the other mainly through the values we project onto each.

Anyway, to give you a better idea of exactly what Paco de Lucia did or didn't do to or for flamenco, I should give you a bit of background. Paco grew up in a family that was steeped in flamenco and he most certainly was exposed to its rhythms even while still in his mother's womb. Those rhythms are very special, by the way: they're rooted in ancient Arabic, Roman, Jewish, and Andalusian folk cultures and they are absolutely unique, emphatic, expressive, complex, and compelling -- and Paco mastered them brilliantly. He was a recognized talent at age 14 (he played guitar like an adult of many years' experience!) and he would go on to become a giant in the emergent flamenco world. To add some perspective to this, when I was fourteen I could just about manage to chew gum and walk in a straight line while doing so.

The "authentic" flamenco was ethnic in every sense of the word: very cultish, clannish, and restricted. These are negative words in our culture, but I'm just describing the music of an isolated and out-of-the-way population (and one that, moreover, had centuries-long history of been overrun by conquering armies). Flamenco was by gypsies, for gypsies, and about gypsies -- appropriated earlier on, of course, from local forms and remade to their own rhythms. The principal thing to keep in mind, however, is that if old flamenco was clannish and culturally restricted it was at the same time

decidedly bursting with life and juice.

A word about the gypsy community: the gypsies lived in villages, in the countryside, and in their own sections of whichever towns they called home – not at all different, in that regard, from today's Oakland, California (my home base) which has its Korean section, its Chinatown, it's Vietnamese section, it's Mexican neighborhood, its upscale and gentrified (mostly Caucasian) areas, its Afro-American neighborhoods, etc. The Andalusian flamencos themselves were mostly unschooled and illiterate, and they would by modern standards have been considered to be urban principally insofar as they lived inside of buildings rather than in tents or caravans (although some did that too). Like any disadvantaged minority, the gypsies lived and survived in any way that they could: they were laborers, farmers, small tradesmen, butchers, bakers, horse-traders, fast-talkers and con-men, etc. Not a one of them went to college, got a degree, became an engineer or a doctor or a teacher, ran a successful business enterprise, had a successful military or legal or civil service career, became an artist or writer, was a city councilman or politico or a policeman or fireman or a craftsman or a manager . . . or a trained and skilled technician, or a photographer or draftsman or architect, or scientist, or anyone who was trusted with money, or had anything named after him, or was the subject of a biography.

From the point of view of the mainstream society, these were the throw-aways. (NOTE: Under dictator Franco's repression, the *gitanos* were prohibited from higher education, although they had to go to regular school like everyone else – even if they didn't stay there long enough to learn much.) Toss in a lack of social services, electricity, running water, dental care and basic sanitation and you've pretty much got the picture: not unlike being a poor black in the historical American South. It's not by accident that flamenco has been called gypsy Blues. And, like the best of the original Blues, flamenco occurred in private surroundings that included friends and neighbors . . . who ENJOYED IT DEEPLY. In many ways it was a "cosa nuestra" – "our thing" – and it was difficult for non-gypsies to gain access into these circles.

I think that a large part of the POWER of traditional flamenco – the guitar parts of which were much simpler than the complexly contrapuntal and technically flashy examples one hears today – came expressly from the fact that it was personal. As I said, it was "by us, for us, and about us", and it participated in the community life of the participants. As such, the music

and the song were *essential*: not overcomplicated, but heartfelt and directly understood. No one could read music; it was all done by ear and by feel; and the guitar playing itself was perfectly adequate to supporting the feeling without calling attention to itself. I think this must have a lot to do with the “purity” that is spoken of (today the guitar is often The Star, which sort of messes up the balance of things). And to top it all off, flamenco would have been kept local and informal by the fact that it was almost impossible to make a living with it. Consequently, the "original" flamencos did not tour, travel, rehearse, record, or anything like that. They played for themselves because it pleased them, because those other outlets weren't available to them, and because even if there had been there was no wider market or audience for this music.

But in the 1930s (a time of great trouble in Spain) some of the more ambitious gypsies formed groups that traveled and put on shows in other cities and countries; these travelers gave the world its first taste of flamenco, and in doing so they created a wider audience. Flamenco on tour was also, necessarily, a somewhat artificial product that was quite at variance with the GREATLY IN-THE-MOMENT nature of the "old" stuff. I mean, let's face it: these were stage performances – an entirely new phenomenon with ticket sales, a starting time, a program of set pieces, flashy costumes, and a showy finale at the end (gasp!).

In fact, this was the whole nine yards about change, right then and there: something had been created that entertained, that gave some people a livelihood and reputation that they wouldn't have had previously, and that was at the same time essentially a prostitution of the social function that that music had served before. *Prostitution* might be too harsh, actually; let's instead say *eclipsed*, or *outgrew*, or *aimed at a different target*. These are better words because the new flamenco was simply NOT APPROPRIATE to the uses and purposes of the old flamenco. And I mean exactly that: the old flamenco wasn't ever something that started at eight p.m. on Thursday the twenty-second and ended ninety minutes later.

Incidentally, the “coming out” of flamenco began at about the same time that Andres Segovia was touring the world and for the first time exposing listeners to the classical guitar and its music. Hardly anyone would know what the classical guitar and its musical possibilities are today if it hadn't been for him – as well as the invention of nylon, which eventually became the material of choice for guitar strings, by the DuPont company in

1930. [A BRIEF BUT COOL HISTORICAL DETOUR: Nylon was in fact discovered accidentally; the DuPont people, at first, had no idea what to do with this new synthetic substance that could be stretched into very thin but very strong filaments; they tried various things (including nylon hosiery) and eventually discovered that they could market this product as fishing line. Interestingly, it was the fishermen/musicians of the seaports of Southern Spain (i.e., the flamencos) who first thought to put fishing line on their guitars: it was cheaper and lasted longer than the gut strings that had been the only option until then. So: we owe it to the flamencos – and, later, to the Augustine string company, which first popularized nylon strings through Andres Segovia’s endorsement of them – that the modern Spanish guitar has become established the extent that it has. Basically, *nylon made playing the guitar affordable.*]

In any event, Segovia took a germinal musical form and made it grow, very much in the same way that the first touring flamenco troupes gave their own germinal musical form wider exposure. The difference between Segovia and the flamencos is that the flamencos already had a community of adherents, while Segovia was pretty much creating a new musical form from the ground up (there really had not been any such thing as “music for the guitar” before then) and creating its adherents as he went. This was, and is, no mean accomplishment. And it speaks to how successfully Segovia steered this new music toward respectability and away from the disreputable and alcohol-lubricated informality of the guitar’s folk roots, that one can speak of their respective and respected icons as “Segovia” (formal last name) and “Paco” (casual first name; but not even that: it’s only a nickname!) without blinking an eye. It’s a phenomenon that’s right up there with Cher, Beyoncé, and Madonna.

But, getting back to Paco de Lucia: he carried the thrust to make flamenco respectable two steps further than his predecessors had. First, he made flamenco respectable by insisting that it be included in and with more “formal” musical programs (i.e., that were more in line with the musical tastes of the middle class) and that the flamenco artists *be paid the same as the other performers*. This was unprecedented. Yet Paco managed it because he was well enough known by then to have such clout. And second, he made flamenco international by melding it with jazz. He created Fusion Flamenco: jazzy, modern, flashy, dazzling, stylistically impeccable, etc. This is a musical form that is barely recognizable as anything resembling traditional flamenco: the old rhythms, sensibilities, and melodies are stretched out of

recognition, and the guitar is now accompanied by drum (or *cajón*), electric bass, accordion, flute, piano, and sometimes brass instruments and an orchestra. Altogether, it's edging the "original" flamenco into disappearance in the sense that this is more and more what people think of flamenco as being.

Aside from the new instrumentation, a main difference between traditional flamenco and stage flamenco is also captured in the fact that the latter builds up toward a flashy finale; in the traditional flamenco get-togethers the party starts with the fast and flashy stuff and builds toward the more feelingful material that is slower, deeper, and sometimes devastatingly cathartic. The most expressive forms from this deeper level of the traditional flamenco repertoire – the *seguiriyas*, *tientos*, *mineras*, *rondeñas*, *tarantas* and the *soleares* – are entirely absent from the repertoire of Fusion Flamenco, as are some of the traditional lighter repertoire (such as the *sevillanas* and the *farruca*). Just as significantly, in much of Paco's and the new generation's illustrious recording careers, the Song – so much at the center of the old form – is optional.

And so are the dancers that the guitarist formerly accompanied. The motions, color, and physical movement are gone. Instead, Fusion Flamenco offers the visual stasis typical of a jazz group. These are all basic changes that cannot all be Paco's fault . . . but the result is a complex in which elements and personalities are hard to separate out.

At least, that's my perception. I think that the tradeoff speaks to the pressures and pace of the modern world, more so than it speaks to any conscious intent to harm or abandon something that was previously useful. I think that the old flamenco has essentially served its purpose and is not viable, because the concerns and conditions of the modern world have changed and don't support such musical uses any longer. What I mean by this latest statement is that, in general, CLOSENESS AND INTIMACY in many forms are . . . well . . . so . . . uh . . . nineteenth century; today's world likes to embrace PRIVACY AND DISTANCE. Accordingly, the new flamenco is all kinds of things, but intimate isn't one of them. Paco's music is publicly, not privately, accessible. It is so on many levels. And I don't think that it is something that is ENJOYED AS DEEPLY as the old stuff was. It is not . . . how should I say it . . . intended to be that kind of thing.

But I wouldn't rush to condemn Paco for having done this. He did do

it, of course; but he had lots of help. He had help from the other young bucks, the greater recording industry, the music biz, the media, modern society with its hunger for new entertainments, the pressures of the modern world, the lure of money and success and, not least, a world in which more and more (food, business, music, clothing, etc.) is "connected", available on demand, and international. But, as I said, I'm inclined to believe that what is lost is a way for a few people to have ENJOYED SOMETHING DEEPLY AND AT THEIR OWN PACE. In its place is something more streamlined and packaged and sold commercially . . . that dazzles momentarily at its best . . . but that seems to have less aftertaste in satisfaction. You cannot buy authenticity in a cd, or scheduled-at-showtime form, or when you turn your mp3 player on; you get a simulacrum.

Is this a gain, or is this a loss? Oh hell, yes.

Finally, I want to point out that everything I've just said – and will be saying below – is a generalization: true as far as I know, but undoubtedly subject to exceptions and other interpretations.